

So Far, No Information Model Beats Print

By Nancy Rathbun Scott

A [really excellent blog post](#) by Bruce Hendrickson addressed the certain death of print publications – trade magazines, specifically. No denying Bruce is right, and he hit upon something that’s been troubling Marketing Brillo for some time. With print evaporating into the ether, what will become of information communications generally, and business communications specifically?

Newspapers Look Like the Ultimate Information-Delivery Model

At this point, major newspapers are the only business communicators who seem to be “getting it right.” Perhaps that's because communicators like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *the LA Times* are on-screen replicas of their print selves (only better). How so?

At major online newspaper sites, information presentation features the tried-and-true layout that information junkies love. Like their print counterparts, the information is categorized under easy-to-find tabs and indices. Articles have bylines and terse headlines; they are carefully researched and full of facts, parsed interviews, and background references. Articles are beautifully written and as long as they need to be. Best of all, articles proceed from an understandable point A, to a conclusive Point B. Truly .. can we yet say the same for most electronic publications?

Most Electronic Newsletters and Magazines Still Don’t Get It

Reality is, electronic newsletters and publications, generally, are still climbing all over themselves to figure out what they should look like. Should they be one short email with two-sentence headers, linked to a longer article? Should they offer the first paragraph, and *then* link? Should they have photos or no photos? Should they include “read more” jumps or not? Nobody knows for sure, because nobody agrees.

The result is an electronic jumble that many prospective readers are turning away from. Surprisingly – despite the marketers’ yelp for “more content, content, content” -- some organizations are simply stepping back. [Lucy Kellaway](#) writing in the U.K.’s *Financial Times* [says](#) “... companies have decided to deal with too much information by giving up any attempt to manage it on the grounds that to do so costs too much. Since the recession

began, many have closed their libraries and taken the axe to their knowledge management divisions, set up with such pride and optimism barely a decade ago."

So Far, Information Video Is Looking Even Worse

In addition to cutting back on information delivery and/or toying with electronic versions of print, some organizations are eschewing editorial and switching to video to communicate with readers. Have you ever watched the stuff some of these videophiles are putting out? For one thing – unlike journalists who make it their living to write well -- the people featured in videos are generally amateurs in front of a camera... which means their thinking may be fuzzy and the content may not get to the point quickly enough. Moreover, from looking at the ever-present video introduction (which is usually infused with upfront advertising), you don't have any idea whether the content will be good, bad, or horrible. In fact, until you've already invested time, there's no gauging the value of what's "in there" at all. Not so, with *The New York Times*. In fact, not so with print publications generally. These you can evaluate in a glance.

Print Pulls and Doesn't Push

All this is not to say that electronic alternatives can't work. They just don't enjoy the "pull" characteristic of print. A study in November 2009 by [Marketing Sherpa](#), confirmed that the most effective ploy of email marketers is delivering content *relevant to segments* ... which means the pusher (publisher) has to know *which specific individuals* (not simply which demographic) want the marketing push. That makes marketing more difficult, demands continual attention to the fickle opt-in, opt-out nature of readers, and also leaves in question "who's really 'buying' this anyway?" ... which brings us to another benefit of print; namely, print pulls-in its own self-selected readership. With electronic publications,

The Essential Problem Is Purpose

Let's face it: Except for the noble online newspaper, most electronic media is about marketing, not information. Since marketing's number one concern is the bottom line – whereas information delivery has something to say – it's not surprising that marketers want to go digital. It's *so much* cheaper.

So far, few organizations have figured out how to deliver information digitally. Yes, we have Twitter and electronic newsletters for headline type information, but the in-depth stuff we want usually arrives as a downloadable pdf (that gets printed). The four-color glory of a magazine simply – with its portability, thumbablity, fileability, tearability, and sharability -- can't be replicated online. Maybe that's why empire builders like Oprah Winfrey and Cesar Millan (the Dog Whisperer) always include a print magazine in their enterprise mix. In fact, Millan launched [his magazine](#) in the third quarter of the recession-ridden 2009.

Those who can afford it understand that when people are really interested and committed, they want to hold what they love in their hand. The first digital genius to figure out a way to do that electronically, will make a trillion. Until then, for optimal information delivery, print remains the cream in the mix.

Conclusion

I hope I'm not one of the 'monkey-fisted' folks Bruce was talking about in his article. I know he's right about the future of high-overhead print: It's the old architecture and it's going to crumble.

What I am saying is that nobody -- yet -- has certainty what the new architecture should look like. In figuring that out, I hope we analyze carefully the underlying value that most information seekers find in print.

Stats do report that people, generally, are watching more video every day. But, when people want *informed* opinion, apparently, they still are reading gray matter like Wikipedia and online newspapers and blogs – especially blogs. They also are searching out hefty online articles and white papers—the stuff that's not necessarily pretty, or short, or entertaining ... but IS where the content meets the seeker.

Entertainment is a whole different subject, of course. But, if information and analysis are the point, well, the easy-digest that's trending now may not work so well in the long-term. As we adopt the new architecture, I'm betting (hoping) we'll figure out how to include some elements of the 550-plus-year old print model.

p.s. In the meantime, check out [what print can still do](#) to knock off your socks.

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