

HR Future shows the way for B2B publishers

By  Herman Manson: @marklives

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A small independent business-to-business (B2B) publisher is leading the way in the B2B publishing segment with its innovative multimedia approach to publishing. *HR Future* publisher Alan Hosking has embraced the potential for significant cost savings and an increased footprint (and ABC circulation) that digital editions hold for B2B publishers.



HR Future has achieved an ABC-certified circulation of 15 468 for the period April 2010 to June 2010, up from 9733 in the corresponding previous period, of which 13 428 come in the form of digital editions.

Printing and distribution has always been a prohibiting factor towards building circulation in the B2B segment. It would be fair to say *HR Future* would not find printing this number of magazines financially sustainable. With nearly 87% of its circulation being digital, it now doesn't have to.

The [ABC](#) requires digital editions to be exact replicas of their print counterparts to count towards certified circulation figures. Digital editions are also only allowed for titles of ABC members with a print edition (so standalone digital magazines cannot receive an ABC-certified circulation figure). Sadly, this leaves little leeway for publishers to innovate.

The only other B2B player for which sees digital editions contribute significantly to its ABC circulation is Southern African Tourism Update, where digital editions represent just fewer than 10% of its total ABC-certified circulation.

Bizcommunity.com: Why did HR Future decide on a multimedia publishing strategy?

Alan Hosking: Our move to making use of digital editions was the result of a journey I undertook over the past 18 months to understand the changes in the media industry and the implications thereof for publishers such as ourselves.

Reader habits have been changing, advertiser-buying patterns have changed and the way people respond to advertising

has changed. When advertising revenue came under pressure, I realised that continuing as before would take us on a road to nowhere. Because I am aware of the old truth that doing more of the same will not achieve a different result, I took a strategic decision to change the way we were doing things.

I reinvented *HR Future* from a print publication into a multimedia content platform. We now deliver content in four ways: via our hard copy magazine, via our digital version, via our newly launched [website](#) and via live events like our networking breakfasts. Our digital magazine is therefore only one component of our overall strategy.

There are a few other components of the strategy due to be rolled out at a later stage as and when we have put them in place, so our strategy is still in its very early stage.

Biz: How successful is your digital edition?

Hosking: As far as reader response is concerned, there was an immediate, positive response to the digital version. I had anticipated that people under 50 would be cool with the digital edition and those over 50 probably wouldn't. I was surprised to get positive comments from a number of over 50s who claim they are trying to cut their paper consumption.

Because we have not opted for an "either/or" strategy but an "and" strategy, we have continued with our print version, but have reduced the number of copies printed. This has had two benefits: one, it has helped us effect a major saving on printing and mailing costs and, two, it has helped us contribute to sustainability by reducing our paper consumption - something which has pleased a lot of our readers as many of them have indicated that they are also trying to do so.

My view is that, while print magazines will generally decrease (worldwide) in number, print will not die out, in the same way that TV hasn't killed the radio or the movies. Radio has, however, had to adapt and movie theatres are a lot smaller than they used to be, but they're still a viable concern. Print will just have to adapt, either through design techniques or other factors.

It's also been interesting to see the way different people have responded to the different media. Some people have indicated that they still prefer reading a printed magazine and cite convenience, comfort and pleasure as their reasons. Others have claimed they prefer the digital version.

Both options have features that the other doesn't have. The printed magazine has the tactile (and olfactory) experience, ease on the eye and convenience of being read in places inconvenient for electronic media. The digital version provides the opportunity for interactivity with hyperlinks, emailing and instant gratification regarding responding to offers etc.

Biz: How important has digital become to your business model?

Hosking: It's very important. It's the way of the future for many reasons, so ignoring digital format and thinking/hoping it will go away is a bit naïve. Failing to embrace it is also a bit short-sighted as it provides ways of communicating content that print could never do.

We have intentionally gone into a state of flux regarding our business model because we are now experimenting with different options. For example, because of the influence of free content on the Internet, we're playing around with our free content/paid-for content model and will then make a decision as to how best to move forward once we've seen what works best for us.

Biz: Will you be expanding the number of platforms your brand is represented on?

Hosking: We are indeed looking to expand our platforms - we've got two more platforms we'll be introducing. I'm a bit precious about outlining them, though - we're a small team punching above our weight and I don't really want to give away our plans before we're ready to roll them out.

Biz: I know the ABC requires digital copies to be similar to those produced in print to qualify towards your circulation figures but I have found magazines designed for print aren't optimal for online reading. Has your strategy influenced how you design the print book and do you think there should be more leeway in ABC rules to cater for the design requirements of e-editions?

Hosking: You're absolutely right about the whole matter of design of digital magazines. While our digital version is currently exactly the same as our printed version, my homework did reveal that a digital magazine requires a more reader-friendly format with certain design conventions utilised to achieve this.

We've opted to play according to the current ABC rules because it suited us right now as we wanted to pump up our distribution figures. A fully fledged digital design is, however, on the cards for as and when we think the time is right.

Regarding the ABC and the design of digital editions... If the ABC wants to remain relevant, it will definitely have to adapt its rules to embrace the move to digital magazines. One understands that, being an auditing organisation, it would tend towards a more conservative approach, but it needs to factor in the growing trend towards digital publications which, while very noticeable in the international community, is still to make its presence felt in SA.

Maybe if it started catering for the different design of digital magazines, it would act as a stimulus for such magazines to be produced...

For more, go to www.hrfuture.net and follow [@Alan_Hosking](https://twitter.com/Alan_Hosking) on Twitter.

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