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# INTERVIEW

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**TONY SUTTON**, President, NDA Inc.

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*First published in Password magazine, Brisbane, Australia, July 2005*

TONY SUTTON

# TALKING SHOP WITH A DISCERNING DESIGNER

This interview originally appeared in **Password**, a magazine produced by the Australian Provincial Newspaper (APN) group in Brisbane, Australia, July 2005

**Redesigning regional daily newspapers to meet the expectations of increasingly fickle readership markets demands close consultation with readers, some serious soul-searching on existing content's effectiveness, seemingly endless bench testing – and much more. Tapping into the knowledge of an internationally respected design consultant such as Tony Sutton, as the Australian Provincial Newspapers (APN) group is currently doing, makes the process more enjoyable and less instinctive for all involved. Greg Swain recently caught up with the globetrotting Tony Sutton for his thoughts on the processes and philosophies behind a successful redesign and relaunch of a daily newspaper**

**PASSWORD:** Tony, thanks for your time. Could we start with some profiling of Tony Sutton and of how News Design Associates Inc (NDA) came about?

**TONY:** My career began as a teenage failure. I was a schoolboy soccer prodigy and had planned to play for England, marry a film star and retire at 30; but, at 17, I was told I wasn't good enough to be a full time professional. So, as an alternative to getting a real job, I joined the staff of my local weekly, the *Horncastle News*,



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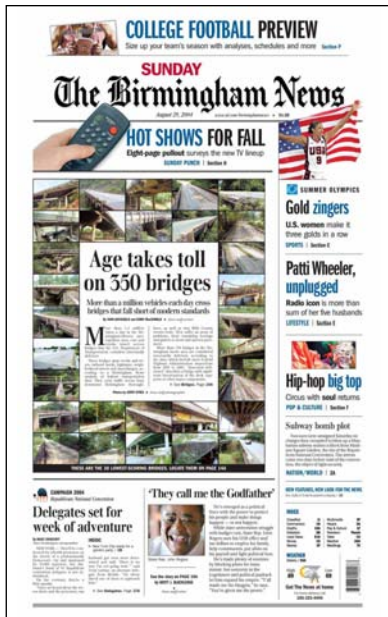
tuous aftermath. The following years, four with *Drum*, the rest as a consultant, were the most exciting of my life: editing, designing, and developing publications for black readers was never easy under a government that was quick to crush any form of protest. Seven publications for which I worked or consulting were banned during the next 13 years of my extended stay in the country.

We packed up our kids and dog and moved to Canada at the beginning of 1990 when I was invited to redesign the national daily *Globe and Mail* in Toronto. "Canada is as dull as hell," said the *Globe's* then managing editor, "but you can walk safely down the streets at night". That attitude permeated the newspaper and made my 20 months as design director the most boring of my career, so I jumped at the chance to move a couple of miles down the road to Thomson Newspapers' head office as head of design for the company's North American operation. Especially as I got to fly around the continent at company expense.

My contracts with the *Globe* and Thomson allowed me to operate News Design Associates, which I built in my spare time into one of North America's main design agencies, specializing in alternative weeklies, magazines and non-mainstream newspapers. I moved full time to the company in the mid-90s and the dropping of a non-compete agreement allowed me to shift focus to mainstream newspapers. During this period, I also spent five years as part time editor of *Design*, the magazine of the US-based Society for News Design, during which time, I also published my own journalism tabloids, *RaggedRight* and *Nine On Ten* (pdf files of *Nine On Ten* are at [www.newsdesign.net](http://www.newsdesign.net)).

**PASSWORD: Looking around your website (<http://www.newsdesign.net>), NDA has certainly undertaken some significant redesign projects around the globe. What sets NDA apart from other newspaper design consultants?**

**TONY:** I think we're successful because my background is as an editor, NOT as an artist. This means that I understand, from experience, the problems and pressures of content as much as those of layout and projection. I also believe good design and great content go hand in hand, that news should never, ever, be subservient to layout, and that great writing always beats great design. Good design should be simple and easy to implement, especially in smaller papers that do not have their own design



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and graphics department. In addition, we do good work at a reasonable price, give great aftersales service and, as a result, get lots of repeat business.

**PASSWORD:** What is the process of consultation with a newspaper for a redesign?

**TONY:** Clients have different needs, but I prefer working with editors and managers who know what they'd like to achieve from a redesign. Usually – not always with success – I ask project leaders to give me a 2,000-word summary of what they're seeking before I start so we begin by aiming for the same goals. But most prefer to wait until I've done a first draft so they can figure out what they like and dislike and take it from there. Most jobs take two or three runs before we get things right, a process that is accompanied by lots of head scratching, some heartache and merciless revision – occasionally helped by a few beers; the hang-over is part of the process.

Looking back, my favourite clients are Andrew Jaspan, the brilliant editor with whom I worked on the launch of Glasgow's *Sunday Herald* in 2000, and Stephen Haw, a senior editor at Johannesburg's *Sunday Times* – the biggest paper in Africa – with whom I have worked on a number of redesign and new-launch projects over the past four or five years, the latest being a new

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soccer tabloid and a relaunch of the *Daily Dispatch* at East London in the Eastern Cape. What makes them special is wonderful editorial vision, instinctive feel for content and design and an overwhelming desire for their papers to be the best in the market.

I'm also proud to have worked with publisher Mairtin O Muilleoir on the launch, earlier this year, of *Daily Ireland*, a Sinn Fein-supporting tabloid based in Belfast, Northern Ireland, that was launched at the beginning of this year in the face of fierce political opposition and threats of violence. It's good to see a newspaper launched for reasons other than merely to serve advertisers, and O Muilleoir's vision for a peaceful and united Ireland, just like the earlier fight for the ending of apartheid in South Africa, is one that deserves support.

**PASSWORD: Australia's regional newspapers fortunately do not have to suffer the same gut wrenches as other newsgroups over the pros and cons of going "compact". What are your thoughts on optimum space usage in tabloid formats?**

**TONY:** The questions I ask of my daily paper are: Am I getting useful information?; am I conscious of good quality content?; is the paper worthwhile for me as a reader?; or am I merely being fed snippets of information by someone whose real motive is selling me things I don't want or need? Unfortunately, many papers are better at selling advertising than delivering quality news. Format is not really an issue if the product is compelling and I could make as strong a case for broadsheet as for tabloid.

But tabloids are different from broadsheets, and in many ways they're much harder to produce – too many long stories make them look unbearably dull and gray and unreadable, so there's a need to edit everything tighter and make sure there are plenty of short stories to balance the longer reads.

Good picture editing is also a key to the process of effective tabloid design – it's amazing how many 'bad' pictures become brilliant with a bit of thought and effort at the editing stage. And the challenge of competing with massive ads in full colour can be problematic (the solution is, of course, don't try to compete; save the editorial energy for pages where you have the space to be creative).

**PASSWORD: What are the latest surveys showing about the**



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**time an average reader can afford for the local daily newspaper?**  
**TONY:** I don't know. Surveys usually contain a few pearls of information, but common sense and good instincts are more important. There is a direct connection between readership and the quality of the content and I don't need a survey to tell me this – I have a wife who points out the shortcomings of our local daily over breakfast every morning. If the content of a newspaper (or magazine or book or film) is worthwhile, I will spend time with it; if not . . . well, we all know the answer to that. When I was running *Drum* magazine in South Africa, I judged each issue as much on the amount of stuff I'd thrown out on deadline as by what made it into the magazine. I agonized before – and after – publication and continually tried to do better.

One of the biggest problems I've found in my travels is that editors tend not to read their own papers. And, if they can't be bothered, why should they expect their readers to care?

The process of editing was neatly articulated by Ralph Ingersoll, who helped launch *Life* and *Fortune* magazines in the USA in the thirties: "An editor may pass for print only what pleases him. It is his own taste he must discover. If he then finds that people share his taste and like or enjoy or approve of what his taste has chosen, then he is a successful editor. If they don't, then he had better choose another trade, for no man can base his

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choice on what he imagines or reasons other people MIGHT like." Having said that, Ingersoll went on to launch his own daily newspaper – *PM* – in New York City. It failed. He became an author.

**PASSWORD: Both readers, and the journalists creating our daily newspapers suffer from information availability overload. Our newspaper editors are constantly striving to find the right balance of story counts per page. Is there a general rule, trend or philosophy for modern day tabloid design in this area?**

**TONY:** It's all a question of balance – and awareness. There's nothing wrong with running a full-page feature with no photographs or art, providing it's the RIGHT full-page feature. But you'd want to make sure that you didn't have six – or even two – of those in a row. Equally, six pages full of short, inconsequential, stories aren't really going to satisfy the reader, either. The criteria should be the quality of the content. Always. No matter how big or small the market. Each edition of the newspaper should have a full range of stories, ranging from big, important and well-written page leads down to tightly edited fillers. Everything should be worth its place in the pages.

The small stories are just as important as the larger one-pagers. But there is no magic formula to getting the mix right . . . TS Eliot said the only method in such matters is to be very intelligent. And very dedicated. In newspapers, it's about developing and maintaining rhythm and keeping the interest of curious but fickle readers as long as possible. If someone can make something interesting to me that I'm not particularly interested in, I'll read it. For example, when I was riding home from Toronto on the train one evening, I suddenly discovered I was halfway through a 3,000-word story about ballet? Why am I reading this? I asked myself. The answer: The picture was wonderful, the headline and intro informative and fun, and the first par was intriguing. From there, the narrative kept me reading.

**PASSWORD: APN newspapers cater to a wide range of age demographics. And they share a lot of common interest pages with sister newspapers. If not from a design perspective, then from typography directions how feasible/advisable is a one size fits all approach?**



**"It's amazing how many 'bad' pictures become brilliant with a bit of thought and effort at the editing stage"**

**TONY:** It's not really about design or typography or format – it's about the editor. Given the same space, one editor will fill it with wonderful stories, great heads and superb pictures, while another will produce bland pages. I know which editor I'd want to run the paper I read.

My gut feeling is that one size doesn't fit all – that sounds too much like an accountant's wet dream. It may seem sensible when outlined on a spreadsheet, but common content is often bland and generic and tends to degrade every product it touches. Editorial decisions should be determined by whether the words are worth reading, whether the picture is worth its space on the page, and whether the design is functional and appealing. They should not be determined by the time an editor wants to go home or the price a manager is willing to pay for original content.

**PASSWORD:** What newspaper typefaces head up your favourites list for body copy and headlines, and why?

**TONY:** We develop, with associate Nick Shinn, one of the world's leading typeface designers, most of the typefaces we use for our redesigns. This gives customers access to unique faces, which are also adaptable to their needs – we created new condensed versions of the headline face Nicholas for use in the Toowoomba *Chronicle*, for example. Worldwide, another of Shinn's fonts, was

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designed specially for newspapers, combining a large x-height, slightly condensed character forms and tight setting to maximize readability when printed in narrow newspaper columns. This versatile font has grown over six years from a single weight produced for the tabloid *Worldwoman* (read about the development of the font on [newsdesign.net](http://newsdesign.net)), to a wide range of typestyles ranging from text settings to ultra condensed headlines. Other non-Shinn fonts I have used recently for text are Utopia and Clarion and, for heads, Griffith Gothic, Meta and Miller.

**PASSWORD: From what you have seen of APN products, what are your general impressions on the design front?**

**TONY:** The design generally mirrors the content, most of which is adequate, without being outstanding. I'd prefer to see a more adventurous display of good solid stories that have a real significance to our readers – that, after all, is why we're journalists; we're all failed soccer players who want to change the world, aren't we? But it would be good to see more front pages that are determined by the shape of the news rather than designed strictly according to inflexible design formats, which look good but hardly change from day to day. We should surprise the readers – and ourselves – a bit more.

**PASSWORD: What influence are internet site designers having on newspaper design philosophies and newspaper reader expectations, if any?**

**TONY:** Probably more than they should. Newspaper publishers, editors and designers spend too much time self-consciously trying to replicate other media (remember *USA Today's* sales boxes that imitated TV sets?) when they should be developing unique ways of persuading readers to spend more time with their product. There are no quick fixes waiting to be stolen from other media – excellence is the result of hard work, loads of mistakes and intense thought.

**PASSWORD: Do humungous size front-page images suit conservative readership markets? If so, how often per week should the big picture attention grabber be used on a daily product?**

**TONY:** Good pictures, projected well, always sell, no matter what the audience or how often they are used. But they should



**"it would be good to see more front pages that are determined by the shape of the news rather than designed strictly according to inflexible formats"**

be worth the size. The editing test for pictures should be the same as that which, I hope, we follow with text: Is it worth the space? Readers respond to what we give them – if we make a habit of blowing up dull pictures, they'll think (quite correctly) that we're of no consequence; if we make them too small, they won't notice them. At the end of the day, though, it's about valuing available space; if I don't, how can I expect anyone else to.

**PASSWORD:** APN has a lot of free weekly newspapers, most of which are produced out of the same office of the local regional daily. And often by the same editorial designers. Should there be a different design approach taken for free weeklies rather than to just mimic the flagship product?

**TONY:** Yes, if only because the newspaper is a DIFFERENT title, aimed at a DIFFERENT target market. I, as an editor, don't want my flagship paid-for title to look too much like the freebie (why would readers pay for it if they can get something similar for nothing?); I want it to look different and read BETTER – people are paying for it and they deserve more. That doesn't mean the typographic changes have to be massive, but there should at least be different headline fonts (sans if the main paper is serif, for example), a different style for page headers and so on.

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**"My gut feeling is that one size doesn't fit all – that sounds too much like an accountant's wet dream"**

**PASSWORD: What are the optimum sizes for ads on the primary news pages to allow quality design to do its job?**

**TONY:** On the front page the ads should be no more than 5 to 7 cms deep. I'd expect any newspaper group with a *Readers First* programme to exclude the multi-coloured abominations I saw at the foot of some of the front pages during my recent trip to Australia. The front page should be for the projection of the main NEWS of the day – so the strongest visual signal ought NOT to be for Honest Joe's Gently Used Cars or Bill the Butcher's Mid-week Specials. That's not to say there isn't a place for ads on the front page, but let's make sure they don't swamp the news – which is, I believe, what readers buy the paper for, even if news doesn't, as my pals in advertising keep telling me, pay the bills!

**PASSWORD: More is best seems to be the general approach towards colour usage in news pages. And that's bound to increase with more sophisticated presses. What are your thoughts on editorial design to accommodate this, particularly in view of eye competition with colourful and busy advertisements?**

**TONY:** More isn't best. I meet too many people who want to use masses of colour to compete with advertising or because their press CAN print colour on every page. That's a recipe for chaos and confusion: If everything is fighting and screaming for attention, we all lose. We should place colour intelligently, in the RIGHT places: great photographs, pointers to important information and as a guide to help readers through the paper.

**PASSWORD: What are the right and the wrong ways to introduce readers to a major design overhaul?**

**TONY:** It's amazing how often we claim to serve our readers but never bother to ask their opinions. Let readers know when the change is taking place and explain what we've done in the relaunch issue. I'm in favour of reader groups, but we should never allow them to hijack the process – we're supposed to be the experts, so we should use their responses and ideas as a resource, not as a gospel that must be slavishly followed!

**PASSWORD: Thanks for sharing your thoughts.**

**TONY:** It's a pleasure.

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