

# The growth business

Editorial outsourcing is a hot topic in our industry. AAP business unit Pagemasters has shot to fame as it wins business globally. PANPA's Brett Taylor meets its managing director Bruce Davidson to discover future plans.

**Brett Taylor:** So Bruce, can you give us an overview of Pagemasters structure?

**Bruce Davidson:** We have 140 staff across our four operations - Melbourne, Auckland, Brisbane and Sydney.

Sydney is just doing the *Daily Telegraph* (UK) features so it's small.

Of the 50 staff in Melbourne, about 13 are sub-editors. The rest do listings, which is how we started. In New Zealand, the 56 staff are all journalists. The 25 people in Brisbane are all sub-editors. The shift has happened very quickly in that we've become more of an editorial production house rather than just listings.

**BT:** Do you have a sales team?

**BD:** No. We haven't had to. People have come to us.

**BT:** Who are your customers?

**BD:** We provide listing for basically every newspaper in Australia that runs them, with one or two exceptions. We supply TV listings to publications from *TV Week* to the major metros, right through to community papers, so we have hundreds of clients.

Our major editorial clients are APN in Australia and New Zealand, Fairfax Media through the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* supplements, and regionals like *Shepparton News*. We do the *Adelaide Independent Weekly* out of Melbourne and provide for News Ltd dailies through our racing form guides.

The only overseas customer is the London *Telegraph*.

**BT:** Can you sum up the services you provide?

**BD:** We serve our clients in any way possible so long as it works financially. We have a suite of services from just listings to a full-blown production centre. We don't tend to say 'this is what we do'. If the client says 'we'd like to change the production of our newspapers in this particular way,' we sit down with them and work out a solution that achieves their aims.

**BT:** So if someone asked 'what is it you do' the answer is 'what do you want us to do'?

**BD:** Yes. We would then set about setting up an operation, finding the staff, and setting up systems where they deliver us the content.

**BT:** Can you take us through your current operations?

**BD:** There are three loose models. In Melbourne, for the common world



Bruce Davidson... 'It isn't all about cost saving...it's about improving the product'

news, national news, business, and sports pages we supply to the regional market, we're using wire copy, some of our own copy, and we're doing some content selection, some decision making. So we do content, and also design, sub-editing, headline writing, photo-enhancing, then supply the entire finished product back to the paper.

At the other extreme, some newspapers retain the design and we simply do the sub-editing and send it back.

Where the growth is happening though, such as with the UK *Telegraph*, is where it's their content and their decision-making, but we do the rest. They give us strong direction as to what they want on page one, page three, page 23, and how they want those pages to look. We lay out the content to their design and do the normal sub-editing process like fact-checking and rewriting if necessary.

Our creativity is in the design, the headline writing, the captions, the nice parts of sub-editing. Then we ensure that technically the pages are good to go to press before we send them back. The editors then have the chance to check them.



Pagemasters provides a modern environment to get the most out of happy employees

**BT:** Are the editors taking those opportunities?

**BD:** They are, and it could actually improve the quality of newspapers. In some cases, there is a mistrust of a third party. We know we'll be judged if we get things wrong that should have been picked up, so we do a lot of fact-checking.

**BT:** What are the other implications for editors?

**BD:** The editors do a lot of work at the front end. They commissioned the stories - it's their vision, they decide what's in the paper. Our technical editing is important in terms of fitting things to pages, cutting copy and also grammar, spell-checking and fact-checking.

If you ask any editor in the world if they'd rather change their production system or lose a whole lot of reporters, what would they say?

**BT:** How do you measure quality?

**BD:** We have weekly production meetings with our clients. Particularly in the early days, we talk about what they like and what we can improve.

The feedback from the *Daily Telegraph* has been very positive. They've been very complimentary. We've been doing the (London) *Daily Telegraph* supplements for about five weeks and as far as I know, the sky hasn't fallen in. People are picking the paper up in London and don't notice any difference.

**BT:** Do your sub-editors read the UK press to keep up to date?

**BD:** Very much so. I purposely hired some English subs too. It's good to have somebody you can ask: 'do they say that in London?' when you're writing a headline. They read all the UK websites, and we get *Telegraph* papers delivered every week.

**BT:** Could that work for clients from other regions?

**BD:** The same principles could be adopted. We have had enquiries from the US. It would be slightly harder because we're not quite as close to the US. We'll just keep away from trying to understand gridiron or baseball (laughs).

**BT:** Other than English expats, who are the subs you employ?

**BD:** It's a real mixture. Let's take New Zealand for example, where

we do 1000 pages a week for APN NZ with 56 staff.

The managing editor, Anthony Philips, is ex-APN. We did pick up quite a few of the APN subs who took redundancy, there were some really good people. We then have a number of remote subs who used to work for regional papers. We've got people from radio and from community titles. We've got two graduates there. Two in 56, that's about the ratio we'd like to maintain.



The company's workforce is constantly growing to meet demand

In Brisbane, we have senior people who have been at *The Australian* and the *Financial Times* in the UK. There are subs with three-to-four years of experience, and no graduates just yet because it's so new. So there's a range of people from senior right through.

**BT:** Is it risky to employ journalism graduates in a business where quality is so important?

**BD:** We do believe we should employ graduates. We have a commitment to training, too. We have monthly workshops across headline writing, legal issues, check-subbing, all the disciplines. All of our subs must complete a set number of workshops every year. We also have a mentor program.

**BT:** Are you doing any work for online purposes? What about audio and video editing?

**BD:** No but it's on the radar. AAP is offering audio and video grabs already. We could morph our production centres. There's plenty of opportunity.

**BT:** Are there any compatibility issues with clients?

**BD:** We've got the Roxon editorial portal system in Melbourne, where we do the *Adelaide Independent Weekly*. It works with InDesign but it has a database back-end, so it's a content management system too. It gives the client the ability to view a page through the internet every time you save it.

**BT:** What do your services cost?

**BD:** Each operation is different. I can't put a dollar figure on what a page costs for one client because they're all different. Volume makes an amazing difference.

We're very transparent about the cost structure. We'll sit down with someone and ask what they want, and tell them what it costs. Again, the scale of the operation comes into that.

And it's not just about cutting costs. Regionals want to be the best local paper they can be. They're better off to get us to do a world news page, or an Australian Open page. They move resources into the local reporting. So it isn't all just about cost-saving necessarily, it's about improving the product.

**BT:** From the publisher's point of view, where do they save money?

**BD:** By centralising your production, you're able to even your workloads across the days and the weeks. It's all about increasing the productivity. If a newspaper is getting good efficiency in their production system now, maybe we can't help them. Fairfax is on the record saying they needed to improve their productivity. We delivered that.

**BT:** So you have enough subs to cover the peak times but you keep them just as busy through the rest of the day?

**BD:** That's right.

**BT:** What would you say to people still sceptical about the editorial outsourcing concept?

**BD:** Content is king in the industry and it always has been. Getting good stories and good news coverage in your newspaper is what it's all about. How that's put together and how that's delivered is less important than getting that content right in the first place. ■

Pagemasters sub-editors handle pages from opposite sides of the globe

