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## The future is here: How media brands can thrive

As Wired gears up for its iPad debut, its editor tells Ian Burrell how media brands can adapt and thrive

Monday, 5 April 2010

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If there's one media brand that needs to be ready for the inevitably game-changing arrival of the iPad, it's Wired, the magazine that carries the strapline "The Future As It Happens".

A year after its arrival on UK news-stands as a data-saturated, luxurious, silk paper guide to life in the digital age, Wired is already at risk from the technological revolution to which it is dedicated. As he sits in his office overlooking Old Bond Street, David Rowan, its editor, acknowledges a critical moment. "Any new technology creates an opportunity for a fast-moving, smart start-up that knows what the consumer wants," he says. "It's a threat to all sorts of media companies, games companies, and magazines like Wired. We'll be on the iPad in the second half of the year."

The entry into the market of Apple's tablet is clearly also a great opportunity for Rowan's title, with its obvious ties to a US edition founded by Chris Anderson way back in 1993 and set to launch on iPad as early as June. "We are talking closely to them but also working on our own product. There's an awful lot of beta-testing going on," says Rowan. "It means we are going to have to rethink how you make a magazine. When you are designing a beautiful spread – an infographic – you design a screen version and a second screen version that works when you turn the screen, and then you animate the infographic so that it looks fantastic when you touch it."

Such ambition costs money. According to Wired's publisher, Rupert Turnbull, the anticipated savings in distribution costs associated with the iPad will largely be soaked up by production spend. "It may seem like it will be more cost-effective to deliver on an iPad but the amount of multimedia skills you have to buy in offset not having to have a truck go round the country," he says. So don't expect the iPad edition of Wired to come cheap, warns Rowan. "Because it's going to be a high-quality experience [the cost might not be] that different from the magazine cover price."

The print version of Wired retails at £3.90 each month and is proving quite popular. Since publication of its debut ABC figure of 48,275, subscriptions have increased from 10,900 to 17,000 meaning the circulation has, after exactly a year, comfortably surpassed Condé Nast's target of 50,000 sales.

Extensive market research before the launch indicated that the audience would be 73 per cent male, an average reader being 33 with a household income of £44,000. But it turns out that men make up 89 per cent of readers, and the average household income is, at £79,050, much higher than expected.

There were those who doubted the wisdom of using dead trees to document the progress of digital media, especially when the first UK edition of Wired – a joint venture with Guardian News & Media – crashed soon after take-off in 1995. "It was a very different era; not many of us owned mobile phones or had email addresses. It was fair to say the action was west coast, so it was harder to tell European stories," says Rowan, who was at The Guardian in 1995 and remembers tensions between the two partners. "In 2010, technology affects all of our lives. We all get digital because we live it and consume it."

Rowan says that the credo of his magazine is encapsulated in a quote from the sci-fi writer William Gibson: "The future is already here, it's just unevenly distributed." His other watchword is upbeat. "We are a magazine about optimism; we're the only uncynical journalists left," he says. "We want to tell success stories and give innovations that some companies have found that other people can use."

Isn't this sunny disposition out of step with the snarky and world-weary online tone of those who wish to be seen as early adopters? "Don't you think people still have a yearning for hope and excitement?" Rowan counters. "There's a fantastic creative buzz going through the UK at the moment."

In comments that reflect the breadth of the magazine's interests, he cites the work of designer Thomas Heatherwick for the UK pavilion at Shanghai Expo, the fashion-inspired artist Benjamin Shine's use of fabric in his artwork, and the "extraordinary success story" of Michael Acton Smith's Moshi Monsters, an online game with an audience of 15 million children. The epicentre of Wired's world and a symbol of the UK's relevance as a creative hub is Silicon Roundabout, the junction at London's Old Street around which are clustered at least 85 tech companies, design businesses and digital agencies. "It's the quirky English sense of humour," says Rowan. "The Americans have Baywatch, Pam Anderson and Silicon Valley, we have black cabs that won't go south of the river and we have Silicon Roundabout."

The new UK edition of Wired seems to have greater autonomy than the 1995 incarnation. "We are quite global in our interests. In the last couple of weeks we have sent reporters to tell stories in Brazil, Russia, Belgium, Italy, Kenya and the US," says Rowan.

When Wired featured luxury laptop bags it could not resist introducing a little extra data with a "Papadum Test" that involved placing a crispy Indian flatbread inside each bag and counting the pieces of shattered snack when the luggage was dropped from shoulder height. "The brief for journalists on Wired is to write about what they're excited by – they don't have to write about things that are convenient to advertisers."

Perhaps, but this magazine is not inexpensive to produce, not when it commissions 5,000-word articles and eschews publicity photographs. Rowan later admits he has been following the well-worn path of the Condé Nast editor meeting luxury ad clients. "Last week I was in Milan going to visit Armani and Prada. The week before I was at the Basel watch fair, learning about tourbillion and chronograph developments."

It must be tempting for someone at the cutting edge of technological invention to chase economic opportunities of his own, but Rowan says his entrepreneurial appetite is satisfied by building a successful business around Wired. The next stage of that strategy will involve branded conferences, building on a relationship that Wired has developed with the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) movement.

Another annual event will be the Wired 100, an annual list of the UK's biggest digital players which debuts in the first anniversary issue of the magazine. The list is headed by Matt Brittin, the UK head of Google. "We all know Google, but I don't think many of our readers would have been able to name Matt Brittin," says Rowan.

"I think we all think we understand Google but I feel we are going to be introducing to many of our readers this individual who can decide whether or not Street View should operate in the UK, whether Google Buzz should be put on hold until they iron out some of the privacy concerns."

As Rowan prepares Wired for new technological opportunities – "and it's not just the iPad: I'm told there are about 50 equivalent devices being launched over the next year" – he is not holding out much hope that Rupert Murdoch's "over optimistic" online paywall experiment will transform the business model for print media.

"I think it will be tough to find enough people who will pay their £1 a day or £2 a week to make it viable," says Wired's editor, who as a former trainee on The Times says he wishes his old paper well with its great experiment. "There are a dozen examples of papers in the US that have started charging, and unless they offer a value proposition that can't be replicated by others, they have found it be potentially suicidal as a strategy."



STEPHANIE SCHAEERER

Well connected: David Rowan, editor of Wired magazine, which launched a year ago

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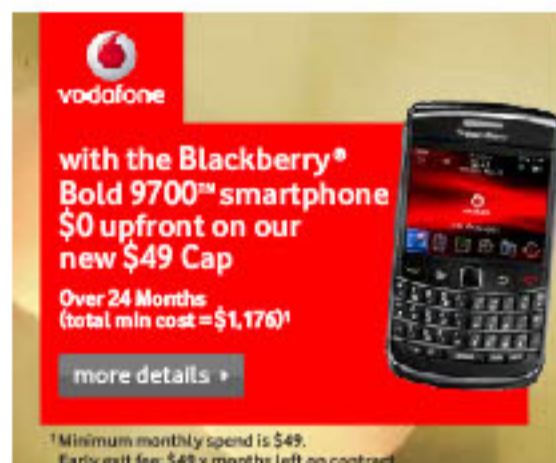
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