

When a paper ain't broke, you only fix it surreptitiously, says *Daily Dispatch* editor GAVIN STEWART.

change by stealth

THERE IS no visible reason why the *Daily Dispatch* should be the fastest growing mid-level daily in South Africa.

It has not had a major revamp, spectacular redesign or costly relaunch. It offers no discounts, big-money competitions, treasure hunts or other come-ons. It has gone through a protracted and painful conversion from a Hastech mainframe computer system to an Apple-based QPS pagination system. But ABC figures for January-June 1996 show a Monday through Saturday sales increase of 3,8 per cent to 39 147. March 1996 was the paper's best month ever, breaking an average of 40 000 for the first time.

The only other dailies to show any growth during this period were *Business Day*, up 3,2 per cent to 38 145 (avoiding Saturdays and public holidays), and the *Eastern Province Herald*, up 0,65 per cent to 31 387 on its Monday through Saturday sales. The *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, a Monday to Friday paper, recorded a phenomenal 14 per cent, rising to 7 534.

Outsiders like to use the absence of direct competition to explain the success of the

Dispatch: only in Kokstad and Umzimkulu and on the loop from Grahamstown to Port Alfred does it come face to face with rival dailies. This argument would be persuasive only if total daily sales were rising in areas where there is competition — Gauteng and parts of KwaZulu-Natal, for example. They are not.

Another set of pointers comes from a 1995-6 survey conducted by DSI for the Newspaper Press Union, "What people want from newspapers". Rated most important were accuracy of reports (87) and ease of reading (85), areas in which the *Dispatch* is unexceptional. Amount of news came next (79), a topic to which we will return in discussing our spread of news and our local/provincial political coverage. This is followed by entertainment value (68) and TV-Radio guide (63), another two areas in which the *Dispatch* does not visibly offer anything absent from other dailies.

Only with great caution should editors claim the credit for any increases in their sales. Such claims oblige them to take the blame for any decreases, which is unwise. When we draw a graph to show long-term circulation trends for newspapers operating in the same market — ABC figures go back to 1942 — we find a cor-

relation strong enough to induce humility in almost any editor. Far more significant influences appear to be the state of the economy, or people's feelings about their liquidity, and the flow of news.

The best any editor can hope to do, it seems, is to flatten the declines by a few dozen copies and steepen the inclines.

Armed with this scepticism, we can talk about changes in the *Daily Dispatch*. Before I joined the *Dispatch* in 1993, its sales figures and readership profile sounded immediate cautions for the aspirant changer. ABC figures showed that sales were better than those of any comparable newspaper, and that they had been climbing a more-or-less even staircase since at least the mid-1970s: the first six months of every year going up like risers; the second six months flattening like treads with the yearly price increase. The All Media and Products Survey (AMPS) showed a readership profile which was equally encouraging: about two thirds black and one third white. Given that the likelihood of anyone reading a daily newspaper increases with income, education and urbanisation, this seemed a fair reflection of

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Invisible design

FORTUNATELY perhaps, changing a newspaper is not easy. Since it is produced by a large and dispersed committee of people, each with a bundle of habits and attitudes, it contains a great deal of institutional inertia. Stealth strategy can benefit from these. Only by looking back three years is it possible to see that the presentation of the *Daily Dispatch* is significantly different from what it was.

The title-piece (generally but incorrectly known as the masthead) was once a robust Rockwell Extra Bold. In some distant time, and in order to accommodate ear advertisements, it was mechanically compressed without any change to the spacing between the letters. This produced a scrawny version of the original, printed in a sickly process cyan. It was awful, but it was also the trademark of the newspaper. First a touch of magenta was added and then increased, over a period of some months, to produce the richest

blue possible from only two process colours, which was all we could be certain we would have on any given day on the present press. It looked richer, but still asphyxiated. The only way out, without risking a new typeface, was to move the word "Daily" to an upper line and to letter-space the Rockwell. This was not really easy until the new Apples and the QPS system were installed early in 1996. Then the new style was tried out on the Sports pages for several weeks. There we could see what it looked like, adjust the letter-spacing, show it to management, and allow it to make its subliminal footprint on the minds of our readers. Nobody complained. Almost nobody seems to have noticed.

The change from Bodoni to Times Bold as the main headline type was accomplished with less stealth but no more comment. One day the old Hastech system was set to default all headlines to Bodoni Bold; the next day

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to Times Bold. If anybody outside the newspaper noticed, they have never said so. In the same surreptitious way we gradually dropped Perpetua from the Feature pages and replaced it with Helvetica and, most noticeably, Helvetica Black.

The riskiest change, and the one of which I am not yet wholly convinced was changing the text face from 8pt Corona on 8.5pt to 9.5 Times on 9.5. Generated on our system and printed on our press, it is as economical, even more so in some settings. But Times below 9.5 is dangerously illegible and some subs have a nasty way of dropping a size when something refuses to fit.

With one exception all typographical changes to the paper have followed the same route. The exception was dropping column rules late in 1996. On the

QPS system, inserting rules when a page is otherwise complete is a fiddle and unreliable business for page subs. It also costs valuable minutes when the circulation department and the press room are begging us to get the paper away on time. The result is not yet completely satisfactory, but the use of ruled panels and of large, fine-rule boxes in the heart of a page can overcome most of the problems which arise when column rules are abandoned.

The shift from Hastech to QPS — from bromides stripped up in Cold Type to full-page make-up — has upset the established relationships in subbing. Since younger subs tend to be more fluent computer jockeys, they tend to be laying out the pages while their seniors in age and experience edit the copy and write the headlines. The *Dispatch* experience suggests that the words are more important than the appearance of the pages and that they deserve the careful attention of senior subs. A livelier layout might have contributed to the increase in our sales by making for a more congenial reading experience, even if most readers are not conscious of much difference. But the 20 preceding years suggest that layout is not the decisive seller.



SYFRETS/SAPOA

PROPERTY JOURNALIST OF THE YEAR AWARD

The Syfrets/Sapoa Property Journalist of the Year Award aims to raise the standard of property journalism in South Africa. It will serve to recognise the individual's contribution to the better understanding of property trends and developments and the education of the public in property matters.

THE CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION ARE:

- objectivity
- responsible reporting
- subject expertise
- reliable information
- relevance
- presentation (use of medium)
- ethical standards

ENTRANCE:

Journalists who write extensively on property and related matters (eg. building and construction) on a regular basis are eligible to enter. The competition spans the period June 1996 to February 1997. Entrants should submit work published over at least five months of that period. No more than 10 examples of the entrant's best published work should be sent.

PRIZES:

There are two awards. One overall national prize winner and a regional prize winner. Regional will be restricted to publications that only operate in a certain region, such as the *EP Herald*, *Daily Dispatch*, *Daily News* and so forth. The awards will be made at the annual SAPOA convention which will be held in Sun City during May 1997.

- Overall National Winner: R10 000
- Regional Winner: R8 500

JUDGES

Neville Berkowitz (*independent property consultant*)
Francois Viruly (*JH Isaacs Properties*)
Magnus Heystek (*Independent financial consultant and freelance journalist*)
Professor Guy Berger (*Head of Department of Journalism & Media Studies, Rhodes University*)
David Rennie (*Independent management consultant*)
Tiny Barnetson (*President of SAPOA*)

DEADLINE: 28 February 1997

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the population the newspaper tries to serve.

The clearest caution was one editors might borrow from the medical profession: first, do no harm. Translated, this comes down to: first, lose no readers. Major surgery is warranted only on a newspaper in terminal condition, and then it does not guarantee survival. A further caution was that the newspaper had achieved this growth under three editors with very different styles — Donald Woods (1965 – 1977), George Farr (1977 – 1987) and Glynn Williams (1987 – 1993) — and a common passion only for local news in preference to national and international.

It was already policy that the newspaper should try to lead every day on a local story and that it should attempt to give fair coverage to all the towns, villages and hamlets in its remarkable web of delivery routes. *Dispatch* trucks cover almost two million kilometres a year, at a time when the big urban dailies are trimming down their rural sales and transport costs. A newspaper reaching Ugie or Maclear makes the journey through the night in four different vehicles, three belonging to the *Dispatch*, the fourth to a private contractor.

It also seemed to be understood that readers were interested in information about their locale and not in some confectioned version of it. Woods had given the newspaper some reputation for being non-racial which, above all else, I am concerned to preserve.

Dramatic changes in the content, appearance and character of an even moderately successful newspaper seem reckless and conceited on the part of editors, and insulting to the readers. With few exceptions, South African examples of spectacular change show the chances of losing readers are infinitely greater than the chances of attracting them. My guess is that newspapers draw from a reservoir of buyers who range from the occasional, through the frequent, to the compulsive. The best an editor can hope to achieve is to move the occasional reader to a frequent reader and the frequent reader to a daily reader, while keeping all the compulsives as compulsive as possible.

This view has guided my editorial policy at the *Dispatch*. Call it stealth strategy if you wish: the rule we have followed is to make changes in content and presentation as invisible as possible. Robin Ross-Thompson, our Deputy Editor, recalls with some amusement the day the *Dispatch* tried to conceal a price increase under the mantle of newspaper that was "new, different, redesigned, etc., etc., etc." Readers were unmoved: they still complained the crossword blank was wrong and so, too often, was the bridge diagram. Every change now made is done with the understanding that it will be tried and, if it does not work, reversed.

In the second half of 1993, South Africa was already in the midst of profound political upheaval. Our first democratic election was due in April 1994; a different Who's Who was taking

centre stage. The threat of violence from many points on the spectrum was real. A newspaper which did no more than attempt to report what was happening was going to change rapidly enough. Only later, I believe, did we come to realise that changes in provincial and local government would be at least as important to our readers as changes in the national pantheon. Daily newspapers probably have an advantage over all other media when it comes to reporting these second and third tiers of government, which are routinely ignored by the national media unless they force their way to the microphone, which is guaranteed only in times of crisis.

The regular taps we had into our readership were our daily sales, our subscriptions, and the letters basket. Apart from the obsessives who haunt all newspapers, the letters reflected a very rich spectrum of opinions, which rewarded the effort needed sometimes to distill meaning from the pens of those writers whose home language is not English. Anybody in a rural village who takes the trouble to round up paper, pen, an envelope and a stamp in order to send a letter to a newspaper deserves to be taken seriously.

Politically the paper has attempted to persuade the provincial and local governments that we are as concerned as they are to achieve good governance. In a province totally dominated by the ANC, it would be stupid to imagine that a newspaper could have much influence on voting patterns at any level. Rather than to embarrass government, our concern has been to cover corruption, lassitude and inertia as problems in need of urgent attention. Our purpose is to make government effective, not to hamper or harass it. I suspect that this is not very well understood in Bisho.

We take the view that most of our readers are passionately interested in what government is and is not doing at every level and do our best to find out and to report it, and then to give it some context and analysis. Channels of communication are still constricted, but they improve each time the provincial government pirates a member of our staff. I know that many members of the Eastern Cape government and many other readers still see the *Dispatch* as a relic of the old South Africa, hostile to their aspirations. They say so regularly in the Letters column, and saying so in speeches seems almost obligatory — although the blame is given to "the media" and never to a single publication. My guess is that most of our white readers see us as too black.

I do not take the Goldilocks view that this means our content is therefore "just right". To do so would require the assumption that there are only two views of the world and that as long as you are somewhere between them all is well. Mercifully life and newspapers are more complex than that.

Gavin Stewart is former head of the Rhodes University Department of Journalism and Media Studies.