

Open For Business: What Can Your Readers Do For You?

#GdnOpenWeekend

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Selling the Guardian to readers is a piece of cake

What will readers give to their newspaper in terms of money, time and data?

That was the question I have been putting to loyal Guardian readers at the [Open Weekend Festival](#) at a series of workshops where they conversed with leading managers such as Alan Rusbridger (Editor), Dan Roberts (National Ed), Joanna Geary (Digital Development), Andy Miller (CEO), Janine Gibson (US Ed), Gary Younge (Correspondent) and Adam Freeman (Exec Ed Commercial). The answers were revealing.

Firstly, they liked the festival. Just as the music industry has learnt that live performance can help replace lost product income, so the Guardian has now realised that it's better to have its own events rather than sponsoring Glastonbury or the Hay Book Festival.

I expect Open Weekends to follow in Manchester and Edinburgh and I don't see any reason why they can't be much more regular. People love the poetry, music, debate and cookery classes but they also enjoy celebrating their community and interacting with their newspaper.

The Guardian already sells £15 million of holidays, £1 million of MasterClasses, has a very successful dating agency (the only one with more women than men registered) and is planning a Paris Hotel. The readers at Open Weekend wanted much more. They suggested everything from a Guardian version of the Kindle to Guardian Bitter.

Generally, they were surprised that the Guardian doesn't ask them more often for money and more of it. Some even asked for a way of leaving a legacy. As long as the commercial interaction is kept strictly away from the editorial they were more than interested in monetising the brand in all kinds of ways.

To a degree they also accepted that it meant giving more of their personal data to the Guardian so that services and goods could be more carefully targeted. One young woman complained that she had given the Guardian more data about herself than any other organisation and yet she's never been contacted with an offer. This is the kind of enthusiasm to make marketing people weep with joy.

They are also very eager to give their time. At one point Alan Rusbridger floated the idea that Guardian readers could volunteer to help moderate online comments. A few hands immediately went up offering their assistance. Another scientist said how much he valued the chance to share his expertise. But there was a limit. In the end they want the Guardian journalists to provide the news using their skills, experience and resources.

However, all this willingness to be economically exploited by the Guardian was based on one assumption. In return The Guardian has to continue doing the kind of liberal, public service, investigative, critical journalism with that special interest in international affairs and social justice. It has to continue to have the sense of humour, eccentricity and humanity that their readers value in their own lives.

And it has to be more open with its readers.

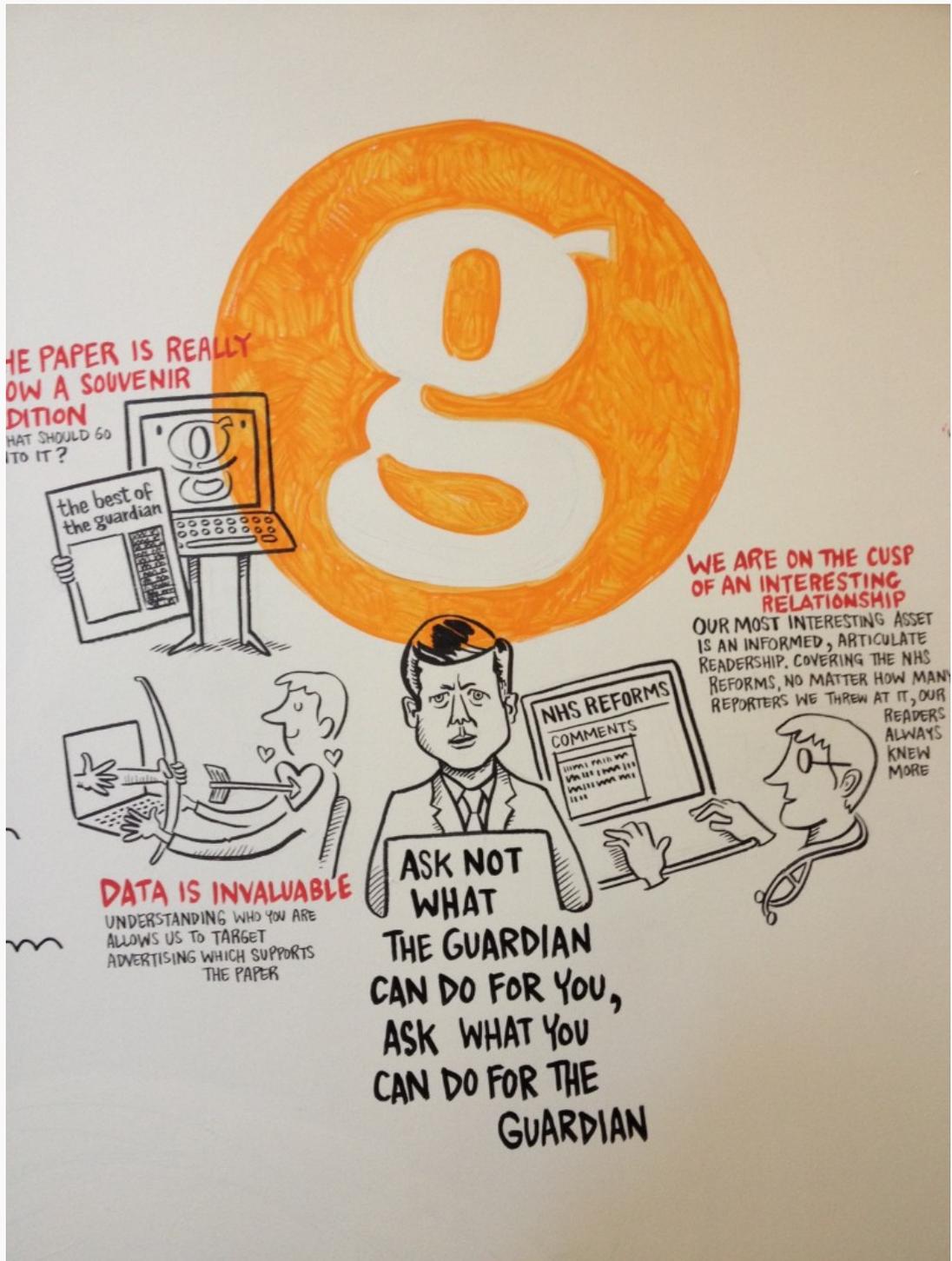
It appears that if your readers identify with your brand, if they trust your ethics and value what you create as something relevant and vital to their personal lives, then they will do everything for you up bar selling their own grandmother.

Of course, these were the core of the most loyal readers. They'd paid £60 to be there, many travelling from all over the country. Perhaps the Guardian is a one-off, too. I am not sure Times or even Telegraph readers would identify so closely and personally. There was also something of a generational divide. Wealthier older people were prepared to pay, but younger folk with student loans to pay off were more used to not paying online.

But even if these are the most passionate of readers I think they show how new relationships can be formed with the audience that can have editorial and commercial benefits – and enrich the public's experience of their newspaper.

The Guardian has a long way to go. It is still losing a fortune every month. Even without the pressure of shareholders it still has to pay its way. Selling Guardian cupcakes will not bridge that gap. Some Guardian execs have bought into this vision, but every member of staff has to contribute in everything they do. Every day has to be Open Day.

[I also wrote [a Comment article](#) for the Guardian about this]



A graphic visualisation of the conversation between readers and editors

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