

How can the print media industry secure its future?

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For years, influencers in the media industry have predicted the print industry's demise, but despite all the pessimists whom all had valid arguments for their stance, print media is still here and it won't be going anywhere in the next few years.



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The print industry will continue to play an essential role in the South African media landscape because it is the only affordable platform for access to local and national news for many impoverished South Africans. Print serves a need by providing a sense of community and connectedness to communities of all socio-economic levels while helping advertisers target diverse audiences.

Digital is an expensive platform to access and therefore not freely accessible 24/7 to most South Africans. Unless data becomes freely accessible to everyone, print is here to stay.



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However, media owners must find creative and innovative ways to adapt to change and take their workforce with them or print media brands will fall by the wayside.

Print media will need to adopt a change mindset and be agile to survive digital transformation and amidst the trust deficit that threatens its longevity.

Here are some vital strategic interventions that print media companies must adopt to survive and to thrive into the future.

Customer-centricity

Readers are the audience of the print media industry. These readers judge whether a newspaper is worth its support based on their perception of how the company presents its stories, the context of the story in the entire newspaper, and what they read on other news platforms. If readers don't trust what they read in print, they will eventually stop reading news from mainstream news brands which in turn means there will be fewer readers and the number will keep on declining.

To supplement the need of information, people are turning to influencers, people who authentically align to the values of honesty and the pursuit of justice, something that they expect from the mainstream news media. This new wave of power assigned by the public to these influencers threatens the media's authority, because the more people turn to these sources for a unique perspective of the events affecting their lives and their community, the less people are turning to the traditional sources of news. The only way the mainstream media can save their space as trusted news sources is to present opposing views on popular topics.

Based on an [analysis by Media Monitoring Africa \(MMA\)](#) on the media's Covid-19 coverage "the people who have been interviewed and/or quoted the most by the media are high-ranking government officials." Therefore, news coverage on Covid-19 has brought media companies into question, as diverse and opposing views and voices in the media were not adequately presented.

The readers are the customers of the print media industry, and content is the product. Therefore, to take a customer-centric approach, print media companies must attract and retain customers with news presented comprehensively and objectively, where readers hear their own voices and voices of other ordinary citizens, even when those voices do not maintain the status quo. Newsrooms should ensure that their news do not reek of agenda-pushing, which unfortunately is the perception when a multitude of voices are not adequately presented in the media.

Hybrid marketing

The traditional aspect of print media has always been its charm. However, the charm is only appealing for so long. The print industry hasn't stepped up its marketing game compared to other platforms like radio and TV. Excellent marketing has been the cornerstone of thriving media platforms, and that is where print media is currently lagging as the print media industry does not view marketing as a pivotal division.

Editorial remains critical, but no media platform can succeed without the support of a marketing division that sets world-class standards of excellence. While journalists and editors make sure they dot the i's and cross the t's, and are consumed with the details, as they should be, marketing ensures that the newspaper's brand positioning remains consistent across platforms.



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How well a brand looks to the public matters. For years, newspapers have seen themselves as newspapers only, forgetting that they are brands. Therefore, any marketing dream team will have their work cut out to build an appealing brand persona

for a newspaper. Print media companies will have to adopt a more hybrid marketing approach, where the brand is seen in print, online and in-person, and start experimenting in experiential marketing to succeed.

When referring to in-person (when that was still allowed) or experiential, I am referring to pure brand-building void of any objective to sell newspapers or subscriptions, which includes community development initiatives with the sole aim to connect. Without a brand that people trust, respect, and admire, there is no brand. People must believe in the brand as much as they believe in the product.

Sell the audience

Print media sales executives still sell per centimetre by column ratios to clients. However, when clients decide to purchase, they don't buy the space. They are buying exposure to the newspaper's audience. Focus is on the quality of an audience, an audience can be small, but if it's the right audience, then that's all that matters to advertisers.

Measurement

If you want to succeed in any project, you need to start at the end. Usually the end means asking what the client wants to achieve by advertising. Once you know that, then you can consciously work towards achieving that goal. To ensure repeat clients, you need to prove to the client that you helped them succeed. Proving return on investment requires agreeing on a method to evaluate success and using that method to prove that the news company has delivered on the client's desired return on investment.

Flip the focus away from print

In 2021, no print media company should be talking about digital as an add-on service or a secondary solution. If print media companies don't start placing digital at the centre of the solutions presented to their clients, clients will believe that the only solution the newspapers can offer is print.



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Steve Thobela 23 Dec 2019



The time will come that news will no longer be available in printed format, and the only way to ensure that print media companies survive into the future is by repositioning to a digital-first approach. Switching to a primarily digital focus should have been done years ago, but for those who haven't truly yet embraced digital, a better time than yesterday is today.

Stop adding digital as an add-on; make digital the key focus of offerings to clients.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to secure its future, print media companies must focus on repositioning itself as news media companies and truly embrace digital as the main news distribution platform. However, this new positioning presents a unique challenge as media companies are not only competing with other media companies, but also with popular influencers who are informal writers.

The question remains whether traditional paper-and-pen professionals will be able to step up in this cut-throat competitive market. It will be the responsibility of journalists and editors to maintain a focus on quality, objective and honest reporting, supported by a hybrid marketing strategy that will maintain and attract quality audiences, while sales executives must incorporate a measurement method to diligently prove ROI to clients.

How we access news may be changing, but what we want from the information is still the same. Digital must become the primary platform and print secondary for print media companies to stay in business.

If the print media industry can hold onto the [core values of journalism](#), then journalism's future is bright. Print may be gone in a few years from now, but journalism is not going anywhere, unless newsrooms let it.

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