

# WHY NOT UNBUNDLE THE HOUSE JOURNAL!

*The humble house journal has an important role to play in corporate communication, but first we must unleash the creative potential of South Africa's corporate journalists, writes **KERRY SWIFT***

**A**S FAR as I know, there is only one black house journal editor in South Africa. If there are more, you could count them on one hand. Yet, the vast majority of readers of these company staff journals is black and house journals are still at the forefront of the in-house corporate communications effort.

Even stranger is the fact that many corporate journalists in South Africa have never been formally trained, nor have they worked in media.

These are just two of the anomalies surrounding corporate journalism in this country, and clearly in this time of change, we need to think more deeply about this vital area of communication because it is the economically active men and women of South Africa who will be expected to provide the economic foundation for social and political change.

**A measure** of South African companies' commitment to in-house communication emerged from last year's National House Journal Competition, organised by the South African Association of Industrial Editors (SAAIE).

The total declared budgets for the 109 house journals entered in the competition amounted to R11 million. The combined circulation of these 109 house journals was just under one million readers. This amounts, on average, to a budget of around R10 per employee per year on printed communication through the house journal in South Africa.

Granted the competition entries by no means exhausted the number of in-company journals in circulation, but the figure of R10 per head per year would appear to be a credible supposition for the South African economy as a whole. R10 per year is less than one tea bag per employee per working day and it's a paltry sum given the enormous uncertainty about the future, the perilous state of labour relations and the gulf which still exists between people in the workplace.

And, it is unlikely that this situation will ever change. Marketing is where the real money is and undoubtedly where it is going to stay. For corporate journalists this simply means having to work a whole lot smarter to make the available budgets do the job.

Already there is talk in communication circles, particularly among those who are in the developmental field, that perhaps many of the house journals companies produce are inappropriate for their target reader-

**One way in which house journals could be given a healthy injection of creative enthusiasm is for companies to 'unbundle' them to their editors on a simple contractual basis.**

ships. Perhaps the up-market, glossy, First World approach is entirely wrong for the vast majority of house journal readers. Advertising executives are questioning their entire approach to creative messages in developing countries. Perhaps corporate communicators in South Africa should be doing the same.

But criticism is always easy. What about creative solutions?

One sure way in which house journals could be given a healthy injection of creative enthusiasm is for companies to 'unbundle' them,

**What is** to stop house-journal editors from entering into agreements with their corporate employers to float their own businesses editing, designing and producing their corporations' publications? Some such arrangement has interesting possibilities:

- ☛ Small publishing businesses would proliferate;
- ☛ Corporate journalists would work harder and smarter working for themselves;
- ☛ Corporate editorial standards would rise;
- ☛ These new publishers would build their businesses, opening up new job opportunities for journalists wanting to enter the corporate field.

There is nothing quite so likely to focus the mind as a healthy dose of market-place reality and corporate journalists could profit enormously – both creatively and financially – by being on the outside looking in. They might also rise to the creative challenges of producing editorially effective publications which are appropriately designed for their target audience – the predominantly black working men and women of South Africa.

There can be few more enervating challenges at this stage in the nation's development than helping to bridge the informational and perceptual gulf that exists between the real wealth producers – the employers and employees of South Africa. Because when all is said and done, if South Africans fail to get that vital area of communication right, whatever positive results may flow from the political process will largely be meaningless. Only a dynamic and productive economy can give substance to the ideal of liberation. ●

*KERRY SWIFT is a Senior Lecturer in Corporate Communications with the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University.*