

# ARE YOU SELLING PRODUCTS YOUR ADVERTISERS DON'T WANT?



With a little bit of research and planning, any association can raise its game to ensure its media products sync with what their market really needs.

In the association media business, new-product development is an insular process. It's frequently driven by association executives who rarely speak to advertisers and don't understand timing or the pain points in the market. They just know they're under pressure to produce revenue for the association, so they push out a flawed idea.

Suddenly, the association sales team finds itself selling a media product developed with the association's needs in mind — not the advertiser's. The result is predictable, says Jim Elliott, president of James G. Elliott Co., Inc., one of the nation's largest outsourced ad sales firms for print and digital publishers.

"The salesperson ends up behind the eight ball. The advertiser doesn't have the budget. The idea doesn't sync with their current priorities. They lose trust in the association's brand, which they believe has lost traction in the market," Elliott says.

That's devastating, but it doesn't have to be that way, Elliott says. In this interview, Elliott and Jack Semler, owner and CEO of Readex Research, share advice on this common — and potentially crippling — media product development mistake.

**signature:** How prevalent is this mistake of creating new media products from the association's point of view instead of the advertiser's?

**Elliott:** Many times in my career, we've had situations where someone in a media company we represent comes up with an idea that gets internal approval. But it's often done for political reasons. They didn't do it in consultation with a large sampling of their member or advertiser base. Too often, the association's publisher or CEO is disconnected. New-product development is about them — not the members and advertisers they're trying to serve.

**signature:** Where are the mistakes being made?

**Elliott:** Successful media product roll-outs usually include research. We see so many publishing brands chasing the latest shiny object. An example is the brand studio. Some association media groups see their peers build an operation, so they run off and try to do it, too. But unlike their peers, they may not have the resources, and they have not done feasibility research.

Then they proceed with the project after talking only to their own salespeople, not with formal research. They anticipate broad market success from what may have worked with just one client that had a particular set of problems. They view it as a solution for every advertiser they have, but it becomes an expensive exercise with poor ROI. The better approach is for research to serve as an advisor in a new publishing project.

**Semler:** I can count on one hand the number of times we've been brought in to do real, bona-fide feasibility research. Associations should at least sit down with a focus group to get some feedback. But to be honest, that hardly ever happens. Instead, people get excited about their vision. "This is going to happen! We can do it! We can roll it to great success!" They have this attitude even though, if they did the research, they might find out that it isn't really what their market needs.

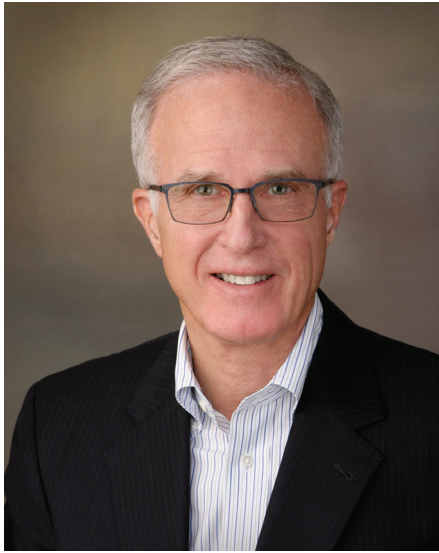
**signature:** How, specifically, can research help in new media product development?

**Semler:** Research brings a different vision to a process, an unbiased vision for what the process might be. It extends beyond new products.

Think about editorial research. It's rarely, rarely done. True, there's a cost to it. But if you really want to develop new products right, you have to be prepared to put a process in place that is going to work. Even the best research can be faulty, but if you don't research it at all, you're just throwing caution to the wind.

**Elliott:** The cost of research isn't near the cost of making a bad mistake. Research is a cheap way to go, not an expensive way.

Take a print magazine, for example. A print magazine may have had the same 10,000-reader circulation for 10 years. And



**Jim Elliott, president of James G. Elliott Co., Inc.**

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that was fine — you can do a research study once every five years. The problem today is that same magazine has social media, a website, events — all these other audiences — which makes it more important to know how each of them plays into the others.

**signature:** How do you start the conversation with an association customer who is excited about a new media product — but you don’t think it’s a good idea?

**Elliott:** If we’re regarded as a strategic partner, and we meet regularly to discuss strategy, the conversation can develop into changing the product mix slightly or getting rid of a product.

Unfortunately, in many cases, the ad sales person or team — whether internal or outsourced — is blamed for their inability to sell what is actually a lousy idea. That happens more often than not. Regular conversations minimize that. It’s important not to confuse enthusiasm with capability.

**Semler:** You have to ask yourself, “If I launch this publication or some other media product, what is it going to cost me to get it to full speed? What does the member or advertiser really have to say?” But, you also have to ask: “What’s the penalty if we go through with something, and it doesn’t work?” That’s the real cost.

But associations are not doing a lot of research that informs strategic decisions. They’re not doing a lot of research that publishers need when they decide what they’re going to offer their customers or as they bring new products and services

into the marketplace. If there was more research, we’d see fewer mistakes and a better mix for the publisher to offer the marketplace.




**Jack Semler, owner and CEO of Readex Research**

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**signature:** Do you see association publishing teams struggling to do or offer too much?

**Elliott:** If you’re going to take the beach on Iwo Jima, don’t send half the force to Saipan. It’s about the cost of the sales team and the potential expense of directing their attention off the job to be done and onto some stupid idea. Research can be the air support.

Smart and innovative associations will use research in their product-development process. Any organization can avoid mistakes by adjusting their internal go-to-market strategies. 

## HOW RESEARCH SUPPORTS AD SALES

Research isn’t an expense; it’s an investment. How this investment pays off — that is, assessing the benefit to the publisher, staff, and customers — depends on the objectives. Here are some of the most important benefits of research.

- **Research informs a decision before you make that decision.** More mistakes are made — and more money wasted — by not having good data to support decision-making.
- **Research allows you to own information no one else has.** There’s a well-known phrase, “Knowledge is power.” Information you have that no one else has is valuable.
- **Research supports the sales effort because sales teams can use research in sales calls.** It helps sell the value of your market and demonstrates your association’s expertise.
- **Research makes you a more valued partner.** It provides customers with insights they may not have the time or resources to get on their own.

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