

Identifying Readers' Needs

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Most newspaper executives agree that the key to staying competitive is to focus on the needs of their readers, but it's often difficult to know where to begin. A sophisticated tool and effective process to identify and meet those needs is a "reader needs-based strategy." This can often be the first step to real action, because the newspaper will no longer be guessing what readers want, but will actually be listening to them.

A reader needs-based strategy provides clear and actionable information so that the newspaper can:

- Better satisfy readers needs with the core product
- Identify specific product advantages and disadvantages in comparison with other media
- Build plans and take actions to improve readership, circulation and penetration
- Reposition its marketing efforts
- Enhance new product ideas

Typically, building a reader needs-based strategy tool involves a three-step approach.

1. Build a baseline understanding of readers.

Begin the process by gathering and synthesizing internal as well as publicly available research to establish a baseline understanding of readers and non-readers. From this baseline understanding, researchers can develop an initial set of hypothetical drivers of behaviors and reader segments.

2. Refine understanding via direct feedback.

Test the preliminary hypotheses in exploratory focus groups. The focus groups should emphasize the attitudes and needs of readers and the ways in which these needs are met. The results of these focus groups will provide the necessary detail and nuance to build a better quantitative research instrument.

3. Identify key segments and how to address them.

Segmenting on needs and attitudes can provide the most useful tool for gaining insights into the market's structure, because attitudes shape the motivation for customer behavior. In order to understand these attitudes, one approach is to drive the research with a battery of agree/disagree statements having to do with needs and benefits specifically related to the categories under study. Some samples of attitudinal statements are:

- "Keeping up with the news makes me feel better about myself."
- "TV news has more "fluff" than the daily newspaper."
- "Reading the newspaper makes me a better consumer and shopper."
- "Reading the daily newspaper helps me feel connected to the people in my community."

Once the quantitative questionnaires have been fielded, analyze the data and identify key customer segments. Expect between four to eight reader segments. Too few, and the segments may not reveal unique characteristics; too many, and the segments may be too small to warrant taking actions.

Generally, readers will begin to segment by the degree—high to low—to which they want to obtain information. Other key factors include the depth of information they are after; the amount of time they are willing to spend on obtaining and absorbing this information; and the type of information they are seeking (for instance, event-driven or topic-driven). This attitudinal research will help explain not only the “whats” but also the “whys” of readership.

Reader needs-based strategy is not only a tool, it is also a process to take action. Actions are typically drawn in editorial, circulation, and advertising.

4. Editorial

Readership levels and satisfaction ratings can be measured. Knowing which sections or topics are read, and by whom, can help clarify the tradeoffs to be made to set the right balance within the newspaper. Segmentation does not replace editorial judgment, but serves as a useful process to determine not only which sections or topics target segments read, but also what benefits are derived from reading them.

5. Circulation

Most circulation-marketing efforts focus on converting single-copy and pass-along readers to seven-day subscribers. However, segmentation can help the newspaper tailor its message to its target segments. Single copy sales may have several benefits to a target segment that subscriptions do not offer, such as convenience, economy, and social interaction).

Consequently, the newspaper might decide to invest in a strategy to build single-copy buying. For example, encourage purchase (and discourage pass-along reading) by promoting clip out coupons and advertisements.

6. Advertising

Not only does the reader needs-based strategy provide a newspaper with in-depth awareness of its readers, but the newspaper also learns how its readers overlap with its advertisers' shoppers. The newspaper can then share precise demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal information with advertisers—information advertisers do not already have. The process also can provide a newspaper with data to help advertisers appreciate the value of total readership and not just circulation.

The return on the investment will be a newspaper that is more valued by its readers and more stable in its readership because it sits on a solid understanding of who its readers are, what its readers need, and most important, why they need it.

How to Become More Reader-Driven

- Build a baseline understanding of readers
- Refine understanding in focus groups
- Identify key segments and how to address them
- Translate findings into action plans