

R.O.I. Let's face it.

A redesign is a waste of time and money if it doesn't deliver a **return on investment.**

Raymond Loewy knew the value of good design. He described it as “a salable commodity, that often cuts costs, enhances a product's prestige, raises corporate profits, benefits the customer and increases employment.”

Loewy was the designer behind the Exxon and Shell logos, the modern Coke bottle, the Post Office's eagle. He even redesigned the paint scheme for Air Force One.

But often forgotten is Loewy's first big success. He redesigned a Sears refrigerator, the Coldspot. And he did it so well that 70 years later, his approach still stands as a blueprint for successful redesign, of newspapers and everything else.

Loewy understood that his job wasn't just making the fridge prettier.

It was keeping the beer cold.

At Brass Tacks Design, we believe good design is vital to product success. We believe it's as important to newspapers as it is to cars, telephones, coffee makers. We know that a redesign can build circulation and increase advertising.

At the same time, we do not believe in redesign for its own sake. We are no fans of redesigns that have little effect on readership or revenue. To succeed, a makeover has to offer a return on investment. If a redesign looks nice but doesn't make a paper better and better-performing, it isn't working. It isn't keeping the beer cold.

Unfortunately, many editors and publishers get nervous when the time comes to redesign because they never expect to see their investment reward-



Designer Raymond Loewy, right, and his 1936 Sears Coldspot refrigerator. Photo courtesy of Laurence Loewy.

ed. Why not? And why do so many redesigns fail to achieve all they might?

Because newspapers define “design” too narrowly. A design starts long before you ever sit down, mouse in hand, to build a look, and carries on long after the vision is realized. Loewy understood this. He saw design as a holistic exercise, involving buy-in not only from the designers, but from a host of ►

players in marketing, advertising, production and in the front office.

You don't have to dig too deeply into the story of the Coldspot to find that its success offers lessons:

Set goals.

A colleague recently asked us to comment on his redesign. "What do you think?" he asked. One of us answered with a pretty basic question: "What were you trying to accomplish?"

He didn't particularly like that reaction, because he didn't have an answer. This was frustrating because he and his team are smart – but you don't have much chance of success if you don't define what you're trying to do.

Loewy would have had little patience for this all-too-common mistake. When he undertook the Sears job in 1934, the Coldspot worked well enough, but it was noisy and cramped, and it looked like a curio cabinet crossed with a safe, perched on curving, 11-inch legs. At a time when the streamline movement was reshaping cars, trains and everything else, the fridge seemed a clunky anachronism.

Loewy's redesign set out not only to grace the Coldspot with a modern feel – which it certainly accomplished – but to make it quieter, more user-friendly and easier to repair. In other words, to make it better. And lurking beneath these primary goals was an assumption: If we make it better, people will buy it.

Do the research.

All too often, newspapers embark on redesigns without pausing to ask their customers – both readers and advertisers – how they feel about the existing products, and what might be done to improve them. No other industry is so cavalier about its customers' desires.

Focus groups have been key to our successful redesigns. Some might view a reliance on focus groups as an abdication of responsibility. But assume you know more than your customers, and put yourself at peril. After all, they're the people who can



The redesign of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reversed a decade-long trend of declining circulation. A year after the redesign, a survey found that readers believed the Post-Dispatch had become a better paper as a direct result of the redesign.

steer you clear of mistakes you might not see coming. They're the ones who don't have J-school degrees, and they don't know they should like your nifty new format.

Evidence abounds that papers don't bother much with this crucial step. A Colorado newspaper editor, proud of his recent redesign, waxed poetic about it in a story. Then as an aside, he slipped in that "after about two weeks, the readers stopped complaining." At both the Boston Globe and Chicago Tribune, complaints about recent redesigns far outnumbered compliments, according to accounts published by each newspaper.

Many designers believe that an abundance of complaints is part of any redesign, but this is not an inevitability. Research done right will reveal problems before they become complaints. However, most newspaper surveys and focus groups aren't conducted in a way to provide the data we need. And that's why research gets a bum rap.

Before the designing begins, our clients gain a clear notion of what readers want changed – and just as importantly, what they don't want us to fiddle with. These findings aren't as confining as you might think – in fact, they usually free you to act more boldly than you might have otherwise.

Loewy researched. He learned that the old refrigerator's door was difficult to open with full hands, that the machine issued an unattractive industrial buzz, and that the metal shelves inside rusted – all major annoyances to the homemaker. Armed with this research, he had specific issues to address in his redesign.

Listen carefully.

You'll hear things in gathering your research that will hurt. You'll hear things you flat-out disagree with. But do not ignore the data.

A few years back a publisher shared the results of a survey that showed that more than half his readers did not feel the paper was fulfilling its mission. The research was so critical, so

utterly damning, that the editors refused to believe it. Follow-up focus groups confirmed the findings of the survey – readers felt the paper was out of touch with them. It had to hurt, but the editors were finally willing to do something about it.

In 1999, the American Journalism Review published “The State of American Newspapers,” edited by Gene Roberts, former executive editor of The Philadelphia Inquirer. It included a description of focus groups at the Dallas Morning News, during which staffers sitting behind a one-way mirror resorted to gallows humor when they heard readers criticize the paper.

This is not productive. Instead of making jokes, these staffers should have been discussing solutions rather than ridiculing the readers. And it’s not limited to Dallas. Too many newsrooms reflexively laugh off outside opinion.

We need to embrace what readers tell us. We’re not recommending a knee-jerk reaction, but rather that we give more weight to the preferences of groups of readers when they speak as a majority.

Create a terrific design.

Most of what has been written about newspaper design has missed the most important point – a great design can drive a strategy to boost readership and revenue. Just make sure you have a terrific design before you launch. Here’s how to be sure:

Test the new design.

Show off the prototypes. Solicit reactions. As with the initial testing, be sure to do the right kind of testing. If you want to appeal to young people, it doesn’t do you any good to bring in a focus group of retirees. And be careful about who is hired to moderate the sessions. Get someone who knows the newspaper business, not a moderator who was testing yogurt that morning and pantyhose the day before.

And be absolutely, scrupulously thorough. Don’t show mere mock-ups to focus groups. They need to see something that seems like the real thing. This means rebuilding an entire edition – story by story, page by page – to reflect



The Ledger-Star was a dying, 80,000-circulation afternoon daily. Our redesign gave it new life and its first circulation boost in years.

the new design and editorial philosophy. Then print it on your press. This is the only way readers can make side-by-side comparisons between your old format and your new one. It will take a staff of five editors and designers at least a week to produce this prototype edition, but it’s well worth the effort.

Promote the new design as if success depends on it.

Because it does.

It used to be that newspapers almost always conducted their redesigns under cover of night – they’d introduce change piece by piece, without a mention of it, lest they anger a comfortable readership. But that was in the days when redesigns were aimed at satisfying the newsroom’s aesthetic sensibilities, rather than the reader’s wants and needs.

It’s been our experience that readers don’t mind change a bit, provided it’s change for the better. In other words, if you’ve done the research, done the testing, and it all says you have a winner on your hands, tell folks about it.

Had Sears not thrown a massive advertising budget behind the new Coldspot, there’s no telling whether it would have caught on. As it was, the company pitched the revamped fridge as a beautiful boon to modern life, and sales jumped more than fourfold in the Loewy model’s first year, from 60,000 units to 270,000.

We don’t know of a newspaper that’s done quite that well, but we have seen some wonderfully creative campaigns to herald new designs, and we have no doubt that they’ve helped make those designs fly. For instance: A week before launch at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, billboards appeared all over town as blank canvases wrapped in giant yellow ribbons, bearing the message: “Coming soon.” On the day of the new design’s debut, the billboards were “unwrapped” to reveal the new P-D. And every paper delivered that day – all 300,000 of ’em – was wrapped in yellow ribbon.

The paper followed up that piece of genius with a relentless and very funny TV campaign.



The Express Line was a new, first-of-its-kind, nationally syndicated TMC. It boosted ad revenue 41 percent over the product it replaced.

Follow through.

It's the tallest order, and the one that so few get right, because newspapers fail to recognize that launch day is a redesign's beginning, not its end. From that day forward, you have to badger and cajole the newsroom into staying true to the changes you've introduced. Constant vigilance will be the price of success. Let the folks on the desk slip into their old habits, and your labors are lost.

Rest assured, there will be those in the newsroom who slip, some consciously, some not. For instance, at a big Midwestern daily, the redesigned A-section boasted an open inside page of national news and another of world news every day. Both got color press positions to capitalize on the wealth of color photos that move on the wire; that art illustrated three to four display stories per page, and a column of briefs contained smaller pictures.

These pages were a big hit with focus groups. But a couple of weeks after the redesign debuted, the editors riding herd on the pages "got bored," and started using the space for jumps and longer wire stories that were easier to paginate. Senior editors never raised hell about it.

Another sad story: At a little paper in Appalachia, research made plain that readers wanted more local news on the front page. They got their national and world news off the TV and didn't want a second helping in a paper they bought to glean insight into their neighbors and community. A redesign thus devoted 75 percent of the front to local stories, and the remaining quarter to national and world digests.

But the arrangement didn't appeal to the stubborn front-page editor, whose news sense was out of sync with the research. He restored wire stories to the display positions on the front page. The local news initiative at the heart of the redesign was lost.

You can keep this from happening. It requires a paper's editors to stand firmly behind their new design, and to brook no noncompliance from the desk or anywhere else.

Do that, and you just might accomplish what Loewy did: Turn an uninspired, and uninspiring, product into a must-have, and in the process redefine your customers' expectations of quality, style and modernity.

Our redesigns deliver a return on investment.

■ A complete makeover of the **St. Louis Post-Dispatch** gave the paper a fresh and sophisticated air, and vastly improved the paper's organization. Just as important, it jumped on focus group research showing that readers defined local news as subject matter that affected them directly, rather than a matter of geography. Story selection and play were consequently rethought and improved. Research conducted a year later showed customers thought the P-D had become a better paper. The redesign also reversed a circulation freefall that had been under way for a decade.

■ **The Ledger-Star** of Norfolk, Va., was on its last legs before overhauling its design and content. The product of extensive research by Chris Urban, the new design boasted a newsy, hard-edged feel, using Franklin Gothic heads with strong visual punch and tightly edited briefs on each section front to boost the number of heads on every page. Content was formatted so that certain types of news were presented in the same place, and in the same way, every day. Jumps were minimized. Headlines had more pizzazz, befitting an afternoon daily. The result: The paper reversed a years-long circulation decline.



Opportunities for \$88,000 in new revenue were the result of a redesign of the classifieds at the 9,000-circulation Morning Sun in Pittsburg, Kan.

■ **The Morning Sun** of Pittsburg, Kan., had one goal in mind when it started its redesign: Increase revenue. Acting on research that indicated readers don't make the same distinctions between advertising and editorial content that we in the industry do, the 9,000-circulation daily revamped its classifieds into three attractive sections, each topped with a half-page of stories. Two independent experts reckoned the strategy was good for \$88,000 a year in new income – a pile of cash to a small paper.

■ Most TMCs simply repackage content from last week's paper, and straddle two missions – to sell ads and build circulation for their parent newspaper. Not so **The Express Line**, which was reinvented as a pure advertising vehicle, with all-new wire content, lots of photos, and a look, attitude and voice that was everything a conventional newspaper is not. In one year, ad revenue in the anti-paper jumped 41 percent.