

A good story on any day of the week

By RIC WILSON, editor of the Eastern Province Herald



Editors are the product of their own accumulated experience in newspapers, and much of mine was in the executive corridor of the Sunday Times, in the days when it was defined and refined by the late Tertius Myburgh as a "quali-pop" paper.

Although the Sunday Times is a national newspaper, I believe Myburgh's "quali-pop" formula applies equally to regional dailies.

The principle is that our newspaper-reading market is so small that for a publication to be successful it has to cater for all the different sectors from quality to pop in one package. It has to be a Times, Daily Express and Sun all rolled up in one.

If it works on Sunday, why shouldn't it work every other day of the week? I was never able to understand the view that certain stories were "Sunday stories", referring often to in-depth follow-ups, good human interest, and wraps of big court cases. To me, a good story is a good story, no matter what day of the week it's published.

When I was appointed editor of the Herald in 1993, I had the opportunity to put this into practice, and so far I have been proved right (touch wood). The Herald has just posted

its fourth circulation record in three years, increasing steadily from 29 660 to 32 656.

The variety of a newspaper's content, what I call "the mix", is the key to its success. Every day we go out of our way to look for off-beat and human interest stories to supplement the daily fare of politics, sport and hard news.

There are no firm rules, but we always try for a front page menu of hard news, politics, human interest/animal interest (don't forget Max the gorilla), sport, and often business.

Former Daily Telegraph editor WF Deedes believed that every front page should have a story that will have a wife/husband commenting to the family over breakfast: "My goodness, dear, listen to this." It's not always easy to find a good local national "my goodness" story, but there's often one to be found from somewhere in the world.

Fun is also a crucial ingredient. A newspaper that can tease and jest with its readers, even gently poke fun, will become a cherished member of the family. I love pictures that lend themselves to cheeky headlines and captions. Some time ago, when nudity was an issue in Durban and Cape Town, we had a front page picture of a topless sunbather on PE's crowded Hobie beach. How to use it without offending our conservative readers (and there are plenty, believe me)? I headlined the picture "Excuse me, ma'am, this isn't Durban", and ran a caption in similar vein. I got letters complimenting the Herald for its stand against public nudity, and letters accusing the Herald of being old-fashioned and chasing away tourists.

In addition to the content, a newspaper must have character and that character must include passion, commitment, and a sense of humour. People love, hate, make money, lose money, cry and laugh, sometimes all in one day. I believe a newspaper, no matter what market it serves, should reflect the gamut of life's experiences. The stockbrokers who read Business Day enjoy a juicy scandal, even if they say they don't.

Other journalists often remark (sometimes enviously) that we have more sensational stories in Port Elizabeth – like the Merwe Swart murder trial – than anywhere else. At the risk of sounding arrogant, I just think that the Herald does them bigger and better.

But let's get the definitions right. What do we mean by sensational and tabloid journalism? Normally both are used pejoratively to describe lewd

or shock/horror stories and the way they are presented. But sensational, in the true sense of the word, is what many big news stories are, and the only way to present them is with due impact.

How else can you describe the savage rape and maiming of Alison, who went on to become a national heroine after stories about her courage appeared in the Herald? How else can you describe the trial of a jealous teenager who killed her sister in a stabbing frenzy over a pair of Doc Martens; the murder of a leading attorney allegedly by his wife's lover; the arrest of a controversial business tycoon in Britain on drugs smuggling charges; the prominent philanthropist who was caught smuggling gold coins hidden in his Rolls Royce into Britain?

These are all so-called sensational stories that the Herald has gone big on over the past few years. But in the same period we have given equally prominent coverage to political trials – the Goniwe inquests and the trial of Motherwell car bomber, former security police colonel, Gideon Nieuwoudt.

More recently, we had a world scoop on the application by five security policemen for

amnesty for the murder of Steve Biko. This story went around the world and I was proud to see the Herald's front page displayed on CNN, Sky and BBC news bulletins.

The Herald's coverage of the local hearings of the TRC was also imaginative and innovative. ANC stalwart Ivy Geina told the TRC about a North End prison wardress who showed her kindness and sympathy after she was tortured by security police in the 1980s, but she could only give the woman's name as Mrs Crouse. Geina's story touched the hearts of the TRC and local chairman Bongani

Finca commented: "It is wonderful that even in a system like that, people rose above it... I salute Mrs Crouse."

But who was she? I was determined to find out. We carried the story on the front page, with the headline: "Who is Ivy's mystery angel of mercy?" And below the story we appealed for information about Mrs Crouse.

It worked and the next day's Herald had a big front page picture of the two women embracing. The headline commented: "Now this is what reconciliation is really about".

When white ratepayers complained about a 12% tariff hike to fund township development projects, we ran a series called "The 12% difference", which set out to show how the extra income was being used to provide township residents with electricity and water for the first time. The

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moaning letters dried up. Here was a newspaper actually making a difference.

I also believe in picture power. A good picture, particularly a poignant one, is worth using as big as you can. When we got the first, exclusive pictures of PW Botha and his lady friend, Reinette Ter Water Naude, I splashed them all over page one. It was a big seller because the pictures were news – everyone wanted to see the happy couple together. They were also upbeat pictures of a happy occasion.

More difficult to judge is when to go big with a dramatic news picture that may offend or shock. An example here is the shooting of three AWB men by Bophuthatswana soldiers during the troubles of 1994. AP put out a graphic news picture, which I used over 10 columns on page one. It was a shock/horror picture, but then it was a shocking and horrific incident in a time of great emotional and physical upheaval in South Africa.

Most important however was the chilling message to any gun-happy, gung-ho right-wingers who thought of heeding a call to arms. This picture of pathetic AWB men dying in a dusty Mmbatho street told them in no uncertain terms that death was a real possibility, and that violent death – for whatever cause – is never dignified.

We are always looking for opportunities to be innovative and different in our presentation and handling of news, and that is what sells newspapers in steadily growing numbers, not the occasional sensational court case.

I don't subscribe to the view that because radio and TV have a huge advantage in breaking news, newspapers have to be more featurish or in-depth in their coverage.

This may be true of the US and Europe, where radio and TV news services are highly competitive. But not in South Africa where the

SABC has never risen to the challenge of providing a comprehensive national and regional news service.

I believe that newspapers must never lose sight of their primary function to deliver news.

How that's done, and the mix, can vary widely. But I remain convinced that a newspaper that fails to keep its readers fully informed about the latest events in their community, region, nation and the world, will not flourish.

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The happy couple!



ALL SMILES... PW Botha and "good friend" Reinette share a joke as they chat in her garden.

PW and his 'girl' pose for the Herald in their first picture together

THIS is the picture the world has been waiting to see — former President PW Botha and his sweetheart Reinette Ter Water Naude. The couple gave an exclusive interview to the Herald yesterday and posed for their first public photographs together at Mrs Ter Water Naude's luxury guest-house, Kinsinger Lodge, in the picturesque Karoo town of Graaff-Reinet.

“ A free Press is the most dangerous foe of tyranny ”

Winston Churchill



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