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Building blocks for change increasing newspaper readership in the age of electronic media through innovations in style and approach

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Building blocks for change increasing newspaper readership in the age of electronic media through innovations in style and approach

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BUILDING BLOCKS FOR CHANGE
INCREASING NEWSPAPER READERSHIP IN THE AGE OF ELECTRONIC MEDIA
THROUGH INNOVATIONS IN STYLE AND APPROACH

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Declining newspaper readership	4
How young people view the newspaper	6
What young readers want from newspapers	8
Assessing individual market needs and wants	11
What newspapers can do to increase readership	12
References	15

Introduction

Pittsburgh, 1920 – Frank Conrad didn't exactly know what he was doing when he began experimenting with broadcast radio signals in his garage. He had a small show during which he played phonograph records and read from the local newspaper over the recently discovered airwaves. His employer, Westinghouse, caught on to his activities and sponsored the first official radio station on the roof of their tallest building. This station, given the first call letters of KDKA, is still in operation today. Without knowing it, print news media would soon have some serious competition (Dominick, Messere, Sherman 2008).

New York, 1939 – David Sarnoff, head of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), debuts his new invention at the New York World's Fair. He called it "a new art so important in its implications that it is bound to affect all society." This technological marvel was the first television and Sarnoff was right, far more so that he could ever have imagined. Print news media would soon have yet another, more powerful competitor in television news and it would again be sink or swim (Dominick, et al. 2008).

Nationwide, 1986 – The Internet is born. Universities across the nation are connected for the purpose of greater research capabilities. The World Wide Web would soon come onto the scene in 1989 to give users a graphical interface. Mosaic, the first Web browser, launched in 1993 and combined with the World Wide Web virtually catapulted the Internet into seemingly overnight success. Newspapers and other print news media are still fighting its effects on their readership numbers today, over 20 years after the Internet's debut (Dominick, et al. 2008).

This study will take a closer look at newspaper readership trends among young people and identify several ways print news media can attract that ever-elusive group back to their publications in the age of electronics. The industry is currently facing declines in circulation, which has led to the closure of several print newspapers over the last several months. The *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver, Colo. said goodbye Feb. 27, 2009, after nearly 150 years of publishing their news. The *Ann Arbor News* in Ann Arbor, Mich. announced March 23, 2009, that it would be shutting down the following July to be replaced by Web-based news company.

Declining newspaper readership

The rapid progression of electronic media has taken a heavy toll on newspaper readership. This downward trend has been especially noticeable among college-aged students who have fewer minutes to spend gathering news information than ever before and repeatedly turn to the faster electronic news media. The Newspaper Association of America reported in 1972 that almost 50 percent of young men ages 18 to 29 and 38 percent of young women in the same age range read a newspaper daily. By 1991, the figures for that group had dropped to 32 percent for men and 22 percent for women. This loss of readership indicates a steadily decreasing interest in newspapers with each new generation.

A survey conducted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1990 recognized men and women under the age of 30 as being the most at-risk group for not reading a newspaper. This group contains the majority of the nation's college students. The most worrying fact for the industry is that some of the trends generally associated

with younger readers are starting to appear even in adult readership studies. This continuation of a downward trend may have some serious implications for further declines in circulation (Schlagheck 1998).

Leo Bogart also reported in 1989 that college students who live with their parents at home while attending school read newspapers more often than those who leave home to attend college, but only 8 percent of those students ages 18 to 24 were frequent newspaper readers. An additional 22 percent of the students studied were occasional readers, while the majority reported they did not read a newspaper at all.

There have been some studies, however, that seem to temper the chaos related to younger readers and introduce some good news. A study sponsored by the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Newspaper Association of America in 1988 confirmed that young readers ages 16 to 29 did in fact read newspapers at the time. The study indicated that nearly two-thirds of the group read both Sunday and weekday editions each week and an additional 15 percent were loyal readers of Sunday newspapers only. Carol Schlagheck's 1998 study of college readership choices also indicated that young readers are giving newspapers a chance. In her surveys she found that more than two-thirds of the subjects read a newspaper in the last week, almost 25 percent read a newspaper "yesterday" and another 20 percent actually subscribe to newspapers.

But Schlagheck repeated her work after a ten-year period in 2008. Her results indicated a drastic drop in newspaper readership among young people from her 1998 study. The 2008 study revealed that nearly three-quarters of the college students surveyed noted that it was easier to obtain news from Internet sources than from

newspapers. 83 percent of the students also said they never read newspapers, indicating a dire need for print news media to reconnect with young readers.

The overall decline in newspaper readership cannot be denied (Stevenson 1994). Print media businesses Philadelphia Newspaper Holdings, the Tribune Company, Ziff Davis Media and the Journal Register Company have all declared bankruptcy within the last two years along with many others. It's enough to send chills down a newspaper, or any other print media employee's spine and have them keeping a close eye on their individual job security and a wary eye on the industry itself.

How young people view the newspaper

In order for newspapers to make changes to attract younger readers, they must first understand how those readers view the current version of a newspaper and its content. Today's college student generally views the newspaper in a different way than his or her parents.

David Atkin and Leo Jeffres studied the leisure reading habits of college students in 1996. They explored the students' level of interest in newspapers, books and magazines. They found that overall newspaper readership was positively correlated with students' focus on public affairs, entertainment as well as job and travel information. But they also noted that students preferred reading as a leisure activity only with a relation to public affairs. They had also studied the impact of the students' particular majors and gender, but found no significant differences. Jeffres and Atkin did discover, however, a small relationship between age and the reading of public affairs where older readers were more attracted to news about public affairs than their younger counterparts.

Gerald Stone and Timothy Bourdeau explored reader content preferences over the course of ten years between 1984 and 1994. They found significant differences between readers ages 18 to 34 and readers 35 and above. The younger age group showed a preference for sports, national news, classified advertisements and weather. Older readers, 35 and up, rated editorials, food advertisements and weather higher than the other news topics. Younger readers also were noted to have less interest in international news and letters to the editor while older readers weren't as attracted to announcements of marriages, births and deaths.

The introduction of the Internet in the 1990s threw another monkey wrench in the newspaper industry's clockwork. Schlagheck's 2008 study showed that nearly 71 percent of the students surveyed indicated that news was easier to obtain from online sources, up from a much lower 37 percent ten years previous in her 1998 study. The researcher stated, "In the 1998 study, young people had not yet realized the potential the Internet had to provide information to help them live their lives. That perspective changed significantly over the next decade."

The Readership Institute also looked into how people were using the Internet in 2002. The results of the study showed that the average American logs on to the Internet for about 3.8 hours per week. The study also said that in terms of news readership online,

"If we focus on the types of sites visited, newspaper Web sites are clearly outperforming those of other media. Newspaper Web sites have been visited by an average of 16 percent of all people nationally, significantly more than for television news or magazine Web sites."

Their findings indicate that people are still consuming news, but are doing it in new

ways. The shift from print news media to online news sources is now a well-known and major factor affecting newspaper readership, especially among younger readers who are increasingly technologically astute.

What young readers want from newspapers

In a 2004 *Time Magazine* article, Russel Pergament, founder of the free daily publication *amNewYork*, said, “What these kids like is fast, blather free and unbiased. Something to give them a good, comprehensive scan of the country in 20 minutes.” This statement came from the knowledge that the group he was referring to, ages 18 to 34, is highly pressed for time and distracted by technology. Many of them are college students working on degrees or recent graduates frantically trying to find their place in the professional world. Studies have shown that more and more often, the people of this age group are turning to speedier electronic media for their news instead of flipping through the more cumbersome newspaper pages.

So what is it exactly that young readers want from a newspaper? “Revolution, not evolution” may well be the answer (Nesbitt, Lavine 2004). Revolution is based on innovations in print news media instead of simply improving on existing concepts. The authors say,

“Innovation is about creating and implementing big ideas, currently not in play, that will substantially change the experience for the better for groups the newspaper wants to reach... Improving what newspapers do now will bring only limited success, because it focuses only on the current range of possibilities” (Nesbitt, Lavine 2004).

The researchers go on to say that such innovations involve writing style and content more so than overall page design as many publications are attempting to change.

The table below is taken directly from the Readership Institute's 2001 study called "The Power to Grow Readership." The study focused on content of newspapers and how changing the mixture of news stories will affect reader satisfaction. The table also summarizes the methods of writing and treatment of the various newspaper topics that result in increased reader satisfaction based on their studies of what young readers want to see in their newspapers.

CONTENT AND READER SATISFACTION

Intensely local, people-focused news:	Quantity
Lifestyle news:	Quantity; feature approach
How we are governed and global relations:	Quantity; stand-alone opinion section; color photos; feature approach
Natural disaster and accidents:	Fewer stories, fewer color photos
Movies, television and weather:	Shorter; less complex stories
General and personal business news:	Quantity; point-of view approach (commentary, criticism, advice)
Science, technology and environment:	Quantity; international focus; longer and more complex stories; feature approach
Police, crime and the judicial system:	More local focus and fewer national events; fewer photos; fewer stories overall
Sports:	Feature approach; point-of-view approach

The table shows that instead of the traditional hard-news style, or inverted pyramid, readers are more often looking for a feature approach to news. From a journalist perspective, this information seems contradictory to the traditional view of news and news-style. Those readers studied also wanted a greater diversity of stories in their newspapers than currently available.

Another study conducted by the Readership Institute delved into reader satisfaction, but focused on the stories themselves versus overall content. This 2002 study showed that the importance of the story topic to the individual reader was the “single most significant factor contributing to satisfaction, accounting for about 30 percent of a story’s satisfaction rating” (Lynch, Nesbitt and Duke). Therefore, selecting the right topics and the subsequent news events or stories to cover is the “first and most crucial step to drive reader satisfaction with stories.”

The same study also indicates that even though a topic is considered important, the worst story of greatest importance can be outshined by the best stories of considerably less importance. This nuance is based on four key criteria readers use when judging a newspaper article: appeal, relevance, readability and information. Not all criteria are equal in the eyes of the readers. Appeal is the strongest element affecting reader satisfaction, closely followed by relevance in terms of the individual reader. The information presented in the story – whether it is accurate, complete, balanced and clear – is third, but also affects a story’s score in relevance. Fourth is readability. If a story is easy to read and is not dull or too complicated to follow, it also increases the story’s appeal to the reader (Lynch et al.).

Assessing individual market needs and wants

While researching ways to increase their readership, print news media need to keep in mind that each market is different. A community in Topeka, Kan. will not have the same needs and wants as people in New York, N.Y. will have. The first step to increasing readership among print media is to assess the community in which a publication is distributed.

Looking again at studies conducted by the Readership Institute provides some insight on how to perform such a daunting task. Steven Duke and Mary Nesbitt boiled the process down into four steps in 2004.

Step one involves forming a small cross-departmental group within the newspaper staff to tackle the audit. The authors say at least half of the group should be younger adults, as this is the main group trying to be reached. At least three editions of the newspaper need to be distributed to each team member, more if time allows.

The second step is for each member to take a look at what consumer statements make up one of the eight key experiences readers have with newspapers, six motivators and two inhibitors, as determined through studies. These experiences include “something to talk about; advertisement usefulness; makes me smarter; looks out for my personal and civic interests; value for my money; good service; discriminates and stereotypes; and too much” (Duke, Nesbitt). For example, the statement, “I show things in the newspaper to my family” would fall under the experience category “something to talk about.”

Each member, either as a group or individually, then has to look at each key experience and determine how the publication measures up. This is the third step in the process. Does the paper create that particular experience for the reader successfully?

Were there any missed opportunities that could have been taken to enhance the experience? The person performing the audit also needs to ask if the content was relevant, unique, easy to find, presented in an attention-getting manner and what kind of prominence the content received.

The final step is to take the publication to the community it serves. Focus groups are useful here, as are one-on-one interviews. Do the notes the employees made on the newspaper match those made by the public? How do the readers describe their experiences with the paper and do they wish something had been done differently?

Though it may take some time to complete, such an audit is an exceptionally useful tool for a newspaper. They not only gain critical information as to how the publication currently operates, but also get the community's take on the publication and how it should serve them. As an added bonus, staff will interact with the community they serve, increasing the newspaper's visibility and overall community standing.

What newspapers can do to increase readership

Since the beginning of the steady decline in newspaper readership in the 1970s (Schlagheck 1998), the industry has been trying to answer the question of what to do. The most obvious answer is to give the readers what they want and need. Those needs have changed since the newspaper business began hundreds of years ago.

Young readers ages 18 to 34 should be the target group, as they will grow up and continue to read based on the sources they read now. Newspapers must learn to adjust their tactics to draw in this demographic and show them the benefits of reading print

news media. The research presented here shows that it is possible to increase readership in an electronic world given knowledge of the readers and the right tactics.

Writers and editors need to reevaluate story content and learn to approach news from different angles. More prominently featured local and people-oriented stories will attract the average reader to the newspaper and keep them reading through the issue. Having several ways for a reader to enter a story through break-out graphics, bullet points, subheads sidebars and the like will allow the reader to get the information he or she needs in as little time as possible. After all, this particular age group is known for always being on the move.

Stylistically speaking, the Readership Institute's study in 2001 shows that young readers are not generally attracted to the traditional inverted pyramid style of news. Young readers are looking for more feature-style stories as well as more point-of-view approaches. News style can be crossbred with feature style to help keep young readers interested in the world around them, even with more complicated political and governmental stories.

The institute's research also indicates that letting the newspaper itself take a clear stand on an issue instead of just publishing opinions columns is not as horrible as the industry seems to feel. Such a stance stimulates discussion and community interaction with the newspaper through vehicles like letters to the editor. It is important, however, to have the newspaper recognize other points of view on the same topic to avoid "preaching" to the readers.

Writers, photographers, sales personnel, editors and publishers all alike must take responsibility for readership numbers. Only a joint effort will see a newspaper

successfully introduce new ways of reaching younger readers (Nesbitt, Lavine 2004). An appropriate analogy for that sentiment would be that a newspaper is the readers' bridge to knowledge of the world around them. If one support crumples, the readers stand a chance to slip through the gap, no matter how small the space.

Perhaps the American newspaper industry should take a leaf out of our technologically-savvy president's book and follow Barack Obama's lead. Can newspapers increase their readership numbers in the age of electronics? "Yes we can!" by simply giving the readers what they want and need. The research presented here shows that innovations in newspapers, particularly in writing style and overall content, have the potential to draw back young readers that will become adult readers. Based on the research, newspapers need to step up to the plate and reinvent themselves in the eyes of their readers before those readers are lost to electronic media. A home run is just a swing of the bat away. The batter just has to hit the ball right to send it sailing out of the park.

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