

# READERSHIP INSTITUTE

Media Management Center at Northwestern University

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## Q & A about the Experience Newspaper

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### **Q: How does the new “Experience Newspaper” research fit into the Readership Institute’s earlier work?**

A: We wanted to see if the opportunities suggested by the earlier research could be realized. In other words, how could a newspaper implement the findings and get results? Research is great, but the real test is in putting it to work.

Each major piece of RI research probes different but related aspects of local daily newspaper readership. Each study builds on the previous one.

For instance, the **Impact study** (2000) identified current practices in a representative sample of newspapers that got better overall readership results. We measured what newspapers were actually doing then – not what they *could* do – and what worked better.

The **Experience study** (2003) identified feelings, emotions and reactions that make people read their daily newspaper more, or read it less. Experiences go beyond the basic techniques identified in the Impact study to the *effects* you want to create in consumers.

The **New Readers study** (2004) looked at experiences that cause different age groups – especially younger and diverse adults -- to engage with the newspaper or discount it. It also identified approaches that resonate with them.

The **Experience Newspaper study** (2005) with the *Star Tribune* is all about implementation. We took content and consumer findings from previous research and put them into action in a test with a target group that is crucial for newspapers’ future.

If Impact was about what newspapers do now that works better with readers generally, the Experience Newspaper is about what innovative things newspapers could do in the future to attract a critical group, under-30s.

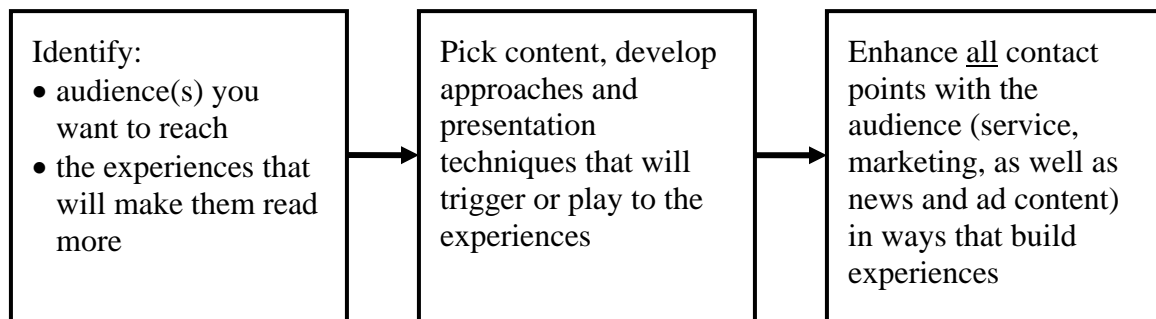
**Q. Does this mean the Impact study has little meaning now?**

A. Not at all. The approaches identified in Impact are still highly relevant. But if you focus *only* on those approaches, and disregard the experience research, your success in building readership will be limited.

The Experience research crystallized many things. One is that the traditional way of choosing and presenting content isn't adequate in today's crowded media environment. It's no longer enough to choose content according to your audience's interests. You have to focus first on the experiences that matter to them, and then use those experiences as a filter when assigning, gathering, selecting and presenting content.

Further, it's not just about news content. All contact points with the consumer, be they in ad content, service, marketing or news – all identified as readership drivers in the Impact study – should be focused on enhancing the key experiences that will get your audience(s) to read more.

The new approach looks like this:



**Q. What were the most surprising things to emerge from the Experience Newspaper project?**

A. One was how difficult it was to continually force ourselves to think of content and presentation elements that would really engage the target. Not just interest them, but engage them. It's easier to simply improve conventional methods and feel that major strides have been made. But while it may feel that way to content creators, it fails to impress consumers (especially younger adults) who have low engagement with the newspaper. There were multiple, multiple revisions to the prototypes before we had something to which we thought young adults might respond. And they did.

Another thing was the super-strong pull of tradition. A little example: the prototypes had a number of headlines in the form of questions, which bothered us, because we, like other journalists of our generation, have been taught not to do that. But since it was a test, we went ahead. And it simply was not an issue for readers. In fact, the question heads allowed us to speak directly to readers, which they liked.

A third thing: ostensibly small things had a big impact. There was widespread, very positive response to “In the Know,” a brief feature anchoring the lower left of the front page that listed five must-know news items that would make readers feel and look smarter. Respondents mentioned it, unaided, as one of the things that made the Experience Newspaper special for them.

Finally, it’s possible to make some stories that look pretty tedious on the surface into engaging ones by doing two things. The first is to ask “why does it matter to readers” and to be able to come up with a compelling answer (and to be prepared to ditch the story if you can’t). The second is to be willing to experiment with different story forms and headline treatments to unlock the relevance.

**Q. If we implement the Experience Newspaper ideas, don’t we run a big risk of alienating our older, loyal readers?**

A. There are always risks associated with change and we advocate testing any significant changes with key stakeholders to gauge both acceptance and the essence and strength of resistance.

But we must point out that the bigger risk is in not changing and thus forgoing opportunities to engage the people who could be your future loyal customers. If your newspaper can continue to lose readership, do nothing; but if you care about the vibrancy of your news and advertising-based business, you must act.

Many newspapers have also observed a softening of habit among their middle-aged readers, and we see this trend in our national research as well. We think they will respond to many of the techniques associated with the Experience Newspaper.

Whomever you are targeting, with whatever product or platform, you need to appeal to the experiences that move them.

**Q. So are you saying that if we create an “Experience Newspaper” we can stop the decline in readership?**

A. We can’t guarantee something that hasn’t been tried widely yet. What we can say is that younger adults responded very positively to the Experience Newspaper on many indicators in the tests. We can also say that the approaches that we and the *Star Tribune* used are only some of the techniques that other creative newspaper people could invent and apply. In other words, there are both big untapped consumer opportunities and equally large, untapped internal capabilities.

We believe that newspapers that reinvent themselves in this way, focusing every day and in every part of the newspaper on delivering the experiences that matter most to their

target audiences, will be able to hold and increase those audiences. At the same time, they need to apply similar thinking to online and other products as well.

**Q. All of this looks like dumbing down the newspaper to me. It also seems to be “me-the-consumer-centric.” Where is the journalism in all of this? Where is the community of interest?**

A. If you look closely at the experiences -- [http://www.readership.org/new\\_readers/data/all\\_experiences.pdf](http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/all_experiences.pdf) -- you'll see that many of the things that journalists value are also valued by readers. For instance, readers want newspapers to be watchdogs, to look out for their personal and civic interests and to make them smarter. But what constitutes “looking out for my interests” and “making me smarter” must in large part be defined by what **readers** see as their interests, and what they want to be smarter about. Sometimes those interests are personal, consumer-type interests; sometimes they are identified with a larger group and are citizen-based. It's not one or the other, it's both.

But those aren't the only experiences that readers value. Things like “turned on by surprise and humor,” “touches and inspires me” and “people I know” also motivate newspaper reading. Newspapers must appeal to a variety of experiences.

We think that clear, pointed communication that respects readers' time is a virtue, not a vice – especially since “too much” is a primary inhibitor of readership among younger adults. This isn't dumbing down the newspaper; it's making it more accessible.

Too often, great journalism – thoroughly investigated, important stuff – fails because the approach, the story-telling, the presentation are too confusing, too long and too daunting. So readers choose not to know. That's the consumer-based reality with which newspapers must deal.

**Q. Why do you continue to focus on print when the future clearly is with online?**

A. We don't think print news products are going to disappear anytime soon: they are where revenues and resources are concentrated and their reach, both daily and in the course of a week, among consumers is extensive. But we also think online use will strengthen. In this transitional period, newspapers must continue to innovate and grow their print enterprise. They must also innovate online and with other digital platforms. They need to be aggressive on both fronts.

Many of the approaches and techniques that engaged young adults in the Experience Newspaper study are applicable to other platforms. For instance, simply transferring current news and advertising approaches to online products will not do the trick.

RI has also been busy with online. Later this year we will share results of an experience study for online news and information sites that we conducted in partnership with the Online Publishers Association.

**Q. What do I need to do in my market to establish what the key newspaper-reading experiences are?**

A. We have yet to see significant variations among markets and are comfortable saying that you don't need to measure experiences before you act. That said, the instructions for measuring experiences are at:

[http://www.readership.org/new\\_readers/data/measuring\\_results.pdf](http://www.readership.org/new_readers/data/measuring_results.pdf).

We don't recommend investing time and dollars to measure experiences **unless** you intend to follow that research with significant innovations. There is no point in replicating what RI's extensive national research has already determined unless you intend to establish a benchmark in your market, make some dramatic changes, then measure what the effects are on your audience's experiences, make more changes, etc.