

LOCAL NEWSPAPERS



The challenge to THE COUNTRY PRESS

“Negotiate!” **HARVEY TYSON** tells small town white newspapers.

WHAT failed yesterday may work well today, or tomorrow. That is our experience in our attempts to adjust some of the daily mainstream press to the needs of a changing society. We have had to look again at ideas we thought of as being too risky or far-fetched. In short, we have had to change our attitudes, to negotiate, and to believe sincerely in the advantages of sharing.

The same, surely, must apply to each actor in the local press. So let me list the obvious threats and opportunities that face your business in the next five years, and let me suggest some ways of winning.

THREATS INCLUDE:

- White readership of country newspapers will shrink. So will your advertising market.
- Many new community papers, some of them highly politicised, some of them powerfully backed by outside funding or by numbers of mobilised communities, will spring up all over South Africa.
- Most of the new publications will die through lack of experience in management and marketing. But those that remain will demand – and get – much of the market you currently own. Those that die will bring strong pressure to bear on your business.

- Transition, and the change in political structures, will make new community papers highly relevant. Unless existing papers change rapidly, they will lose relevance.

OPPORTUNITIES INCLUDE:

- New readership of acceptable and relevant local papers will grow – may explode.
- The advertising industry will gear itself to serve this sector of the media, as soon as the community papers and alternative press and country press combine properly to offer effective advertisement packages.
- Constitutional regionalisation, as opposed to the trend of the past 50 years of concentration of decision-making at the top, will make regional papers far more influential and relevant. Country papers will have a key role to play in the coming decade.
- The infrastructure and experience of the existing country press is impressive by any standards, let alone Third World standards. You are in a position to lead the way to meaningful diversity of the print media.

Some of us say that joint ventures, or regionalised (i.e. cultural) editions cannot work. I suggest that, in most cases, doing it on your own cannot work.

A different approach is needed. A generous spirit of sharing may do it. By sharing – by assisting emerging entrepreneurs to enter your field – your printshop, your market, you are likely to become more relevant and more acceptable. You are likely to increase your own share of the market, simply by sharing what you already have.

How you do this depends on the individual circumstances of every case. You might run a new paper like the one in Colesberg in the Karoo which is supported by the people of the townships and the people of the town. A paper printed in no less than three languages. Or you may run different papers, or different editions for your community. You and I cannot decide. We have to listen, we have to negotiate, we have to seek ways of mutual benefit, and agree on these.

Let me end with an old Chinese saying which is particularly relevant today:

*Life is like a wild tiger
You can either lie down, and let it
Lay its paw on your head
Or you can sit on its back and ride it.*

■ *Harvey Tyson is former editor of The Star. He addressed these remarks to the Provincial Press Association in December last year.*

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