

Advertising – it's as easy as ABC



Companies that increase their advertising activity during a downturn, when competitors are cutting back, can increase their market share and reap the rewards in the long term, says **Mike Shepherd**.



Practical Boat Owner is ABC audited and IPC's biggest selling marine title

Yachts & Yachting will only offer a publisher's statement on circulation



In this tough financial climate, advertisers can get better value for money as media outlets struggle to retain readers. Fewer readers should translate into cheaper rate cards for advertisers, but getting hold of accurate circulation data can prove difficult as publishers opt out of providing audited data.

So how straightforward is advertising in this climate? Establishing what you've got to sell and how you want to market it forms the basic content of any advert. Talking the language of the customers you want to reach and placing a quality piece of artwork in front of them is step two.

But often companies miss out a crucial step: Finding out the magazine's actual reach. How many potential customers are you actually reaching in each title you advertise in? Are you paying for more than you are actually getting?

Once you've identified the magazine that you feel has the right sort of readers to become customers, it's important to

understand exactly what currency the media sales rep is talking in.

Print run, circulation, copy sales, readership, ABC audited or a publisher's statement are all ways to describe a title's reach into its market. Page impressions, unique users and site traffic describe a website's reach.

They are all very different and it's worth getting familiar with these various ways of recording readership.

Credible data

Savvy advertisers look for the ABC logo to ensure they're receiving the comparable and credible data they need to make critical media comparisons. Owned by the media industry, the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) independently verifies and reports on media performance providing audited sales and subscription data.

Certificates can be downloaded from their website at abc.org.uk by typing the name of the publication into the search box and following the link to the PDF. Once you've downloaded the title's ABC certificate you can start to crunch the numbers and work out year-on-year performance, issue-by-issue variances and overall value for money based on the rates you are being quoted.

The latest round of ABCs which audited sales figures for 2009 shows just how difficult the last year has been for publishers. Other than the *RYA Magazine*, IPC is the only publisher brave enough to allow ABC to audit their sales figures.

Their biggest selling title, *Practical Boat Owner*, has seen its overall sales drop from 47,406 to 42,096. Not a bad performance considering that

total marine magazine newsstand sales dropped by around 15% in 2009.

If you look more closely you'll see that *PBO* still commands an impressive 19,120 subscribers, down on last year but not significantly. The ABC also shows that the June issue sold 11% more and the August issue 14% more than the overall figure. Advertisers that chose these issues reached many more readers than they would have done in previous months.

Commands

When quizzed about the latest round of ABCs, IPC Marine Media's publishing director, Simon Owen, was upbeat. 'We can't deny that it's been a tough year for magazine sales. The first few months of 2009 experienced a dramatic decline in high street footfall and this ultimately affected the copy sales that would normally be picked up by the floating reader. It's these readers that add that extra 10% to 15% of sales our core sales.'

'We've continued to invest in the portfolio, maintaining editorial pagination, paper quality and distribution levels, he added. These readers are now coming back and as the confidence returns we'll be in a strong position.'

Mr Owen cites a 10% increase in traffic across their online portal, YBW.com and says that magazine distribution is changing.

'Up to a third of all our titles are now sold through the large grocery multiples such as Sainsbury's and Tesco and IPC invests heavily in this channel to obtain strong listings,' he told me. 'We often find we can make use of promotions previously booked but not taken for some of our consumer titles. For example if *What's on TV*, *Marie Claire* or *Now!* decide not to take up an allocation then, for example, I can increase *PBO*'s distribution through the south coast stores.'

If IPC with all its distribution punch has found it tough, then the smaller publishers must have been wondering just what to do. *Yachts and Yachting*, which has developed a

dedicated following since it was first published in 1947, had been struggling until it was finally saved by a management buyout last August.

Well received

The title's new look has been well received and the future looks good. When asked about sales, *Yachts and Yachting* sales manager John Arthur was bullish but could only quote a publisher's statement. The same type of statement is offered by Trojan Publishing's *Sailing Today* and CSL's *All at Sea* and *Sports Boat and RIB*.

So what is a publisher's statement? It's an unaudited sales figure which can be taken with a pinch of salt. It's often seen as the number of readers a publisher would like advertisers to believe its publication has and most large media buying agencies won't entertain booking space in an unaudited title.

One myth is that it's expensive to audit a sales figure. According to ABC, it costs around £1,400 a year, so not prohibitive by any means. If a title has opted not to provide ABC audited sales figures, they would probably rather keep their actual sales figures to themselves.

In the current climate, sales figures are predictably depressed and put advertisers in a strong bargaining position. Within our market there are lots of ways to reach customers.

Budgets are tight and the UK's marine media, both print and online, is still very much a viable source of potential customers. However, it doesn't do any harm to evaluate the titles and websites on your media schedule on a regular basis.

Is the circulation going up or down? Is the editorial product still being invested in?

As marine media struggle to maintain readers, they need advertising revenue to keep them afloat. It's a buyers market, so make sure you do your research and get what you're paying for.

■ Mike Shepherd is a director of the Marine Advertising Agency