

AIP's Sustainability Group wants to explore solutions

By Anton van Zyl, publisher of the Limpopo Mirror and Zoutpansberger

AIP has set up a committee to help publishers in the search for more sustainable sources of income.

That we are all worried about how we will survive in the next few years, is certain. Throughout the industry our reliance on advertising as a source of revenue is problematic, to put it mildly. Over the past few years, the income from this source has continued to dwindle. There is greater pressure to lower our rates, but printing costs and other expenses are rising by double-digit percentages. At first, most of us went looking for the fault with "them". The big publishing groups have been blamed, as were the political instability that limits growth, and more recently the Big Two (Facebook and Google) that gobble up our revenues. Yet the big publishers struggle with the same problems as us. Our problem is also by no means unique, with the rest of the world's publishers engaged in a similar struggle for survival. As for the Big Two - we must accept that they just do certain things better than us.

To make things even more complicated, there is no single solution that will work for everyone. We will have to find and implement our own solutions. Google or Facebook can widely state how important the small "voices" in the community are and how they throw millions of dollars into the fight to try to help. The reality is that they don't know how to help us, and in all likelihood aren't looking too hard for solutions either.

But we are far from lying down and perhaps this situation has become a challenge for us. In South Africa there is the saying "'n Boer maak 'n plan" (literally translated as 'a farmer makes a plan'). This saying has its origins in many generations of innovative thinkers. We must make plans, because the idea that all the "watchdogs" will disappear from the communities, is just not acceptable.

Our best chance to find solutions is to talk to each other. We need to hear if someone hasn't already built a better mousetrap. We must learn from each other's mistakes because we don't have the reserves that allow us to make the same mistakes.

This is what the AIP's Sustainability Study Group is trying to do in a nutshell. We try to find out what publishers (worldwide) are doing to ensure more steady income streams. If we hear that someone has a model that shows promise, then we focus on it. We invite the publishers to talk to us and tell us what works and what doesn't. We are very sceptical, but terribly curious.

So far, the group has been active on a broad front. We're not just looking at new technologies either. We are trying to figure out how we can help publishers save on printing costs or how can procure advertising (specifically national) in a more effective manner.

But the exciting part is exploring the possibilities that new technology offer us. Does a subscription model already work in South Africa? Is it worth it to produce and publish YouTube videos? Is WordPress the most suitable platform for a website? Will a cryptocurrency make it possible to generate an income from our news through micro-transactions?

The plan is to look critically at each of these revenue models as well as how we can implement the new ideas affordably.

The group works closely with experts in South Africa as well as international experts such as those from Ohio University. The ten AIP publishers who are going to Ohio next year will have to also serve as our "guinea pigs".

So, if you feel you can contribute to the group, please get involved. If you have a revenue model that shows promise, please share your experience. If you are wondering about a new "miracle cure" for your business, ask us for an opinion. We may not have the answers, but we will look very critically at the pros and cons with you.

The group consists of volunteers and there is no budget for projects or payment for consultants. Those interested can call Anton van Zyl on 084-6164997 or send an email to anton@zoutnet.co.za