

20 ways to leave an impression

 By [Louise Marsland](#)

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Newspaper newsrooms are being expanded globally, journalists retrained in multi-media functionality and consumers engaged with like never before. Journalism has become a conversation with your readers and communities. This may have been the World Association of Newspapers congress in Cape Town this week, but is there really any difference between the different media categories with digital innovation?

We are all publishers of news in multimedia formats these days, whether it be voice, words, video, printed or online.

The WAN annual survey by the Innovation International Media Consulting Group looked at 20 things for newspapers to consider to improve the quality of their journey into the digital age. These in-depth and detailed approaches are as applicable to any media operating in this new media world, as newspapers.

'Now media'

In fact, here's a quote from the Innovations report that puts it all into context, by Felix Soh, deputy editor for digital media at *The Straits Times*, Singapore: "Internet is no longer text, it is multimedia. (Recently) I gave a presentation to people who used the term 'new media'. I said, please do not use that term. It is 'now media'."

Indeed. We are already all operating in the digital age and all the WAN and accompanying World Editors Forum presentations were blogged about, podcasted and posted in video blogs on the WAN site, on YouTube, by the *Mail & Guardian Online* and of course, [Bizcommunity.com](#), among others. There are no barriers to entry any longer; we're all going multimedia whether newspaper newsrooms and labour unions like it or not. The future is here already, that much was clear this past week.

Building communities

The WAN Innovation report consultants yesterday, Wednesday 6 June, presented their 20 new approaches to conquering the world of online on this, the last day of this information-rich event. Some of their examples were mind-blowing and not confined only to the larger media groups, but included community newspapers, niche publications and free sheets. And those that are doing it well are light years ahead of the competition.

WAN footage courtesy of the Zoopy.com team.

Their key message was: don't let the digital noise distract you from your key purpose either. Journalists are still there to do what they do best: tell stories. It's just that the conversation has gotten a whole lot more detailed and faster and engaging.

1. FOCUS ON LOCAL

Newspapers excel at covering local information. You know your local market. You know its needs. Even when covering national or international news, try to give it a local angle and involve your community. Case study: www.naplesnews.com.

2. STRESS IMMEDIACY

The web is a wonderful tool for providing immediate coverage of breaking news – don't waste it. Don't become redundant in the next day's print edition. Make the print edition continue the online coverage, not repeat it. Alert the reader to a newsbreak and be the first to do it. Then flesh out the story as it develops. *USAToday* and Argentina's *Infobae*, www.infobae.com.ar are good examples for how to update a developing story online. Others such as *Asahi Shimbun* in Japan take this concept further and extend it to using mobile alerts.

3. USER GENERATED CONTENT

Do research to find out what your readers want. Citizen journalism is the most important new trend in the media industry. Ask users to contribute content for specific stories. This can include personal accounts, still pictures or videos. Use this content to complement the work of your professional journalists. When users participate, their loyalty to your brand increases, and so does your exposure to other users since contributing users heavily promote the stories where they appear. A good example is the Foto-Reporter project of *O Estado de S. Paulo* in Brazil, www.estadao.com.br/imagens/fotoreporter/index.htm. CNN and BBC have dedicated sections for citizen journalism, including user provided audio, still pictures, video and so on.

4. ALLOW USER COMMENTS ON STORIES AND FACILITATE USER RANKINGS

Start a conversation with your readers. Allow them to give you feedback. There should be an easy-to-use comment box at the end of every story where registered users can leave their own tidbit of information, opinions and links to other sites with complementing material. Ideally, the system should keep track of what each user likes or dislikes which in turn would permit further personalisation and increase the efficiency of alerts. The news site www.newsvine.com has had this feature since its inception and it is quickly being adopted by many other sites. The new www.USAToday.com also uses this feature extensively.

5. EMBRACE RSS

Be realistic, only hardcore users will come to your site many times during the day to see what's going on. If you want to capture the majority of users, make it easy for them to know when there is something new on the site. The easiest way to do this is by providing multiple RSS feeds. Sell sponsorships for the feeds or include small advertisements in them. Use the feeds to promote your content, not just to distribute it. Smart feeds include teasers on what to find on the website itself, not just the first paragraph of a story. Think of RSS feeds as direct advertisements of your content.

6. FACILITATE BLOGGING OF YOUR CONTENT

Go to where your readers are. If they are on MySpace, then set up a video blog, like *Seventeen* magazine has, or Reuters with the launch of its bureau in Second Life. There is no better promotional tool than allowing users to make reference to your content in their blogs. Make it easy for them by placing 'Blog This' links next to each story and integrating with the top blogging tools in your market. All of the most respected blogging tools have API integration, which would give you more control on what is posted in the user's blog. This not only increases your audience, but also improves your content's relevance in search engine results. Next to the 'Blog This' button, there should be buttons to allow users to post the story to the top online communities such as www.digg.com or www.technocrati.com or any other relevant community in the market. All these communities have easy-to-configure interfaces that allow this process to be completely automated. www.washingtonpost.com goes even further by showing links to the blogs which have blogged the story.

7. USE EXISTING WEB SERVICES TO YOUR ADVANTAGE AND EMBRACE OTHER POPULAR SERVICES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Leverage existing services such as Google Maps (for location of real-estate in classifieds, to identify the location of entertainment venues in the city guide and even to pinpoint the location of news events), or YouTube to post your videos, at least until your video audience is large enough to justify setting up your own video system. This saves you money in bandwidth and video technology and also increases the potential of growing your audience.

This combined use of different websites is better known as a 'Mashup'. An interesting example combines the crime database of Chicago with Google Maps, www.chicagocrime.org/types. If there is a website which becomes very popular in your community, embrace it, cover it and include links to it. *Bluffton Today's* website, www.blufftontoday.com has developed from a small free newspaper in South Carolina, US, into more of a community than a breaking news site.

8. THREAD THE USER EXPERIENCE FROM ONE CHANNEL TO THE OTHER AND USE A HOMOGENEOUS BRANDING STRATEGY

Don't get clever with your brand. Your brand is the one you should be pushing on the internet. When creating content, assume that your readers will consume that content through all of your channels: print, web, mobile, podcasts, etc. Each channel has its advantage as a medium. A truly multimedia strategy requires a single brand. The brand should represent a multiple media experience, and not separate the newspaper and online products.

9. COMPLEMENT THE PRINT EDITION

When all news doesn't fit in print, use the web to go deeper into the story, to complement the print product and satisfy the information needs of the most interested users. www.washingtonpost.com, for example has compiled extensive lists of databases that can be queried by users 24/7 and are continuously updated.

10. INCREASE THE USE OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Show, don't just tell. Long gone are the days of a single photograph per story.

11. CREATE SELECT AUDIO AND VIDEO NET CASTS

Even though podcasts are in their infancy, it's time to move forward and secure your space in the audio and video content market. You don't need to go for broadcast quality, but the quality of the content should be consistent with your brand. Podcasts and video should not be overlong, they should tell a story that words cannot or tell another side of the story. The *Washington Post* has given consumer-grade video cameras to more than 70 reporters who have volunteered to provide footage to accompany certain stories. Reporters are given basic training in shooting techniques and stories are then edited by online staff.

12. GIVE BLOGS TO JOURNALISTS

Blogs are an escape valve for journalists to extend their conversation with the audience and publish shorter, more informal content. This allows a publication to maintain the editorial impartiality and integrity while allowing their audience to know the writer better and interact with them directly. There is no need to reinvent the wheel here; adopt one of the freeware blogging platforms such as Wordpress. Case study: www.expresso.pt where blogs are visited as much as the news section.

13. LINK TO EXTERNAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Newspapers no longer exist in an information vacuum; they must acknowledge other publications, particularly online, and point their readers to primary sources. Virtually every story has reference or complementary material online. Also include links to experts' blogs and fan sites. The new USA Today.com site takes this to the extreme by publishing links to interesting stories elsewhere on the web – even to competitor's sites.

14. PERSONALISE

Personalisation is the key to success. It's the best way to improve the user experience, by changing content displayed and also offering more advanced services such as email or mobile news. All aspects of the user relationship should be concentrated in a database of preferences. With news sites becoming increasingly large, allowing users to filter content based on their individual preferences becomes critical to success. *The New York Times* has a new service called *My Times* which allows for the creation of a personalised homepage, as does Spain's *El Pais*, www.elpais.es.

15. ALLOW USERS TO MANAGE THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PUBLISHING COMPANY

The web is an ideal customer support channel, yet many companies fail to use it for facilitating the customer's interaction with the company. Subscription management, classifieds publishing, letters to the editor and complaints are among the features users should be able to manage in their online account.

16. USE TAG CLOUDS

Tag clouds are phenomenal navigation tools for users because they permit an instantaneous evaluation of the content panorama. Simply put: they are lists of keywords reflecting the site's content or traffic. The use of tags is a must in the current web and it will become even more important in what is now being called Web 3.0 or the Semantic Web. Spanish free sheet, *20 Minutes*, www.20minutos.es, uses tags even on its navigation bar, changing them according to the section's top content.

17. CREATE A 'LIGHT' VERSION OF YOUR SITE FOR SLOW CONNECTIONS AND MOBILES

The more digital outlets you can adopt, the better. The BBC's mobile, www.bbc.co.uk/mobile versions are excellent.

18. INCREASE THE COVERAGE OF CONTENT NICHEs RELEVANT TO YOUR COMMUNITY

The web is ideal for covering niche content and advertisers are willing to pay top dollar for a focused audience with high interest levels. Niche content is great for building a user community and increasing participation and loyalty, particularly when given a local twist, such as *The Irish Times*, www.ireland.com.

19. USE THE WEB AS A CONTENT LAB

See the web as a content laboratory where innovation is welcome, cheap and fast. Try new sections, columns, subjects.

20. DESIGN INTERNAL PAGES AS LANDING PAGES

If you are successful in using RSS, search engines, news aggregators and user blogs to draw traffic, much of it will go straight to internal pages and many users will rarely see the home page. Design internal pages so that they are intuitive and capture those users who 'land' in them from somewhere else. The navigation bar should tell you at a glance where you are and there should be enough things to do to entice the user to stay in your site. A good example is *La Stampa*, www.lastampa.it.

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