

## What Makes a Newspaper Ready to Innovate?

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What internal characteristics put a newspaper in a better position to connect with underserved audiences?

As part of the *New Readers* study, we asked newspaper employees in all departments to answer questions about their newspaper's culture and about its reader orientation. Using some questions from each of those surveys, the Readership Institute and research partner Robert Cooke created a scale called the "Ready to Innovate Index."

It measures how effective newspaper managers are in creating and communicating a reader-oriented mission, keeping the organization focused on readers/customers and their needs, and taking steps to respond to changes in the market. (See index items below.)

The index is important because it is statistically linked to external results (readership). For example, newspapers that scored high on the index also had higher Reader Behavior Scores (RBS) among all readers, and among non-whites and 18- to 34-year-olds.

Equally important, the index also is linked with workforce characteristics. Newspapers that scored higher on the scale had a larger percentage of women, more racial/ethnic diversity and younger employees than newspapers that scored lower on the scale. Smaller newspaper tended to score higher on the index, also.

Newspapers that had relatively more constructive cultures tended to rate high on the index; passive-defensive newspapers rated lowest on the index.

The findings indicate that newspapers need, first, a determined, organizational mission to build readership. And the mission has to be communicated regularly to all employees, at all levels with strategic plans for implementation.

The newspaper also needs the human capacity to understand, reach and respond to the audiences it is seeking. But just having a variety of backgrounds in place is not enough. People need to be managed in ways, typified by a constructive culture, that bring out their best individual and group performance -- in the service of readership.

Finally, the more positive results for smaller newspapers may indicate that structural agility is an important factor. In larger newspapers, current approaches to organizing people around the product may work against change and innovation.

The Readership Institute is developing an online assessment tool that would enable a newspaper to determine its readiness to innovate, along with suggestions for how to improve.

### **Ready to Innovate Index**

The index was created by testing different factors from a *New Readers* culture survey (the Organizational Effectiveness Inventory) and from a reader orientation addendum to that survey. Here are the factors (in bold) and statements from the surveys (bulleted under each factor) that make up the scale.

### **Mission and Philosophy**

- People throughout the organization have a clear understanding of its mission and its role in the larger community/society.
- The objectives and priorities of this organization are clear and well understood by all members.
- Management here holds a widely shared philosophy that provides employees with a real understanding of what this organization stands for.
- This organization frequently holds ceremonies, informal get-togethers and meetings to celebrate outstanding work by employees, special accomplishments and similar achievements.
- There are members of this organization (past and present) who are well known to employees and whose actions illustrate the philosophy and priorities of the firm.

### **Readership Mission**

- I believe this newspaper exists primarily to serve readers.
- According to top management, serving readers is the most important thing our newspaper does.
- Readers' interests always come first, ahead of profitability.
- Increasing the newspaper's value to readers drives our business strategies.

### **Customer Service Orientation**

- Your department is responsible for client satisfaction.
- You are encouraged to emphasize the perspective and needs of customers when making decisions.
- Your organization relies on you to provide information about the preferences and needs of customers.
- The organization relies on you to help win customers and generate sales.
- The organization responds effectively to the changing needs of clients.

### **Responsiveness (negative items were reversed in analysis)**

- For one reason or another, we tend to ignore changes in what readers need or want from us.
- We are slow to detect changes in our readers' preferences.
- Even if our newspaper came up with a great plan to build readership, we probably would not be able to implement it in a timely fashion.

- Internal politics drive the newspaper we sell more than reader needs.
- Reader complaints fall on deaf ears at this newspaper.
- When we find out that readers are unhappy with our newspaper, we take corrective action immediately.
- Management is open to new ideas from employees to increase readership.

**Adaptability**

- New programs and procedures are efficiently and properly implemented when they are needed.
- This organization proactively identifies and adjusts to changes in its business environment.
- This organization responds effectively to external opportunities and threats