

Advice to a new Publisher

Kevin visits with new publisher to discuss improvements to his community paper



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So tonight I was sitting with my son, Zachary, at Dragon Den. After a bite of his eggroll, Zach stopped and turned to ask a question.

“Dad,” Zach asked, “what happens with all those things you write all the time?”

I told him in my best fatherly voice, “They’re called columns. Every column I write appears in more than 60 industry journals and publications around the world.”

I couldn’t wait to hear what my son had to say next.

“So write about Legos.”

A story about Legos makes more sense than some of the stories I’ve read online in the past week. Did you read about the Russian who was killed when the Olympic ring didn’t appear as planned during the opening ceremony?

Remember the one about Tony Romo and Jason Whitten, NFL stars, coming out of the closet together? Everybody was talking about that one a few weeks ago.

As my son so aptly reminded me later in the evening, “You can write about anything dad.”

Maybe that’s true. But, as I explained to him, there’s a big difference between the headlines he reads on Facebook and those in the newspaper.

Tips For a New Publisher

I have a new friend on Facebook. I just “accepted” Roger’s friend request this morning. More about that later.

While speaking at a convention last week, I noticed Roger sitting in the front row, taking notes furiously in my classes. There were sessions on photo editing, page design, newspaper management and PDF technology. He sat through every class, writing most of the time.

I hadn’t met Roger before, so I struck

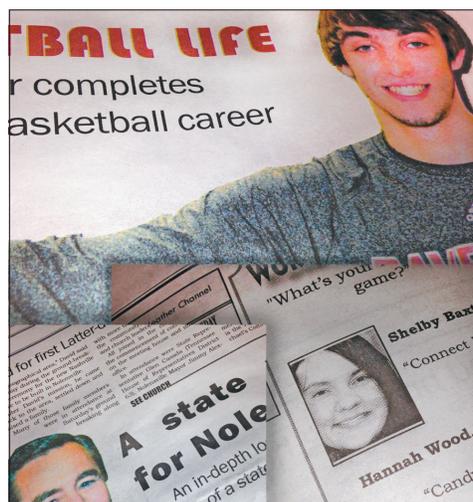
up a conversation with him during a break. I learned that he was new to the newspaper business. When I asked what he did at the paper, he paused.

I interjected, “Let me guess. Everything.”

He laughed and said, “Yes, just about everything.”

We chuckled about that for a moment, then I explained to Roger that I’d heard that before. He told me he had recently purchased a paper and was doing everything he could to make it grow.

I asked how he ended up at the convention, when he wasn’t even a member



Lots of local content. Roger has learned the first rule of successful community newspapers.

of the association. He said, “I read about the convention and saw you were speaking, so I registered and here I am.”

Roger told me he wanted to improve his paper and this seemed like a good first step. He gave me a copy of his most recent issue and I promised to look over it and make suggestions after I returned home.

Trainers and speakers tend to like people who listen closely and write lots of notes. It reminds us that we’re saying something that is important to the audience. After visiting with Roger, I liked him even more.

Here are some simple tips I give to folks like Roger to help grow their papers:

Improve the quality of your content.

For community papers, the key is hyperlocal. Include stories that are important to the readers.

Improve the look of your paper.

If I had to name one thing that could increase the popularity of many community newspapers, it would be improving the look of the product. Looking over Roger’s paper, I see a lot of areas that could be improved:

- Headlines aren’t consistent. Some are centered. Some are justified. The leading (space between lines) is too great in the headlines.

- Black & White photos are too dark and muddy. It makes the whole paper look dirty. That will probably change after a lesson I gave Roger between classes.

- Get rid of the clip art. Clip art can make a newspaper look more like a church newsletter. I’ll have a talk with Roger about that.

Even more local content. I would have more columns like “Students of the Month” and “An In-depth Look at the Life of Our State Representative” and fewer columns like “Are You Ready For Valentines Day?” and a few others.

I like Roger’s paper. He’s done some really good things. He’s got a religion page with a column by a local clergy member that is full of ads from local religious groups. He has several stories about local athletes and ball teams. And I’m sure a lot of families pick up his paper for the kid’s page, which is very well done.

The keys to the future success of Roger’s newspaper aren’t that different from any other paper: local content that draws readers, continued updating of equipment and training to produce an attractive publication, plus consistent efforts to keep and attract advertisers.

I’ll look forward to checking out Roger’s paper in a couple of weeks and seeing if the training was worth it.

See Kevin in person in March & April:

Denver CO, Syracuse NY, Hershey PA, San Antonio TX,
Des Moines IA, Brookings SD and other cities.