

The Self-Reliant Publisher: Use Internal Resources For An External Perspective

by Mike May, Thursday, Jun 1, 2006 2:47 PM ET

MY FIANCÉE AND I COOKED chicken parmesan roulades last night. We got the recipe from a magazine she just subscribed to called *Cuisine at Home*. She paid attention to the quantities of mozzarella and parmesan and fontina required; I was struck by a little red box below a picture of a pair of hands folding the ends of a tightly packed roulade which read, "onlinevideo" and directed readers to the magazine's Web site for a video complement to some of the technique called for by the recipe. It was a clean execution of a simple but fabulous idea--using the Web to enhance the value of a print publication.

But my column isn't about this specific idea--it's about where to *find* ideas like this one. I found it in my kitchen, dusted with grated parmesan. But my island countertop is not a consistent source of online publishing best practices. In fact, there are very few consistent courses of online publishing best practices--especially when compared to all the sources of online advertiser and marketer benchmarks, expert advice, commentary and research.

Yet I would argue that the online advertising industry will be driven as much through publisher innovation as advertiser innovation. Advertisers are pulling money out of traditional media and looking for new media opportunities, but these opportunities can only be created through online publisher growth and new program development. Publishers who rely on organic user growth and higher CPMs to meet the increasing demand will profit in the short-term; publishers who continue to innovate with new programs for both advertisers and audience, who actively grow their readership, and who develop new channels to pair advertisers with receptive consumers, will enjoy more enduring success.

Simply looking inward, or at key competitors for benchmarking, will drive incremental evolution, not the step-changes required by shifting consumption patterns. Publishers need a much wider net when trolling for ideas--wide enough to encompass their closest competitors, the biggest players in publishing with their vast resources, as well as the tiniest upstarts driven by ingenuity, nimbleness and hunger.

Most industries rely on their trade associations as a hub of education, content and networking. The principal associations that represent online publishers--the Interactive Advertising Bureau and the Online Publishers Association--remain focused largely on advertiser education with their programs and especially events. As their member needs become more introspective, the associations will inevitably turn their focus more towards

member-specific education and content.

But until that happens, online publishers need to develop their own means of spotting, recognizing, nurturing and sharing the ideas necessary to propel their organizations--and the industry--forward. The best resources available to them are within their own organizations. Here are three ways to turn your publishing organization into an idea factory:

1. Create a formal process of informal sharing. Everyone on staff reads magazines, Web sites, blogs or newspapers, and they watch TV, listen to the radio and drive by billboards. Develop and encourage a way for them to share what strikes them as innovative or successful. Consider e-mail lists, an internal company blog, lunch-and-learns, staff meetings, even the old-fashioned suggestion box. As with any new process, there will be logistic, technological, even cultural, hurdles to overcome. But a staff of professionals is also a staff of consumers, and a powerful perspective to tap into.

2. Consult consultants. Don't consider just those who have backgrounds in publishing; look especially at online advertising and marketing experts who are simultaneously working with buy-side clients. Skilled ones have some fresh insight into what advertisers are seeking, and may also have a perspective on consumer behavior not immediately apparent to publishers.

3. Give insiders an external perspective. In addition to consultants and new hires with experience outside of publishing, consider also rotations and exchange programs that give existing staff firsthand exposure to other parts of your business, and even the business of key partners or clients.

Do some of these ideas sound unorthodox, complex, unlikely? They may very well be, but remember also that competitive advantage is no commodity.