

BUDAPESTER ZEITUNG

THE BUDAPEST TIMES

BZT Media Group, publisher of **The Budapest Times** and **Budapester Zeitung** and their websites joined the BCCH in 2009. In interview, publisher Jan Mainka talks about how his organisation has grown over the years and been able to weather the crisis.

You have been in business for a decade with the Zeitung and publishing the Times for six years now. Why do you keep at it when so many competitors have pulled back or left the scene entirely?

I do it because it matters. It would be much easier to sit behind a desk somewhere and draw nine-to-five wages in a faceless job. But I am not that kind of person. I need to contribute and I have a genuine interest in the expatriate community even though I myself have been here more than two decades. I am German, but I can do something to help build this country. You would be amazed at how many expats have the same type of attitude. Do we all want profits? Of course! But we want to give something more back other than taxes. In my case I publish newspapers that cater to the expat community and at the same time represent their interests to the government and powers that be. It is more than meaningful. It is essential.

You really feel that you provide an essential service, like schools, transport, etc.?

The Budapest Times and Budapester Zeitung represent an important part of Hungary's English- and German-speaking infrastructure. For businesspeople who do not speak Hungarian, they are a useful aid to understanding Hungary. As a podium for presenting the various activities of the English-speaking community, the Times plays a vital role in integrating and bringing together the community that should not be underestimated.

But is there a sense of community among English speakers or is English just the language that we share and do business in?

There is some truth in what you are saying. One of the first budget items to be hit when business turns sour is marketing so the last year has been very dark for our industry. It is only with the greatest efforts and not least the support of German Chamber of Commerce in Hungary (DUIHK) members such as Audi Hungaria, Bosch, BASF, ELMŰ, Magyar Telekom and Takarékbank that we have managed until now to withstand the devastating effects of the crisis, enabling The Budapest Times and Budapester Zeitung to continue.

But on the English-speaking side of things there is less interest in support?

I am not sure if you could cover it with a blanket statement like that. We have had, let's say, 'British' advertisers that have been with the Times since Day One and stuck with the Times

through the crisis. Others pulled out last year, but have now told us they are coming back in 2010. Still others seem to be completely disinterested. Why can we get unsolicited ads from a major French hypermarket while all we get from its British competitor are press releases? Cora appreciated the market opportunities we offer. We cannot say that their competitor does not, but is sending out press releases in the hope of them being published for free appreciating such opportunities? I don't think so. However, with the BBJ cutting back two years ago to publishing only fortnightly and The Budapest Sun closing its doors a year ago we have decided to see if there indeed is an English-language community of some sort or not. We have had dealings with a few chambers, where English is supposed to be the language of business and after weighing the options we figured that if an English-language business community existed, it most likely exists here. The fact of the matter is that it is the smaller German-speaking community that funds not only the German-language newspaper, but also a major portion of the English-language one. That situation has to change.

So how do you expect to woo BCCH members?

Since we started six years ago we have reported regularly on major chamber events and would like to do this more intensively in the future. Thanks to our publication the talks which the chamber has sponsored have regularly reached an audience of several thousand interested readers. That is not only pleasant for the speakers, but also an important way of presenting the chamber to the outside world. Other than The Budapest Times there is no medium through which so many English-speaking expats can be reached in such a targeted way.

That sounds like an invitation for PR...

Businesses have to be realistic. We could choose to profile one from any thousands of businesses in a given week. Why would we choose yours? Because you sent me a press release about your anniversary? No. Your workers care about that, and maybe your mother. Business partners will congratulate you and it ends there. Publications that considered this type of thing to be news have fallen by the wayside.

So you have to pay to play?

No, I am not saying that, it is more like live and let live. We are creative and try to come up with a win-win solution. For example, if someone is down or hurting we come in with not just empty empathy, but real support. What can we do for you? People remember a good deed and tell others. And when their situation turns around they come back and support us not out of obligation, but appreciation. That is the philosophy regarding our business partners, but at the same time let us not forget the value of the editorial product in all this. We came out the winner in the newspaper war, in German too I might add, because ours is the best news product and the best-managed business. We get complimented on our coverage all the time because our newspapers tell people what they need to know about Hungary and do so from a perspective that they likely share: a foreigner who is investing time, money and energy into what oftentimes can seem like a hopelessly illogical and perhaps corruption-ridden country. We bring you the information that you, as a manager, need to know, whether it be in the areas of business, economy, politics or news. We put it in an attractive package with some culture coverage, and

bang, you have the source for info on Hungary. It is much preferable over another message clogging your inbox.

So people advertise and you offer expats news in return. Where is the community crusader part?

We rub elbows with decision makers and those who develop and implement policy. I interviewed the prime minister at the end of 2009, for example. I asked him questions that expats wanted answers to. Our perspective is very different from the Hungarian media as we are not left-or-right biased. We are also different from the foreign news agencies who are reporting to the world regarding its interests, whether they be bond holders or investment funds. We are an effective mouthpiece for foreign investors towards Hungarian decision-makers. The potential problems of foreign investors can be conveyed to the public in a matter-of-fact way via The Budapest Times and Budapest Zeitung.

And how will 2010 unfold for your newspapers?

Although we are now through the worst of the financial crisis, we are still not in the all-clear. The first months of this year in particular will pose a very tough challenge. We will only be able to overcome that hurdle together with further support from the business sector.

So you are asking fellow businesses to cough up some cash to get you through tough times?

I cough up cash every day in support of business partners. Business begets business. I am not asking for a handout nor have I ever applied for a subsidy. My business survives because the advertising works. Take out an advertisement for your own products and services. Some 30,000 western business people and diplomats can be reached via my newspapers. We also have a great readership insofar as skills and education. An advertisement in our paper seeking only those candidates with good German and/or English language skills acts as a natural filter. Just last week an international school took out a classified ad for a manager in their administration end. It is a simple and inexpensive solution as they know that the talent they seek can likely already be found here in Budapest. It is not the first time they advertised a position through us, either.

Not everyone needs to advertise, such as a parts supplier to a major manufacturer based here. Even if they sympathise with you, marketing budgets cannot be accessed by everyone.

That is true and in fact one of the good things to come out of the crisis is an attitude of kindness or solidarity in these tough times. For example last year, we saw our overall revenues from subscriptions double. And people sent personal notes with them, saying that they were 'doing their part' so Budapest would continue to have the Times and Zeitung. It is subscription season again. HUF 30,000 quickly adds up and it is an easy expense for a company to justify. Some even go further by sponsoring subscriptions for schools or universities. In this way you can both support foreign language learning at these institutions and enhance your image to these institutions and the local community. These sponsors firms are getting positive PR specifically with potential employees at a school that produces the educated workforce that they want.

What of good old fashioned Hungarian red tape in the ad game?

Perhaps the biggest uphill battle we face is with what we call ‘the Marketing Zsuzsa’: a young girl who handles the marketing budget for a company. They never give a second thought to advertising in a language other than Hungarian. The blinkers are on. Or they say they are interested but when the time comes, the budget gets ‘forgotten’. It strikes us as rather odd that so much effort has to be put into convincing a marketing person - who works for a multinational company that has come to invest in a foreign country, in this case Hungary – that they should market to foreigners. Do they not see in their own company that often it is the foreigners that have a high level of disposable income and are accustomed to high levels of service? Do they think this is a phenomenon exclusive to their firm? I think laziness and a lack of confidence has something to do with it. They do not want to go to the bother of translating ads or conducting business in a language other than Hungarian. I remember a couple of years back meeting with a large British firm. The new British marketing manager was very apologetic for not having done business with us over the years, but would do so now. Months later the whole deal fell apart at a junior level. The Marketing Zsuzsa said that the company that made the ads for them was not capable of making them in English and by contract, they could not outsource the work to us either. Oh, and the budget was already gone too. You can see their campaigns all over the world in different media... Somehow I doubt that they are producing the ads originally in Hungarian and the translating them to English for use elsewhere across the globe. Clients knowingly nod their heads and relate some similar tale of woe when I tell that story. But to us the lesson is this: it is great that expats in leading positions appreciate us and pledge their support. But unfortunately as is so often the case, you need to not only state what you want to get done, you need to check that those entrusted with the job actually do it. We need you not only in our corner, but also fighting for us.

So in the end, do you really believe that Budapest could not do without you? There are blogs out there.

It would be much poorer for it. Imagine Budapest without a serious newspaper in English. Somehow you feel less important, a speck in the ocean of Hungarian. Having that paper there, and produced by expatriates like you, legitimizes your sense of self. We are like you. You can identify with us. You belong to a community with not only a critical mass, but also clout. And unlike a blog, you can hold onto us. It’s tactile and it is trusted. I would be grateful - in the interests of the whole English-speaking expat community - if you could see whether your company could afford to contribute towards securing the existence of The Budapest Times. For further questions and regarding specific offers I look forward to hearing from you at jan.mainka@bzt.hu or mobile: (06-30) 203-2692. I am also open to a chat over coffee. Hearing readers’ impressions and concerns about us or Hungary is always pleasurable.