

Rare sighting: First new UK paper in 25 years

LONDON, UK: With the launch of the *i*, the UK sees its first new quality daily in 25 years. Does this signal a resurgence in print - and how are media buyers reacting to this new arrival? Rebecca Ironside* comments.



News stands, just like magazine racks, have been relatively dormant over the past few years. So the launch of *i*, from the Independent stable, is understandably refreshing. Yet for Rebecca Ironside, director and publishing expert at market research consultancy SPA Future Thinking, there's a significant 'but' over its business rationale...

It's the first quality daily newspaper launch for nearly 25 years, and on first glance, *i* looks like many people's idea of the perfect read. It does exactly what Alexander Lebedev's Independent Print Limited group said it would do. It's modern, accessible and a bit more upmarket than Metro. It's got an eye-catching cover, it's colourful, has great signposting and an impressive News Matrix that gives the reader bite-sized chunks of all the main news stories at a glance.

Moreover, it's generated good feeling among media buyers, which is always important.

A big... ?

However, there's a major market issue that put a question mark over the long-term success of *i*: the 20p cover price.

The Independent's executives say the cost was fixed through market research and on a stand-alone level; it is a brilliant price point. Yet no newspaper fights on the news stands alone these days. The freebies, including the Independent's own *Evening Standard*, have long given the paid-for sheets a run for their money, based mainly on the fact that they're put directly into people's hands.

With competitor Metro still alive and kicking - I don't even have to take time out of my day to buy it - that 20p means effort as well as cash. If people aren't already in the habit of going into a shop to buy a paper, something like this, regardless of its quality, is unlikely to change behaviour to any critical mass. As it is, four days in, *i* is already being handed out free with the *Standard* in some places in London.

It's also combating a more insidious threat: the online habit. It's dull but true that online consumption of news is growing: despite the paywalls on the FT, Times et al, news is largely free online. Few would argue that the introduction of smart tablets such as the iPad are set to erode print further. So it will be interesting to see how that affects long term take-up of *i*, especially since it doesn't appear to have its own website. (Try searching for *i* online: it's quite an experience.)

A threat

Finally, there's the threat of potential cannibalisation of the main brand - the *Independent*. As a teaser, or a way of targeting lapsed or non-readers, *i* might just work in the short term. In addition, although content currently differentiates *i* not only from its free competition, but also its parent, there's no getting away from the fact that it could almost certainly kill off the *Independent*. The more successful it is, the less successful the *Independent* will be; after all, why pay £1 when you can get the best of the *Indy* for 20p?

My bet is that Lebedev has a back-up strategy that enables it to go free if the 20p cover price stops it achieving critical mass - it's easier to start with paid-for and then go free rather than other way around.

However they play it, I hope it works. While everyone else is bemoaning the decline of the quality press, these guys have been brave enough to do something positive.

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