

MANAGEMENT OF A CHURCH NEWSPAPER

by Noel Bruyns

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Working for a Church publication can make one slightly schizophrenic! From a business side, you must ensure your medium is a financial success. On the other hand, you feel uncomfortably mercenary in adopting this policy because you are involved in a pastoral tool for evangelisation - serving the Church in the field of social communications.

Thus one may rightly argue that success should not be measured only in worldly terms, in the same way as Our Lord's early mission could not be. Nevertheless, there is also the parable about using our talents to the full.

Marrying these two elements was the task which I set myself on *The Southern Cross*. The basic premise is: Strategising to make the Church newspaper as successful as we can does not diminish the spiritual dimension of our profession, but assists us in enhancing our vocation as Catholic journalists to serve the people of God.

Success in the newspaper industry is measured by circulation and by sound management to ensure financial viability. *The Southern Cross* is not yet excelling in either field, but for the first time in years ended the past financial year with a (pre-auditing) trading surplus due to strict management, despite the country's debilitating economic crisis.

How is management of *The Southern Cross* conducted? (For the purposes of this paper, management is understood as all parts of promoting business success - administration, marketing, promotions etc., but excluding editorial strategies and policy).

1. Cultivate business attitude

Charitable service and business venture

This may sound obvious, but the introductory remarks above show it is not axiomatic. Without sacrificing the attitude of vocation and mission in producing this Church publication, stricter attention was given to the policy: this is not a charitable service but a business venture. Prior to the incumbent Administrative Manager's taking over, *The Southern Cross* was run - in some people's eyes - as a slightly antiquated, cozy family affair.

A general climate of professionalism

A more professional approach was introduced - from insisting incoming calls are answered within five rings of the telephone and callers can «hear» the friendly, helpful smile of the receptionist, to computerisation of the accounting system; from typing letters neatly spaced to project a professional image to inculcating a customer-orientated mentality in which customer service and customer complaints are handled promptly and friendly, and the administrative staff's realisation that the Administrative Manager, although congenial, has a fetish for efficiency!

This reflects the challenge set in the invitation brochure to the 46th World Newspaper Congress, held in Berlin in May this year, of the International Federation of Newspaper Publishers (FIEJ):

«As market forces continue to change the media landscape, newspapers clearly find themselves at a new crossroads. "Business as usual" has become the quickest recipe for failure! If senior management fails to recognise the strategic necessity to reinvent the business, then fundamental change will never happen and their newspapers may be on the way to becoming history. The key to success lies in listening to your customers - whether readers or advertisers - and giving them the products they need (not what you think they need), before your competitors resolve the question for you.» (Excerpts)

A small incident shows how management's setting a professional example rubs off: the auditor checking the books last month commented that the various documentation had been much better prepared this year compared to last year. The staff members in the various departments (e.g. advertising, accounts) who had contributed to the documentation for the auditor had not been told beforehand to take greater care in preparing their material: this more business-like approach had come about subsonsciously because such a climate had been encouraged in the office.

2. Work hard on marketing

There is little point in having a good product, but nobody knows about it. (Conversely, of course, there is little point in aggressive marketing if the product is inferior!)

Marketing *The Southern Cross* has been identified as a second important element in management. For any Catholic newspaper, anywhere in the world, it was easier in previous decades: there was a much more intense sense of being Catholic, and «good Catholics» would buy their church newspaper out of tradition or habit or because that is what «good Catholics should do».

And for those who didn't, a word from Father encouraging church newspaper sales would do the trick. But today many Catholics do not do what the priest or even the Pope says on as grave a matter as contraception - so much less will they automatically buy the church newspaper if they are invited to do so from the pulpit.

Management at *The Southern Cross* had to realise most modern Catholics justifiably subscribe to normal free-market norms: they will not spend money on what they don't want or believe they don't need. The challenge for the editorial mix is simple: Without resorting to the latest on Princess Diana and Prince Charles, we must give readers what they want as Catholics, we must give them what they need as Catholics, and we must give them what they can use in their everyday life as Catholics.

The marketing challenge - upon which *The Southern Cross* is at present acting - is to inform particularly potential or lapsed readers that their church newspaper is rising to the editorial mix challenge.

Recently thousands of brochures were placed in pews of parishes throughout the country. The front cover showed a collage of headlines and intro's of relevant, interesting local stories of recent editions. Page two had a pair of similar drawings (the type you see on the comic pages), with the heading «Spot the Difference». Page three had the text saying, in effect, it's even easier to spot the difference in *The Southern Cross*, which is changing to reflect the changing society as the country undergoes dramatic changes in preparation for post-apartheid democracy. Page four advised them the newspaper is available at parishes at weekend Masses, and a subscription form appeared for those who wish to «see the difference for yourself!».

3. Promote client cultivation

Managing a church newspaper is no different from running any other business: to be successful, it has to be customer-orientated. *The Southern Cross* is cultivating a relationship with clients on two levels: with parish priests and with parishioners.

Besides 2,000 subscriptions posted directly to subscribers, the church newspaper is bulk-posted to parishes throughout the country, to be sold at weekend Masses. The parish priest is a vital link. Thus every month a letter is posted to parish priests, thanking them for their assistance, asking them to help promote the publication, offering suggestions on how this can be done, keeping them informed of trends in the paper's performance, asking them to distribute promotional material, etc.

Stimulating the demand for the paper...

... in a society where Catholics show less interest to identify themselves with Church papers

Competition with other newspapers and magazines

A customer-oriented management

"What is good for my customers?"

The main aim of the monthly exercise is to let the priests know they and their assistance and support are genuinely valued. This has paid dividends, as many more priests today are actively responding positively to this client cultivation. No longer need they feel the newspaper is simply dumped on them week after week without appreciation or acknowledgement from management.

On a second level, parishioners as consumers are being taken more seriously. At the FIEJ congress mentioned above, Mark Ashley, managing director of Lancaster Publications Ltd in Britain, said in his address:

«What characterises the UK success is that they have moved from a process of asking “what is good for me?” to a process of “what’s good for my customers?”, sharply focused on the needs and aspirations of the public and the business our newspapers are here to serve.»

This realisation has caused management of *The Southern Cross* to conduct a readership survey. Six thousand questionnaires will be handed out at random to parishioners throughout the country in November. Market research should be obvious to any business, but since *The Southern Cross* was founded in 1920, not one readership survey has been conducted!

Are there other church newspapers of which management has ignored the obvious?

4. Build teamwork

People are the key of success,
not technology

Chief Executive Officers of the commercial press are realising more and more that the greatest investment of any newspaper is not its technology but its people. The most up-to-date computer programmes or sophisticated printing presses will have little value unless staff is motivated, happy and committed.

The Southern Cross, as probably most church newspapers, is fortunate in that staff members feel themselves as «family» because they are in communion in a religious service. The hard-nose jostling for power and to use any rat-race trick to further one’s career at the expense of colleagues which is often the attitude in the general job market, is normally absent in the church newspaper environment.

However, management at this newspaper does not take this for granted, and actively attempts to build a happy atmosphere. This does not have to preclude efficiency.

5. Improve finances

More money, more possibilities to
achieve the vocation of the newspaper:
to be a tool for evangelization.

Even church newspapers serving the noble mission of evangelisation through social communication have to entertain the «dirty» idea of making money! The printers have to be paid, as do salaries. (It seems a worldwide phenomenon that to work for the church means to work for charity rates. As a result, church newspapers often employ not the most qualified people, but people who will accept what they can afford - which is usually below market-related salaries).

The Southern Cross management made improving finances another vital element in running the business. Why?

Getting the church newspaper to grow as a business is a pre-requisite to strengthen it to perform its primary function: to be a pastoral tool for evangelisation. Increased revenue will facilitate this strengthening in various ways, inter alia:

* The church newspaper will be able to use colour regularly. (Many church newspapers, running on a shoe-string budget, cannot afford the wide use of spot-colour on their pages or full colour pictures). Where the public is used to finding a liberal use of colour in the secular press to make it more attractive, it will not find a newspaper without colour to be reader-friendly. Such a newspaper will find it more difficult to induce people to buy it.

* The church newspaper will be able to increase its number of pages. More pages will mean more space for the editor to offer his readers a wider contents variety - e.g. a dedicated Youth Page or Ecumenical News Page - which in turn will attract more readers.

* Many church newspapers, especially in developing countries, are produced by only two or three people making up the editorial team who sit in tiny, dingy offices. They don't have full-time reporters. The budget does not allow for that. Overworked, they thus have to rely on news from official church statements, news agencies and freelance reports written by church members with no journalistic training. Improved income means more qualified journalists can be employed, which will increase the scope and quality of news coverage - which in turn will increase circulation.

* Staff can be paid equitable and market-related salaries.

The cover price of a newspaper, as is common knowledge, does not cover production and other costs. And world press trends show that adspend has dramatically decreased in the face of the international economic recession. This development has affected church newspapers, too. Management therefore has to be imaginative in finding additional sources of income. This can be from the most sophisticated ideas, to the most down-to-earth.

For instance, vice president of the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) Therese Ee Chooi, relates after a visit to Vietnam that the only Catholic newspaper in Ho Chi Minh City, Cao Cia Va Dan Toc, is «an example of great ingenuity for survival».

Staff used to manufacture and sell ball pens to supplement their income. When Ho Chi Minh City opened to development, multinationals poured in. One of the new industries was ball pen mass-produced manufacturing, so that Cao Cia Va Dan Toc could not compete with the low prices on the open market. But, assisted by funding agencies, the newspaper built a hostel. Rooms are let - this is now the newspaper's extra source of income.

At *The Southern Cross*, management is seeking to improve finances by, for instance, utilising its computer equipment by offering readers laser-printed letterheads «at a third of commercial printers' prices», yet still making a healthy profit. A more aggressive campaign is to solicit advertising despite - or because of - the drop in adspend, is also paying off.

6. Keeping abreast of innovations in the publishing world

It became obvious at the FIEJ congress that newspaper Chief Executive Officers around the world are concerned that the rise of the new technologies may make newspapers obsolete - or at least dramatically alter their role in the next century. They speak of the day when «readers» will press a keyboard button to call up teledata news onto their television screens over the telephone. Some are already investing in the new technologies to hedge their bets.

Whereas church newspapers have neither the finances nor (because of small circulation) the urgent need to follow suit, management of church newspapers has to divest itself of running a quaint service with an antiquated mentality, if it wishes to ensure survival in a changing society.

Speaking from my own experience, for example, even though I began my career in journalism almost 20 years ago, I still find it necessary to improve professional skills by picking up news ideas and tips from trade journals, magazines, documentation from the local Newspaper Press Union or international contacts such as FIEJ or UCIP. ■

Imaginative management to trace
new sources of income

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