

Designing For a Difference

Handout by Ron Reason, delivered at the "Designing for a Difference" Workshop in Chicago. Updated and posted to the web September 2006

Indexes, digests, rails: How to do better?

DEFINE THE PURPOSE. There are a variety of reasons to use a front page index or a rail or directory of highlights from throughout the paper (and/or material from the web). Summarizing the day's news? Promoting the most lively mix of inside features? Offering something of interest to a variety of demographic groups? Promoting your web content, or what's coming in tomorrow's paper? Be very clear about the purpose of each indexing element of the paper. Anything above the fold has the potential to sell some papers, if the size and visual impact is large enough; if this is a stated goal, be serious about it, and throw some resources at it. In any case, take some care to craft something unique from your paper as you write and edit any kind of news summary. People read them!

HEIGHTEN YOUR STANDARDS. Don't use a news summary as a dumping ground for the AP budget, or parrot the lead headlines from your inside section fronts (which most readers will scan anyhow). Chances are that your readers may have seen much of it on TV or the internet already. Even if the stories are getting stale, you can spin it in a new or forward way. And think about the element of surprise - there is a place for it in a digest!

FOR SOME READERS, THIS IS THE ONLY THING THEY MIGHT READ IN PRINT. Ask: If a reader ONLY spends 90 seconds reading our digest, rail or other summary, and nothing else, will they TRULY get a good snapshot of the day's happenings, or of the contents of the newspaper? Will it make them feel more equipped for a water-cooler conversation later in the day? Will it make them want to return to the paper to read 2 or 3 good articles after dinner (something we hear in focus groups from digest fans)? When you do your final edit of a news summary, ask how well it stands on its own. For many readers, it certainly will have to!

PLAN EARLY. Front page or inside news summaries, in many cases, can be planned early in the day (if not days before, for weekend or advance feature material), or at least can be edited as you go along. Don't put it off to the last minute, as so many papers do! Write, edit and design these early on; have the best eyes in your newsroom look them over and ask if they truly serve the time-starved reader in the way that you want.

LOOK FAR AND WIDE FOR THINGS TO PROMOTE. It's not always the lead stories of the inside sections, or even the centerpieces, that lend themselves to indexing. Often it's the advice column, the health column, a consumer report on new products in the business section, fitness tips hidden in the sports pages. Whoever writes the indexes (or promos) should see a printed out EVERY page that is being produced for the newspaper that day. Try to keep track of things electronically and the good stuff will often fall through the cracks.

RETHINK THE RULES. The old rules of "what's news" that you put into play while selecting stories or while fashioning a traditional digest are not necessarily the best tools to use today. Put on your marketing and sales hat, and go on the hunt for good consumer stories that will make a difference in the busy reader's life!

Have a tip for better indexes or news summaries that you'd like to share? Email me at the address below!

WHO INDEXES WELL?

THE WALL STREET

JOURNAL Factual, news of record in the "What's News" column on Page One; enticing, relevant and consumer-oriented in the Personal Journal. They know how to sell the news!

ST. PETE TIMES This paper puts top editing talent to work throughout the day on their front page rail. It's popular with readers, well edited, often catchy and not an afterthought!

ON THE WEB: msn.com and msnbc.com have a way with words on their home-page promos! They want clicks!

Ron Reason is a *Poynter Institute* Visiting Faculty Member and Design & Editing Consultant (*Crain's Chicago Business, Advertising Age, Harvard Crimson, Dallas Morning News, Emirates Evening Post of Dubai* and many other newspapers and magazines, large and small)