

Taking Action on Readership

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Executive Summary

Earlier this year, the Readership Institute surveyed newspapers that took part in the 2000 Impact study of readership to get a sense of the breadth and intensity of readership-building activity.

It is clear from the results that the vast majority of papers are focusing on readership activities, to varying degrees. And it is paying off, particularly for a small but significant number. We found that newspapers that did more, more deeply, had above-average readership results.

We asked about 50 activities or practices that the Impact research indicated were linked to readership, and we probed the degree of emphasis newspapers were putting on them. (A list of the questions is in the appendix at the back of this document. It can be used as an informal checklist by any newspaper to gauge its activity.)

Highlights of the findings:

- More than three-quarters said they have paid at least some attention to most (80 percent) of the readership-enhancing actions or practices on the Institute's list.
- A smaller number said they have acted with both breadth and intensity: 16 publishers reported placing "a lot" of emphasis on more than half of the recommended actions. That group of 16 papers had better readership results than the rest of the papers surveyed.
- In general, newspapers have placed more emphasis on the Institute's recommendations for specific tactics to improve readership quickly and directly than on recommendations to build their internal, organizational capacity to tackle readership challenges.
- In broad terms, publishers reported placing the most emphasis in the last two years on:
 - Becoming more reader-oriented;
 - Stories about ordinary people and community news;
 - Providing service excellence;
 - Increasing in-paper content promotion of news content;
 - Making the paper easier to read.
- They have placed less emphasis on:
 - Improving the quality and variety of the paper's story-telling;
 - Telling institutional stories through the perspective of ordinary citizens;

- Increasing the promotion of advertising content;
- Making it easier to find specific advertising content;
- Targeting segments of potential growth, such as light or infrequent readers;
- Improving people management practices within their organizations.

The breadth of the findings indicates that readership is firmly on newspapers' radar screen and that they have a keen interest in finding ways to improve it. What is needed now are more intense and deeper efforts to act on the research findings. In other words, there is still much untapped opportunity – and readership to be gained by doing so.

Please note that during the summer of 2003 the Institute is gathering information from newspapers across the country about specific activities. That information will be shared later this year.

Background

The Impact study of 100 local daily newspapers included a series of recommendations for actions the newspaper industry could take to increase readership.

In early 2003, two years after the recommendations were released, the Institute assessed both the breadth and intensity of readership-building activity by Impact newspapers through a self-report survey addressed to publishers. Ninety-one newspapers responded.

The survey asked publishers to indicate whether in the last two years their papers had engaged in any of 50 activities or practices recommended by the Institute as keys to building newspaper readership. They were also asked how much emphasis their papers have put on 33 of those items. And, in a separate study earlier this year, the Institute measured the change in Reader Behavior Scores among readers of the newspapers between 2000 and 2003.

General Findings

Almost all newspapers surveyed said they are doing most of the readership-enhancing actions or practices on the Institute's list. But far fewer said they are acting with much intensity. In other words, there is great breadth of activity but less depth. That in turn indicates there is much untapped opportunity.

From the list of 33 recommended practices for which publishers gauged the intensity of involvement, there are only two that are being done intensely by the majority of papers: making day-to-day operational decisions based on what's good for readers and increasing emphasis on stories about community events. But there are many recommended activities being done intensely by a large number of papers (even if not the majority).

The 16 papers that bucked the norm and reported acting with both breadth and intensity have results to show for it. As a group, the 16 papers that reported placing "a lot" of emphasis on

more than half of the 33 recommended actions held their own on readership, while the rest of the Impact papers taken together experienced shrinkage from 2000 to 2003. The differences between the intensely active and the less-active groups are not large enough to be statistically significant, but they point to a trend in which the intensely active papers rate consistently higher.

In general, newspapers have placed more emphasis on the Institute's recommendations for specific tactics to improve readership quickly and directly than they have on recommendations to build their internal, organizational capacity to tackle readership challenges. In broad terms, publishers reported that they have placed the most emphasis in the last two years on:

- Becoming more reader-oriented by trying to make day-to-day operational decisions based on what's good for readers;
- Increasing the number of stories about ordinary people, community events, community announcements and community news;
- Providing excellence in customer service, particularly trying to ensure high standards of customer interaction in all departments;
- Increasing in-paper content promotion of news content, both on the front page and throughout the paper;
- Making the paper easier to read by increasing use of graphics, summaries, breakout boxes, refers and "go and do" information.

They haven't placed as much emphasis on:

- Improving the quality and variety of the paper's story-telling, by having more stories told in feature style, more Q&A features, more "story" obituaries and by telling institutional stories through the perspective of ordinary citizens;
- Increasing the promotion of advertising content;
- Making it easier to find specific advertising content;
- Targeting certain segments of potential growth, such as light or infrequent readers, or pass-along readers;
- Improving people management practices within their organizations, such as rewarding employees who contribute to building readership, tying executive compensation to readership success, improving training or changing hiring practices.

Breadth of Activity

Use of the recommended practices is widespread. Of the 50 recommended practices or activities, 47 are being done at least “a little” by a majority of the papers surveyed, and 40 are being done at least “a little” by at least three quarters of the papers. For instance:

- 96 percent have made use of Institute reports;
- 88 percent have assessed their paper’s news content against the Institute’s findings;
- 87 percent now conduct regular departmental meetings to discuss and develop reader-oriented improvements;
- 85 percent included readership measurements in strategic plans for 2001 and 2002;
- 84 percent identified target audiences;
- 80 percent conducted regular cross-departmental meetings to discuss and develop reader-oriented improvements;
- 80 percent included readership measurements in their 2003 strategic plans;
- 79 percent added a new regular section to help build readership;
- 79 percent created a new product targeting a specific market segment.

Intensity of Action

These activities are being done with “a lot” of attention by at least a third of the newspapers:

- Making day-to-day operational decisions based on what’s good for readers (53 percent);
- Increasing emphasis on stories about community events (52 percent);
- Increasing promotion of upcoming stories or news content throughout the paper (49 percent);
- Presenting local obituaries with photos and normal-size type (46 percent);
- Increasing content promotion on the front page (44 percent);
- Increasing the story count for stories about ordinary people (43 percent);
- Increasing the story count for lifestyle stories (43 percent);

- Increasing readership among single-copy readers (41 percent);
- Increasing the number of stories about ordinary people in the community (40 percent);
- Ensuring high standards of customer-interaction in all departments (38 percent);
- Increasing the number of refers or other tools to help readers find related stories on similar subjects (38 percent);
- Increasing the use of "go and do" (actionable information) breakouts and boxes to accompany stories in all sections of the paper (37 percent);
- Improving community listings (37 percent);
- Increasing the number of presentation devices such as graphics, summaries, and breakout boxes (36 percent);
- Developing a clear sense of who current readers are (35 percent).

Little Action

Some recommended practices aren't getting much attention. Most papers are placing "little" or "no" emphasis on:

- Holding readership meetings with all or a majority of non-management employees;
- Adding new or different positions with readership-oriented responsibilities;
- Increasing promotion of advertising content;
- Making it easier for readers to find advertising content of interest to them;
- Increasing the variety of story-telling techniques used;
- Providing content specifically targeting light or infrequent readers;
- Increasing pass-along readership;
- Tying employee compensation to achievement of readership goals;
- Providing non-cash rewards to employees who help build readership.

Breadth and Intensity

Sixteen newspapers reported they are acting with both intensity and breadth – and RI research in their markets showed they have widened the readership gap, compared to the other less-active newspapers.

These 16 papers reported that they are acting intensely (i.e. placing “a lot” of emphasis) on more than half of the recommended list of 33 actions. (Another 24 reported placing “a lot” of emphasis on between a third to a half of the recommended actions.) Data about the performance of individual newspapers is confidential, so the names of these papers cannot be reported.

The combination of intensity and breadth appears to pay off. As a group, the 16 papers held their own. In contrast, the rest of the Impact papers as a group experienced decline. The differences are not large enough to be considered statistically significant, but they point to a trend in which intensely active papers rate consistently higher.

	RBS 2000	RBS 2003	RBS Change
16 Most Active Papers	3.68	3.69	0.01
All Other Impact Papers	3.63	3.50	-0.13

APPENDIX

The following sections explain the survey findings in more detail.

Part One

In Part One, publishers were asked whether the newspaper in the last two years had done any of 17 different things. Here are the percentages of respondents who answered “yes” to each question. The question was: “In the last two years, to the best of your knowledge...”

	%
Has anyone from your newspaper made use of reports from the Readership Institute?	95.6
Have you assessed the news content of your newspaper against the findings in the Impact study of readership?	87.9
Do you conduct regular departmental meetings to discuss and develop reader-oriented improvements?	86.7
Did you include readership measurements as part of your strategic plan for 2001 or 2002?	84.6
Have you identified target audience(s) for your newspaper?	83.5
Do you conduct regular cross-departmental meetings to discuss and develop reader-oriented improvements?	80.2
Did you include readership measurements as part of your strategic plan for 2003?	80.2
Have you added a new regular section (daily or weekly) to the newspaper to help build readership?	79.1
Have you created a new product (such as an insert or standalone publication) targeting a specific segment in your market?	79.1
Separate from circulation sales, does your newspaper measure readership?	71.1
Have you established or revised a reader feedback mechanism (such as a comments hotline or email)?	64.8
Has your paper established a team / taskforce / or committee focused specifically on readership?	56.2
Have you established a process to receive staff suggestions for improving readership?	52.2
Does your newspaper actively encourage pass-along readership?	51.6
Have you held a readership meeting involving all or a majority of non-management employees at the newspaper in the last two years?	48.9
Have you conducted an RBS (Reader Behavior Score) survey for your newspaper?	36.7
Have you added any new or different positions in the company with readership-oriented responsibilities?	31.9

Responses varied somewhat by circulation size. Overall, larger papers reported doing more things on the checklist than smaller papers. Though not statistically significant, the trend is that the higher the circulation, the more papers said they did.

Part Two

In Part Two, publishers were asked to indicate how much emphasis their paper puts on each of 33 readership-related practices, based on a scale of 1-4, where 4 represents “a lot” of emphasis. The average overall intensity score for all respondents is 2.86, which means that newspapers as a whole have placed at least some emphasis on the practices asked about. One might say the publishers have given themselves a grade of “B minus.”

The chart below shows the percentage of respondents for each answer to each question, and the average of all the intensity scores given by all respondents to each question. Responses are organized into eight categories of action.

The question was: “For each of the following statements, please indicate how much emphasis your paper currently places on it. Please use the following scale when providing your ratings: 1 “None,” 2 “A Little,” 3 “Some,” 4 A Lot.”

	----Percent of Respondents answering----				Average Ranking
	1 (None)	2 (A Little)	3 (Some)	4 (A Lot)	
READER ORIENTATION					
Making day-to-day operational decisions based on what’s good for readers.	3.8%	9.7%	33.3%	53.2%	3.4
Developing a clear sense of who your current readers are.	6.1%	22.3%	37.1%	34.5%	3.0
Developing an understanding of who future readers will be if current demographic and reading trends continue.	11.0%	20.9%	48.5%	19.7%	2.8
ORDINARY PEOPLE AND COMMUNITY NEWS					
Increasing the number of stories about ordinary people in your community.	1.1%	12.4%	46.9%	39.6%	3.3
Increasing emphasis on stories about community events.	2.8%	11.7%	33.7%	51.8%	3.3
Increasing the story count for stories about ordinary people.	4.5%	13.0%	39.4%	43.0%	3.2
Improving community listings. (For instance, an increase in quantity, frequency, or improved display and packaging.)	10.4%	7.4%	45.0%	37.1%	3.1
Presenting local obituaries with photos and normal-size type.	10.0%	18.0%	25.8%	46.2%	3.1
Increasing the story count for community announcements (e.g, events, weddings, etc.)	15.5%	12.1%	43.7%	28.7%	2.9

SERVICE					
Ensuring high standards of customer-interaction in all departments.	0%	11.7%	50.0%	38.2%	3.3
Eliminating barriers to customers quickly getting through to the right person when they call with a complaint or question.	1.2%	24.0%	50.5%	24.4%	3.0
Making bills easier for customers to read and understand.	8.8%	16.5%	49.7%	25.0%	2.9
PROMOTION					
Increasing content promotion on the front page.	2.1%	11.7%	42.6%	43.6%	3.3
Increasing the promotion of upcoming stories or news content throughout the paper.	1.7%	18.0%	31.4%	48.8%	3.3
Increasing the size of in-paper content promotions.	15.8%	22.2%	46.2%	15.8%	2.6
Increasing the promotion of advertising content.	13.5%	38.8%	37.6%	10.1%	2.4
NAVIGATION AND EASE OF USE					
Increasing the number of presentation devices such as graphics, summaries, and breakout boxes.	7.2%	16.0%	40.8%	36.0%	3.1
Increasing the use of "go and do" (actionable information) breakouts and boxes to accompany stories in all sections of the paper.	6.6%	23.3%	32.8%	37.2%	3.0
Increasing number of refers or other tools to help readers find related stories on similar subjects.	9.3%	19.4%	33.4%	37.9%	3.0
Increasing the use of "go and do" (actionable information) breakouts and boxes to accompany stories in all sections of the paper.	6.6%	23.3%	32.8%	37.2%	3.0
Increasing guidepost elements (i.e., headlines, indexes, pointers, refers) to help people quickly find what's relevant to them.	4.8%	24.9%	46.5%	23.8%	2.9
Making it easier for readers to find advertising content that is of interest to them.	20.9%	33.0%	35.3%	10.8%	2.4

STORYTELLING					
Making sure every story has a point and is clearly written.	2.1%	30.4%	37.8%	29.6%	3.0
Increasing the story count for lifestyle stories (i.e., home, food, fashion, health, travel)	11.7%	17.4%	28.4%	42.5%	3.0
Including "story" obituaries (as well as shorter death notices).	19.7%	20.5%	30.6%	29.2%	2.7
Telling government and other institutional stories from the perspective of ordinary citizens.	10.1%	38.8%	42.5%	8.6%	2.5
Increasing the variety of story-telling techniques. For instance, more stories written in a feature style, Q&A, commentary, advice.	16.1%	39.5%	32.4%	12.1%	2.4
TARGETING					
Increasing readership among single-copy readers.	8.8%	13.9%	36.3%	41.1%	3.1
Including content specifically targeting light or infrequent readers.	15.8%	38.0%	30.0%	16.3%	2.5
Increasing readership among pass-along readers (readers who read a friend's copy of the newspaper or read a copy set out in a public place, i.e. in a doctor's office, on the bus, in a café or lunchroom cafeteria, etc.)	24.1%	39.3%	26.9%	9.7%	2.2
PEOPLE MANAGEMENT					
Improving the criteria and process for how you hire new employees at your newspaper.	12.3%	18.4%	37.0%	32.4%	2.9
Improving employee training and development at your newspaper to align with readership goals.	8.4%	22.3%	43.0%	26.3%	2.9
Tying part of compensation for individual employees to meeting readership goals.	37.9%	16.8%	30.2%	15.1%	2.2
Increasing the use of non-cash rewards (e.g. extra time off, conferences, event tickets, etc.) to recognize employees who contribute to building readership.	37.9%	38.7%	19.3%	4.1%	1.9

Circulation size did not seem to affect responses to these questions; there was no significant difference between responses by big and small papers and no discernable trend.

Practices Receiving the Most Attention

This chart shows the actions that have received the most emphasis by newspapers. The first column shows the average amount of emphasis the 91 newspapers have been placing on an action, based on a scale of 1-4, where 1 is “None,” 2 is “A Little,” 3 is “Some” and 4 is “A Lot.” The second column shows the percentage of papers giving this action “a lot” of emphasis.

	Average Emphasis	% Placing “A Lot” of Emphasis
Making day-to-day operational decisions based on what’s good for readers.	3.4	53.2
Increasing emphasis on stories about community events.	3.3	51.8
Increasing promotion of upcoming stories or news content throughout the paper.	3.3	48.8
Increasing content promotion on the front page.	3.3	43.6
Increasing the number of stories about ordinary people in your community.	3.3	39.6
Ensuring high standards of customer-interaction in all departments.	3.3	38.2
Increasing the story count for stories about ordinary people	3.2	43.0
Presenting local obituaries with photos and normal-size type.	3.1	46.2
Increasing readership among single-copy readers.	3.1	41.1
Improving community listings. (For instance, an increase in quantity, frequency, or improved display and packaging).	3.1	37.1
Increasing the number of presentation devices such as graphics, summaries, and breakout boxes.	3.1	36.0
Increasing the story count for lifestyle stories (i.e., home, food, fashion, health, travel)	3.0	42.5
Increasing the number of refers or other tools to help readers find related stories on similar subjects.	3.0	37.9
Increasing the use of "go and do" (actionable information) breakouts and boxes to accompany stories in all sections of the paper.	3.0	37.2
Developing a clear sense of who your current readers are.	3.0	34.5
Making sure every story has a point and is clearly written.	3.0	29.6
Eliminating barriers to customers quickly getting through to the right person when they call with a complaint or question.	3.0	24.4

Practices Receiving the Least Attention

These are the 14 practices receiving no emphasis by at least 20% of the responding newspapers. Listed is the percentage of publishers who reported that their papers do not do or do not emphasize this practice. (This chart is drawn from responses from both Part One and Part Two. The percentage represents the percentage of publishers who answered “no” to the questions in Part One or “none” to questions in Part Two.)

Percentage of papers that have not:	%
Added any new or different positions with readership-oriented responsibilities.	68.1
Conducted a Reader Behavior Score survey for the newspaper.	63.3
Held a readership meeting involving all or a majority of non-management employees in the last two years.	51.1
Actively encouraged pass-along readership.	48.4
Established a process to receive staff suggestions for improving readership.	47.8
Established a team, task force or committee focused specifically on readership.	43.8
Tied part of compensation for individual employees to meeting readership goals.	37.9
Increased the use of non-cash rewards (e.g. extra time off, conferences, event tickets, etc.) to recognize employees who contribute to building readership.	37.9
Established or revised a reader feedback mechanism (such as a comments hotline or e-mail).	35.2
Measured readership separate from circulation sales.	28.9
Increased readership among pass-along readers (readers who read a friend’s copy of the newspaper or read a copy set out in a public place, i.e. in a doctor’s office, on the bus, in a café or lunchroom cafeteria, etc.)	24.1
Created a new product (such as an insert or stand-alone publication) targeting a specific segment in the market.	20.9
Added a new regular section (daily or weekly) to help build readership.	20.9
Made it easier for readers to find advertising content that is of interest to them.	20.9

Tactics versus Core Capability

The Readership Institute’s recommendations included many specific “do now” tactics designed to directly increase readership. But it also concluded that key changes in organizational culture and capability are necessary for newspapers to successfully adapt and compete over time for increased readership. The survey shows that papers have placed more emphasis on the Institute’s tactical recommendations than on its recommendations regarding development of core capability. Here are the intensity scores given to each action in Part Two, divided between actions designed to develop core capacity and tactics, where 1 is “None,” 2 is “A Little,” 3 is “Some” and 4 is “A Lot.” The average intensity score is 2.89 for tactics and 2.72 for core capability items, a small but statistically significant difference.

ACTIONS TO IMPROVE CORE CAPABILITY Average Rating: 2.72	RATING
Making day-to-day operational decisions based on what’s good for readers.	3.4
Developing a clear sense of who your current readers are.	3.0
Improving the criteria and process for how you hire new employees at your newspaper.	2.9
Improving employee training and development to align with readership goals.	2.9
Developing an understanding of who future readers will be if current demographic and reading trends continue.	2.8
Tying part of compensation for individual employees to meeting readership goals.	2.2
Increasing the use of non-cash rewards (e.g. extra time off, conferences, event tickets, etc.) to recognize employees who contribute to building readership.	1.9

TACTICS Average Rating: 2.89	RATING
Increasing the number of stories about ordinary people in your community.	3.3
Increasing emphasis on stories about community events.	3.3
Ensuring high standards of customer-interaction in all departments.	3.3
Increasing content promotion on the front page.	3.3
Increasing promotion of upcoming stories or news content throughout the paper.	3.3
Increasing the story count for stories about ordinary people.	3.2
Improving community listings. (For instance, an increase in quantity, frequency, or improved display and packaging).	3.1
Presenting local obituaries with photos and normal-size type.	3.1
Increasing the number of presentation devices such as graphics, summaries, and breakout boxes.	3.1
Increasing readership among single-copy readers.	3.1
Eliminating barriers to customers quickly getting through to the right person when they call with a complaint or question.	3.0
Increasing the number of refers or other tools to help readers find related stories on similar subjects.	3.0

Increasing the use of "go and do" (actionable information) breakouts and boxes to accompany stories in all sections of the paper.	3.0
Making sure every story has a point and is clearly written.	3.0
Increasing the story count for lifestyle stories (i.e., home, food, fashion, health, travel)	3.0
Increasing the story count for community announcements (e.g, events, weddings, etc.)	2.9
Making bills easier for customers to read and understand.	2.9
Increasing guidepost elements (i.e., headlines, indexes, pointers, refers) to help people quickly find what's relevant to them.	2.9
Including "story" obituaries (as well as shorter death notices).	2.7
Increasing the size of in-paper content promotions.	2.6
Telling government and other institutional stories from the perspective of ordinary citizens.	2.5
Including content specifically targeting light or infrequent readers.	2.5
Increasing the promotion of advertising content.	2.4
Making it easier for readers to find advertising content that is of interest to them.	2.4
Increasing the variety of story-telling techniques. For instance, more stories written in a feature style, Q&A, commentary, advice.	2.4
Increasing readership among pass-along readers (readers who read a friend's copy of the newspaper or read a copy set out in a public place, i.e. in a doctor's office, on the bus, in a café or lunchroom cafeteria, etc.)	2.2

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