I often use that quote in presentations about the digital future. It reminds us how quickly things change and how little we can know at any given time. (Cliff Stoll was no dummy, either; he’s a former astronomer and was one of the first people to track down a hacker.)

We are at a similar moment with tablets: simultaneous unbridled enthusiasm coupled with skepticism, particularly in regard to what this new medium might mean to publishers.

Let’s start with what we do know. Apple’s iPad is the only tablet that matters right now. As of this writing, Apple has sold around 25 million iPads. Best estimates of sales of tablets running the Android and Blackberry OS, among others, are well under 1 million. At least for the remainder of 2011, competing tablets are unimportant from a mass audience perspective but may still have value for some businesses for experimentation.
The rate of iPad adoption exceeds that of the iPod and even iTunes.

Apple has around 250 million credit card numbers in its database and has passed a billion apps downloaded. It’s clear we’ve passed the point where anyone can credibly dismiss tablets and the app ecosystem that powers them as a short-lived fad. Even though in five years these first-generation iPads will look as clunky and useless as the click-wheel iPod does now, touchscreen-based, tablet-form-factor, app-powered, connected devices will be a significant part of people’s lives — on par with at least the MP3 player, if not the phone, the computer and the TV.

But can publishers have a place in this future? Absolutely! What we do as magazine makers — deliver curated experiences to targeted audiences that want them, often paid for by advertisers who want to reach those engaged audiences — is even more important in a world crowded with content and options. The brand trust we have built with our audiences (and the larger public) becomes ever more important when two guys in a basement can build an app that sits right next to ours in the store.

This doesn’t mean that every publisher should push a monthly replica into Apple’s iPad store right now, but it does mean that ignoring this phenomenon is a bad idea. Many publishers ignored the Web out of fear or arrogance and they were overtaken by Silicon Valley kids, only to spend years catching up and trying to build a business on the tail end of a platform they played no part in creating or shaping. Don’t let the same thing happen this time.

So what should you do? Experiment, succeed or fail, learn. Repeat. Or, as the chairman of our 200-year-old family-run Swedish parent company, Jonas Bonnier, says “Go ahead and fail. Just fail quickly and cheaply.”

The belief in the need to experiment — to engage, to try, to learn — is one of the fundamental tenets of the Mag+ platform, from its inception as an in-house R&D project to its new life as a licensed software platform. Mag+ was conceived and built by teams of editors and designers who worked with digital design experts over a few months trying different things. We didn’t have tablets then, but we built layouts that approximated the size of the touchscreen we thought we’d get. We laid them under cardboard cutouts and made conceptual videos to see how these layouts might look when they were swiped and tapped on a real screen.

As a result, when Apple CEO Steve Jobs announced the real deal in late January 2010, we knew what we wanted to do and what we believed would produce the best experience for our users and our creatives. We were able to build it in just 59 days and launched simultaneously with the iPad on April 4, selling 20,000 copies of the first tablet issue of Popular Science plus at $4.99 each (or around $70,000 net revenue in just a few weeks).

After the launch, as we improved our production tools and began exploring what more could be done design-wise on the platform, we realized that the only way designers could experiment and improve would be if they could immediately see at any given time what the thing they were making on their computer screen in InDesign would actually look and feel like on the touchscreen device. So we built an instant-review capability, where a single-button press beams the fully functional, optimized layout to the iPad. If you don’t like something, change it and hit review again. That’s how we play and learn.

When we decided to spin off the platform into its own business earlier this year, we realized that we’d all get better more quickly if more people worked with our
tools and experimented with new ways to present content on iPads. So we decided to make the tools – an InDesign plug-in and issue-bundling app – and the Reviewer app available on our site absolutely free.

Every publisher’s experiments will be different. Some might want to launch a few titles while others might just want to download a toolset like ours and build pages to show around on the Reviewer. The important thing is to begin thinking about how content (even the content that hasn’t been developed yet) and its audience (even an audience you don’t know about yet) can intersect on these devices.

So let’s get practical. Here are the three areas I believe you need to consider as you move forward in tablet publishing, with as much specific detail as I can provide.

**START WITH CONTENT**

For publishers, of course, content is where it all begins. While many magazines might end up making a perfectly legitimate business out of replicating the content, if not the form, of their monthly magazine, I believe that a future in which magazines move significant portions of their rate base from print to digital is still years away. That said, don’t dismiss the power of the proven bundle of content you’ve already got. It is a convenient place to begin and as far as we know, the iPad has a broad user base; it’s not all techy young men. Food Network magazine is one of the highest grossing magazine apps out there and *Popular Science*, which has been producing versions of its monthly magazine with identical content since its tablet launch, has made more than $600,000 in net consumer revenue, including the sale of more than 20,000 subscriptions (at $14.99 or $10 net each) in just four months. Those numbers are not insignificant.

Don’t forget that one of the great things about the tablet and app ecosystem is that the cost for distribution is essentially zero. Once you have a toolset like Mag+ and an app in the Apple Store, you can push new issues or content bundles into it for free. If they don’t work, pull them down and try again. Publishers should look deeply at the content they already have (particularly those things they know people already love), as well as widely at what content legitimately falls within their brand. Is there another way to leverage the expertise of the brand that didn’t quite fit into your print magazine? At *PopSci*, for instance, we’re creating special issues built from 138-year-old archives with bundles like “The 50 Craziest Ideas in Aviation.” Given the digital nature of tablets, publishers should also think broadly about how they define what an “issue” can be. There’s no reason it can’t be all video, or simply audio and images. Publishers have a vast, powerful multimedia canvas, so they should play with it.

**GET CREATIVE**

Here, too, only experimentation will tell a publisher how its brand best translates to the device. Anyone who says they’ve figured out exactly what design and interaction people want on these devices is as off base as Cliff Stoll in the quote at the top of this piece. All of the customer testing that we and others have done indicates that there are no truly established behaviors in this space yet.

But I’ll share a few lessons we’ve learned.

Don’t frustrate your readers. Since we’ve not yet agreed upon a common language or architecture for content, make sure to clearly communicate instructions to the reader. Let them know if they have to swipe down to read more or tap an image to get a caption or play a video.

Don’t disrupt the immersive experience with a lot of buttons and instructions and don’t make things look like buttons that aren’t. People like to touch their tablet, and if they think you’ve invited them to touch it and nothing happens, they’ll be annoyed.
Don’t treat the tablet like a 6-by-8-inch printed page; it’s a borderless canvas on which the screen is a window. It’s scary to those of us accustomed to telling stories and packaging pages in a format with precisely defined boundaries, but it is also creatively liberating. And though this is exactly how every other digital medium works (from reading the Times app on your iPhone to the Web to video games), it can be unsettling for users, particularly if you’re giving them the content equivalent of the print product.

Some people assume that consumers won’t read long articles on these devices, that all they want is video, that you’ve got to make your pages look like games and that more interactivity is better.

Hogwash.
The New Yorker app is as boring as a magazine app can be, but because it’s effective at delivering the experience that its readers want, it is among the top grossing magazine apps. Although you have to make decisions based on what you think your audience will want, don’t dismiss ideas out of hand or even assume that there’s a conventional wisdom.

As you build a business case for publishing on tablets, think creatively and take several models to market. Legitimate revenue streams in this market will emerge from both advertising and consumers. For advertisers, the high-resolution, multimedia tablet canvas, combined with the interactivity and measurability of the Web, can revive high-impact, full-page display advertising on a digital device. (And yes, we can measure just about any interaction and page view in a digital publication using a number of different analytics systems, including Localytics, Omniture and Flurry — just not demographics.) If you think that’s just a print guy’s fanciful hopes, look at the business models of Flipboard, Yahoo’s Livestand or Google’s forthcoming tablet entry — all based on inserting effective and compelling digital display ads into packages of curated content.

In these early days, when the scale might not justify a CPM buy, look for advertisers you can partner with. Offer single-issue or single-category sponsorships and sell the advertiser on the value of learning along with you. They need to figure this market out as well.

On the revenue side, digital does not have to be free. If it did, people would not have spent millions of dollars on apps during an economic downturn. Digital content doesn’t have to be free, either. If it did, a vertical, small circulation title like Popular Photography wouldn’t be making $25,000 a month on its iPad app, with virtually no promotion. And digital books wouldn’t be the juggernaut they’ve become.

To that point, I’ll end on a potentially controversial note: Giving away the digital version of your magazine to print subscribers is a mistake. It’s protecting an old business model and devaluing your next one. We don’t let print subscribers walk into any Barnes & Noble and grab a single copy off the newstand just because they left theirs at home. This is a separate product and it should have its own value. Bundle, sure. Discount, you bet. Offer incentives with free SIPs or other premiums, absolutely. But if we ever want the tablet part of our publishing business to generate revenues, we can’t start from the assumption that it’s simply a cost center and a revenue hole. There are plenty of examples already of real money being made with the right product, the right audience and the right marketing. It’s hard and fuzzy and often frustrating. But it’s also fun, and it is our future.

And that’s one thing I do know.

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“Giving away the digital version of your magazine to print subscribers is a mistake.”
— Mike Haney