

Innovation

A key demand of mass media is to look again at the given — and renew it with the subtly, or spectacularly, different. Innovation is the sure cure for boredom. How do you conjure the art of making new without alienating the loyal, long-time consumer? What are elements of the process?

Dick Wald

ABC News tried to make a newsmagazine 24 or 25 years ago and started “20/20.” The first program was a disaster. The next six months of the program were a modified disaster. The first program was like an atomic bomb so that anything that came near it got radiation sickness. What we did to make it work was put an enormous amount of effort into getting celebrity interviews. In a sense, that’s a dumb thing to do. You’re dealing with a relatively serious series of news pieces and yet you’re mixing them with all these celebrity interviews. But what happened was, the celebrity interviews developed an audience. The audience became used to seeing something valuable in addition to the celebrities, and gradually the celebrity interviews went down and the serious stuff came on. It’s a constant readjustment.

Tim McGuire

Many people have heard the old story about railroads and how they should have realized they were in the transportation business in the same way newspapers ought to realize they’re in the information business.

I heard someone else say a few years ago that in fact the railroad people knew they needed to be in the transportation business. They just loved railroads so much they couldn’t make the change. There’s a lot of that in our business.



Newspapers have a problem in that the world is changing faster than we are. As long as that’s the case, we’re going to have difficult times.

I remember a person [who] said we shouldn’t change for change’s sake. I took the opposite view. I felt we needed to change for change’s sake because we needed to convince ourselves we could change. We’re a far more flexible organization than we were.

I think that's essential for the challenges we face. Having the ability to change, having the ability to work across departments, is essential in today's environment.

Nancy Maynard

The process of investing in ideas frees folks to behave well.

Norman Pearlstine

As a manager, you have to be willing to innovate and to change course when things aren't working. The campaign slogan in Joe Heller's "Good as Gold" was, "Nothing succeeds as planned." I repeat it more often than you can imagine.

That was certainly the case at *The Asian Wall Street Journal*. Peter Kann, who had covered Southeast Asia for the *Journal*, was named editor and publisher, and I was named managing editor, having worked for three years in Tokyo. We began with a staff of four reporters ... because everyone thought the publication could get by with minimal coverage of the region, since readers were thought to be interested primarily in business and stock market news from New York. Our early marketing efforts talked about the paper as a "window on the world." But we quickly realized that readers were even more desperate for credible coverage of Asia, something that was in short supply. We ended up expanding the staff, devoting more space to regional coverage and delaying by many years the profitability that had initially been envisioned.

It is equally difficult to get redesigns right. I have never received a letter from a reader asking for a bigger publication or for a redesign. Even though you may want new readers, it isn't worth alienating the ones you have. You know your redesign is a success if old readers don't complain about it. Later, much later, you will find yourself attracting new readers. It took two or three years before readers of *Fortune* began to understand the full measure of the redesign that John Huey and his staff had imposed on the publication. That's why I think it was the most successful redesign of the 1990s.

Alberto Ibargüen

I find newsrooms to be extremely conservative about change. People like the process. People have made their peace with the arbitrariness of the authority of the editor and the deadline. It's not so much the editor as the deadline.

Within that, they know how to act and move. So if you want to change that, you really have to tread pretty carefully. First, display respect. Show respect for the work that's done. Then show how that work never reaches [many people] if it's not delivered on time or is so long that the reader won't stick with the story, a problem we've had in many, many newspapers.

If the stuff we do is so important, if it's so good, why are fewer and fewer people reading it? What is causing that? You need to first talk about that and get people to think about it in their own lives, and think about it as a member of the community.

Jack Fuller

We started thinking about a 24-hour local cable news operation. What if one of our competitors did this against us, how would that feel? So what would feel the lousiest if done to us? Let's do THAT.

It wasn't like anybody had a grand design. As in most experiences, a lot of [the ideas] didn't work, or they worked briefly and then they flashed out.

Tom Johnson

Creativity is in many ways determined by the environment in which people can work. They can't work with rigid rules. And I fear that so many of our bureaucracies don't enable creative people to flourish.

They must go out to think tanks. They must go out to the university communities. We're so driven by quarterly profit goals, annual profit goals, cost containment, trying to be politically correct about every single [decision] that is made.

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In a way, I think we're putting a straitjacket on a lot of creative people today that needs to be taken off. That happens to be one of the reasons I'm enthusiastic about the new technology, because we are just now really discovering what we can do with news on demand, sports on demand, all forms of interactivity, the wireless devices. Before long, we'll be able to access, almost anywhere in the world, some of the greatest forms of entertainment and music and movies and news. It's a revolution taking place. Some of the great creative minds of Hollywood are doing it in the fields of music and movies already. I think we're going to find in news, without changing standards of quality and accuracy and responsibility, ways to disseminate that we never had before.

Sandy Rowe

I make sure, as I start new sections, to understand what we're trying to accomplish and to say that out loud. I believe in making promises out loud in order to state what the expectations are, to make sure the structures are there to support it, and to make sure people can see my commitment to it. I'm participating in the planning even if I'm not the one driving the planning.

They (co-workers) can see a payoff for them, too. Sometimes it's by seeing a different way of telling stories. Sometimes the payoff is in how something is received in the community.

All of us deep inside want to improve. So if they see how the innovation is going to help improve them as journalists, then you really have a double benefit. ... I'm also not afraid to say something didn't work out as planned. So I will admit mistakes publicly, but I try to be relentless in expecting forward movement. You have to keep some forward momentum going, and you have to do that with a laser-like focus.