

Reaching New Readers: Revolution, not Evolution

For more information:

Mary Nesbitt, m-nesbitt@northwestern.edu, 847-467-4285
John Lavine, j-lavine@northwestern.edu, 847-491-4900

Newspapers that want to forge strong bonds with younger and more diverse readers must prepare themselves for nothing short of revolution.

The Readership Institute makes that bold assertion after five years of readership research with more than 150 large and small U.S. daily newspapers, 48,000 consumers and 12,000 newspaper employees.

Revolution? Won't a minor skirmish do?

No, not in the long-term. The simple truth is that newspapers can spend too much time making improvements around the edges that only benefit older, more loyal readers. In the meantime you skirt the heart of the issue – coming to grips with what makes lighter, younger readers really engage (or disengage) with your paper.

That something is “experience” or “brand experience” – the thoughts and feelings consumers have about your newspaper and its relevance to their lives.

Lest you think experience is touchy-feely stuff that should be delegated ASAP to the marketing department and its promotion campaigns, we hasten to emphasize that experience is firmly rooted in the news and advertising you put in the newspaper and in your service, marketing and promotion.

But acting on experience goes beyond making readers more satisfied with this kind of content or that aspect of service. It's about purposefully playing to feelings and values that readers really care about and that your newspaper could really deliver.

Just think of the lifelong attachment you could build with younger readers if they came away from your news, advertising and marketing messages feeling smarter. Or equipped with something they just had to talk about with their friends. Or impressed with how the newspaper had looked out for their interests.

That's experience, and you can do a lot to make it happen.

Our New Readers research identifies eight key experiences that matter to young and diverse readers. But at the moment, newspapers are doing a pretty ho-hum job in delivering them. This is a big opportunity, if you're prepared to act boldly. Moreover each experience is relevant to core readers as well, so the benefits are widespread.

The concepts are not revolutionary, but doing something about them is. There is no how-to guide. It's not as simple as "more of x and less of y."

Acting on an experience means thinking first of the effect you want to create in your readers, and then making content, service and marketing decisions that create and support it.

Inevitably, long-held assumptions and traditions will be challenged.

- Editors must make different news choices and invent different approaches and presentations based on the experiential effects that they want to create in at-risk readers.
- Advertising directors must get more ads of certain sorts and execute them in ways that work for younger and/or diverse readers.
- Circulators and marketers must discover how to sell to powerful reader experiences that the newspaper embodies.

As we say, revolution.

We are emboldened to make this call to action because of the New Readers study, conducted in late 2003-early 2004. (It is called New Readers because newspapers' primary challenge is to build new generations of readers to replace older, heavier core readers.)

With results from 10,800 readers of 52 newspapers (a list of participating newspapers is at http://www.readership.org/new_readers/paper_list.htm) we looked at how different demographic groups "experience" their local daily newspapers. We looked for connections between current experiences and content of the newspapers, analyzing 33,000 stories and visuals, 12,000 ads and 21,000 in-paper content promotions. We looked inside the newspaper organizations to see whether the workforce, how it's managed and what the expectations are, play into readers' experiences and readership.

The report that follows is divided into three parts, which correspond with our major strategic recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Focus on the experiences you want to create in readers and let decisions cascade from this focus.

In this way you work backwards from a desired reader-experience outcome to what content you put in the paper and how it is presented, and the kind of service and marketing you deliver.

This demands a significant change in mindset across the newspaper, in both long-term and day-to-day decisions. It's easier to move straight to specific, familiar actions – such as doing more in-paper content promotion, or providing more intensely local, people-

oriented news – than it is to re-examine and probably overhaul your decision-making criteria. But the returns are greater.

Recommendation 2: Tweak less, innovate more.

Ask yourself if the changes you are considering are continuous improvement or innovation. That is, do they primarily polish various aspects of content, service and marketing? Will you do essentially what you do now but to a higher standard? Or are they bold changes or big ideas that will fundamentally change, for the better, the experiences that target groups have with the newspaper?

To stimulate your thinking, we've laid out some of our ideas about what a newspaper could do if it were to innovate around a particular experience. That scenario starts on p. 9.

Recommendation 3: Build an organization that is expected to innovate, that measures what it does and rewards progress.

The evidence is very clear that whom you have in your organization, and the environment or culture that you create, are key to your ability to respond to consumers.

Part I: Getting into readers' heads

The Readership Institute's Impact (2000) study identified four cornerstones or basic building blocks for readership – content, service, brand perception and culture.

New Readers goes a crucial step further. It identifies and describes the kind of reader experiences, or brand experiences, that the building blocks can be used to create. The research is in the context of younger adult readers, who read newspapers less than their elders; are unlikely to read more as they age without significant change on the part of newspapers; and are more racially/ethnically diverse than older generations. (The study builds on a preliminary exploration of the notion of “experience” by the Institute in winter 2003; <http://www.readership.org/consumers/NewsExp.htm>)

Experiences are thoughts and feelings consumers have about your newspaper and its relevance to their lives.

Some experiences come from things over which the newspaper has no control – for instance a person's background that instilled a love of reading or a passion for current events. (Not surprisingly, the most powerful experience readers have with a newspaper is “enjoy reading.”)

But with many others, newspapers have great opportunities to intervene and enhance readers' feelings and reactions. If you can substantially drive experiences that motivate readers' usage, you can grow readership.

High-reading and low-reading experiences

The New Readers study identifies 34 distinct experiences. Of those, 22 are positively related to readership – the more people have them, the higher their readership – and are called Motivators. The rest are negatively linked – the more people have them, the lower their readership – and are called Inhibitors. A full list is at http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/all_experiences.pdf

Building the Motivators and reducing the Inhibitors will strengthen readership.

Here's a key point: there is plenty of room to move. Overall, readers have a fairly tepid experience with their local daily newspaper. Moreover, our content analysis shows that newspapers take a pretty similar approach to what they publish and how it is presented.

Together, these findings tell us that newspapers must take bold, noticeable, strongly marketed steps to significantly change those experiences and build reader engagement.

Thirty-four experiences are too many to contemplate, let alone tackle, at once. We pared the list to eight key experiences that hold promise for readers in general and for younger adults, African-Americans, Hispanics/Latinos and Asians/Pacific Islanders in particular.

There are many synergies among the eight experiences: Intensify one and it can have beneficial effects on others.

More detail on the eight key experiences is at http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/key_experiences.pdf. We strongly recommend you spend time getting familiar with all the consumer-based feelings expressed.

The chart below summarizes the key points.

Experience	What it means	Examples of consumer statements	Our observations
Something to talk about (Motivator)	People use the newspaper as a socializing device – telling others about what they’ve read, discussing news with friends and family, acting as information brokers.	“I bring up things I’ve read in this newspaper in conversations with other people.” “I like to give advice and tips to people I know based on things I’ve read in this newspaper.”	Make it the focus of innovation. Not only is it a powerful driver for readership, but you have the resources to leave other media in the dust. Young, white adults are experiencing it the least of all groups.
Makes me smarter (Motivator)	The newspaper helps people get more out of life and learn new things.	“Even if I disagree with things in this newspaper, I feel like I have learned something valuable.” “It is a way to learn about new products.” “I learn about things to do or places to go.”	Build it and you’ll enhance “something to talk about,” too. An especially strong readership driver for African-American women. Younger, less-educated readers are least likely to feel the newspaper makes them smarter.
Looks out for my civic and personal interests (Motivator)	The newspaper helps people take part in the community and also acts as a watchdog for the community.	“It gives me ideas about how to help in the community.” “I count on this newspaper to investigate wrongdoing.” “Reading this newspaper makes me feel like a better citizen.”	Readers value what a journalism-based business values: being citizens as well as consumers. Perfect! Now, really deliver on it. Young people are less likely to have this experience with newspapers than their elders; white people more likely than non-white.
Discriminates and stereotypes (Inhibitor)	The newspaper’s interest in minorities is mostly commercial, and it perpetuates stereotypes.	“This paper has a history of discrimination against minorities.” “They only target minorities for their money.”	African-Americans feel this most of all, followed by Asians/Pacific Islanders and Hispanics/Latinos. It inhibits readership most strongly among 18-24 year olds.
Ad Usefulness (Motivator)	The newspaper is a marketplace for goods and services, and acts as a guide for what’s out there.	“I like the ads for unusual things.” “It makes me want to go shopping.”	Younger adults more likely to feel this way than their elders.

Value for my money (Motivator)	Whether through direct savings or other forms of enrichment, the newspaper is worth the price.	“I save more money from its ads and coupons than I spend on the paper.” “Even if this newspaper cost twice as much as it does now, I would still read it.”	Hispanics/Latinos and African-Americans feel this more than white people. “Value for my money” is a strong driver for 18-24 year olds.
Good service (Motivator)	The newspaper is reliably available and in good shape.	“I always get it when I want it.” “I always get the newspaper in good condition.”	While all groups have a positive experience with service overall (it has the highest rating of eight key experiences), it still has strong potential to drive more readership.
Too much (Inhibitor)	People feel the newspaper is daunting – too much in it and stories are too long.	“I wish the newspaper had fewer pages.” “Too many of the stories are too long.”	Young people, especially 18-24 year olds, are more likely to have this reaction than other groups.

In summary, experiences are powerful, consumer-based realities that our research has identified, quantified and validated. They apply to magazine-reading as well, with many similarities and some important differences. (See <http://www.medill.northwestern.edu/faculty/malthouse/ftp/magexp.html>)

And there are many other reasons to pay attention:

- Experiences are highly predictive of readership – more predictive than satisfaction with content, for instance.
- Preliminary research shows that newspapers that deliver stronger motivating experiences also give a boost to the impact of the ads in their pages. (See <http://www.medill.northwestern.edu/faculty/malthouse/ftp/geneva.html>)
- Acting on experiences requires a deep understanding of how consumers feel that can't be gleaned from data in a questionnaire. It will force you to talk, frequently, with at-risk customers – the ones you need to develop to ensure future readership – and act on what you hear. It will help your newspaper become more reader-focused.
- Consumer experiences reveal many intersections between what consumers value and what a journalism-based enterprise values. There are also many disconnects.
- Focusing on the effect you want to create in consumers will make you re-evaluate everything you do. It will change the way you make and sell the newspaper.

For suggestions on how to do an internal audit on the experiences your newspaper currently delivers, and how to assess whether changes are working, see:

http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/auditing_experiences.pdf
http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/measuring_results.pdf

Part 2: Improve vs. Innovate

If experiences are such a powerful force for readership, how can you intensify them?

There are two options. One is to take cues from what is currently creating experiences – for instance, certain kinds of content and techniques for presenting them – and to do more of the same.

The other is to innovate. Innovation is about creating and implementing big ideas, currently not in play, that will substantially change the experience for the better for groups the newspaper wants to reach.

Here's an example of the difference. Doing more in-paper content promotion – such as skyboxes or rails – on the front page is an improvement. Turning the front and back pages into a combined physical and content “wrap” – a digest of all the news in today's paper – is an innovation. The first action is a navigational tool that helps readers choose what they read. The second is both a guiding device and a new experience – a quick but thorough tour of today's news. Both combat the “too much” experience, but in very different ways.

We glean insights into improvement by looking at the eight key experiences and the elements of content and service that currently drive them. That detail is provided in http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/content_service_drivers.pdf

For instance, it is clear that for younger adults a mix of content – in particular hard news, feature and lifestyle news, movies and music, and ads about places to go and things to do – currently helps create the experiences “something to talk about,” “makes me smarter” and “looks out for my personal and civic interests.”

In terms of approaches to that content, dynamic visuals (such as number of photos, who's in them, action photos) have a strong effect on experiences. And within those broad content categories, specific topics – such as environment news, health news and recreation advertising – have untapped potential.

But we must reiterate that improving what newspapers do now will bring only limited success, because it focuses only on the current range of possibilities. In other words, don't do essentially the same things and expect to get substantially different results.

Remember that readers generally have tepid experiences with newspapers. Moreover, content analysis shows that newspapers, regardless of market, tend to take similar approaches to defining and presenting news and advertising content. (See results of the content analysis at http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/content_analysis.pdf)

From this we infer the greatest opportunity for newspapers lies in innovation.

A picture of an experience-driven newspaper

There is no template to follow. To stimulate your thinking we'll lay out some of our ideas about how your newspaper could innovate around an experience. For simplicity's sake, we'll focus mostly on the mainsheet with its current sectional structure.

First, we establish simple central ideas that will guide our tactics. The **consumer experience** that animates our newspaper is “something to talk about.”

- We've listened to readers describe their lives, how they use news and how they use our newspaper, and realize that for many people, of all ages, news is a socializing tool. They use it to connect with others. So our newspaper will provide a high proportion of content that people can't get anywhere else, with a strong quotient of “did you see that [story/photo/column/ad] in the Hometown Gazette today?”

Our **internal values** also shape what we do.

- We value straight (but civil) talk, debunking myths, simplifying the unnecessarily complicated, respecting our readers' time and making our community a better place to live.

These two principles are reflected in everything from the way we write stories and headlines, to our relationships with customers, to the causes the newspaper embraces.

Next, how will we make **news content** more of a “something to talk about” experience?

From the vast array of locally assigned and news service material available, editors will make at least 50 percent of their news choices (both stories and visual elements) on a single criterion: Will they produce a strong “did you see this story/photo in the newspaper?” reaction among our target readers.

If any story does not have a strong and clear “why you should care” element, it does not run. Wherever possible, we also include “what you can do about it” information.

Starting at the assignment stage, we approach most government or institutional stories and visuals with a focus on what the event, action or policy means to readers, rather than what happened.

We shoot and choose photos that are rich in meaning and show people and activity. They're not decoration – they tell stories that are worth telling. We make liberal use of standalones, with ample, informative cutlines.

All significant stories carry a prominent box asking readers what else they want to know or see about the story. They can tell us by phone, e-mail or snail-mail. Every day we use this input to help shape follow-up stories and visuals. But we're not just reactive – we maintain an online panel of readers in our target groups, and ask them daily what we

should be doing on key news stories and issues. (Are they dictating content? No, they're sharpening our news instincts and our news report. They're providing intelligence from the field.)

Most of the time we handle "commodity news" – news readily available in other media or likely to be dated by the time it appears – in briefs packages. We reserve full story/package treatment for news that is unique, or where we can put a compelling, differentiated angle or perspective on important news that happened yesterday.

We realize only a small percentage of our readers follow news developments in ongoing stories as doggedly as we do, so we handle them in an "update" fashion. That is, we either brief them in a column or package, or if we are giving full story treatment, we dress them with an update background box. Both formats are backward- and forward-looking, telling readers succinctly what's happened and what's likely to happen next.

We give major stories and personalities follow-up treatment after they have fallen from the active news agenda. In fact, we require reporters, photographers and editors to keep track of stories they've covered or handled that will make good candidates for follow-up some time down the road. We solicit "whatever happened to" ideas from readers and we encourage (with prizes and recognition) employees from all departments to contribute ideas.

Every day, in every section, we take at least one story or issue and present it in a "debatable" format. We lay out different sides of a controversy, simply and clearly, without taking sides. We ask readers what they think, and tie this to a news discussion Web site that we've started (see below).

We often hear readers say how they lack the background to follow complicated stories. So several times a week we select one of those and explain its essentials – briefly and as simply as possible – with words and/or graphics. The challenge is to simplify without over-simplifying or misrepresenting. We use this technique in all sections, using our best writers and thinkers to show how it's done.

We regularly highlight "quick fixes" or physical improvements that will make the community a more pleasant and safer place to live. You might dismiss this as a cosmetic approach. But we want to balance the in-depth reporting we do on complex social, economic and infrastructure ills with things people can see, feel and touch immediately.

Our front page is never a reprise of yesterday's TV or radio news. To the extent that we have any of those reports, they are updates or different angles. At least 75 percent of stories and visuals are unique to the newspaper. At least one story is intrinsically a "talker."

At least half of our headlines are engaging, pointed, punchy or sell the story, rather than simply descriptive. We rarely use label heads.

We've re-thought some beats to discover different kinds of news. At least two are centered on populations (such as under-35s) rather than institutions or topics. We staff them with visual and word people whose mission is to find content about the lives, issues and matters of importance to these groups. They're also on the lookout for people who would be strong contributors to the newspaper and our discussion Web site.

We established a "talk about it" beat, based on what readers (especially in the target groups) are talking about and what they want to know. Sounds corny, right? But the best way to get good new material is to put creative, savvy, open-minded journalists on the case. Readers generate story ideas and ask burning questions and whenever possible we credit them with the ideas. Internally, we encourage all newspaper departments to contribute.

We've developed two strong local daily news columnists, and one each in lifestyles, entertainment and sports. They have a challenging mandate: to discover news about things that matter to our target audiences before they comment, and to write in a way that gives readers "something to talk about." They also participate in the newspaper discussion Web site, below.

We're working on developing an easy way for readers to e-mail information – stories, photos, graphics, coupons, ads – to a friend or family member without having to search through the Web site.

On to **Advertising**. We showcase members of the targeted audience in the ads we create or can exert influence on – local people who are shopping for the product in our advertisers' stores or who comment on the product/service.

Wherever possible, we provide "go-and-do" stimulus with times, locations, demonstrations, product comparisons and so forth. We're aware that readers, especially younger adults, are turned off by information clutter and like to do research and comparison shopping online, so ads also refer readers to Web-based information.

We feel we've ceded some turf to television and magazines, so we focus on creating ads that not only push "buy" elements such as price or promotion, but have a strong "why" effect. We challenge our advertising creators to make content that is so clever and arresting that it will generate buzz among target readers as well as results for advertisers. And we use in-paper content promotion to point to this advertising.

We've begun a "real deals" feature that highlights value on selected products or services that our newspaper advertisers are offering and that are of interest to our reader target groups.

In **Service** we've introduced loyalty pricing, so that now our most loyal customers get the best subscription offers. We've stopped ramping-up practices that just encouraged people to churn. This was a very scary step, but the significant changes in content made the

value much more apparent and attractive to new readers. And we've been able to ballyhoo this real revolution in pricing in our marketing campaigns.

When we promote other aspects of customer service, we make a point of highlighting customers – ordinary people – who have been surprised and delighted by the treatment they received.

Every three or four months, we gather our most talkable or talked-about stories and visuals into a special section. It's a bonus for current readers and we use it as a marketing piece for prospective customers.

We haven't forgotten **affiliated media**. We've developed what we call a populist Web log that is seeded and moderated by "experts" (us), but most of the conversation is among readers. It's a combination of selected news posts with commentary, and interactive features. The target is 18-34-year-olds who like to discuss current events. (We think a key to our future is showing news can be fun and engaging and interactive.)

Among the interactive features we've included:

- Readers forecast outcomes to current issues or events.
- Readers predict ideas and products that will become mainstream.
- Readers put themselves in the shoes of political, judicial, business, sports or cultural decision-makers who currently face a tough issue. What would they decide and why?
- Readers untwist the spin of the day/week.

The best of this Web log runs daily in the print newspaper. You can read more about the blog idea at http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/website_innovation.pdf

Now You Take the Plunge

We're certain you'll have little trouble coming up with innovative ideas to build experiences – and readership – among the groups you want to reach. Moreover, they will be far more inventive and far-reaching than the examples we've given.

But be prepared to implement many of them, not just one or two, if you want them to be noticed by readers and to change their experiences.

Don't bury them.

And market them.

Part 3: An organization ready, willing, able – and expected – to innovate

The third campaign in the experience revolution has to be waged inside.

Newspapers that want to act boldly and effectively on consumer experiences need to build an organization that:

- **Has a strategic focus on readership.** Without a readership strategy, with specific goals and targets, newspaper employees won't have a context to guide their activities.
- **Expects continuous innovation in the service of readership.** If innovation isn't made part of the stated expectations for departments and individuals, newspapers will do essentially the same things and get substantially the same results.
- **Rewards readership growth.** If the reward and recognition system doesn't focus on readership, employees will logically conclude it's really not a priority.

Reader/customer focus, expectations and rewards are all part of a newspaper organization's culture, or "the way we do things around here."

They and many other culture components were analyzed in the New Readers study, using input from 6,600 employees at all levels and every department of the newspaper. The data were also analyzed by gender, age, race/ethnicity, length of tenure with the organization and position in the newspaper. For more details, see http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/how_to_read_culture_report.pdf and http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/industry_culture.pdf

In addition, we collected workforce data from each newspaper (http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/workforce_census.pdf) and constructed a measure of employee engagement (http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/employee_engagement.pdf)

The results are very clear. Newspapers that get better readership results now and are better positioned to make change for the future tend to have constructive, adaptive cultures. They have better management practices. They tend to have greater diversity in race and/or gender, both in the workforce generally and in positions of influence.

All but five of the 48 newspapers that completed the internal culture surveys are characterized by defensive cultures, where risk-taking is not encouraged and cross-departmental collaboration is infrequent. (And although the Impact 2000 and New Readers studies are not directly comparable because of the different methods used in selecting markets, we note the results are consistent.)

Constructive cultures, by contrast, are more customer-focused, adapt more quickly to changes in the market and are able to collaborate across departments.

Their employees are more engaged – that is, they’re not only present for work and performing to standard, but often perform above standard and are deeply involved in crafting the newspaper’s future. Throughout this report we’ve stressed the big opportunities for newspapers to enhance readers’ experiences; the opportunities are just as great *inside* the newspaper to intensify their employees’ experience, or their engagement.

A constructive culture is neither an ironclad guarantee nor a necessary pre-condition for higher readership. But both Impact and New Readers showed a strong relationship between newspapers that had weaker defensive behaviors and stronger constructive behaviors and general readership. And in New Readers, readership among under-served groups was higher, and some of the key experiences were also more strongly felt.

Further, we suggest that if a newspaper is change-resistant and not tuned in to customers, bold and timely innovation is unlikely – at least within the core organization. But if employees at all levels are expected to be reader/customer-focused and if risk-taking is rewarded, conditions are more hospitable to innovation.

We tested this notion by developing a “readiness to innovate scale” from the New Readers organizational data. (For details, see http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/readiness_to_innovate.pdf)

The highest-scoring papers have these things in common:

- They are more constructive and less defensive than the rest.
- They are more attuned to the marketplace.
- They are quicker to react to changes in the market and in customers.
- Their employees are much more “engaged” with the newspaper.
- They are better at articulating the mission and involving employees in decisions that affect them and the business.
- They provide more training and development.
- They have a higher proportion of female and non-white employees.
- They have a higher proportion of female and non-white employees in positions of influence.

But even “the best” have much room for improvement – there are no models from this study that we recommend others should emulate. But the direction is clear: change the culture not just because it’s the nice or right thing to do, but because it will also enable you to win new readers.

If you have any questions or comments about this report and its recommendations, or about other New Readers reports, don’t hesitate to contact us at institute@readership.org
For a full list of downloadable New Readers reports, go to:
http://www.readership.org/new_readers/all_reports.asp