

NEWSPAPER READERSHIP *Tracking Studies*

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RESEARCH GROUP

Over the last 50 years, tracking studies have enjoyed an evolutionary history due in part to changing research methodologies. However, in the mid-1970's tracking studies took another evolutionary turn. It was not data collection that was innovative: It was the way in which the data were analyzed that made a significant difference. According to Nigel Hollis in an article for *Admap*, "Prior to 1976 tracking data had been collected continuously but then typically aggregated over time on a period-by-period basis."

However, leading firms like Thoroughbred Research began examining the data along a continuum. And as Hollis notes, this process "took tracking from a report card to a dynamic view of the changing marketplace."

Challenge

A major news corporation with 12 properties across the United States was at a crossroads. With ad revenues declining, readership trends changing and low-cost digital properties emerging, this media group was looking for more than data collection. It was looking for projective research to help guide it through a major cultural and business shift in the media industry.

Research Solution

Thoroughbred Research Group was retained to develop a continuous daily tracking study. Strict adherence to ABC methodological best practices was at the core of the research strategy. Drawing upon a long history in the development of tracking studies, the Thoroughbred Research media team developed a questionnaire that not only included the standard measures for print readership but also contained parallel measures for electronic readership. Then, as specific issues arose, ad hoc questions were added to address the issues of concern.

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Outcome

The dual measurement of readership achieved significant benchmarking data. Perhaps equally impressive were the cost efficiencies created by the design process, which combined the study across the 12 properties with quarterly reports. Customized reporting enabled the research team to provide an individual focus as well as a detailed analysis for each unique property.

With the enhanced data, the media sales team presented advertisers with a comprehensive view of valuable readership information for both print and online. Advertising revenue increased due to a more targeted approach, while research costs were reduced.

Conclusion

Tracking studies will continue to play a vital role in helping major brands position themselves with consumers of media, in print and online. The future challenge is here. And that is an overwhelming number of media options, increasingly tighter research budgets and a demand for faster answers. All of which creates a perfect storm for the contemporary researcher. It is critical to use tracking data to help determine the probability of events happening or not happening. It will be incumbent upon researchers to create category-specific predictors to help with analysis. It will be up to the media to understand that the dynamics of media consumption today require more than data collection; it requires a firm that can provide meaningful analysis of very granular data.

