CIRCULATION: chasing the numbers can harm your profile

by *CLEO EHLERS*

IT IS traditional for newspapers in this country to look to their circulation — the raw numbers — as an indication of their success or failure. In a changing society, the social dynamics and the commercial responses to those dynamics, mean that this approach is no longer apt. Why? Very simply, when one digs more deeply into those circulation numbers, one finds such a diversity of readership in terms of attitudes and values, that very few newspapers continue to "be all things to all people".

Increasingly people are drawn to goods, services and media which appeal to their way of life and their thinking. The growth and proliferation of "niche marketing" bears witness to the extent of change in society. More and more, manufacturers and suppliers of all kinds of goods and services hone in on specific markets in order to succeed. In our own industry the growth of specialised magazines indicates that readers want information which is specific to the various aspects of their lives.

Looking for greater numbers of readers without targeting who makes up those numbers, can hurt your business, both in terms of advertising and in terms of reader loyalty.

It is becoming increasingly critical to understand what it is that makes readers tick. Knowing that they are of a certain age, income group and profession does not go far enough in understanding how to reach them. Chasing numbers is fine as long as there is a focused attempt to gain numbers of similar sorts. The direction in which a newspaper chooses to move is not that relevant to this argument. It can move upmarket or downmarket or choose the middle ground. It is, however, **vital** that the newspaper remain within the area it has chosen, in order to foster loyalty and therefore, success.

Increases in circulation are possible in more focused markets. But circulation is not the only factor for success. It is important to consider that a certain level of readership, even if it is small, can be highly lucrative. The newspaper's pricing policies can be altered to cater to an exclusive market, both in terms of cover price and in terms of advertising rates. In this way a smaller number of readers can actually deliver **better** financial returns than were previously experienced.

Often editors are afraid that if they focus the newspaper's attention on a specific segment of society, they will not be able to increase their sales or be profitable. There is sound evidence that the so-called "emerging market" is composed of fairly small numbers of people at this stage. However, these people are emerging both in the sense of growing numbers and in terms of better incomes, and better education. Their attitudes too are changing in that they are increasingly looking for more information in virtually all aspects of their lives. They are becoming more interested in a certain quality of life and are very open to new ideas. For many regional newspapers these "emerging" people would make a happier marriage with existing readers, because they have a similar view of life and look for similar things in a newspaper.

Creating synthesis in a newspaper makes a great deal of sense, editorially and commercially. It is much easier to write for a fairly homogeneous group of people and it is much easier to convince advertisers of their value. Advertisers need to know who they will be targeting and how to talk to them. There is also a greater chance of response to advertising, if the products and messages in a newspaper fit with the readers.

The million rand question then, is how to create this synthesis? Most important is to identify the current readership and to gain a deep understanding of who they are and what motivates them. Normally, demographics are used to sketch these profiles. While this approach is necessary, it is only the first step. Psychographic investigation **in addition**, is just as critical, since this "colours in" the statistics. Psychographic information provides valuable insight into readers' motivation, values and attitudes — why they behave the way they do. This should then be followed by ad hoc research into the specific needs of these readers and even into particular components of the newspaper — editors and journalists have a craft and a feeling for what they do. The role of research is merely to be the ears and eyes for the newspaper, in order to blend the key parties together.

By knowing and understanding the people behind the circulation numbers the newspaper can accurately shape the content and style of the paper. Targeting potential readers becomes easier, because the newspaper knows to whom it would appeal and can synthesise all its efforts to do so. Every aspect of the newspaper as a business, becomes clearer: from sales efforts to promotions which would be effective, to the most effective distribution strategies. Advertisers are clear on who they are talking to. Journalists are clear on who they are writing for. Readers are clear on how their newspaper fits into their lives.

At no stage have I been suggesting that newspapers must be niched in order to be effective or that they should aim for lower circulations in exclusive markets. This may be right for some and very wrong for others. I am, however, suggesting that newspapers need to be **much** more targeted and synergistic in their efforts. There is mounting evidence in numerous studies that most newspapers are **not** a mass medium. Many are in fact losing ground in their traditional markets, as they try to satisfy everyone. Readers **themselves** are telling us that they are more comfortable in a media environment which reflects and relates to their lives. Newspapers almost need to re-think themselves in order to be successful in the current information explosion. Chase the numbers, yes. But chase the numbers that would best be suited to your newspaper, the numbers which are similar to each other. Exchange the old shotgun for a new telescopic rifle.

■ *Cleo Ehlers, previously of Marketing and Media Research in Johannesburg, now operates her own consultancy, Synergistic Solutions. The primary focus of the company is media marketing.*