THE STRAITS TIMES

Name of programme: THE STRAITS TIMES SCHOOLS (INNOVATING THE OLD)
Category: Newspapers In Education (NIE)
Sponsoring newspaper: The Straits Times, daily, circulation 350,000
Publisher: Singapore Press Holdings
Circulation / frequency: IN is the broadsheet’s weekly youth magazine, which reaches about 90,000 readers in Singapore with The Straits Times’ Monday edition.
Target of project: Youth aged 13 to 17
Time: September 2009 – August 2010
One-sentence description: Going back to basics to turn a traditional medium into a new, must-have English learning resource for learners across all secondary school levels.
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DESCRIPTION OF PROGRAMME

INNOVATING THE OLD: MAKING THE NEWSPAPER A MUST-HAVE EXAMINATION RESOURCE

THE MISSION
Overhaul The Straits Times’ five-year-old magazine, IN, to focus on one thing: Transform the 16-page weekly publication, distributed with The Straits Times’ Monday edition, into a crucial classroom learning resource to improve English language ability among lower-level readers, while making it an must-have authentic resource for teachers.
THE RATIONALE
The previous year’s recession had hit publicly funded schools the hardest. Islandwide, a majority of young readers had to manage with fewer learning resources than other better-funded autonomous schools.

Many learners in these schools come from homes where English is not the main language of communication. They struggle with passing mandatory first-language English proficiency tests and examinations, and face the biggest issue concerning all school-going young people: Advancing to higher education.

The Straits Times’ findings from surveys and consultations with a panel of selected senior educators, curriculum planners at Singapore’s Ministry of Education and, of course, students themselves, showed that it would not be enough to generate new material, or even engage them through new media.

The real challenge was in winning over their teachers – many of them, younger ones who were themselves unfamiliar with exploiting the newspaper’s learning possibilities. Along with the revamp, it was crucial to market our product to educators.

TIMELINE
September to November, 2009: Teachers Forum event to engage educators islandwide on how to use current events articles in classrooms. Discussions, surveys and panel discussions with secondary school level English teachers, Education Ministry’s curriculum planning division.

October to December 2009: Re-design of IN, and dry run of “live” pages, as well as production of serialised pages pegged to curriculum. Focus group discussions with educators to fine-tune product, especially for lower-level English learners.

January, 2010: Launch of revamped education product at the start of the year, and introduction to teachers and students.

May, 2010: Launch of teachers’ handbook, Using Newspapers In Your Classroom, as part of marketing plans directed at teachers.

June to August, 2010: Youth engagement events to drive home the magazine’s new values, which include media partnership with the national Youth Olympic Games planning committee, as well as launch of The Straits Times Paper Chase, to promote a healthy lifestyle among teens.
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THE PROCESS

Within the newsroom, all Straits Times’ various departments agreed to offer advance articles to the editorial team’s staff English teacher, so that she could develop lesson activities around the feature.

The commitment from each section head was simply this: run the committed article on the Monday, no matter what. We used everything – commentaries, in-depth features, photographs, infographics, profiles, sports briefs, you name it.

These “live” lesson activities and worksheets saved teachers precious time. They would get an instant lesson activity with a guaranteed learning objective pegged to the curriculum.

Students were now able to track their own progress, by keeping scrapbooks of their worksheets and completed activities, which they could then use at the end of a semester for revision and examination preparation.

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THE OUTCOME

- Instant lesson activities, worksheets and curriculum-based discussion topics pegged to the news of the day, each marked with specific learning objectives that readers would accomplish in completing them.

- Serialised lessons leading up to examinations and tests devoted to building up core language abilities, accompanied with “Interactive” elements that encourage young readers to write in with their opinions on a subject, and encourage on-going civic mindedness.

- Devoted space within the magazine to explain concepts that are harder to grasp, with a strong focus on infographic presentation.

- Developing core language skills, spelling and grammar rules needed to pass tests and examinations, by outlining how they are correctly used in news articles.
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DEVELOPMENT
These lesson activities give teachers and immediate go-to lesson activity / worksheet for the classroom using the newspaper of the day across their classes.

Serialised content, like this six-part feature about the economy, explains complicated issues and subjects using entertaining infographics, which students could then piece together over the weeks to get a view, literally, of the big picture.
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“Interact” boxes on the page invite readers to write in with their opinions on a current events subject, and engage their peers in debate and discussion within the classroom. The boxes are aimed at promoting civic consciousness.

Published responses from students allow them to air their views on any number of subjects, and offer their opinions on teen issues concerning their peers.
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Published responses from students address national issues too, including the national Budget.

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MARKETING

We engaged teachers with two essential marketing strategies.

1. We hold the now-annual “Straits Times Teachers’ Forum”, an annual lecture and sharing session which offers teachers a chance to hear from an expert panel how to help their students achieve better results in English learning using the newspaper. Teachers responded well to our engagement programmes, with 2009’s attendance attracting a record number of more than 100 teachers from schools islandwide.

2. We produced a first-edition “Using Newspapers In Your Classroom”, packed with ready-to-go lesson activities and ideas that they could instantly use, mining articles on everything from deforestation in the Amazon rainforest to army fitness training.

The 36-page publication is a first for The Straits Times, and covers 10 areas, including critical thinking and analysis, examination preparation, values education and multi-literacy. The publication is exclusive to subscribing schools of The Straits Times.
MARKETING
Marketing to students was simpler.

1. We created a community of forum-letter writers, who shared their views and opinions on a number of youth issues from dieting to de-stressing. Instead of driving a campaign through Facebook, we used our online group as a way to reach out to readers with news updates throughout the week. The group, “The Straits Times IN & Media Club”, has teen administrators include from the student council, called “The IN Crowd”.

2. Instead of involving them through new media, we hit the road. We created a run event called “The Straits Times Paper Chase”, which identified the revamped product with healthy values and good sportsmanship. With a category for running as a family, we also hope to promote strong family values.

Teachers’ response to the handbook, as well as the newly revamped IN, has been positive.

With little time between receiving the news and the start of lessons, teachers do not always have time to come up with activities, said Ms Poongkodi Jayabala Krishnan, 35, head of English and Literature at Pei Hua Secondary School. But one of its ideas, to develop students’ reading and listening skills by creating a podcast encyclopaedia from newspaper articles, especially impressed her. “I have never seen newspapers in that light,” she said.

Mr Abdulattif Abdullah, 42, who heads the English language department at Bukit Batok Secondary School, said the book “puts in a very structured way all the possibilities and insights that we can get out of the papers”.
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Introducing... brand new ideas from a traditional medium. The teachers’ handbook in 10 sections how teachers can use the newspaper as an authentic learning resource.

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The Straits Times Paper Chase, a nationwide inter-schools run event to be held on July 17, received more than 400 sign ups within the first weeks of its announcement, and is expected to receive about 5,000 runners from families, friends and teachers across its three categories.

The event, a first for the newspaper, will be open to all secondary and tertiary students aged 13 to 19, and offers more than $5,000 in prizes for those who complete the 5km race.

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<td>Men’s Team (2 teachers + 4 students)</td>
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To get students off the couches and worshipping Xboxes and Wii sets, and fit enough to run 5 kilometres, we published a serialised running guide called “From Couch Potato to 5km Hero”, to focus on safe training. Editorially, we aimed to get students to pay attention not only on the cram culture, but their physical fitness too.

PARTNERS AND PLATFORMS

The strong emphasis on English education using the news of the day marks a return to the basics, and proved to be a hit. Instead of chasing the next big new-media channel, we developed our education strategies. More schools subscribed to the renewed product because of its values and national education elements, as well as history and current events content. We also attracted new partners including:

• The committee for the world’s first Youth Olympic Games, which will be held in Singapore in August. The committee made us their media partner, to help promote Olympism and positive sporting values among young readers. Leading up to the Games, we focused editorial coverage on sports in schools, with weekly features on athletes, coaches and Olympics trivia.

• Big name sponsors signed up for The Straits Times Paper Chase including official partner Nestle, official presenter FUTURO by 3M, as well as sponsors Lenovo, Block Up! (sunblock), the National Crime Prevention Council, The Face Shop. They supported 70,000 copies of the newspaper to non-subscribing schools, over a period of seven weeks.
MEASURING SUCCESS / EVALUATION OF RESULTS

• The greatest measure of success for The Straits Times revamped edition of IN has been its uptake rate among schools nationwide. In the process of introducing young teachers to the treasures of an old medium, they in turn were able to exploit its material for classroom English sessions.

Since its relaunch, IN has increased its subscription rate among new schools, with previously non-subscribing schools making it part of its classes. IN, along with The Straits Times, currently reaches about 90,000 young readers islandwide.

• The changes in the magazine have resulted in an extremely hard-won endorsement from the Ministry of Education in Singapore. At the launch of the schools’ programme five years ago, the ministry held us at arms’ length, because we are a commercial publisher.

IN’s revamped content, however, this year received a nod from the ministry, which now regards the publication as a must-have classroom resource. Its curriculum planning division has most recently taken steps to working more closely with The Straits Times’ editorial team, organising training sessions for editorial staff and cultivating closer working ties.

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BENEFITS TO THE NEWSPAPER

For The Straits Times, “Innovating The Old” has had an impact in several ways, some of them less tangible than others, but no less important.

IN’s endorsement by the Education Ministry is the first open endorsement of its kind from a conservative governing, but will now inform all future editorial plans.

That young teachers are finding new uses for the newspaper too prevents it from being ignored, or sitting in a heap at the back of the classroom.

Most importantly, we have the weekly responses of young readers who keep up with the learning activities within IN, and have access to the language through the newspaper’s buffet of articles. Many note they an improvement in their grades, general knowledge and understanding of world affairs. In fact, this year the newspaper noted an spike in the number of young writers who now addressed letters not only to the youth publication, but to the broadsheet’s Forum pages.

As one educator put it: “The newspaper brings the world into the classroom.”

We couldn’t agree more.
The END