

Chemical dependence: Turning a B2B brand into a business-critical partner

An article inspired by a presentation from Julian Rose, Co-Founder of Chemical Watch, at the Independent Publisher Conference, Friday November 8, 2019.



Tales of transformation are as old as time. And the story of Chemical Watch’s development from B2B publication to multi-platform business information brand, while not quite Cinderella, follows a familiar arc.

Founder Julian Rose shared the independent title’s journey with delegates at the PPA IPN Conference, opening up with the admission that “where we came from was journalism”. In just over a decade, that has changed, however, and online news now forms part of a broader offering focused on the global community it serves.

That community is formed of people within large manufacturing organisations who have responsibility for managing the environmental impact of chemicals within their operations and processes. These product safety professionals are responsible for managing compliance and risk within an ever-changing regulatory environment.

News was the priority for Chemical Watch when it started in 2007, but this quickly evolved into events in the form of workshops and conferences, as well as industry reports on regulatory information.

“We were addressing a new professional community,” said Julian. “They’re not very popular people; they’re quite lonely. We help bring them together.”

Despite registering growth across key territories, Julian and Co-Founder, Mamta Patel made the decision to disrupt themselves. “We got this sense that we weren’t really building on the opportunity to the scale we could be,” he said.

Market insight revealed that the audience didn't particularly want to buy news, and that they didn't understand all the various products being promoted to them - "it wasn't actually very customer-friendly", admits Julian. What they did want, was to invest in support from trusted partners.

It became clear to Julian and his team that the business needed to transform its model. Where once the brand stood at the centre, publishing content and providing information services to a defined audience, it needed to bring the customer into the centre and provide them with an all-encompassing membership-style offering that would give them what they want in the way they want it.

As Julian explained: "What's really fundamental is to take the business apart and rebuild it from the point of view of what customers want."

Investment in technology was a key part of this transformation, which is something that Julian says has been made more affordable as software targeted at publishers has reduced in cost in recent years as it has evolved.

For users, an investment in AI-powered 'semantic fingerprinting' technology opened the door to more targeted content suggestions, helping enhance engagement levels on the platform. Having listened to feedback, the platform also provides collaboration tools to support better sharing of content among internal teams – something that was previously not possible because of licences were restricted on a per-seat basis.

The company's pitch to customers has also adjusted to become more consultative than transactional, requiring investment in people with the skills to engage with professional procurement departments and manage client 'value plans', which set out targets, promote available services and track performance. This, says Julian, is more involved and integrated than a more straightforward product marketing programme.

Internally, this change required an increase in information and a cultural shift. Chemical Watch now operates in customer teams rather than the more traditional publishing structures of old. Audience data, and the valuable insights that can be derived from it, now flows into editorial and sales teams via the newly created Chief Customer Officer, who ensures teams have the tools to truly understand why customers need the information they are creating.

So, is it a story that ends with happy ever after? Julian says it is early days but points to a renewal rate of 85% in terms of volume and 147% in revenues for the first cohort of 'new' customers. These promising figures validate Chemical Watch's decision to transition away from a platform-centric model of old but provide a reminder of the valuable content at the heart of it.

"They want access to this network; they don't particularly want to attend 'events', or whatever it is," concludes Julian. "We're selling knowledge."

Written by **Tom Hawkins** on behalf of the PPA <https://www.workwithwords.co.uk/>

To view Julian's presentation from the Independent Publisher Conference [click here](#).