says Jack Gentile, chairman of Harborside Press, which publishes The ASCO Post (up 13.7% in pages and 18.2% in revenue during the first half of 2014) and two other oncology titles. While all three Harborside titles have been aggressive in creating and building digital products, Gentile doesn’t believe these products can exist without a sturdy print underpinning.

“To have all those digital things, you have to have the bricks and mortar. Well, the print version of The ASCO Post is our bricks and mortar,” he says. Harborside President Anthony Cutrone adds that this focus isn’t likely to shift anytime soon, especially as pharma companies cut back sharply on the number of publications in any given therapeutic category in which they advertise.

“It’s not a market anymore where if you put a publication together and slap a cover on it, you’ll do well,” he explains. “Over the last five years or so, when a new product comes out, the number of publications it’s advertised in isn’t as deep as it used to be. If you don’t invest [in your print product], you’ll have problems.”

The most forward-minded publishers have found a way to do that while toeing a thin line: appealing both to older audiences used to consuming content digitally. Psychiatric News, which grew ad pages by 49.1% and revenue by 64.3% during the first six months of 2014, was among the publications that succeeded in this regard.

Doing so took a lot of discipline and focus, according to Jeff Borenstein, editor in chief. “We redesigned the traditional print version to make it more readable,” he says. “But we also did a lot of things to appeal to younger members [of the American Psychiatric Association], the residents and fellows, that were more than gearing more of the content towards them.” Enter video reports from the APA’s annual meeting and other online- and mobile-friendly content that, as recently as 18 months ago, wasn’t on the publication’s radar.

Such flexibility underpinned another top performer’s success. In the first six months of 2013, American Family Physician took a hit: a 33.7% decline in ad pages and a 29.7% drop in revenue against the first half of 2012. Understandably less than pleased with those numbers, the publication aggressively moved to effect what Craig Doane, VP, journal media & strategic partnerships for AFP publisher the American Academy of Family Physicians, calls “quite a transformation… We realized we needed to be fluid. We had to expand the way people read and interact with American Family Physician.”

The title added online channels and redesigned its offerings to make them more phone- and tablet-friendly. “We had to give readers more options and opportunities,” Doane recalls. While the transformation isn’t yet complete, AFP enjoyed a bounceback-and-then-some first half of 2014: gains of 52.8% in ad pages and 55.5% in revenue against the year-ago period.

Looking forward, Doane advises similarly situated publishers to “work the process slowly” with skittish pharma advertisers. “They’ve always been pretty conservative in general, but you can only push them so much now. You might want to try new and innovative things, but it’s important to remember that many of these [companies] don’t want to be the first. When they’re able to see a positive response to a new idea, that’s when you can move them.”

McNally agrees. “Media is changing faster than advertisers can keep up with the competition. To a certain extent, it’s not about keeping up with the competition. It’s about keeping up with customers.”