

# Taking Insert Accuracy to the Next Level: *Implementing the IPIC Guidelines*

by Owen Smith

**I**nsert foul-up. Do I have your attention? If I don't, then you've never been caught up in one. Because if you have been, then you would remember the calls from the advertiser, the e-mails from your readers, the meeting with your boss, and the time it took to sort it all out.

Well, it's going to get worse if industry processes do not get better.

Most newspapers have recognized this, and the NAA has taken steps through its Circulation Federation's Insert Process Improvement Committee to develop guidelines for improving insert accuracy and accountability. However, the world has not stood still during this time. The Audit Bureau of Circulations has just completed a trial test of its insert accuracy audit with the help of a handful of newspaper partners. The results should be released shortly, but the ABC has already announced it expects to offer an insert accuracy audit early next year.

Quite apart from these developments, the newspaper industry has always worked to improve customer service and accountability. Now, the IPIC white paper released by NAA last August gives newspapers a roadmap for taking accuracy and accountability up a notch. It is important that newspapers take advantage of these guidelines.

Accountability is not accuracy. Accuracy is an antecedent of accountability, which encompasses other factors such as the ability to quickly and accurately explain to customers what happened with an order, what the newspaper did about it, and the consequences—in other words, providing great customer service. Unfortunately, this process may take days while managers in several departments working different schedules sift through recollections and records. Increasing the precision and speed of this process improves customer service and increases the confidence of the customer.

While the IPIC guidelines are clear and logical and recommend activities some newspapers already have underway, there is a critical component that few newspapers have implemented—a regular, formal review of the entire process that affects insert accuracy. Moreover, many newspapers do not have documentation

and archival processes in place that would facilitate any kind of audit—self or outside.

Part of the problem is that multiple newspaper departments are involved in a single process that influences the accuracy of insert distribution. For example, the method used for developing, documenting and communicating circulation forecasts for insert buyers can be problematic. The inability to provide documented communication to the advertiser quickly is a complicating factor. Just the complexity of forecasting for each insert zone is vexing enough, and I have not even begun to discuss draw adjustments or the accuracy of the inserting machines!

Given the recent developments of the ABC field tests and the release of the IPIC guidelines, newspapers' insert accuracy is going to become a much hotter topic for the industry and their advertising customers in the near future. For those who may be cynical about such a conclusion, you should speak with your large insert advertisers. They can hardly wait for the ABC to begin offering insert accuracy audits.

Fortunately, you can overcome this complex problem—rationalize the process with a process analysis. Document all the steps of the process and develop written policies and procedures to guide the process. One way to begin is the same way we did it at Technical Solutions. Take the IPIC guidelines and translate them into actionable questions.

Stand back from the process and ask yourself if you have all the questions and answers for all the circulation, advertising, packaging and distribution procedures and processes. Also, ask yourself how you can enforce compliance to your procedures and processes. It is a waste of time to design a system that cannot be monitored, so this is where documentation, supervision and management come into play.

Don't miss a thing! For example, the IPIC guidelines do not address a few problematic issues that may arise at newspapers that do some insert printing either for themselves or others or both. If you print inserts, then you must also include some of the pressroom processes and procedures in your compliance analysis.

After you are sure that you understand the entire insert process, develop and implement measurable standards,

document them, and write the policies that will govern the system. For example, do you have a written policy stating who will produce your circulation forecasts for each zone, how the forecasts will be calculated, and how they will be communicated to the insert customer? If not, then you need one in order to meet the IPIC guidelines.

If successful, you are only part of the way toward having a reliable process. Now comes the not-so-popular part: ensuring that sufficient record-keeping and archival processes are in place. Fortunately, computerization, databases, wireless technologies and digital cameras are available!

“Why do I need everyone filling out database forms or keeping records?” you ask. Remember, you cannot assess the functioning of a process after the fact unless there is a “paper trail” or hopefully a “digital trail.” Moreover,

you will want to be able to access performance information very quickly in order to provide timely answers to internal and external clients. You certainly do not want to tell an advertiser that you will need three or four days to sort out an issue.

Is everything in order once the record-keeping system is implemented? Certainly not. It is an immutable fact that every process a newspaper puts into place evolves and morphs into something else over time. The only way you can police the process is to conduct a regular, formal audit of the entire system. Make a checklist and score yourself.

But now, another problem arises. It's a potential credibility problem because the newspaper is assessing or auditing the very process it created and manages. ABC can solve this problem for you, but you gain extra insurance and assistance from

third-party assessors. If you do look toward third-party assessors, it is very important that you make sure the third party is able to conduct an assessment in accordance with the IPIC guidelines. This is important because these are the industry guidelines with which the insert advertisers are familiar. Large insert advertisers participated in the formulation of these guidelines.

Identifying, documenting, measuring and reviewing the cross-functional tasks of the process are the keys to a successful start on the road to insert accountability. ■



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