

Change with Purpose

By Jennifer Hamilton Bingo, Publisher

Oracle Magazine, Profit, and Java Magazine

Many of us in the publishing industry have been tasked with making changes. Personally, I've been challenged on multiple occasions to make drastic changes—mostly stemming from budget cuts and other reduced resources. But lately the changes seem to be happening just for the sake of change.

You have to be an innovative early adopter and a leader to stay relevant in a dying industry—or so the conventional wisdom goes. It's true that in some cases, change is necessary, but making changes *with a purpose* ensures you are doing right by your readers and your organization. Altering your strategy or approach with a clear, well-articulated purpose will enlighten your teams and push them to think and act like the consumer. This isn't easy. In order to do the disrupting, we all have to be flexible, stay positive, and embrace change.

I recently took a 30-year-old print publication and turned it into a digital-only publication. I have no regrets, but I still ponder the question of why change is good. My Publisher's Note in our first digital-only issue specifically addressed change—in fact, "Change Is Good" was the title! I received many letters and emails after we launched that digital-only publication, and one in particular stood out. The subject line read: Change Is Bad. No doubt this letter came from a print subscriber wanting the magazine in the same format the way he'd always received and enjoyed. His complaint was merely the format change. Nothing else. Our content is still top-notch, the articles are of the same high quality and explore the same subjects, the columnists and expert advice are still the same, and now the format is even better, with new up-to-the minute feeds. But this reader could not get past the change.

From my perspective, the staff at *Oracle Magazine* has found a new lease on our publishing lives. Change infuses a new energy into one's work, and I find myself craving

that newfound energy—that “We can do this! We can do that!” spirit—on a daily basis. Change is invigorating and rewarding. A new, agile approach to content delivery, along with the flexibility to publish content updates and special editions, has given many of us new skills and a broader knowledge base. I’m not saying change doesn’t come with obstacles. The publishing industry still has yet to establish best practices for monetizing the digital ad space. (And if you figure that one out, please give me a ring!) We also haven’t had a go at this for long enough to quantify our metrics and dive deeper into what changes were in fact good, and what changes were unhelpful. But in addition to direct reader feedback, analytics will be our best friend going forward, and we wouldn’t have that invaluable tool with a print edition.

I recently sat down with my colleague Rob Preston, editorial director for Oracle’s Content Central, to discuss reasons for change and the opportunity we have to make an essential difference in a struggling industry.

JH: *Oracle Magazine* recently went all-digital. Why change when we have a loyal print audience?

RP: Borders and Blockbuster had loyal customer bases as well. But loyalty is only as strong as your latest innovation—or that of your competitors. The media/publishing industry has been digitally disrupted as much as any other. Readers now expect their magazine content to be easily accessible from any device, highly visual, easy to navigate, and even interactive. *Oracle Magazine*’s new platform delivers all of that. We’re using the platform to offer readers new kinds of content. For example, our interactive quizzes are proving very popular. Meantime, our advertisers want feedback on reader engagement that only a digital platform can provide. *Oracle Magazine* could have sat back and pretended our readers would stay loyal amid widespread digital innovation and disruption, but then we’d end up as the next Borders or Blockbuster.

JH: If change is good, why do so many people resist it?

RP: Most people like to stay in their comfort zones. Change represents the unknown. It's a threat to what they're accustomed to and expert at. Change requires people to learn new skills, adopt new processes, interact with customers in new ways. It's not easy. And those who can't or refuse to keep up can become expendable. But those who embrace change often find that it energizes them, their companies, and their customers. Change can be a lot of fun.

JH: Aside from a move to digital, what else should editors and publishers focus on changing?

RP: Even in the predigital era, change was constant, though the pace wasn't as frenetic. An editor's first focus must always be the reader. How can we make the content more interesting and compelling for readers? How can we improve the story narratives? The design? How can we make the content more informative, fun, and engaging? Who can we enlist as guest writers and columnists? How can we expand the subject matter? How can we grab readers' attention? That kind of constant change isn't a function of going digital.

JH: We can provide digital content smarter, faster, and in a richer environment. What do you say to the folks who simply won't convert? How do we encourage someone staunchly change-averse to accept change?

RP: If they insist on resisting the inevitable, suggest that they look for other work. Maybe Borders or Blockbuster is hiring.

JH: I probably won't suggest that, Rob, but thanks for the honesty! Lastly, what makes magazines relevant today, when content is everywhere? What separates a magazine from a website, blog, or social content? Are we changing simply to keep up, or are we changing for a purpose?

RP: Magazines are still relevant for several reasons: The depth and rigor of their content. Their attention to detail and accuracy and fairness. The extreme care taken with the

presentation. Editorial quality and standards still matter to readers. To the extent that blogs or social content are only so much straight-from-the-hip blather, they're a dime a dozen. Magazines aren't special so much for their platforms as they are for the quality people and standards they represent.

JH: Thank you so much, Rob!

Personally, I didn't just want to make changes because I was asked to. I wanted to change because that is what needed to happen. I wanted to change *with a purpose*—to make an impact not only on the publication, but also on the company the publication supports. To elevate the quality of what the reader takes in, how they receive it, and how they perceive it. My goal was not to upset our audience or lose subscribers (although both will no doubt happen, to an extent). It was simply to make an effective change and stay ahead of the curve. We still have one print publication, and I don't consider myself an advocate for either format. I'm focused on discussing change, how it's impacting the industry, and what we can all learn from it. Change is good, and if it's handled properly you have the opportunity to exploit it to your advantage.

I encourage furthering this discussion and would welcome feedback, advice, and opinions on the positive power of change.