DIGGING DEEPER INTO READERS' RELATIONSHIP TO THE NEWSPAPER

Research on Redesign and New Product Development to the Newspaper.

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Research can be the secret of success or it can be the undoing for newspaper redesign. I've had the opportunity to talk with hundreds of newspaper researchers and marketing professionals over the past several years – as clients, or as participants in seminars I've conducted at The American Press Institute. When we talk about newspaper redesign and new product development, I hear some common themes.

The amount of product research has grown significantly. Two reasons account for this growth. First, newspapers have more resources to spend on research and development. Second, newspapers know they need what research can offer.

Last year, I conducted a survey of publishers and CEOs for The American Press Institute. Almost 300 top executives responded to the mailed survey which addressed the current state of the industry, the outlook for the future, the evaluation of newspaper operations, and the vision for how newspapers will meet changing demands and challenges.

One of the main findings in this survey is the priority top newspaper executives are putting on data-driven marketing decisions.

- The greatest threats to the industry, according to publishers and CEOs, are exactly the areas where research can be the most helpful, addressing: competition for readers' time, competition for advertising dollars, and competition from non-traditional media.
- One of the most common critical needs identified by publishers and CEOs is understanding broad principles and market forces affecting newspapers.

Because of these interests, newspapers are stepping up redesign and new product development projects with a fervor I didn't see earlier in the decade. Besides the traditional focus groups and surveys, newspapers are using some additional tools to assist in new product development.

Benchmarking. Newspapers are increasingly interested in looking for signs of success from readers as well as advertisers when they launch a new product. They are therefore doing more pre-test/post-test surveys to assess reader interest in the topic and evaluation of the current product so they can chart any change that could be attributed to the new product. Benchmarking is a harder test for a new product than just asking readers to evaluate the new product after the fact. However, this is the kind of hard data publishers hunger for.

One-on-one interviews. On a per-respondent basis, this is expensive research. However, taking the time to truly follow one person's logic from beginning to end is the best way to identify key reader concerns. I especially like this format in highly competitive markets. In the course of an hour with a person who reads both newspapers, an interviewer can learn a great deal about how the two newspapers compare and contrast, and where the strengths and weaknesses lie. After ten hours with ten such respondents, the common themes emerge, providing grist for the quantitative mill. This method also works when you can identify a group of "elite" users of a part of the newspaper. For example, if you are redesigning the business section, it might be fruitful to interview a handful of business leaders in a one-on-one format to find out how they use the section, what is missing, and how they might respond to proposed changes. These sessions can prove enormously helpful because these readers are typically more articulate about what works and what doesn't work with the product.

Story-level tracking. This last item is not in common use in newspapers, at least not yet. But, I see the interest level growing. Editors and reporters who listen to reviews of major market studies of their products are often frustrated by the lack of depth. On the basis of an inventory of content interests, they cannot always translate the rankings into story strategy. A study that tests readership and interest in specific stories across a number of issues could help newsroom staff get a deeper understanding of how the newspaper works for readers and how different types of stories within categories succeed or fail to live up to readers' needs and expectations. Magazines, which publish less frequently, have the luxury of getting story-level content feedback from readers. I've seen first-hand the fruits this can bear for editors. Again, this is the kind of harder data that can help drive the decision-making process publishers say they want.

The theme these approaches have in common is the increased depth they provide for understanding the relationship between readers and news products. The mistake these approaches avoid is in covering vast territory at a superficial level.

But, let me end with a note of caution about the pitfalls I still see newspapers falling victim to. Research is a process of measuring the match between readers and products. Newspapers have been struggling with the question of how to change their existing product to be a better match to readers who do not currently fit the product. This is a dangerous approach to product design, akin to the "new Coke" calamity. If you change your existing product so dramatically (in an effort to attract new readers) that current readers no longer fit the product, then the newspaper cannot survive. Better to think about new products – separate from the core product – to reach out to new readers.

After using invalid research methods (notably the in-paper "poll"), this is one of the common mistakes newsrooms make when they plan research for product development or redesign: They want to focus exclusively on potential new readers at the expense of understanding their current core customer base. So, even as research helps newsrooms push deeper into the specifics of the relationship between reader and product, sound decisions are also always a matter of wise judgment.