



InPublishing

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Variety is the spice of life

In 1896, Henry J Heinz came up with one of the all-time great marketing coups when he introduced the slogan '57 Varieties' to describe the breadth of his company's product range. And therein, writes Ian Eckert, lies a valuable lesson for today's publishers.

This certainly wasn't an original idea - his inspiration came from a poster for a shoe manufacturer that advertised 21 styles that he spotted while riding a train in New York.

However, Heinz' genius was in realising that by promoting the wide range of food products his company produced, he'd convince consumers that his brand had a solution for every culinary eventuality. It's interesting to note that, even at the time, the company's range significantly exceeded this number, but Heinz chose 57 because he believed this 'magic' number was the right choice from a marketing perspective.

The fact that this legendary piece of promotional chutzpah endures to this day - when HJ Heinz markets more than a thousand times the number of products - and the famous 57 is still seen on supermarket shelves around the world shows the enduring power of the idea of choice.

Lessons for publishers

And I believe there's a valuable lesson here for the publishing sector. Specifically, we have to stop seeing our audiences as a homogenous mass and instead start to look at them as complex, highly-segmented entities with each segment having very specific content needs that do not always overlap as much as we would like. In other words, we have to give them more choice over the products and services we provide for them.

Companies like UBM, Centaur, Top Right, Thomson Reuters and TSL all produce market-leading print titles. But every one of them is necessarily a compromise that's aimed at a wide, sector-based audience - from CEOs of major international construction companies down to site managers, for example, or from NHS board members down to frontline nursing staff. And while the editors do a magnificent job on a weekly or monthly basis in creating issues with maximum cross-audience appeal, a print product is always going to be such a compromise.

Of course the same restrictions don't apply in the digital world. It's relatively straightforward - providing you've adopted the right technology - to create highly-targeted products and services whether these are functional apps or complete websites. Indeed, a constant complaint from publishers is that they are under attack from just such products in the form of online start-ups.

So why is it that the publishers - who've



already got the attention of their audience - are struggling to convert this potential? I think there are two key reasons - the first is around systems and process, and the second is around data.

Need for flexible systems

I began to encounter the first of these challenges some years ago. At the time, we were building a website for a B2B title in the engineering sector (to avoid embarrassment I won't name the title, but I can say it once featured heavily in the final round of *Have I Got News For You*).

I discovered that the title - and particularly its archive - was frequently relevant to engineering students who would often be studying projects that had been covered in detail in the publication. What would typically happen is that a student would ring the office and ask for a copy of the relevant article. A member of staff would then go to the archive, find the said article in the bound copies, photocopy it and post it out to the student. For free!

I asked the publisher why the students - or at least their college library - didn't buy

the publication and he explained that an annual subscription was far too expensive for them. So I asked why they couldn't simply sell a single issue or even a cut-price student subscription. Not only would this provide additional revenue, it would also be capturing the next generation of subscribers early in their career. The somewhat depressing answer that came back was that this was an 'interesting' idea but simply too complicated to administer and probably not worth the effort financially.

When I pushed the publisher on the point, it became apparent that what he actually meant was that both his internal systems and, critically, his subscription house couldn't really cope with more than one subscription product at a time, let alone ad hoc back issue requests.

Now fast-forward a few years to 2013 and I still see many of the same limiting factors in place, even though these days, publishers are attempting to deal with the added complications of a multiplatform environment where the product set typically includes print, web, mobile and apps.

What publishers desperately need are joined-up systems that allow them not only to create the content and services, but to also define the commercial models that sit around them; to market these products and offers; to monetise them and then to manage entitlement. This is easier said than done, but it's certainly an area where publishers are now pushing suppliers and rightly so.

Freeing the data

The second key challenge in creating a differentiated, customer-focused product set is around data. Publishers have access to hugely valuable data assets whether in the form of subscription and marketing databases, controlled circulation demographics, event attendance details or reader research. And that's before you start to consider the gigabytes of rich user data collected from the web and apps.

But all too often, this data sits in functional silos within a publishing business - seldom joined-up properly and therefore ineffective in its impact on the product development process. Yet if we look at the mega-successful online players - whether we are talking about Google, Facebook or Amazon - we see that it is the way these businesses join the dots in customer data that allows them to develop must-use products.

If publishers can follow suit, they have a fantastic opportunity. They can use the data provided by their audience to identify and

develop new products precisely targeted to the needs of distinct segments of that audience. And they can use that same data to ensure the new products are targeted at exactly the right set of consumers with exactly the right message and offer to generate maximum conversion. And once the new product is deployed, usage data can be employed to hone the offer even further. This is what we call the virtuous circle of data-driven product development.

In this way, publishers will develop a much richer product matrix with different brands and services available to be bundled in a multitude of different ways to suit the needs of the customer.

To be clear, I'm not talking about personalisation here. It's not about expecting your clients to use some 'pick 'n' mix' platform to create exactly the product they need. That route has been tried many times before and generally it doesn't work. In fact it diminishes the role of the publisher by delegating the mediation and curation role that is part of our core value proposition to the consumer. More often than not, this type of 'active' user-driven personalisation detracts rather than adds value.

Instead, publishers should be using the rich stream information they have on their audience to create products and services that are tailored to their needs. Then they should market these products in a smart, proactive way – getting the right message in front of the right consumer at

the right time.

And this sophisticated product matrix should allow publishers to manage their business in an optimal way. So they can market products aimed and priced for students with another variant specifically tailored to the needs of C-level execs. Much of the content might be shared, but the 'packaging' and commercial model can be completely independent.

It's often said that in the internet age anyone can be a publisher. That now access to a printing press and complex distribution networks is no longer required to get content in front of an audience, publishers have lost their competitive advantage and indeed find themselves significantly disadvantaged by their high overheads and organisational entropy.

But this hypothesis ignores the power of the domain expertise and the deeply embedded audience relationships that smart publishers can leverage. As I've argued, publishers will have to become smarter and much better at giving each consumer exactly what they want and need rather than what's convenient. They will need to invest in people, processes, systems and delivery platforms that allow them to do this. But if they can get this right, they will be able to protect their commercial position as well as mine a rich seam of new business.

Ultimately, in the age of the internet and the app, some of the tools required to become a

publisher may be ubiquitous, but the skills to be a good publisher are still pretty rare. Which brings us back to Henry J Heinz, who – albeit unknowingly – gave the publishing sector a motto for the internet age when he said, "to do a common thing uncommonly well brings success". ■

OUR CORRESPONDENT



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