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How to Hire "Reader-Oriented" People

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Newspapers that are more reader-oriented tend to have higher readership. That is, newspapers that make a point of learning as much as they can about their reading customers and acting on this knowledge see positive results in higher readership.

It makes sense, then, that newspapers should hire and promote people who understand and act on the principle that readers are the primary focus, or have the potential to be trained and developed toward this focus.

But how do you do that? Often, newspapers are more concerned about whether the applicant has the necessary technical skills and competencies. As a participant at a Readership Institute seminar remarked: "I want to create a reader-oriented culture, but how do I hire reader-oriented employees? Usually we're just happy to find someone who can do the basic job."

It's a good question. This report discusses ways of discerning whether new and existing employees have the skills or potential to help make your newspaper more reader-focused.

Characteristics of a reader-oriented newspaper

Newspapers that are reader-oriented put a strong emphasis on learning everything they can about their customers — their lives, needs, habits and expectations. They seek customer feedback in many ways. They monitor changes, trends and developments in the marketplace and are attuned to their competitors.

Information isn't hoarded among a select few, or in a particular department — it is shared throughout the organization. This is done bottom-up and sideways as well as top-down. They use that information to plan responses — changing what's in the newspaper, improving its services and so on. Finally, they are able to put the plans into action in a timely way, and they measure the results to create new learning. And they do these things continuously.

To be this kind of organization, newspapers need people who are willing to put customers first, who seek out new knowledge about customers and the community, who are willing communicators and share what they know, and who can take actions based on what they know.

Preparing for the interview

To get these kinds of people, newspapers should develop a picture of what a reader-oriented hire would look like in action.

Before starting the interview process, first arrive at a clear understanding of the job and the characteristics necessary to fulfill it. Customarily, this means identifying the responsibilities of the job and determining the qualifications and skill. The Institute recommends that you add another important element:

Identify behaviors or attitudes that are critical to the reader/customer orientation aspects of the job for which you are hiring.

As you develop a list that meets your own unique requirements, consider the following attributes that come from RI research and discussions with the leaders of reader-oriented newspapers. (Many of them will also drive to other requirements of the job.)

- Respects readers and customers
- Deals with others in a friendly and pleasant way
- Shows understanding of the needs of others
- Uses listening and careful questioning to draw people out.
- Takes time with people
- Can say "I'm sorry — we goofed," and mean it
- Communicates information and ideas about improving the reader/customer experience
- Has curiosity about the community and a desire to learn more
- Freely shares information he/she has picked up on the job or in the community with colleagues
- Knows the business — its economic model, goals, who its customers are, its role in the community
- Offers ideas about putting reader/customer knowledge into action in ways that will benefit the business
- Thinks in unique and independent ways
- Shows a desire to improve personal and functional skills that will also benefit readers/customers
- Shows dedication to and enthusiasm for serving a public

When establishing performance expectations for the job in question, be sure to include the reader orientation dimension.

Let's imagine that you are considering external and internal candidates for a mid-level editing job. The editor will be responsible for assigning and coaching reporters who cover several local beats and editing their work. Beyond those basic responsibilities, though,

you want the editor and his/her team to focus on more stories that will be of interest to young families, because this group has been identified as a target for increasing readership. You also want the team to move away from reporting on the decisions and actions of institutions and toward the impact on and importance of these decisions to "ordinary people."

It will be hard for the team to reach those highly reader-oriented goals. None of the team members fit the demographic target, and although the newspaper has lots of data about its readers and their interests, none of it has been shared below the management group level. Reporters have never sat behind the one-way mirror walls of a focus group and listened to readers talking about their coverage. Traditionally, the newsroom has valued its "paper of record" and "watchdog" reputation, covering as many meetings as it can get to and quoting the decision-makers.

The successful editor will be able not just to understand who the target readers are, but to help the team get to know them, their lives, their concerns and their information needs intimately. Something to probe in the interview is what specific things he/she would do, what actions he/she would take, to engender this knowledge. Similarly, what specific actions would he/she take to show reporters that a different approach to stories is more popular with the target readers?¹

Conducting the interview

It is estimated that the cost of "mishires" ends up being between two and four times the employee's salary.² Wrong hires often are the result of weak interviewing processes. To increase the chances of hiring truly reader-oriented applicants, interviewers should strive to accomplish two objectives:

- Create an interview environment that enables applicants to express their true attitudes toward and opinions about customers
- Establish an evaluation process that enables the interviewer(s) to compare and rank applicants on customer orientation

Entry level vs. experienced applicants

It is important to recognize that while the behaviors and attitudes mentioned earlier are critical regardless of the job level, you are really looking for something different in entry-level hires vs. experienced employees.

With lower-level new hires, you are buying potential. It is not as important that applicants have demonstrated mastery of reader-oriented skills as it is that they show a willingness to learn them, compatibility with colleagues and managers, and an inclination to serve readers. Scenario questions about what the applicant would do given a particular situation, or a discussion about reader-oriented attitudes and opinions, are most appropriate for these interviews.

For experienced hires, much more weight should be placed on actual behavior in previous situations that are relevant to reader orientation. Applicants should be able to provide specific examples of the skills, attributes and work styles that lend themselves to or demonstrate reader orientation.

Set an agenda for the interview

As time is limited in an interview, do not spend precious minutes covering basic facts and items that are already outlined in the résumé, cover letter or job application. (Those documents can, however, provide valuable clues to issues you do want to explore in the domain of reader orientation. Consider our example of the candidate for the mid-level editor's job. In her résumé she mentions that she helped develop and implement a weekly community news section for her former newspaper. Use this as an entry to discuss how reader information played into the concept, implementation and evaluation of the section and what her active role was in these stages.)

Use the interview time to get a sense of how the candidate would actually perform on the job. Make an agenda – a list of the most important issues you want to cover – because it is easy to get sidetracked in an interview.

Choose a more structured interview style

In an unstructured interview, the interviewer does not have a prepared agenda, and relies on the flow of the conversation to provide a "gut-level" reaction to the applicant's potential fit. This style may not provide the information needed for making a good decision, based on qualities that were assessed across all candidates. An unstructured format makes it difficult to compare applicants and can result in a hire that is based on mood or chemistry.

Interviews need not be rigid to be structured, but it is important to maintain a core set of common elements when interviewing multiple candidates. It can either be one-to-one or involve a panel of interviewers. It ensures the same questions are asked of each individual, but also gives you the scope to put more tailored questions to the individual concerned as appropriate.

Examining past behavior to identify key skills

Behavior description is a process that allows applicants to share specific events from their past. Some experienced interviewers use an acronym called EAR-event, action, and result – in asking the candidate to describe a relevant event, to tell how he/she responded, and to share the results of that action. For example: "Tell me about a time a reader got angry at you. What did you do and what happened as a result?"

In listening to the reply, the interviewer isn't looking for a prescribed, "correct" way of handling the situation. The intent is to check for:

- Evidence that there has been this sort of interaction in the applicants' working life. Has the applicant been cut off from or avoidant of interactions with customers? Is he/she unaware that readers have a "right" to be angry on occasion and newspaper employees have an obligation to deal with that? (If the applicant's experience to date has been working solely with internal rather than external customers – i.e. serving other departments – revise the scenario for a comparable internal situation.)
- Evidence of appropriate kinds of motivation and action. Was the applicant primarily concerned about showing that the problem was not his/her fault? Or was the focus on solving the problem? Does the applicant self-describe as an innocent victim or acknowledge responsibility for the misunderstanding? Did the applicant effectively understand the problem and show appropriate empathy? What else did the applicant offer besides a sympathetic ear?
- Evidence that the response had a positive result. Was there follow-up within the department/company to improve practices if appropriate? Did the applicant keep the interchange to him/herself? Was there follow-up with the complainant? Can the applicant identify the results of his actions? Articulate key lessons learned from the experience? See things from the other party's point of view?

The "what if" technique

In a situational or "what-if" analysis, the interviewer creates a scenario and asks how the applicant would respond. Once again, there is no single correct set of responses – you are looking for signs of attributes and attitudes that are integral to the job.

Let's say you are interviewing for a general assignment reporting job. One of the requirements of the job is to spend a certain amount of time getting to know readers, their interests and their expectations of the newspaper through face-to-face meetings and conversations.

Clearly this is a far different activity than the role of the detached observer, digging up news stories, interviewing sources and writing for the next day's paper. You want the reporter to be able to engage with the "consumers" of his/her work. The reporter is expected to share the information with colleagues and, over time, use this collective information to help shape his/her reporting, focus and approach.

You might introduce the subject by saying: "I know of a newspaper that asks its reporters to spend an evening every month just going door-to-door, in different sections of the town each time, simply talking to readers to learn about community issues and concerns. What do you think about that practice?"

The interviewer is looking for signs that the applicant understands the importance of getting reader feedback; respects and values what they have to say; is willing to exchange information with colleagues; and is willing to let reader feedback affect his/her work. If the applicant expresses concern about certain aspects of the specific scenario, ask how

he/she would improve the practice, or substitute another one to get comparable or better value.

Here's another one. Let's say you are interviewing for a local news editor's job. One of the responsibilities is to decide what qualifies as "news" and whether or not to run certain stories. You present a candidate with the following scenario: "You ran a story in your section about a local politician's decision to run for re-election. A reader calls to express her dislike for the politician and to complain that you gave space to the story. How do you respond?"

Here the interviewer is looking for how well the candidate can think on his/her feet to come up with an appropriate response to a complaint. Answers along the lines of "We aren't responsible for the politician's actions, we just report the news" may be true, but it indicates a lack of customer finesse and an unwillingness to engage with the reader. In this case, even if the paper bears no "responsibility" for the caller's outrage, an appropriate response would be to simply provide a listening ear and demonstrate some interest in what she has to say.

Another appropriate response would have the editor explaining — not in an excusatory way, but just as a matter of explanation — how he/she tries to make sure that all candidates for office get an equal and fair shake. The interviewer should look for a response that is likely to leave the reader feeling that she had been given a hearing, and had been treated with respect and consideration.

A practical tip — finding the applicant's passions

Techniques from other customer-focused businesses can help newspapers discover whether existing or prospective employees really enjoy uncovering customer's concerns and desires and turning those findings into strategies for improving the paper – or whether, as you interview them for jobs, they are just telling you what you want to hear. The following excerpt from the Nation's Restaurant News³ describes a technique for determining what an applicant is passionate about:

Where do you find passion on a resume? The answer usually begins at the end of your candidate's résumé, the section in which he lists his hobbies and outside interests. Many interviewers ignore that information, feeling that it has little to do with work or professional responsibilities. However, a person's primary hobby typically is his passion. It is something he does merely because he loves it, not because he has to do it. The more you can learn about how a candidate relates to his true passion, the better you will be able to evaluate him as a potential employee. Is golf on par with the job? Let's say your candidate, Bill Smith, lists golf as the first of his hobbies. Chances are that he loves golf. And when he talks about golf, he reveals his passionate side. Soon after he arrives at your office, after pleasantries have been exchanged, you should say something like: "I see you're a golfer. Where do you usually play?" Some follow-up questions will keep

him talking about his handicap, the brand of clubs he uses, who his favorite pros are, and so on.

As several minutes go by, you have an opportunity to see how Smith sounds and acts when he is talking about something he loves. Notice the gleam in his eye, the way his voice sounds when he's excited, the way he sits up and gestures. He most likely will be animated and emotionally involved in what he is saying.

While Smith speaks, you should catalogue mentally the way he sounds and looks and watch for those things when you discuss the various aspects of the position for which he is being interviewed. He should look and sound as involved with work issues as he does about his hobby. A truly passionate employee will have the same excitement in his voice, the same look in his eye and the same body language whether he is talking about playing golf, increasing sales, motivating people or preparing quarterly reports. If you see those similarities, you may have found your next outstanding employee. If not, you may be looking at an average performer.

Just remember that we don't learn if someone is passionate merely by asking him. After all, we wouldn't expect any serious candidate to tell us that he wasn't passionate about his work. Instead of asking a pointless question, we give him the opportunity to demonstrate his level of passion about his work.

Additional interviewing techniques

Other techniques can be used to help you assess specific traits or skills you are looking for.

Role-play. This takes "what-if" questioning a step further, placing the interviewer and the candidate into real-time play-acting. It can provide indications of a candidate's abilities to sell, communicate and manage objections. You can select scenarios or situations that highlights a particular skill or attribute you want to examine closely. Role-playing can also show how well an individual performs under pressure.

Problem-solving exercises. These provide an opportunity to examine the applicant's thought processes, ability to understand information and make decisions. For example, you could discuss an ongoing customer-related problem and have applicants articulate a strategy for addressing the problem.

Critique exercises. In a variation of problem solving, this technique asks candidates to evaluate what the newspaper is doing. For instance, ask a prospective City Hall reporter to go through a week's papers and note how well a particular target audience is being served by your coverage, what works, what's missing and how he/she would improve coverage. Or in a "red pen" exercise, ask the applicant (not just newsroom applicant, but marketers, circulators and ad reps)

to look through the newspaper and circle stories that do an exceptionally good – or poor – job of connecting with readers. Then question them about why.

Written activity. If writing skills are important in the job, this provides an opportunity to demonstrate them and to form an impression of the candidate's reader orientation thought processes. It can also link to a previous exercise — for example, a letter to a client after the role-play, or a report on the next steps the candidate would take having met the client. In some cases, it may be useful to ask the candidate, in addition to a resume, to submit a one- or two-page essay on the assets they would bring to the job. The lack of any mention of readers or customers would be a warning sign; references to readers could offer an interviewing "hook."

Multiple interviews. In many industries, particularly where teamwork plays an important role, it is common to conduct multiple interviews with department managers and/or rank-and-file employees. Or consider having managers in other departments interview a candidate to determine how well the applicant would fit into the "extended" team. For example, the circulation manager might want to interview a marketing department applicant. Typically, when multiple interviews are conducted, the interviewers concentrate on different aspects of the interviewee's "fit." Interviewer A might focus on assessing the applicant's people skills while interviewer B focuses on assessing problem solving and critical thinking. It is important to remember that the purpose of this technique is not to subject the applicant to an endurance test, but to learn as much as you can about the candidate that is pertinent to how he/she would perform on the job.

Putting it into practice – An example

A newsroom position

Question: When do you know when you've really been successful as a journalist?

Why ask this question? What the interviewer is listening for are answers that incorporate thinking about readers. In a newsroom context, "success" should be less about the need for personal satisfaction or "task fulfillment" and more centered on coming up with ways to deliver news and information that are relevant to readers.

Joe Grimm of the Detroit Free Press remembers one good response from a copy editor: "I feel successful when I edit a story or write a good headline for a story that is important to my community or the nation. Then I feel I have become part of the story for them." Answers that would steer you away from a candidate would be about winning an award, pleasing the editor, pleasing a source – answers that exclude readers, says Grimm.

Some sample questions

Other types of questions suggested by Grimm:

- Tell me about a time you were tolerant of an opinion that was different than yours.
- Tell me about a time you had to deal with an irate customer.
- Who were the bosses in your last job? (A softball, maybe, but don't be surprised if many miss the point.)
- Who are your readers? (Lack of knowledge implies a lack of curiosity. Also, how a candidate chooses to interpret questions about "diversity" can say a lot.)
- How will you make a difference in readers' lives if we hire you?
- What skills do you think are most important to do this job well? Or, what aspects of your job would you consider most crucial? (At least one skill or aspect should relate to reader orientation.)
- How does this position relate to the overall goals of the newspaper?
- Tell me about a recent experience where you had to persuade someone to accept your idea or proposal.

A final word

The costs of making the wrong hire or promotion are high, and hard on both employer and employee. Thinking through the job requirements – of which reader orientation is an important one – will increase the likelihood that you'll make better choices. You can start small – start with one job, or a small number of jobs, that will have a direct and important effect on readers. Involve a few key people in the process. Assess the success of the people you hired or promoted using the process; make adjustments; and then extend the concept to more jobs.

¹ See Camp, Richard, Mary E. Vielhaber and Jack L. Simonetti, *Strategic Interviewing: How to Hire Good People*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001. The authors suggest that employers focus on what they want the successful candidate to do, rather than be. They suggest that employers identify the most important job goals; the situations or barriers that must be overcome to achieve these goals; and the actions that would demonstrate an effective or ineffective performer in the job.

² Smart, Bradford, *The Smart Interviewer: Tools and Techniques for Hiring the Best*. Somerset, NJ: Wiley John and Sons Inc, 1995.

³ Rovner, Louis (July 16, 2001), "Heads up: A smart interview can tell you much more than what is on a resume." *Nation's Restaurant News*, Pg. 22.