

Truly necessary newsroom revolutions

By JUAN ANTONIO GINGER and CARLOS SORIA
of the Innovation International Media Consulting Group

1 Win back the young people who have lost the habit of reading newspapers and do so through younger and less hidebound newsrooms.

- El País de las Tentaciones (Madrid, Spain) and the Economist (London, UK). Both have very young reporters and writers.

2 Gain the respect and credibility of women who continue to be treated both in news and advertising as a second-class audience.

- See the case of WOMANEWS, an excellent new section of the Chicago Tribune (US).

3 Exponentially increase the quality of newspapers' news and graphics. And reorganise the design department so that it "works with the newsroom, not for it".

- This is one of the reasons for the success of El Mundo (Madrid, Spain), which every year wins many awards from the Society of Newspaper Design (SND).

4 Open newsroom doors to the readers.

- Reforma (Mexico) has different Readers Councils that meet regularly with the section editors.

5 Apply the "news-daily magazine" techniques that make the practice of quality journalism possible.

- Focus and Die Woche (Germany), Semana (Colombia) or Noticias (Argentina) are examples of this new kind of successful news magazine.

6 Eschew the "McDonaldisation" of newspapers. We need newspapers that disturb, excite, make readers think. Do away with the culture of "light" journalism which weakens the consistency and credibility of new sections.

- That's the case at the Philadelphia Inquirer (US).

7 Revamp the newspaper's main section, which is becoming devoid of content amid spiralling sectionalisation lacking any news sense, a characteristic of broadsheet dailies.

- This is one of the reasons for the strong credibility of Expresso (Lisbon, Portugal).

8 Rediscover local news. Today, everything can, should and does have a local angle. That means "local" is not confined to just what is in the local or metro section, but is a general priority for coverage in all sections.

- Good examples: Estado de Minas (Belo Horizonte, Brazil), El Correo (Bilbao, Spain) and the rest of its regional newspaper chain, and the three ultra-local oriented Knight-Ridder papers, the Aberdeen News American, Centre Daily Times and Duluth News Tribune.

9 Redesign the physical layout of newsrooms as a first step toward, or as a consequence of, knocking down the mental walls hindering integration, planning and long-range journalism.

- El Universal (Caracas, Venezuela) and O Globo (Rio, Brazil) are excellent examples of the "walls down" trend.

10 Reorganise the news work flow, getting rid of the assembly line system. Demolish hierarchical pyramids and establish new career paths so as not to frustrate the talents of your best reporters.

- That's the case at the Minneapolis Star Tribune (US).

11 Revolutionise the newspaper's news presentation structure, overcome the habit of organising it by section, and end the old-style beat reporting. Devise new macro-sections and create news diaries and task forces that can be put in place or dismantled in line with a policy based on "issues, problems and solutions".

- See El Periodico de Catalunya (Barcelona, Spain) and its daily section "Tema del Dia" (Topic of the Day).

12 Get rid of "Taylorism" in the newsroom – in which 20% do the thinking for the other 80%. Bring democracy into the newsroom. We are still basically non-participatory, all too authoritarian and individualistic. New chains of command need to be set up in the newsroom – less bureaucratic and dominating, more flexible, agile and stimulating.

- A great example is the Pioneer Press (Saint Paul, Minnesota, US), one of the most innovative Knight-Ridder papers.

13 Create highly-productive news teams. Increase the free time of reporters, and the numbers, so they have time to think and produce quality coverage, rather than being subjected to constant deadline pressure.

- Spain's largest newspaper, the sport daily MARCA (Madrid), has been experimenting with many of these formulas.

14 Turn newsrooms into "news hot-houses" – refiners of information capable of producing high-octane journalism.

- The Agencia Estado of the Group O Estado de S. Paulo, one of the best newsrooms of the country, is a pioneer of these ideas.

15 Get back on the street and once and for all end the "Midnight Cowboy" syndrome.

- That's one of the characteristics of many good sport daily newsrooms.

"To reinvent newsrooms and newspapers, to focus them and organise them in a new way – these are the great revolutions to come in many newspapers around the world. We have reshaped virtually everything, investing in plant, presses, computer, use of colour, distribution, promotion, marketing, display and classified advertising. But our circulation remains stagnant. We are not growing. What can we do? Invest in the quality of the news product of our newspapers and reorganise the newsrooms so that the work flow gives rise to a new kind of journalism. From our experience in devising newsroom modernisation plans, we have come up with a list of 20 priorities in tackling the re-engineering of news handling in the newspapers of the future." – Ginger and Soria

16 Train journalists to know how to navigate on-line information services.

- The digital newsroom of Bloomberg (New York, US) has become a trendy place for multimedia journalism.

17 Make the editorial story conferences more democratic in format, frequency and length.

- See the experience of the Sun News (Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, US).

18 Return to the world of "exclusives" and stop being merely purveyors of the utterances of second-hand sources – journalism with its own agenda, as opposed to merely reactive coverage.

- Like the Miami Herald (US) that has established nine top-priorities in its local coverage.

19 Invest in journalism training. Spend money on thinking about what is beyond the daily deadline. Put innovative news teams in place. Try out new things. Create prototypes. Analyse results and "correct, correct, correct".

- Two papers that have invested heavily in newsroom training are La Nacion (Buenos Aires, Argentina) and El Universal (Caracas, Venezuela).

20 We cannot make newspapers without journalists, but we have to constantly remind our newsrooms that it is the readers who are the real owners and key players in our newspapers. They, and their information needs, must be our foremost priority.

- Zero Hora (Porto Alegre, Brazil) now promotes the paper with this slogan: "you are the owner of the paper".

In short, only those who feel the need to sit back and think and who make operational decisions will be able to reinvent the newspapers and the newsrooms of the future.

Excerpts from a paper given at the World Newspapers Congress (Fie) in May.