

Going against the grain: How IRONMARKETS combines experimentation and audience data to drive results and revenue

Ron Spink, CEO of IRONMARKETS and Ronda Hughes, VP of Marketing and Audience Development of IRONMARKETS



From TikTok to Threads, you can't be caught standing still while your audience moves on to the next big thing.

But as shown by Meta's failed experiment with the metaverse, big bets can backfire, too. You have to be bold — but you have to be thoughtful about it.

It's a tricky tightrope to walk. After 30+ years in audience development, Ronda Hughes, VP of Marketing and Audience Development at IRONMARKETS, knows this challenge well.

But in partnership with CEO Ron Spink, Hughes has found a middle ground by combining a data-driven strategy with an experimental flair and an audience-first approach.

Read on to see how Hughes and the IRONMARKETS team have spearheaded a new age of audience development - and how you can replicate their success.



Business Overview

IRONMARKETS is a B2B media company and buyer engagement platform focusing on the heavy construction, landscape and supply chain industries with a total audience of 5M+ across publications, email, events and webcasts.

Strategy and Solution

IRONMARKETS used multichannel data generated by their Omeda CDP to create a lead scoring model that identified the most engaged leads, creating more robust marketing and ad products and capabilities.

Outcomes

- Developed a lead scoring model to increase engagement and conversion across their audiences
- Created new full-funnel performance products to meet shifting customer requirements



Ronda Hughes

VP of Marketing and Audience Development,
IRONMARKETS

- Previous experience at Advanstar Communications, UBM Life Sciences and EnsembleIQ

Blazing the trail

Back in the '90s, Hughes was one of the first audience managers to see the true value of audience data — and put it to work to generate revenue and sell its value.

"I would go to trade shows and hang on the sportcoat of one of the sales reps," Hughes says. "And I'd say, 'No, you're not leaving me in the booth. I have this thing called a BPA report. I can talk about the power of our audience.'"

She made a big bet and backed it up with the data — a pattern that would repeat throughout her career.

Now, Hughes serves as VP of Marketing and Audience Development at IRONMARKETS (formerly AC Business Media). There, she leads a team charged with engaging, delighting, and converting their 2.8 million known customers across every channel, from email and events to print and website.

Big bets backed by data

"Do more with less" might be a media business cliché, but it's a mandate for Hughes and her small, but mighty audience team.

The key to making it all work? Audience data.

Data doesn't just tell them how their content's performing after the fact. It's helped Hughes and her team shift from a large percentage of top-of-funnel marketing products to a portfolio that expands across the funnel to meet their customers' needs. (For context, the IRONMARKETS team has shifted its portfolio from 82% top-funnel content to a nearly even split of top-funnel and down-funnel assets.)

But as consumers become more protective of their personal information, that information has gotten harder and harder to collect.

So, how do Hughes and her team get the insights they need to please their audience while maintaining a respectful, privacy-first user experience?

It takes constant testing and understanding of the nuances between different segments.

"Every market's different. What works for the contractors might not work for landscapers or supply chain or any other industry we're working in. So what might hook or interest them might be wildly different than a different market."

But getting the information you need to create so many segments is hard enough. Using it to form a truly differentiated content strategy is even more challenging.

To Hughes, using an integrated audience database has made all the difference.

For the last three decades, they've used Omeda's audience marketing platform, which combines a customer data platform, email and marketing automation, and subscription management tool into one solution.



Ron Spink

CEO of IRONMARKETS and CEO/Founder
of SpinKorp

- Previous experience at Hanley Wood and Crain Communications



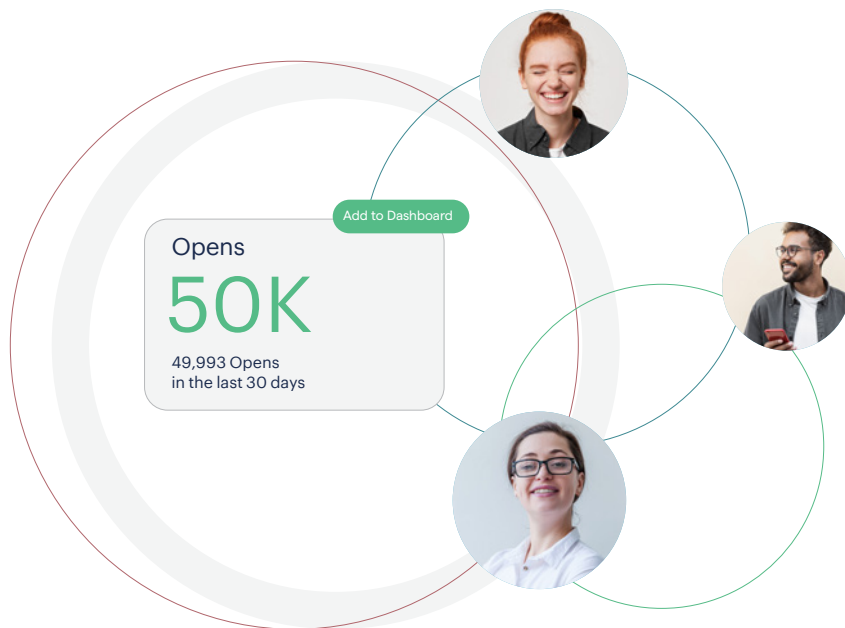
Until all the data was connected and accessible through the Omeda system, we were guessing, running reports and when the day was done, you only had a handful of audience people focusing on an issue close – and not having time to focus on engaging and capturing their audience.”

With Omeda, their team can take in their audience data from every touchpoint – from email and events to print and ads — and see it all in one place. Better yet, incoming data is standardized and automatically added to each user’s pre-existing profile.

This approach doesn’t just save time, Hughes says. It also removes the guesswork from their strategy— so they can personalize content, create targeted ad packages and send individualized offers at scale.

“Back in the day, everything was separate.” she adds. “You had your fulfillment, and your email and your website... Nothing was connected, and it drove me up a tree. Because we didn’t know what we didn’t know before.”

Now, her team has more time for what really matters: connecting with each person in their audience.



Betting big on quality

As part of that mission, Hughes and her team have started creating one excellent gated asset each quarter rather than churning out 20 less impactful articles and hoping they hit.

The goal isn’t to hit a specific quota. It’s to create go-to resources that help their readers navigate their highly specialized industries - and keep them coming back for more.

“It doesn’t have to be a 20-page report. It can be something they can print off and throw it in their piece of equipment and look at, like a maintenance checklist.”

Not each of these pieces is a hit. But as long as you’re listening to — and learning from — the data, you’re still in an excellent position to succeed, Hughes says.

“Some of our high-value assets don’t work,” she adds. “And we’re really bummed because a lot of time goes into them, but then one out of five will hit a home run.”

“My motto is to fail fast. If someone has a problem with failing, they learn really quickly that we are there to help pick them up. Because if we don’t fail, we’re not learning.”

Boosting audience engagement and monetization with lead scoring

We saw this in full effect in 2021, when IRONMARKETS's numbers started to plateau. Hughes knew her audience was still interested. But she wasn't sure how and where to reach them anymore.

"We see a lot of people that we know are still alive and in the industry, but they're just not engaging," Hughes says. "What do we do to hook them in? And what can we use instead of just relying on email to do that?"

Hughes knew they needed to deliver individualized experiences for every one of their audience members – and they couldn't achieve that through basic segmentation anymore.

"The [question] wasn't just, 'Okay, let's segment by just their business and title,' but how engaged are they and what are they engaging with?" Hughes says. "And I didn't wanna run a gazillion reports on that."

And above all, she needed a way for her team to do it as quickly and efficiently as possible.

So just as she did at those trade shows in the '90s, Ronda used data to make a big bet.

Using Omeda, Hughes created a lead scoring model to identify IRONMARKETS' most engaged audience members, regardless of the channel they were using. With this intel, Hughes and her team could reach each person in a way that fit their unique interest level, preferences, and viewing habits.

Here's how it works:

- **Track audience behavior across every touchpoint:**
The IRONMARKETS team used Omeda's audience marketing platform to track every interaction someone had with their brand, regardless of the channel.
- **Create a single audience view with Omeda's CDP:**
Omeda's CDP unified all of this information and stored it in one central database. On Omeda, each user is tracked under a persistent customer ID rather than by email address or phone number, reducing the likelihood that a job change results in a duplicate customer profile.
- **Assign scoring and value to each behavior.**
- **Profile data enters the lead scoring model.**
Each new interaction flowed to the lead scoring model as soon as it entered the database. This way, the team could spot and reach out to newly qualified leads as soon as they met the model's threshold for high engagement.

The end product: a sophisticated model that splits the IRONMARKETS audience into three engagement-based segments – "interested audience," "core audience" and "super users." Since it incorporates unified data from Omeda's CDP, the model accounts for every audience member's activity across every channel. This level of precision allows IRONMARKETS to deliver more robust programs for their customers and deliver more value to their audiences.

So, in one search, the audience team can see who their superfans are, what they care about, and where they engage. From there, Hughes's team creates custom advertising and demand packages targeting their most engaged audience — and, because of the impact, can charge a premium for the performance.

Fast forward two years and IRONMARKETS is implementing lead scoring across all its 10+ brands.

Hughes credits her team — and her Omeda partners — for optimizing the lead scoring model and spreading it across their whole brand.

"Our Omeda account rep was awesome because he really did help us along the way. We didn't have the bandwidth to take the scoring across the other brands. But Omeda helped us with that, which was well worth the money. It was like hiring someone off-site to help get a project done."

What's next?

High value assets and lead scoring have been a hit for IRONMARKETS. But Hughes still must stay one step ahead of her audience — and make her next big bet.

So what's next? Hughes and her team are committed to a data-driven, audience-first approach.

But how they achieve this is flexible. After observing the post-COVID landscape, they're expanding the lead scoring model and investing heavily in events. But from there, Hughes and her team are watching to see where their audience flows next. Habits are changing more quickly than ever, and audience teams need to stay tuned into those changes to drive the results they seek.

"I don't think there's a silver bullet because the industries are changing so much," Hughes adds. "Personally, in my industry, what I'm doing changes. For instance, after COVID, I'm more apt to attend a face-to-face event than before."

This empirical approach, combined with her embrace of risk and technology, has helped her and the team stay attuned to her audience's changing preferences — and make big bets with confidence.





About Omeda

Omeda is a SaaS provider delivering the platform and expertise required to maximize the value of media and publishing businesses' most critical asset - their audience. The platform of choice for B2B and B2C professionals, Omeda's integrated solution, which includes a customer data platform, workflow automation, email automation, and subscription management, provides the professional tools and controls required to maximize a media business' diverse revenue streams, power 24/7 audience development, and orchestrate precise targeting for measurable results. Our platform is built by passionate audience pros, workflow masters, and data nerds who partner with our customers to grow and thrive in a disruptive media world.

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