When newspaper publishers finally accept the inevitability of digital alternatives for delivering news, their first impulse has typically been to create digital replicas of the printed newspaper. Whether it’s delivered on the Web or, more recently, on the iPad, the same news that graces the front page of the printed paper is laid out pretty much the same way in a digital edition, albeit with occasional video and links.

Such a transition strategy makes sense if the goal is to retain readers who are migrating en masse from one medium (print) to another (Internet, smartphone or iPad) or uses them interchangeably. But statistics show that the audience for print is different from those who get their information digitally. The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism noted that adults over 55 are the most likely to read printed newspapers and Nielsen has said that only 15% of iPad users are over 55. Meanwhile, comScore MobiLens reported that in the three-month period ending February 2011, iPad sales were dominated by young adults ages 25-34 (27%) and 35-44 (20.3%). It’s not surprising, therefore, that selling a “newspaper” experience to younger readers on digital devices has been largely unsuccessful, particularly at expanding the audience.

For most newspaper publishers, digital platforms are all just different ways to deliver the same news. Freedom Communications, a company that includes television stations as well as print publications, including the Orange County Register daily newspaper, has taken a radical departure from this approach, creating an iPad app (currently in beta) specifically designed for people who don’t read newspapers.

“When we started thinking about the iPad, we didn’t think about how do we get a replica edition of our newspaper, magazines, websites or even broadcasts from our television sites on the iPad,” said Doug Bennett, president of the interactive division at Freedom Communications. “For us to create a replica edition for the iPad would recognize that our audience is moving very quickly to the iPad, which it isn’t. Our focus was: What is the core problem of our business? The reality is that we’re not attracting the younger demographic any longer. Our audience is still young enough that we’ll be around a long time, but what are we doing to fill the other end of the funnel?”

Bennett set about creating an iPad app for The Register that would appeal to the desirable audience of younger readers who don’t read print newspapers and probably never will. “The two largest buying audiences are 25-35 and 35-45. For the most part, that’s not an audience that’s growing in print as it relates to news. It’s an audience that we don’t serve as well as we once did because they can find information in a plethora of other places. They’ve grown up for the most part without using newspapers or print media,” Bennett said. “The iPad for us was all about how do we get a new audience? That’s our starting point. From there we asked: What are the topics of information they’re most interested in?”

Bennett concluded that younger readers are still interested in information and entertainment (but not necessarily just the news).
and that how they read is at least as important as what they read. "The style they like is much more graphical, it's got much more video, it's interactive, it doesn't have a lot of words. It's more about the visuals and a quick read," he said.

Ipad reading behavior is also different from newspapers, he said. "It's used more from 5-9 p.m. than it's used during the day and it's more of a 'lean-back' experience," said Bennett. "People are using it while they're in bed or sitting in front of a TV. You're not doing that with a laptop. That's why we publish late in the day. If they're looking at content that's published at 6 a.m. for the newspaper, it's going to feel very old to them."

BUILDING A CURATED EXPERIENCE FOR A NICHE AUDIENCE

Bennett said the iPad audience wants an experience that’s different from the all-inclusive smorgasbord newspapers traditionally provide. "The newspaper to some extent is an old-style portal, with news, weather, sports, obituaries, classifieds — supposedly everything you need," compared with niche audiences that go to multiple places to get their information. "Overall, you need to build out more of a magazine-style experience with your information," Bennett said.

Instead of a one-size-fits-all news portal, Freedom Communications designed an experience that is more native to the device: tactile, with relatively short stories told with videos and lots of pictures, and sharable. "Our model is to build out a very graphical, curated experience," said Bennett. Most of The Register's iPad app content — 60 stories in 10 categories — is currently generated by staff inside the company, but Bennett expects that 30-40% of the content eventually will come from outside the company "because the type of content we will need is not necessarily areas where we have expertise."

The iPad team at the OC Register is staffed separately from the print and television newsrooms, with an emphasis on production expertise. "The team is different because the style of content is different, the audience is different and the way it is produced is different," said Bennett. "Production people are more about the whole engaging process of putting something together," he said. "We brought in television, movie, HTML5 designers and video production and formed a team of six people that is responsible for making the daily decisions of what is published on the iPad edition."

Although the iPad edition includes stories from newspaper and TV staffers, The Register’s iPad coverage doesn’t necessarily prioritize the same news. A story about a teachers strike that leads the newspaper might be moved back on the iPad. "There’s no way an editor of the newspaper would make that decision, because if it’s on the front page of the newspaper, it should be on the front page of the iPad. That’s where we disagree," he said.
The Register’s iPad edition is also designed to be habit forming. “We have one interactive feature that’s unique to the iPad each day,” he said. “The goal is to have each day two or three of those boxes to become a unique ‘show’ so that people need to come back on certain days for their show, much like a TV experience.”

**A NEW PUBLISHING METAPHOR**

Creating a new iPad newspaper isn’t easy, Bennett said. “All of the systems you’ve used for years — whether they’re Atex, CCI or any of them — are all built around page layout and this isn’t. The content management systems are evolving, but they’re not there yet, so you’re doing a lot of your own coding and your own things each day to make it come to life. It’s not just push a button and it spits out on the iPad.”

Newspaper content management systems don’t yet communicate well with iPad systems like Woodwing, Bennett said, “so we’ve had to build a lot of interfaces and so on into it. The quality that’s required of a photograph in CCI vs. a photograph that goes into Woodwing is very different, and the two systems don’t talk well together. It’s had its painful moments, but on the other hand it’s stuff you have to do now. You’ve got to go through this because not everyone is going to change out their CMS.”

**A NEW WAY OF ADVERTISING**

Creating a standalone newspaper app that appeals to a young, digital native audience is laudable in its own right, but to be successful the publication has to support itself. Bennett dismisses subscriptions as a reliable revenue source for now. “We believe that if people get the curated experience they want, they will be willing to pay. But it’s almost like the market has determined that it’s less than $10. Most are $4.99 a month. So unless you get hundreds of thousands of people subscribing, that’s a tough model,” he said.

Newspapers have traditionally been supported by advertising, he reasoned, and erecting a pay wall inhibits reach. “My goal is to reach my audience without any barriers to entry, and there’s no model out there except for a national brand that has shown that there’s enough volume without coupling it with a newspaper and a website,” said Bennett. “Once I have the distribution, that’s going to be the main driver for advertisers. We have sponsors now but hopefully that will move eventually to a cost per click or a cost per action model.”

Bennett insists that advertising will be unique to the iPad and as engaging as the stories “because if they’re not, you haven’t fulfilled on the device.” Consequently, Bennett won’t accept any ads that run in newspapers, magazines or even television. “We’re doing the ads for our advertisers and creating something that’s unique. It’s paid off because in the 45 days since we’ve launched, we’re seeing higher engagement rates with the ads. As you build up more distribution, that will allow you to get a $40-50 CPM as opposed to a $10 CPM from a website.”

In a sense, the iPad version of The Register is coming full circle back to the popular ads found in print magazines. “They can once again be part of an engaging experience on the iPad if they are designed specifically for the device.” We have one where we can do a 360 degree spin on jewelry or a dress. That’s an experience that you can’t duplicate in print,” said Bennett.

Although the beta version of The Orange County Register on the iPad has only been available for a couple of months, Bennett said he is seeing some positive signs. About 60% of the people who download the app actually come back, which is much higher than traditional smartphone apps or websites, he said. “On average we’re getting much higher usage. Some people are spending 5-6 minutes with the product, which is much more time than people spend with our smartphone apps or websites.” And as expected, he’s seeing a lot higher usage after 6 p.m.

**GROWING THE AUDIENCE**

In some ways, Freedom Communications is more like a media company than a news-
The content management systems are evolving, but they’re not there yet, so you’re doing a lot of your own coding and your own things each day to make it come to life. It’s not just push a button and it spits out on the iPad.

— Doug Bennett

Inside the O.C. Register’s iPad App

The first thing you notice about the beta version of The Orange County Register on the iPad is that it doesn’t look at all like a newspaper or even a news site — not even The Register’s own online edition. Published late in the afternoon, the iPad edition of The Register does not emphasize hard news, although a list of the latest local news stories is available by tapping the image on the top right corner of the opening page. Weather and a live traffic map are also easily accessible from the top of the page. Even though the iPad version of The Register isn’t a “newspaper” per se, it still manages to maintain a local flavor and sensibility and it’s obviously targeted at an affluent audience interested in regional culture and events.

Most of the “real estate” on the opening screen is devoted to a top feature story above the “fold” and to the iPad newspaper’s six categories, which are displayed horizontally with thumbnails: news for O.C., sports, business, trending, things to do and photo/video.

Each of these headings features 10 stories that are mostly lighter in tone from what appears on the Web version of the newspaper (it’s more like “Nightline” meets “Entertainment Tonight” or “Inside Edition” than “The CBS Evening News”). Stories are also relatively light on text and typically include video and lots of pictures organized as slideshows. User participation and comments are encouraged. One recent story, “The Fashions of Hootenany,” included an avatar of Roxy Gleason in one of the Hootenany fashions that could be rotated for a 360-degree perspective of her dress. Another was a behind the scenes look at the TV show “The Voice.”

Other top feature stories included a real estate tour of pricey coastal houses and a preview of going on an African safari. The safari feature included a mesmerizing YouTube video titled “Battle at Kruger.”

The Register’s iPad app is a radical departure from other news sites. For one thing, new issues aren’t available until late in the afternoon, when studies show that most people use their iPads. Consumers download the latest issue onto their iPad in a few minutes. Page design is straightforward and instructions are prominent. The app is easy to use and it’s hard to get lost, since you can click on a home button at the bottom of the screen to return to the index.

The iPad version is currently free in order to build up its audience, but could eventually transition to a paid subscription model of 99 cents per week.

Overall, the iPad O.C. Register is a quick and entertaining read, designed for people who might be relaxing after work while they’re watching the news or ET on TV. It’s not for everybody, and it’s not meant to be. Think of it as engaging entertainment rather than a source for news.

If the iPad version is successful, parent company Freedom Communications might roll the concept out to other papers as well.