

Myth busting: What people get wrong about advertising in local papers

From 1-28 June 2021, Media24 conducted research using their progressive Forum24 online panel, drawing a response from 2,174 Media24 readers. The results bust several popular myths, proving what many national retailers and local businesses already know: advertising in local papers works.



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Myth no. 1: No one reads them

Results from Forum24's survey show that on the contrary, readers engage deeply with local papers – and pass their copies around. Around 84% of respondents reported reading all or most of the paper, taking on average one hour to do so (27% took even longer). 68% said they looked in the paper every week, keeping an eye out for specials and promotions.

Moreover, 85% of copies are read by more than one person – on average, a copy is kept for almost 5 days and read by 3.24 people. The frequency with which people read the paper also seems to have gone up during the pandemic; 62% said that they read the paper more often.

That people read the local papers is also supported by online activity. Between January and June 2020, and then again between July and December 2020, the number of online digital visitors increased noticeably, as people sought to keep up with their local news.

Myth no 2: Paid newspapers are better than free ones

There is a tendency to dismiss free newspapers as being a throwaway item, something to be discarded without reading. However, as shown above, people do read them. The fact that they are free means that local papers “don’t need to be sensationalist to sell,” as EP media publisher and regional editor, Bettie Glioma-Rossouw, points out.

“Community newspapers are unique in that they only publish hyperlocal content that is relevant to the communities that they are distributed in. They give people in these communities, especially its unsung heroes, a voice which will never otherwise be heard.”

And despite being free, high editorial standards are maintained: “Our integrity is non-negotiable and we abide by the Code of Ethics and Conduct of the Press Council as well as our own Code of Conduct,” she says.

As a result, local news is generally regarded as reliable: 99% of respondents said that they are trustworthy, and 95% felt they were relevant. Around 94% felt that information given about Covid-19 is credible, which is a noteworthy vote of confidence, at a time when many people are divided about which sources to trust.



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Danette Breitenbach 12 Aug 2021



Myth no. 3: Local papers are merely a carrier for inserts

Given that people do engage so deeply with the local paper, this clearly isn’t true. So, why do people read local papers? First and foremost, because they are interested in what’s happening in their neighbourhoods: 40% of respondents said local news is important, 39% said they read in order to stay informed with local events, and 36% to learn about services and businesses in their area.

Clearly then, local papers serve a valuable purpose beyond simply enclosing inserts. That said, readers do value advertising in the local paper – promotions and specials were listed as the fourth topic readers were most interested in reading about. Moreover, 85% of respondents prefer to receive pamphlets this way, rather than loose in the post.

Advertising, then, forms an integral part of what readers want in a local paper. Rather than being perceived as an intrusive annoyance, as it is in so many other platforms, it is welcomed and eagerly consumed.

Myth no 4: ROP brand ads don’t work well

Again: people read their local papers. As such, they come across the ads that appear in the paper, i.e., run of press (ROP) ads – not just those that appear as inserts.

Groceries, pharmacy items and home improvement products, followed by TV appliances/electronics, mobile phones and plans, property and specialty retail products, come out as the most noticed advertising categories in local papers – a pattern consistent across both inserts and ROP ads. The only exception is apparel and fashion accessories, which shows up as a most noticed category only in the insert section.

Myth no. 5: Local papers don’t deliver ROI

“Marketers sometimes fixate on the decline in circulation of papers, and thus miss the value of this platform,” says Tasmia Ismail, general manager of Media24 Advertising Sales. Ultimately, return on investment (ROI) does not only depend on how many people you reach – effective marketing is ultimately about getting a response to the advertising message.

This is where local papers deliver: hyperlocal, door to door reach with M24 locals means 4.1m estimated weekly readers, who spend an average of an hour reading the local paper. And this engagement leads to action; an overwhelming 97% of respondents take some action after reading a copy of their local paper:

- 55% considered purchasing a product advertised in an insert
- 52% visited a store, dealer or other location
- 45% saved an insert for future reference
- 45% recommended a product advertised in an insert to someone else
- And 29% took an insert with them when shopping.

In short, local papers are an underestimated medium, one capable of delivering far more value than many marketers assume. “Local newspapers have been extremely consistent, more so than many other printed news products – if not in fact growing with digital reach,” says Ismail.

“And they offer so much more – from the longer shelf life to their 3+ pass-along rates, to the flexibility of creative executions possible when working with small, agile editorial teams.”

View highlights from the webinar