

Client: Hamilton Bradshaw
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A smart idea?

The Big Issue is moving into the digital age with plans to equip its street vendors with smart phones and turn them into citizen journalists. *Nick Duxbury* hits the streets to find out if it can work

Gary doesn't own a smart phone. He never has and never really expects to. This won't come as much of a surprise to the general public who sidle past him on the outskirts of London's Covent Garden because Gary (pictured right) is homeless and has been rough sleeping for two years. The 32-year-old has very different spending priorities, dividing his earnings from selling The Big Issue between a deposit account in the post office (he banked £80 yesterday) and the O'Neill pub across the road. That said, he does have an old Nokia pay-as-you-go phone and knows his way around an iPhone 4 having set up his sister's recently. Gary is also au fait with social networking; he has four Facebook accounts (he keeps forgetting the passwords).

But despite being proud of his work

with the magazine and the relationships he has built up with regular customers - often from the Freemasons Hall next to which he stands - he is aware of its limitations: 'Writing down 'Big Issue seller' on job applications doesn't always get the best response, so I tell people I am in media distribution,' he jokes.

Digital direction

Gary's jest could soon be a thing of the past as his job description might be about to expand. Last month under the guidance of newly installed Big Issue Foundation chair James Caan, entrepreneur and star of the BBC's *Dragons' Den*, the magazine announced plans to see some of its

sellers move from plain vanilla vendors to become citizen journalists reporting from the front line. The tool that will allow them to lead this unlikely digital revolution? The smart phone.

Magazine bosses want sellers to use the gadgets to blog, use social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, take pictures and record video - all of which can be fed into The Big Issue's website as part of its new digital strategy. The move is intended to equip vendors with a new skill set to help get them off the streets (see box: Smart talk). It comes as founding editor John Bird calls on the unemployed to join homeless people in selling



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the magazine. So can it work?

The magazine plans to pilot the scheme in London during the next two months. So I head to Covent Garden in the heart of the city, where tourists and shopping crowds make for a great magazine-selling pitch, to find out from vendors themselves.

Gary, who has been selling the magazine for a year and seven months hasn't heard anything about these plans but is unequivocal in his response. 'Yes. No questions asked - I'd definitely do that. It seems like a good idea. I certainly see a lot of things that lots of other people don't,' he says with a grin.

Gary does worry though that the magazine could end up as an online-only publication, putting him out of a job, something a Big Issue spokesperson says will not happen.

He also foresees another problem with handing out phones that typically retail between £300 and £500: 'I reckon all the drunks would flog them. They would hang on to them for novelty for a couple of months and then they would get rid of them. I would have thought that would apply to around 75 per cent of sellers.'

A big risk

A couple of roads away I find Ben. A Scot and a veteran seller, he shares Gary's scepticism. 'I would say that risk is live,' he says with a rueful grin. 'Give a hundred homeless people an iPhone - if they have financial difficulties and they have something of value in their pocket, sometimes needs take precedent over honesty.'

so young and already using both Facebook and Twitter, he appears to be an ideal candidate to become a citizen journalist. 'I think it's a really good idea,' he agrees. 'I would definitely do that - especially around here in Covent Garden. The only thing is it might be a bit awkward getting it out as people are passing by. It's like, "you sell the Big Issue, so why have you got that nice phone?"'

However, despite having no experience of Twitter or Facebook, Ben likes the idea and expresses interest in taking part. 'I'd only take one if they were fairly simple to use,' he says. 'I would like to take part, but I don't know if I would have the capability to.'

Another concern Ben highlights is personal safety. 'Having an iPhone could fuel resentment,' he says. 'First because people will think "why has that homeless guy got an iPhone when I can't afford one myself" - so they may just attack us - and second because they may just decide to nick it.'

My next chat is with a friendly gap-toothed man - also a Scot - outside a nearby Zara store. Roderick has been selling The Big Issue on and off since 2004. 'I'd have a look at it and give it a go - if it was free,' he says. 'I did work once as a foreman and they gave us a Blackberry. I knew how to use it-ish.'

Half way down Neal Street, I meet Jed (pictured, right), who stands out because of his youth. It is his first day selling The Big Issue in London, having sold it previously in Essex. Being

But I would still do it.'

Business sense

Jeremy Swain, chief executive of homelessness charity Thames Reach, believes giving vendors smart phones could prove a prudent business move as it could cut the magazine's spending on outreach workers who support and check on sellers. The phones could save wasted journeys and reduce reliance on human presence. He also argues that there are many people like Jed in the homeless community that are far more savvy to new media than most people realise.

'I do a lot of tweeting, and I am followed by or following about a dozen homeless people. Some of their commentary on what is going on on the street is about as good as it gets. People don't realise how advanced some of

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these so-called powerless people are,' Mr Swain says, citing Vendor Zero, Bullring bash, and Aibaihe as examples of influential homeless tweeters.

'They are finding their own way of getting what they need. They can have direct access to chief executives and if they comment on services you have to get on there and respond. Twitter is completely subversive in

some respects,' he adds.

Back on the street, this is confirmed by a shaven headed vendor called Michael who says that he knows several sellers that blog and tweet from internet cafes.

It's not all enthusiasm, though - especially among the older generation. An Australian seller called Peter refuses to believe that there can be any truth in what I am telling him. Similarly, my last interviewee of the day, a wiry bearded man in his mid-60s called Jay, actually laughs out loud at the idea that he might be given a smart phone. 'It would never happen - they'd never waste the money on phones.'

With The Big Issue pilot launch imminent, it won't be long before he can see it to believe it. Whether or not it will work - that's another story. Either way, with his four Facebook accounts, Gary is ahead of the curve.



For more on homelessness,
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Smart talk: what The Big Issue says about its plans

What is the digital strategy behind issuing the smart phones?

We hope to develop an online presence that our vendors can contribute to so we can give them the opportunity of an alternative form of employment – the opportunity to develop new skills. The aim is that they will be local reporters. This will be an entirely separate product [from the print magazine]; one of the reasons that we have been reticent in the past to move into digital is that unlike other publishers we can't just cannibalise our primary source of income because we want to ensure vendors still have the opportunity to sell the magazine.

Are you not concerned vendors will sell their phones?

We recognise that it is fraught with difficulty. This is why we are undertaking a pilot scheme. It's not like we are going to dish out phones to 3,000 people and

hope for the best. This will be a carefully controlled process, and the individuals involved will be given the necessary training and support so they view this as an opportunity. We are absolutely determined that we will find a way of helping our vendors so they can move away from street selling. Given that it is about time we moved into the digital sphere this is the way that we want to do it.

Are you concerned about the public reaction to sellers having smart phones?

The Big Issue has done a lot to change

public perceptions of homeless people – but it is unfortunate that there is still an expectation that homeless people should look shabby when in actual fact someone who has made the decision to purchase a mobile phone has actually probably made quite a prudent decision.

What about the business model?

There are no final costs for the project yet and the business model has yet to be finalised. One option is to allow readers to download the magazine online and then proceeds would go to the vendor nearest to them when they downloaded it. *Lara McCullagh is marketing and communications manager at The Big Issue*

