

Getting the gen on how to publish in Asia

Interview of Media Convergence Asia Pacific's President, Didier Guérin

Sally Jackson | *April 06, 2009*



WHEN seeking to launch a magazine in South Korea, it's important to know when not to sneeze.

Indeed, so numerous and frequently mysterious are the protocols of doing business in the Asia-Pacific that publishing consultant Didier Guerin has built a livelihood guiding Western companies through the pitfalls.

"In Korea you can't sneeze or blow your nose at the table -- it's a supreme insult. You don't point at the head or to the feet -- it's disrespectful," he says.

"In Asia, you don't do business with strangers. It's all based on relationships and connections. That is why the dinners, the whole life outside the business, is very important."

Magazines must also reflect local tastes, customs and even political sensitivities.

"In China you don't talk about 'Taiwan', only 'the Province of Taiwan'," Guerin says. "In China (readers) like red; in Hong Kong they prefer black. Nudity ... is not socially acceptable in Asia, so (no) runway photos of models in see-through blouses. Korean women wear three times as much make-up as in any other country, which for cosmetic companies is huge."

Guerin has been working in the Asia-Pacific for 18 years, since he was posted to Sydney by French publisher Hachette Filipacchi to launch Australian Elle in a joint-venture with News Limited (publisher of The Australian). Later he was president of Conde Nast Asia-Pacific before setting up his consultancy, Media Convergence, in 1999.

Its first assignment was taking computer magazine PC into Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Since then it has launched or relaunched regional editions of more than 30 magazines, including Japanese Vogue, Taiwanese GQ, Chinese Elle and South Korean Glamour. Guerin's most recent project was starting a Chinese bi-weekly edition of Mondadori's Grazia. He visits China about once a month.

Notwithstanding ACP Magazines' portfolio of Asian titles, Guerin believes Australian publishers have generally failed to fully exploit the opportunities, especially in China.

"Australia is a very mature market, so to launch a new magazine here is difficult, costly and risky. You need a very good idea and a lot of money," he says. "Whereas in (the Asia-Pacific) market, especially China, you have a young magazine market that is growing. Of course, you need a good idea, but you don't need to spend nearly as much

and your chance of success is so much higher.

"You need to start with a well-known brand that is recognised among advertisers that also has its own, original content. It is complex and (Australian publishers) say it's too difficult. But there are a few brands, I think, would do well."

Guerin says Chinese versions of Western titles typically sell 200,000-400,000 copies a month. Cover prices tend to be low, with revenue coming principally from advertising, which he says continues to be relatively strong despite the global economic malaise.

"There are products on sale in China you couldn't dream of seeing on sale 10 years ago making very serious revenue," he says. "China's (economic) growth for 25 years has created a very substantial middle class and huge disposable income.

"People with disposable income in China is something new; it's something their parents didn't have. So there's a desire for consumption and there's a desire for status."

With that, he says, comes a desire for Western magazines.

"You just have to know your way around the system."