

Why digital publishers need to rethink what they're doing

 By Leigh Andrews

5 Dec 2017

Jochem Wijnands, Dutch founder and CEO of *TRVL* (it's pronounced as an acronym), explains the need for a 'build it yourself' mindset and putting user experience first when it comes to digital publishing.

“ I started TRVL in 2010. It was the first iPad-exclusive magazine in the world and it quickly became successful. However, the Adobe publishing software we had to use, because no other tools were around, truly sucked. ”

Wijnands explains that there was no publishing software to publish directly to mobile at the time, so they decided to build it themselves.



Jochem Wijnands, Dutch founder and CEO of TRVL. Image supplied.

This may seem an impossible task as they needed to factor in absolutely everything from design, to metrics, to monetising, to publishing, to text rendering, to file compression, but it took them just a year before Prss was born. When it was ready, they decided to turn Prss into a platform, which took another year, and in 2014 was acquired by Apple.

As a result, Wijnands says the full team moved to Cupertino where they built Apple News, which shipped in the summer of 2015. When he came back from Apple, Wijnands realised that publishers need an abrupt 180-degree shift of focus from the 'monetising eyeballs' mantra to one of adding value for users, as that's the only truly sustainable business model.

Digital publishing lessons to diarise

Sharing what he's learned about digital publishing along the way, Wijnands points out the obvious: Most online content is consumed through our smart phones, and this is only increasing year over year. That's why being **platform- and channel agnostic** is the first step, and to try to reach people where they like to hang out: That's probably Facebook and Pinterest, not your app or your home page. So you need to optimise for each channel.



TRVL mobile search. Image supplied.

As a consequence, Wijnands says publishers should think of themselves as media companies. He speaks from experience in pointing out that Apple News and other apps are proving **it's the aggregators that get most of the traffic**. This means publishing success will mean your brand is part of a newsfeed, together with other brands.

Also note that brand loyalty is feeble and that to a certain degree, algorithms will decide how many people will see your story.

Wijnands adds that paid content is not a realistic business model for digital publishers going forward. For traditional publishers, it's diminishing year over year as people simply don't pay for content online.

“ Only a handful of publishers that started in the 1800s, like the Economist or the NYT or The New Yorker, get away with paid content. But their audiences are white middle aged men. Where's the future in that? ”

That's why digital publishers – those in SA specifically – need to rethink what they're doing.



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The forerunners, like *Buzzfeed*, *Vice Media* and *Business Insider* took it to the next level as they are now **content factories**. Wijnands explains that they test every story, every headline, and put money against the ones that are trending to promote them. They don't care about what they write so much. Instead, they monetise eyeballs, do content marketing, end-of-article recommendations and lots of ecommerce – they simply don't leave a revenue model unexploited.

But even there, Wijnands thinks they haven't yet found the holy grail. He finds it disturbing and off-putting that all current business models diminish the experience of the user. And user experience is everything today.

Join the user experience publisher pack

So what is the future of digital publishing? Wijnands says it starts with thinking about how to enhance users' experience and how to add real value. Next, we need to think of publishing as not an objective in itself, but as a way to connect with an audience that have certain interests in common. Wijnands shares the following example:

"Say your audience all like serious music and your publication is about serious music. So every week you write about what's going on and where. What if you auctioned empty seats at concert halls every Thursday night between 7pm and 9pm?



TRVL office, Amsterdam Image supplied.

That would draw a big crowd and people would end up going to more concerts. People would end up going to concerts they wouldn't normally go to. It's a positive spiral. So, at some point, you can start hosting concerts yourself. Publish books. Give an online course about the history of music. Set up Google Hangout sessions with famous musicians. Have readers subscribe to highly specialised newsletters. Create an event where music-lovers can trade collectors' items and records..."

The possibilities are endless, but certainly not pie-in-the-sky. Take *TRVL* as an example. Wijnands reiterates that it was still just a magazine on iPad when he came back from Apple in early-2016. It's when he was looking for ways to add value for readers that he pivoted *TRVL* into a peer-to-peer travel-booking platform, while keeping their publisher focus.



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Not only do they pay travellers an agent commission on every booking they make and provide access to discounts normally off-limits to travellers, you can also count on peer-based travel advice during the booking process.

That's how they're effectively using their publishing assets to up-funnel user acquisition. Hopefully that inspires others to do the same, as media consumers are more likely to return to your offering if they're getting more from you than the latest headlines.

[Click here](#) for more on *TRVL* and follow them on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) for the latest updates.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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