

Auditing Your Newspaper's "Experiences"

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The purpose of the audit is to identify elements in news and advertising content, service and marketing that you and your colleagues think currently help create positive experiences among your newspapers' readers.

More importantly, it's a starting point to help you develop innovative ways of building positive experiences and reducing negative ones. You'll want to bring readers into that process, but first you need a shared internal view of what you do now.

We urge you to do the audit in the context of younger adult readers. Local daily newspapers are a cafeteria of choices that try to suit all tastes. In part, that's a strength, but also a weakness because it tends to dilute the need for a strategy to grow readership among young adult audiences, who are an increasingly diverse segment.

Focus on a few of the eight experiences – six motivators and two inhibitors – that the New Readers study identifies as most relevant to this group (as well as racial/ethnic minorities) and most actionable for newspapers:

- Something to talk about
- *Discriminates and stereotypes* (inhibitor)
- Ad usefulness
- Makes me smarter
- Looks out for my personal and civic interests
- Value for my money
- *Too much* (inhibitor)
- Good service

As an example, let's choose "**Something to talk about,**" an experience that newspapers, of all media, are uniquely positioned to dominate. It has strong potential to grow readership across all groups, but younger adults are currently experiencing it less in their local daily newspaper than other groups.

Step One: Form a small cross-departmental group, at least half of whom are younger adults. Pick, randomly, a constructed week's worth of newspapers (by constructed we mean a Monday from one week, a Tuesday from another, etc.). Depending on the time you want to devote to the process, distribute at least three editions to each team member.

Step Two: Review the consumer statements that make up the experience. **Something to talk about** is a label we use to synopsize the following statements that came from readers:

- I like to talk about the national news and current events I read about in it.
- I bring up things I've read in this newspaper in conversations with many other people.
- I like to give advice and tips to people I know based on things I've read in this newspaper.
- I show things in the newspaper to people in my family.
- Part of my role among friends or family is to keep them informed because I read the newspaper.

What's being expressed is that people use the newspaper to help them connect with others. It's not just a matter of becoming personally more knowledgeable, but being able to use the knowledge in social relationships. So in auditing the current newspaper, you'll be looking for content that younger adults would share with their circle. (And don't forget to consider ad content, marketing, sales and service that is "something to talk about.")

Step Three: The audit can be done as a group process or individually with the group reconvening to compare notes. When scanning the newspapers and reviewing service practices and marketing, consider two things:

1. What did we do that, in our view, successfully created the experience for younger adult readers?
2. What could have been done to enhance it (i.e. missed opportunities)?

Remember to keep a focus on younger readers and be rigorous in asking these questions from their perspective, not from that of newspaper professionals. Steer the discussion away from why something was done the way it was, or the difficulties of implementing change – it is irrelevant to readers and will bog down the audit.

Just to get started, here are some points to consider:

- How much content is unique (i.e. younger adults, who tend to be heavy media users, couldn't get it elsewhere).
- Is this unique content the kind of thing you can envision them sharing with friends?
- How easy is it to find?
- What kind of prominence does it get?
- Was it promoted in some way?
- Did the presentation – headlines, visuals, packaging etc. – draw attention to it?
- Are there other ways of presenting content that could have stimulated thought and discussion? For instance, a set of questions about the story? An invitation for readers to react? Or to submit their questions? A pro-and-con treatment of the issue?
- How much of our enterprise and investigative work is relevant to younger adults?

- In terms of “commodity” information – i.e., news generally available across media – are you developing and presenting it in ways to emphasize its talkability?

Step Four: This step is optional, but at this point you might want to test your judgment of how the current newspaper is performing against the target group. Alternatively you might want to move straight to brainstorming ideas, testing their general appeal to younger adults, developing prototypes, and seeking feedback from younger adults.

If the former, a fairly easy way to test your internal assessment is to put together a couple of focus groups, or several one-on-one interviews with young adult readers. Ask them to read those same newspaper editions as if they were seeing them for the first time and reading as they normally would.

Ask them to flag the things that they would have talked about with their friends. Encourage them to explain why certain things were talkable and others were not. Remember, this is not a scientific exercise; you are just trying to see if your judgments are roughly similar.

After you complete the audit and move through the idea development process, remember to consider broader, organizational issues that could be helping or hindering the creation of more of a “something to talk about” experience (or any other experience). For instance:

- Do we know enough about our target group(s) and how they live to recognize the sorts of things that make them want to “talk about it”?
- Do our own people (all departments) know that this is something important and that we want to encourage?
- How could we enlist our people (all departments) to continually provide “some things to talk about”?
- Are news beats organized to maximize the discovery and reporting of unusual stories?
- At the assigning stage, and at news meetings, do we flag stories that have this potential and pay special attention to treatment?
- Do we consider graphic and pictorial possibilities for this content?
- Are we providing enough “talkable” material that will substantially change the newspaper-reading experience for younger adults and around which we can create comprehensive marketing?
- How do our messaging, branding and promotional activities support the concept?
- Do POP material, rack cards, consumer sales scripts etc. focus on “something to talk about”?