

Why publications have different readers-per-copy

Circulation is an audit of the number of copies sold or distributed of a particular publication, and readership is an estimate of the number of adults reading an average issue of that publication. Readership divided by circulation gives readers-per-copy (RPC). RPC is usually greater than one, but with considerable variation for different publications. This document outlines the main reasons for the variations in RPC between titles.

In the most recent set of NRS results, RPCs for newspapers ranged from around two readers per copy to almost five readers per copy. For magazines, the range was between one and 20. Sometimes there can be considerable variation even within an apparently similar 'sector' of publications, such as home interest magazines or quality newspapers.

A frequent question is why there is such a range of different readers-per-copy estimates, particularly for publications which appear to have much in common.

The relationship between readership and circulation is notoriously difficult to unpick. There are many factors involved, some of which may work together and some in opposite directions. The content and characteristics of a publication will play their role, but probably the most important single factor is the opportunity for pass-on readership outside the home.

The potential for pass-on readership outside the household

The potential for pass-on readership by people other than whoever originally obtained the copy is central to the number of RPC. A high number of pass-on readers translates into a high RPC.

The starting point for any investigation into RPC is therefore 'source of copy', particularly the proportion of readership that takes place outside the home.

A copy which is delivered to the home and never leaves the home only has the potential to be read by adults living in that household, and any visitors there may be.

On the other hand, a copy which is in a public place – e.g. an office, a library, a hair salon, or a café – has the potential to be read by many more adults. If the copy is taken out and about – to work, shown to a friend, left on a train, etc. – this also gives the opportunity for pass-on readership and additional readers-per-copy.

Two publications may have very similar content, pricing and reader profiles, but if one is more freely available in public places, that is likely to make a difference to their relative RPCs.

NRS collects some information on source of copy, including whether the reader has obtained their own copy, seen it within their own household, read someone else's copy, or seen a copy at work, in a public place or somewhere else. This is valuable information in starting to understand RPCs.

However, not all public place reading is equal. Some locations and situations will generate significantly more pass-on readership than others. It might just be one or two additional RPC – and it might be very many indeed, with the effect of increasing the overall average RPC. A study of out-of-home reading in the United States found that public place copies generated on average 30 readers per-copy, and as many as 50 in some locations.

If publishers are using marketing strategies which increase the likelihood that the publication will be available in public places with a high potential for pass-on readership, this too can have an impact.

Household size and profile

For copies that are kept within the home, household sizes will be relevant to RPC. The average household size in Great Britain is 2.35 adults aged 15+ per household, and over time this has been falling with an increase in single person households. However, differences in the average household size for readers of individual publications tend to be overshadowed by any differences in out-of-home reading.

Demographics and lifestyle may also be relevant, particularly if they mean that the publication is more likely to be shared outside the home. For instance, workers may be more likely to take copies out of the home and pass them around in their workplaces, those with a wide circle of friends and social activities may be more likely to share content, and so on.

Pricing and promotions

Pricing and promotions are other factors to consider, particularly when they influence the availability (and perceived availability) of the publication.

If a publication is free (or low cost) and everyone can get their own copy if they want, this can result in a low RPC as there is no need to read someone else's copy.

Zero or low cost may also affect perceptions of the publication. Because there is no significant cost attached, the publication may be perceived as relatively disposable. If so, this doesn't necessarily mean that it is not actively acquired and enjoyed by the initial reader, it is just that there are likely to be fewer opportunities for pass-on readership.

Another example is customer magazines which can be picked up free in store or are sent to the customer's home, sometimes unrequested or perhaps as part of a membership package. Most people who want a copy of these publications will have easy access to their own free copy, so the demand for pass-on copies is limited.

Price cuts and promotions such as gifts, cover mounts and competitions may also have a negative effect on reader-per-copy. This is because previous pass-on readers are encouraged to buy their own copy, thereby reducing the pool of pass-on readers, at least temporarily. Any completely new readers are unlikely to have the same pass-on habits as existing readers, particularly if the publication has been acquired very specifically in order to get the gift or offer. This is why effective promotions and price cuts will result in increased circulation, but are rarely matched with an identical increase in readership.

On the other hand, while high cover prices may be less of an inhibitor to owning one's own copy than they once were, in some cases they may still encourage sharing, or extend the life of a publication.

The publication itself – frequency, content, format

Of course, there are also number of factors about the publication itself that are likely to have some bearing on the demand and potential for pass-on readership. For instance:

- The frequency of publication. Longer publication intervals generally allow more time for RPC to accrue.
- The lifespan of the content. Daily newspapers are unlikely to have many opportunities for pass-on readership beyond the initial day of publication; magazines tend to have longer lifespans, particularly if the content is not time sensitive, or has a reference element, such as car-buying magazines and specialist hobby magazines.
- Some content is particularly likely to be shared and passed on, for instance gossip, recipes, product recommendations, etc.
- Some formats lend themselves more to being 'personal' and therefore have a lower RPC. This phenomenon was observed when the smaller 'handbag' size versions of magazines were launched.
- The life-stage of the publication. New titles generally take some time to establish pass-on readership, so RPCs take a while to build. On the hand, towards the end of a publication's lifespan there is a tendency for circulation to fall more rapidly than readership, resulting in a high RPC.

The competitive situation

The competitive situation may also have a bearing on RPC. If one publisher is having a promotion, advertising heavily, or launching a new title, this may take readers from the pool of pass-on readers for a similar title.

New titles launched into an already busy market sector may find they struggle to develop pass-on readership and do not reach the RPC levels of more established titles. Established titles may see their RPCs fall as their sector becomes saturated.

Conclusion

As will be apparent, there are a wide range of factors affecting RPC, some of which it is possible for the publisher to influence, and others less so.

NRS can provide some clues as to what is happening – by looking at the long-term trends for RPC and the source of copy data. The complexity of the relationship between readership and circulation means that it is usually not possible to establish all the factors involved in a specific situation, and their relative importance.

However capturing the differences in RPC is the reason why a readership survey is vital to give a measure of the true reach of each publication, which circulation data alone cannot do.