

Tablet product holds big promise for Torstar

► BY TARA MCMEEKIN, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The **Toronto Star** is betting big on audience and revenue growth with a new tablet product set to launch on the iPad in September.

Torstar will leverage the product, dubbed **Star Touch**, to create a completely unique user experience, taking a cue from the wildly successful *La Presse+* tablet initiative of fellow Canadian daily *La Presse*.

"Everyone is trying to transition and spin the tides of lost advertising in print," Chief Information Officer Joe Genautis told *News & Tech*. "This is a solution we think is very viable, so we've gone all in."

Torstar in March dismantled the online paywall it erected in August 2013 when, after a brief spike, paid subscriptions stalled.

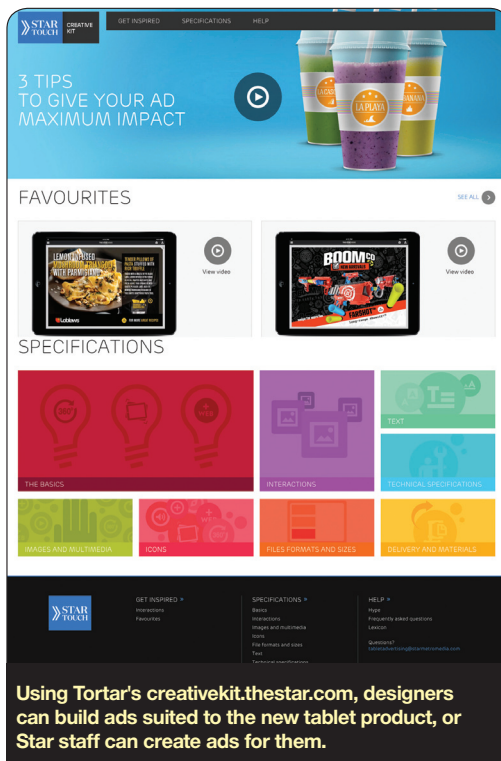
Although the tablet product will also be free to subscribers, the Star expects to generate a new revenue stream based on the attractive advertising options the platform offers. Torstar's vice president of consumer marketing and strategy Sandy MacLeod told *N&T* this summer that he expects the tablet product to follow in the footsteps of *La Presse+*, selling "significant advertising at impressive rates." (See *News & Tech* July/August 2015).

Lending to its appeal will be the interactivity of **Star Touch**, which clearly differentiates it from the print and online versions of the paper, Genautis said.

"We're creating a much more visual experience, and one that works extremely well with the platform," he added. "It is not going to be anything close to a carbon copy of the paper itself."

Because the tablet platform lends itself to a different form of storytelling, the Star will focus on drawing readers into the various media that will foster deep interaction.

The editorial team selected a variety of sections of the paper to be represented on the tablet, but Genautis said the focus will largely be on lifestyle and other stories that attract a different demographic than the printed



Images: creativekit.thestar.com

newspaper, while maintaining the mission to inform readers.

"It's still going to have all of the principles the Star follows — among them, integrity and great investigative journalism," Genautis said. "Those same stories will just be approached with the platform in mind first."

To that end, the Star will leverage some reverse-publishing capabilities of its tablet CMS. The publisher partnered with alfa Media and will use its MediaSuite CMS. *La Presse+* is also produced with MediaSuite. The CMS has been widely adopted by publishers in Europe, and earlier this summer, the company launched the software in North America through its alfa CTP unit.

MediaSuite allows publishers to maximize existing content formats, while developing and presenting new content to target new

readers and advertisers across platforms, the firm said.

When asked about his own personal favorite feature of **Star Touch**, Genautis said he applauds that there is something for everyone in his or her own special interest area. For him, that's sports.

"I love what they've been doing in sports with visuals — it's such a vibrant, dynamic interaction," he said. "The whole product is highly engaging; you get elements of that on The Star website but we are taking this one step further on this platform."

The Star has fared better than some of its counterparts in print subscription numbers, and the publisher is motivated to quickly grow readership with the tablet product as well.

"The Star has a very strong print readership, so we are trying to maintain that and, at the same time, grow an additional audience with the tablet," Genautis said.

No more 'race to the bottom'

"The ad model is really about the opportunity to focus on a new currency that changes the conversation with advertisers from the 'race-to-the-bottom CPM world' to focus on pricing that is much more akin to print advertising than Web advertising because of the engagement that comes with this platform," said Ali Rahnama, chief operating officer, digital for Star Media Group. "That's the big draw — this is a different model; a different approach. It brings together the measurability of digital advertising with the flat rate card structure of print and the opportunity for brand storytelling."

The Star will offer advertisers options from the most basic to highly interactive, more "playful" ads. The publisher created an "ad lab" of sorts over the past several months, assembling a team to master tools to develop ads specifically for the tablet medium. And advertisers will benefit from that as well

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because that same ad lab team will provide ad-building services for advertisers that want it, or train their creative agencies to maximize the tablet platform via its www.creativekit.thestar.com site.

"It's all based on HTML5 and a couple hours of training will allow any ad developer to create really beautiful ads," Rahnema said.

The Star will encourage advertisers to take full advantage of the tablet platform. They'll also have access to ad performance comparison data against ads from the same section so they can tweak their campaigns or "up their game" as necessary.

In addition to offering a more diverse platform for traditional advertising, Rahnema said native advertising will also be an integral part of the Star's tablet product. He said the first native ad campaign will appear on Star Touch sometime in November.

"From a strategic and ad revenue point of view, our digital assets reach more people than our brand has ever reached in the past, but it's still a fraction of what print is reaching," he said. "This is an opportunity to get back to the

levels of engagement that we used to have more broadly in print."

Like Genautis, Rahnema stresses that this is much more than just a tablet edition of the Toronto Star. He said the product is neither an extension nor an end point, but instead represents a major step toward the future of publishing in general.

"I'm not sure what the definitive platform of the future will be, but all of our storytelling will definitely be on some kind of screen, so this is a great environment to re-engineer storytelling and the newsroom," Rahnema said.

Ultimately, success will come from focusing on the audience and how they want to use content, he said, and that will be the key to monetizing any future platform.

"The dimes-for-dollars paradigm has been talked about to death, and we need to elevate the conversation away from the race to the bottom to a conversation about paying for engagement," he said. "We're retooling the organization to think audience first rather than the product-centric view that we've had for decades in this world." ▲

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Star Touch's creative kit is based on HTML 5 and aims to simplify the process of using features like audio and video elements in ads.

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