

Newspaper Growth Finally Gets Noticed

I wonder what took so long?

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A few months back, I had breakfast with the publisher of a very successful community newspaper in Minnesota. As we walked around the restaurant, I was introduced to local residents enjoying their muffins and eggs. At one

table, a customer asked what I was doing in their city.

When I explained I was working with the local newspaper, a gentleman spoke up. “Whatever you do, don’t mess it up. We love our newspaper.”

A few weeks later, while in town working with a community newspaper in South Florida, I found myself in a conversation with the president of the local real estate association. When the conversation turned to my client, he was quick to share some personal thoughts.

“Do you know,” he began, “why realtors, auto dealers and other advertisers advertise in the community paper instead of the big daily?”

He had my attention.

“People who live here pick up this paper, see the faces of the writers and say, ‘I know him,’ or ‘I know her.’ It makes a real difference. That’s why people love this newspaper, and that’s why advertisers want their ads in this paper.”

Last week, as I arrived at the rental house where I would be living for three days, the owner asked me what brought me to her town. When I told her I was there to work with the local newspaper, a smile hinted at what she was about to say. “We love our paper here. We are so lucky to have it.”

Three days ago, as I sat alone at the Lakewood Supper Club, looking out over a beautiful sunset on Big Stone Lake, which creates the border between South Dakota and Minnesota, the waitress quickly recognized my southern accent.

“What brings you all the way from Tennessee?” she asked.

When I explained that I was in town to work with the local newspaper for two days, I had a new friend.

“We are so lucky to have our paper,” Michelle told me. “We love our paper.”

I feel like a broken record when I remind people just how well community newspapers are doing across America. As I work with hundreds of papers each year, it’s a common theme as publishers talk to

me about their individual operations.

I couldn’t help but chuckle when I saw a story in *Editor & Publisher* titled, “Despite ‘Doom and Gloom,’ Community Newspapers are Growing Stronger” in early June.

Editor & Publisher isn’t the only industry journal to take up this mantra. It seems that community papers are “in” again. The column you are reading is carried by industry-related journals and publications on four continents. I often take the opportunity to read what other “experts” are writing in these publications. For years I’ve read how newspapers must shift their focus away from creating quality products to crunching numbers. Now, it seems, quality is important again.

I chuckled because I was reminded of the interview I did with *Editor & Publisher* just about a year ago for a column titled, “Strategic Innovations Overshadow the Technical,” by Eric Schult.

Eric contacted me to discuss the role of technology and centralization at newspapers. It didn’t take long for the conversation to shift to the success community newspapers are having without centralizing production. Eric seemed surprised when I shared some of my research information indicating locally-owned newspapers are doing quite well. At one point, I mentioned the success of community newspapers might be an important topic for a story. As I remember, Eric agreed.

One of the things I remind clients, whether they are locally-owned community papers or part of larger groups, is to be realistic about what they do. More times than not, newspapers ask me to help improve their products while on-site. That always means that something is going to change. I’m noticing newspapers are more accepting of change these days when confronted with reasonable information.

Last week, I had a discussion with a staff that sounded like a conversation I’ve had many times. It revolved around grayscale photos on pages. Now and then, I’ll work with a group that uses color pictures on grayscale pages, to simplify the conversion of documents from print to online. By placing color photos on the pages, the RIP (the device that controls the creation of plates for the press) can simply convert the images to gray while making the plates, allowing the same files to be



My drive into Ortonville, Minnesota last week reminded me of a lot of places I visit as I work with newspapers across North America.

uploaded to a website in full color.

While this does simplify the process of converting print pages for the Internet, the issue – as I’ve explained dozens of times to groups – is the photos will look much better in print when edited and converted to grayscale first.

I know what always follows next. “Yes, but if we place color pictures on the pages, we don’t have to create new pages to go online.”

That’s when I get straight to the point.

“Let me ask you something,” I usually begin. “Do you make more from your digital product or your print product?”

To date, no one has ever answered they make more money from their digital product. Most often, the answer is, “We don’t make a profit from our digital newspaper.”

“So,” I’ll ask, “why do you put more effort in making your digital pages look good when all of your profit is in print?”

At this point, I usually see faces begin to light up.

In her story for *Editor & Publisher*, Sharon Knolle is right: despite the gloom and doom, community papers are growing stronger. I would argue, however, this is not a new phenomenon. Most gloom and doom I’ve noticed among community newspapers over the past few years has been perceived, not real. It took four or five years, but most community papers I visit – and I visit a lot – realize the “death of newspapers” cry was created primarily by folks who could profit if that turned out to be the case. The reality, as Knolle noted, is community newspapers are growing stronger.

Over the next few weeks, I’ll be traveling all over Tennessee, Western Canada, West Virginia and back to the Upper Midwest. I will visit with staffs and hear how much their readers love their papers. Publishers will seek advice concerning software and hardware purchases because, among other things, they realize they have to plan for the future.

In 2008, the dean of a prestigious university school of journalism told me he didn’t believe there would be a single printed newspaper left in America within ten years. He still has 17 months to prove me wrong. If the folks at *Editor & Publisher* are right, it seems a safe bet at least one newspaper will be standing.