

# READERSHIP INSTITUTE

Media Management Center at Northwestern University

April 2005

## Reinventing the Newspaper for Young Adults

A joint project of the Readership Institute and *Star Tribune*

### For more information:

Mary Nesbitt, [m-nesbitt@northwestern.edu](mailto:m-nesbitt@northwestern.edu), 847-467-4285

John Lavine, [j-lavine@northwestern.edu](mailto:j-lavine@northwestern.edu), 847-491-4900

It's the question on every newspaper person's mind: can you reinvent your core newspaper – especially its hard news content – to attract younger adult readers, or is the “mother ship” a lost cause?

Based on results from two Readership Institute studies at the *Star Tribune* in Minnesota, we urge you not to succumb to the doomsday scenario. **You can engage this group — if you're prepared to fundamentally rethink your news choices and the way you present news and advertising content.** We call this approach “editing for experience.”

Both tests, conducted with a total of 340 young adults in the Twin Cities in March 2005, show that content — hard news and advertising — handled in this reader-intensive way gets much stronger results than the current approach to telling and selling news and advertising.

How much stronger? The *Star Tribune's* experience-based prototypes outstripped the others by a roughly 2:1 ratio.

Editing for experience means, first, purposefully choosing the effects you want to create in your audience, then picking and crafting content to get those results. It applies not just to news content, but ads as well.

But haven't newspapers always edited for effect? Yes they have, but the criteria have come largely from the content creators at the newspaper, not the experiences that motivate consumers to engage with the newspaper. As the *Star Tribune's* editor Anders Gyllenhaal notes:

“Experiences are a way of converting traditional news judgment from editors’ definitions (what’s most interesting, what’s most important, what you just can’t believe happened) to readers’ definitions of how they react (what makes readers feel informed, what gives them something to talk about, what tells them the paper is looking out for their interests.)”

Editing for experience isn’t a technique brought out only on special occasions. It has to happen every day, whether the news is intrinsically vigorous and compelling or whether – as is the case on most days in most communities – it is not. Later in this overview, and in the prototypes included in this package, we’ll describe more of what that means for news and advertising.

Even if you believe the core newspaper is on an irreversible slide, don’t ignore the message from the under-30s who evaluated the current *Star Tribune* and alternative prototypes. The lessons for choosing and presenting content, we suggest, are eminently applicable to other products and platforms. If your younger customers’ readership is flat or declining, and if you do not create relevant, engaging content and powerful experiences for them on every platform, another competitor will.

## **Background to the studies**

**Choosing an audience:** Working with the Readership Institute (RI), the *Star Tribune* identified an audience on which to focus: under-30s; single or married with no children; living independently; active lifestyles; mix of white and blue collar occupations; light to moderate newspaper-reading habits.

RI interviews with members of this group revealed a respectful but distant relationship with the current *Star Tribune*. For them, the newspaper is solid but unexciting. They read it when and if their lifestyle permits. What we heard from these young adult Minnesotans is typical of what we hear from young Americans everywhere – newspapers are OK, but they don’t compel and engage.

**Choosing key experiences:** Next, the newspaper identified three “experiences” to intensify in the target audience. Experiences are the feelings, emotions and motivations that cause people to read the newspaper more (or less.) Hot buttons, in other words.

RI research in 2003-4 identified motivating and inhibiting experiences for readers of local daily newspapers. ([www.readership.org/new\\_readers/data/all\\_experiences.pdf](http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/all_experiences.pdf))

So, for the *Star Tribune* experiments it was a matter of choosing a small number of experiences with strong potential for young adults:

- Gives me something to talk about
- Looks out for my interests
- Turned on by surprise and humor

Together, the target audience and the three experiences are the criteria against which news choices and content approaches were judged. It forced the teams working on the project to ask such questions as:

- Does this Page One lineup speak to the interests of young adults?
- Have we written and presented this story in a way that will stimulate conversation?
- How can we treat this routine story in an unexpected way?
- What will make this ad so memorable that I'd be likely to mention it to a friend?

**Building and testing prototypes:** Teams worked on creating alternative front and inside pages to test with members of the target group. This was done in two stages, with several variations and different approaches to testing. For the sake of simplicity, we highlight two key results in this overview report. (Complete detail on the tests will be available at [www.readership.org](http://www.readership.org) in May 2005)

## I. The Front Page Study

Using the Tuesday, February 22 newspaper (a typical news day, with no riveting breaking news or major developing story) a *Star Tribune* team made two alternative versions of the front page and an inside page. Along with the original, the variations were shown to and evaluated by 140 members of the target audience, who were light to moderate newspaper readers.

| Prototype        | Identified to consumers as: | Description   |
|------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Original Paper   | VERSION A                   | The front page that actually ran on February 22, 2005, and an inside page.  |
| Improved Paper   | VERSION B                   | The front page and inside page included the same story choices as the Original, but the team changed the emphasis, play and approach to enhance the three chosen experiences. |
| Experience Paper | VERSION C                   | The team selected stories from anywhere in the newspaper or in that day's news budget. The three experiences drove both story choice and presentation.                        |

### Key finding:

When directly compared with the other versions of the newspaper, the Experience Paper was preferred overall by about two-thirds of the respondents, and scored much higher on almost every other criterion, including the following:

| % who select each version as.....   | Original Paper | Improved Paper | <b>Experience Paper</b> |
|---|----------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Preferred overall</b>  | 15             | 20             | <b>65</b>               |
| Is more likely to catch your attention  | 10             | 17             | <b>73</b>               |
| More visually appealing   | 8              | 21             | <b>71</b>               |
| More likely to get you to read  | 13             | 24             | <b>63</b>               |
| Is more memorable   | 11             | 26             | <b>63</b>               |
| Makes it easier for you to get information  | 15             | 22             | <b>63</b>               |
| Would cause you to mention some of the information when talking with family/friends | 16             | 21             | <b>63</b>               |
| Best story selection  | 21             | 17             | <b>62</b>               |
| Seems to look out for your interests  | 19             | 19             | <b>62</b>               |
| Makes the news more interesting to you  | 14             | 24             | <b>62</b>               |

When read and evaluated independently (i.e. not in comparison with the others) the Experience Paper also rated higher on several key general criteria, including:

| % who select each version as.....                    | Original Paper | Improved Paper | <b>Experience Paper</b> |
|--|----------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| Overall rating: good /excellent                      | 64             | 67             | <b>79</b>               |
| Recommend it to a friend: probably/ definitely       | 52             | 51             | <b>63</b>               |
| Likely to read it more often: very/extremely         | 10             | 18             | <b>27</b>               |
| Different from current newspaper: very/ or extremely | 6              | 16             | <b>26</b>               |

The Experience Paper also scored higher on several measures that gauge action readers are likely to take.

| % who say they are likely to.....       | Original Paper | Improved Paper | <b>Experience Paper</b> |
|---|----------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| Share something with friend/family      | 71             | 75             | <b>83</b>               |
| Share something with co-worker          | 53             | 58             | <b>68</b>               |
| Use information from the story          | 35             | 38             | <b>54</b>               |
| Research a topic from paper on Internet | 27             | 33             | <b>44</b>               |
| Visit the newspaper's Web site          | 29             | 30             | <b>35</b>               |

And it scored higher on two of the three experiences – which are measured by clusters of statements rather than single items – on which the *Star Tribune* chose to focus. (The exception was “looks out for my personal and civic interests” which stayed constant for all versions.) Additionally, even though “grabs me visually” was not a targeted experience, it showed a robust increase.

| Experience<br>(1-5 scale)                    | Original<br>Paper | Improved<br>Paper | <b>Experience<br/>Paper</b> |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| Gives me something to talk about             | 3.47              | 3.53              | <b>3.76</b>                 |
| Turned on by surprise and humor              | 2.95              | 3.17              | <b>3.40</b>                 |
| Looks out for my personal/civic<br>interests | 2.98              | 2.95              | 3.01                        |
| Grabs me visually                            | 2.44              | 2.69              | <b>2.89</b>                 |

### What content changes produced these results?

The *Star Tribune* team was guided by the imperative that the news they chose and how they presented it must play to or trigger the three reader-based experiences:

- **Gives me something to talk about:** Not only must the stories chosen have intrinsic “talk about it” appeal, but they should be presented – via headlines, visual images, pull-out information, ancillary material, different story forms, interactivity etc. – in ways that make enough of an impact that would cause a reader to mention something about the story to a friend, colleague, family member etc.
- **Looks out for my personal and civic interests:** Content should be framed in ways that speak directly to the concerns and interests of this group, and that reflect their faces and perspectives. The implicit message is that the newspaper appreciates and cares about who the readers are and what’s important to them.
- **Turned on by surprise and humor:** While readers expect reliability and consistency, they also respond to energy, fun and unexpected treatment of routine matters.

Editing for experience requires newspapers to get closer to their audience and to shed much of the reserve that has, in turn, spawned reader indifference.

As team leader Nancy Barnes said: “Newspapers tend to talk about topics, keeping a distance between themselves, the topic and the reader. In this experiment, we actively sought to talk to readers directly, and engage them every step along the way. That makes the newspaper seem more personal. It goes against our natural instincts, however.”

The team’s assessment of the Original Paper (prototype labeled Version A) was that few of the stories had intrinsic appeal to the target audience, the headlines were flat and third-person, and some stories were densely written and hard to understand. There were few alternative entry points – that is, the only way in was to go to the beginning of the story and start reading.

In the Improved Paper (prototype labeled Version B), the team kept the same news choices but altered the emphasis and treatment. All changes were meant to appeal to the target readers' interests; to highlight various aspects of the story; and to provide avenues for discussion or more information.

For example, the team downplayed a story about President Bush's trip to Europe (already a day old when published) and emphasized a proposal to collect DNA from any Minnesotan arrested on a felony. The Original story was a third-person, institutional account of what the legislators proposed; the Improved version (also used in the Experience Paper) spoke directly to the reader:

“If you're ever arrested for a felony in Minnesota, you may soon be asked to open wide and give a sample of your saliva along with your fingerprint.”

The Original headline “Broader DNA collection law proposed” became “License, registration and saliva please.....” Marginalia or notes at one side of the story addressed how this would affect readers; how often DNA testing is wrong; where to go for an online poll on the issue; and a pointer to a debate in the next day's paper.

While respondents rated the Improved Paper somewhat better than the Original Paper, the Experience Paper outstripped both.

The Experience Paper (prototype labeled Version C) was an opportunity to make different news choices and to present them more effectively. The team got rid of a story about a woman whose goal is to walk every street of Minneapolis. They felt it was of little interest to the target, and the consumer test later confirmed their instinct. They also jettisoned a story about local civic officials setting up blogs. (It also proved to be of low interest to target readers.)

The new stories they selected had greater appeal to the target than the ones they replaced. To look out for readers' interests and help them protect themselves, the team pulled a story about identity theft from the business section and leveraged it with a photo and refer to Paris Hilton, whose private phone numbers had just been stolen and posted on the Internet. Commented one of the study respondents, a young woman: “Even though I am not a huge Paris Hilton fan, because she is a celebrity she drew me into the article.”

The team retrieved a story about legalizing Texas Hold 'Em poker that was on the day's news budget but didn't make the paper, and developed it into the Experience Paper's centerpiece. A key to the presentation was use of the pro-con “debatable” format. The package included information about how to play and where to practice online.

The team's experience-based judgment was validated by the audience they were trying to reach. For instance, a young female respondent said in written comments: “The topics on the front page piqued my interest – especially the article about poker legislation. This paper seemed to “know” my reading style and what interested me. It was saying – read me: you will enjoy it!!”

The team also created an “In the Know” list – “5 things that will help you look smart today” – with the idea that it would be a must-read every day and provide conversation starters. Many respondents commented favorably on this feature. It was a small thing that had lots of impact.

In summary, the main techniques used were:

- Change news choices to reflect subject matter of interest to the target audience and experiences that resonate with them
- Add and highlight elements of stories that play to experiences
- Write active headlines that speak directly to readers and play to experiences
- Reframe and rewrite stories to get at “why this matters to you”
- Write shorter, clearer narratives
- Pull out facts that clog narrative flow and craft them into separate components
- Explain complicated and/or routine stories in other than narrative form

The team reported that “With each piece, we looked for breakouts and other ways of presenting information that would engage the reader, be surprising, or encourage them to talk about the story.”

Their approach connected with their audience, as the following comments about the Experience Paper overall illustrate:

“More visually engaging - the graphics and pictures seem cool and interesting. I also like how hip this one looks in general. I think it is miles better than the other two. The headlines are also more interesting.”

*-- female, 25-34, college degree*

“Seemed to cover the widest spectrum of subjects. Each article was informative but not too lengthy. Covered articles which better inform the public of both crucial and non-crucial information. Layout was easy to scan for information I was interested in.”

*-- male, 25-34, college degree*

“It seems more ‘real news’ focused. I really dislike newspapers that give all color photos and popular culture news. If I want hype I would turn on the TV.”

*-- male, 18-24, high school*

“I thought this version was more colorful and eye appealing. I was more interested in reading (the story about) poker than the story of the Miracle or the lady walking. I thought the layout was more eye-catching and I liked “In the know.” It informs you on some of the things you can look for inside. Overall, I thought the front cover was more interesting in how they laid it out. I liked the piece on missing IDs. That was very helpful.”

*-- female, 18-24, some college*



When directly compared, the Experience Ad was preferred by 67 percent of respondents. When each prototype was read independently of the other, the Experience Ad rated higher on every criterion.

| Lionsgate Diamond Corp. (1-5 scale)       | Original Ad | Experience Ad |
|---|-------------|---------------|
| Overall rating of the Lionsgate ad        | 2.16        | <b>3.08</b>   |
| Engaging ad                               | 2.90        | <b>4.32</b>   |
| Interesting ad                            | 3.02        | <b>4.32</b>   |
| Persuasive ad                             | 2.66        | <b>4.26</b>   |
| Believable ad                             | 3.38        | <b>4.18</b>   |
| Memorable ad                              | 2.38        | <b>4.04</b>   |
| Value for the money of Lionsgate diamonds | 2.20        | <b>3.04</b>   |
| Likely to buy from Lionsgate              | 1.64        | <b>2.32</b>   |

### What content changes produced these results?

The Experience Ad was re-crafted to both sell diamonds and create a memorable take-away or talking point for the consumer. It worked at getting attention through visual impact – a big diamond ring – and a minimum of text.

While the Original Ad focused on the merchant and a long detailed list of prices, the Experience Ad appealed to the investment and effort the consumer puts into such a purchase:

“Did you know? The average Minnesotan spends two months’ salary on an engagement ring. Shop with us and save yourself a month of work.”

This treatment boosted respondents’ reactions in important ways – their perception of the value of Lionsgate diamonds, likelihood of buying there, and impressions of the ad itself.

Respondents’ written comments showed why the Experience Ad worked for them:

“Visually appealing and just the right amount of text. (The Original Ad) is overwhelming and boring – I would never read it.”

-- *female, 25-34, income 50-75K*

“The big diamond catches my eye, rather than an inventory list with pricing.”

-- *male, 25-34, income 25-50K*

“(The Original Ad) was a mess! There was far too much information in the ad that I became bored with it within seconds, so didn’t even read it. (The Experience Ad) caught my attention with the two months’ salary bit.”

-- *female, 25-34, income 25-50K*

“It (Experience Ad) is more classy. Diamonds are about love and prestige. The other ad just reminds me of some pawn(shop) owner running down numbers.”

-- male, 25-34, income 75K-plus

## Conclusions and Recommendations

**Research has practical application:** The *Star Tribune* results show that intensive implementation of the Readership Institute’s experience research can produce positive outcomes with a crucial audience. When given a choice between traditional news and ad content, and news and ad content that has been intentionally chosen and presented to improve their reading experience, young adult readers clearly and strongly prefer the latter.

**More experiments in more places are needed:** The techniques the *Star Tribune* and RI used are not a pat formula for success. We’re confident there are many other creative ways to “edit for experience.” Newspapers don’t need to spend more money on more research to see if experiences matter to readers: they do. Now newspapers need to develop and test a variety of approaches to using those experiences.

The tests led Editor Anders Gyllenhaal to conclude that American newsrooms “have to move to a whole new level of experimentation. We have enormous strengths – the sheer firepower of the typical newsroom compared with other media, our tremendous command of news topics, the power of our crafts (writing, photography, design).

“But we hold ourselves back in all kinds of unproductive ways, the knee-jerk skepticism about new approaches on the front page, the worry that any experiment will diminish the paper, the basic difficulty of pulling off experiments in light of how much work it takes just to put out the paper.

“When you compare papers all across the country, they really are very much the same in so many ways. We aren’t playing around enough with different concepts, there’s no sense of creating laboratories that might lead to breakthroughs we could all use. I hope this project ends up contributing in some way to that spirit of experimentation.”

**Just settling for improvement will not get results:** It’s important to recognize that just making the kind of changes seen in the Improved Paper isn’t enough – the strong consumer response was to the Experience Paper.

Editors made different news choices for the Experience Paper, as well as significant changes to the way the news was approached and presented. This is design in the deep and comprehensive sense of the word: focusing on the reader-based effect you want to create; aiming to get and hold the audience’s attention; assigning, gathering and choosing content that plays to readers’ experience hot buttons; using presentation techniques to bolster the experiences.

**Apply experience techniques to hard news.** It's commonly and, we think, erroneously assumed that the only way to engage younger adults is through so-called softer news such as entertainment, lifestyle and sports. To be sure, these topics are encompassed in their definition of "news." But it's a mistake to think they are uninterested in hard news.

What doesn't engage them are process-focused or institutional stories, stories that seem to have no relevance to their lives, news that seems just a repetition of what they have already seen or heard, and presentation that doesn't allow them to easily access the main points.

The *Star Tribune* purposely chose the front page and inside pages of the front section for their experiments to test experience techniques on hard news. The results show it's a field ripe for innovation.

**Don't leave advertising out of the equation.** The ad study showed that editing for experience isn't limited to the newsroom – advertising content is enhanced by this approach. Previous RI research established the importance of ad content for young adult readers. Infusing more ads with the experiences that matter to these consumers is an opportunity that shouldn't be ignored.

**Implementation is tough but necessary:** How easy will it be to infuse a newspaper with experience techniques? The probable answer: "not very". But in terms of future readership and other swift-moving media competitors, the cost of not taking an experience approach to a significant proportion of the newspaper is huge.

Deputy managing editor Monica Moses said: "We settle for less than stimulating far too often. We're not honest with each other about how interesting this or that story is. We're not in consensus about "interesting" as a value, even. There are still folks who think readers ought to eat their Brussels sprouts and be grateful.

"Even if we did have consensus, the sheer volume of our work makes more consistently interesting, stimulating content impracticable. With a lot of training and rethinking, that could change. But our determination would have to be unwavering. I'm game."

**Test these approaches with older, loyal readers.** The *Star Tribune* tests were intentionally conducted only among young adult readers to establish whether it was even possible to make the core newspaper attractive to this critical group. The next logical step for newspapers considering adopting these and other techniques in a one-size-fits-all product is to test how older readers react.

RI's experience research has established that many of the motivating (and inhibiting) experiences apply to all age groups. Whether 21 or 61, readers are motivated to read when a newspaper purposefully works to "make me smarter," "look out for my interests," or "give me something to talk about." But it's reasonable to expect that some content choices and framing may differ according to age. That should be tested, but we

suspect many of the techniques used in the *Star Tribune* tests will be appreciated by older, more loyal readers as well.

The Readership Institute thanks the *Star Tribune* and The McClatchy Company for their commitment and creativity in implementing the experience research and testing the results with consumers. Special thanks to Rob Daves, director of strategic and news research at the *Star Tribune*; Anders Gyllenhaal, editor; Monica Moses, deputy managing editor; Nancy Barnes, assistant managing editor; Lisa Clausen, assistant design director, and Leslie Plessner, front-page designer. We're also grateful for the advice of Kellogg marketing professor Bobby J. Calder and Medill professor Edward Malthouse, both at Northwestern University.

**To contact RI staff who worked on the project:**

Mary Nesbitt, managing director, [m-nesbitt@northwestern.edu](mailto:m-nesbitt@northwestern.edu), 847-467-4285

Todd McCauley, research manager

Limor Peer, research associate, [l-peer@northwestern.edu](mailto:l-peer@northwestern.edu), 847-467-6578

Steve Duke, project manager, [s-duke@northwestern.edu](mailto:s-duke@northwestern.edu), 847-467-4374