

Newspaper front-page ads –
The good, the bad and the ugly

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Quill, the magazine of the Society of Professional Journalists, in an article published at the beginning of 2001, credited Gannett Newspapers with leading the charge toward front-page advertisement. But that distinction must be shared with others, as front-page advertisement has been around since ink permeated paper.

But while most U.S. newspapers stayed away from front-page advertisement since the mid 1900s, it has been, and is, common in many countries around the world, prominent in places like Great Britain, Latin America and Canada.

The United States, however, does have a front-page newspaper advertisement history.

Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, in excerpts of an opinion published in 1996 by *The Washington Post*, wrote: “. . . Advertising has been a part of our culture throughout our history . . . Early newspapers displayed advertisements for goods and services on their front pages, and town criers called out prices in public squares . . .”¹

In a 1999 *New York Times* story about front-page advertisements, Felicity Barringer wrote: “European papers, including the staid *Financial Times*, the British paper with growing American circulation, have long run advertisements alongside front-page news. But newspapers in the United States have shied away from this practice, although *The New York Times* has long run classified advertisements of as long as four lines at the bottom of its front page.”²

Jim Grahn, advertising director of *The Daily Independent* in Ashland, Ky., responded to this study by writing: “Ben Franklin ran the original classifieds on his front page. Where in our evolution did the front page become sacrosanct? Front-page ads are common in Europe. Why is it a big problem in the land of capitalism to increase revenue

with the most visible ad spot in the paper? All of our on-line editions have 'front-page' advertising. Let's sell every section front and dog-ear and use the extra revenue to strengthen our content. TV has ads before the show starts. So do movies. Our readers wonder more about why we don't have ads on the front page than they fret about it when we finally do."

A front-page ad revolution in America, particularly over the past few years, can indeed, be attributed, in part, to Gannett Newspapers. But a chief conspirator was the now-defunct Thomson Newspaper Group, whose newspapers published front-page ads before many of those newspapers were sold to Gannett.

Gannett, however, began publishing small color ads in the upper right hand corner of *USA Today's* Money, Sports and Life section fronts in 1993.

The Quill reported in early 2001: "Since *USA Today* began running one-inch strip ads across the bottom of Page One a year ago," (in October 1999) "more newspaper ad directors are looking at their front pages and seeing a new way to grow revenue."³

Gannett reportedly makes \$5 million annually from front-page ads in *USA Today* – with a waiting list of advertisers wanting the costly but prominent space. And, Gannett has nearly 100 daily newspapers that have been encouraged to exercise the option of publishing front-page ads.

Thomas Curley, president and publisher of *USA Today* when it began running front-page ads, told *The New York Times* he got the idea in 1994 of using the color strip on *USA Today's* front page for advertisement.²

Among other large and recognizable newspapers that publish front-page ads are *The Arizona Republic* and *Orange County Register*. *The Republic*, purchased by Gannett in 2000, is one of the fastest-growing major metropolitan newspapers in the country. It ranks 15th among U.S. dailies with a circulation of 440,000.

In January of 2001, *The Republic* began publishing front-page advertisements.

“Many papers are doing this, and consequently it’s become a prime advertising position,” said Sue Clark-Jackson, CEO of *The Republic*, in a news story this year in *The Christian Science Monitor*. “Given newsprint prices in double digits over last year’s costs and the significant slowing of the economy, now is as good a time as any.”⁴

The Orange County Register, owned by Freedom Communications, Inc., is the fourth largest newspaper in California. It is acclaimed by many as one of the top newspapers in the country. It began running front-page ads on March 5, 2001. Those ads, the first in 96 years of publication, have come in the form of a daily money-saving coupon. It was suggested by a readership focus group.

Palm Springs Desert Sun (Gannett) Advertising Director Dar Brown told *Editor & Publisher* early this year: “It’s long been asked for by advertisers. I think you’ll see a lot of newspapers take it on.”³

The Desert Sun began publishing front-page ads on Oct. 19, 2000.

In May of 1997, long before Gannett opened up its front pages to ads, Thomson Newspapers started the revolution when *The Herald Bulletin* in Anderson, Ind., was the first of Thomson’s American newspapers to publish front-page ads. It only took a matter of hours for the newspaper to sell the front-page space for the rest of the year — at three times the regular rate. A few months later, Stuart Garner, Thomson CEO, told *Editor & Publisher*: “We’re not sacrificing our journalistic virginity.” In September, Thomson issued an edict to all of its newspapers. Soon, every newspaper carried front-page ads — and added revenue.

Northwestern University Media Management Center’s Steve Duke looked at 100 newspapers in 1999-2000 and found that about 12 percent included front-page advertisement. “Ads might start appearing on more front pages as papers look for ways to offset rising newsprint and health-care costs,” said Michael Smith, the Center’s managing director.⁵

Newspaper front-page ads – the good, the bad and the ugly, is a look in 2001 at what is happening in the newspaper industry with front-page advertising.

While the Northwestern study postulated that about 12 percent of the newspapers it studied were publishing front-page advertisements, the percentage today is much higher. More than 26 percent of those responding to this survey indicated their newspaper publishes front-page advertisements. This survey, however, included a small duplication of response. But when those responses are factored (nearly twice as many did not publish front-page advertisements), the percentage drops only one point to 25 percent. It appears clear from this survey that substantially more newspapers are publishing front-page ads than the earlier study discovered. And it also seems likely that the trend will continue.

THE QUESTIONS

No. 1 – Does your newspaper publish advertisements on the front page?

One hundred and eighty respondents indicated “no” and 64 indicated “yes.”

Of those that indicated their newspapers do not publish front-page advertisements, 113 worked at dailies and 67 at non-dailies (82 percent of those worked at weeklies). Fifty-nine responses came from independent newspapers, 114 from group-owned newspapers and seven declined to indicate a newspaper ownership classification.

Of those that indicated their newspapers publish front-page advertisements, 50 worked at dailies and 14 at non-dailies. Sixteen responses came from independently owned newspapers, 47 from groups and one declined to indicate the classification.

No. 2 – How long has your newspaper published front-page ads?

Of the 64 who indicated they publish front-page ads, 55 gave the length of time. More than 72 percent have published front-page advertisements for less than five years, lending support to the Gannett/Thomson influence. Seventeen – nearly 31 percent –

have published for less than a year. Nine – or an additional 16 percent – have published one to two years. Fourteen – 25 percent – have published two to five years.

Seven percent indicated they have published front-page ads for five to 10 years, and 20 percent claim to have published front-page ads for more than 10 years. Of those, the duration included 135 years, 100+ years, 40 years, 35 years, 30 years (two responses), 21 years, "decades," "several years," and "forever."

A true average could not be obtained because of the non-numerical responses. An average without the non-numerical responses could be obtained, but it would be skewed by the seven lengthy periods listed above. But of 45 responses of fewer than 10 years, the average is one year and nine months.

No. 3 – Do you receive a premium price for front-page ads?

Ninety-five percent of newspapers publishing front-page ads receive a premium price (61 of 64 respondents; two were not sure and one indicated the newspaper did not receive a premium price).

Forty-one respondents listed the percent of price increase – eight claiming a 100 percent increase. The largest percentage of increase was 750 percent. Other increases above 100 percent included 620 percent (one), 500 percent (two), 380 percent (one), 300 percent (one), 150 percent (one) and 110 percent (one).

The average premium price increase was 118 percent.

The other responses were as follows: 88 percent (one), 75 percent (one), 60 percent (one), 50 percent (four), 48 percent (one), 40 percent (two), 30 percent (four), 25 percent (three), 20 percent (five), 15 percent (one) and 10 percent (two).

No. 4 – Does your newspaper have any restrictions on front-page ads, such as size or product?

Sixty-three of the 64 respondents have restrictions, but there are no consensus restrictions on size, placement or product.

Several respondents volunteered general or specific restriction information. It includes:

- “ . . . Strict control over content and design.”
- “ . . . Ads must be not-for-profit”
- “ . . . Standard banner and ear sizes”
- “ . . . Banner ad across bottom of page”
- “ . . . Size is always the same (3¼ x 2)”
- “ . . . Limited to 2 x 3 size in bottom right corner”
- “ . . . Limited to Saturday only”
- “ . . . We only allow strip ads 6 col. x ¾”
- “ . . . Anchored daily with our index in a 1-inch by 1.5-inch space”
- “ . . . The max and standard is 3-inch-by-6-col”
- “ . . . Must be 1.5-inches deep, but can vary in width to as wide as 4 columns”
- “ . . . 3 col. by 1 inch, at the bottom of the page each week”
- “ . . . No coupons, only image advertising”
- “ . . . No reverses and no screaming headlines”
- “ . . . Contracts only”
- “ . . . No issue ads, merchandise only, good taste, can't detract from news”
- “ . . . Must be 4-color”
- “ . . . We cannot use price points”

No. 5 – Is your newspaper considering front-page advertisements?

One hundred and eighty respondents answered Question No. 1 by saying their newspaper did not run front-page advertisements. Of those, 13 percent – or 24 respondents – indicated their newspaper is considering front-page advertisements. Five had no response. One hundred and fifty-one indicated their newspaper was not considering front-page ads.

No. 6 – Do you believe the current economic climate will be a consideration in moving toward front-page ads?

While only 13 percent of respondents indicated their newspaper was considering front-page advertisements, nearly 40 percent felt the current economic climate would be a consideration in moving toward front-page ads (71 responded “yes,” 104 indicated “no” and five did not respond).

Of those responding “yes,” 52 indicated their newspaper was not considering front-page ads and 19 indicated their newspaper was considering front-page ads. Of those responding “no,” four newspapers were considering front-page ads.

(Questions seven through 13 gauged how strongly respondents felt about specific statements concerning front-page advertisements. A Likert scale was used with the following ratings:

- 1 *strongly disagree*
- 2 *somewhat disagree*
- 3 *neutral*
- 4 *somewhat agree*
- 5 *strongly agree*

No. 7 – Front-page ads do not upset readers.

Newspaper readers can voice many complaints. Circulation – or late delivery – has always been upsetting. Issues of credibility and believability have also surfaced over the years. Even though readers seldom complain about front-page advertisements, some journalists believe readers are concerned about ads on the front page of newspapers.

“This is an issue on which it’s hard to separate tradition from genuine concerns about journalistic integrity,” wrote Durham J. Monsma, publisher of *The (Stamford) Advocate and Greenwich Time* in Stamford, Conn. “Many editors fear that relatively

innocuous institutional ads would soon give way to more aggressive promotional advertising and sponsorships, similar to what appears on many newspaper Web sites. They also note that newspapers with front-page ads don't win design awards. Personally, I think that any premiums for front-page ads would be outweighed by the negatives in our market. We serve very affluent communities in which *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* also have high readership. Our readers expect high quality local news coverage (our newsroom is twice the size of what is typical for our circulation category) and I would be loath to do anything which could negatively affect reader perceptions."

But not all share the same belief about a market or readers' lack of acceptance.

"We've published front page ads long enough to have heard most of the (industry) concerns . . . (but) no reader has ever questioned our policy," wrote Stedem Wood, publisher of *The Skagit Valley Herald* in Mount Vernon, Wash.

"In two years of publishing front page ads we've never had a reader complain about them," wrote Peter Horvitz, president and publisher of *The Eastside Journal* and *South County Journal* in Bellevue and Kent, Wash. "Readers know the difference between news and advertising and are far more accepting of front page ads than journalists are. This is not an issue to readers."

Half of the 242 respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that front-page ads do not upset readers, and another 39 percent were neutral or in somewhat disagreement with the statement. Only 10.7 percent strongly disagreed. The average response rate was 3.3 – (neutral).

Strongly disagree -----	26 (11%)
Somewhat disagree -----	49 (20%)
Neutral -----	46 (19%)
Somewhat agree -----	68 (28%)

Strongly agree ----- 53 (22%)

No. 8 – Readers like front-page ads.

Many readers tend to view advertisements as information, as they do news, but can generally, as mentioned above, differentiate between the two. Asking if readers like front-page ads is a much different question than asking if front-page ads upset readers. Still, the results were similar.

“I have not received a single complaint about our front-page ads since we started them,” wrote Tom Brooker, editor and general manager of *The News Chronicle* in Green Bay, Wis.

The risk, however, is too much of a gamble for some.

“ . . . I am very sure moving ads to the front page does not build credibility, or elevates the importance of our journalism,” wrote Jim Osteen, executive editor of *The Gainesville Sun* in Gainesville, Fla. “We are living in an age of the on-line Wild West, where information is abundant and truth hard to find. Good, honest, reliable journalism does matter today more than ever. Taking a risk, even if it is a small one, of undermining our core journalistic values is a price too high to pay.”

Nearly 48 percent of 242 respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that newspaper readers like front-page ads. Only 17 percent strongly or somewhat disagreed. The remaining 35 percent were neutral. The average response rate was 3.4 (neutral).

Strongly disagree ----- 13 (7%)

Somewhat disagree ----- 29 (12%)

Neutral ----- 85 (35%)

Somewhat agree ----- 69 (28%)

Strongly agree ----- 46 (19%)

No. 9 – Journalists are neutral about front-page ads.

When front-page ads are considered or implemented at a newspaper, the loudest voices of complaint are from journalists. One journalist who is anything but neutral is Tim Franklin, editor and vice president of *The Orlando Sentinel*.

“Critics will call editors like me sanctimonious and old fashioned,” Franklin wrote. “Well, there's nothing old fashioned about credibility. That's the most important asset we have. Inevitably, in local and regional newspapers, the front-page advertiser is going to be a local company that the newspaper covers. So, the first time your readers even perceive that you've given favorable treatment to that company in the newspaper, you're going to get quizzed about a conflict of interest and the integrity of your coverage is in question.

“We should be in the business of avoiding even the appearance of a conflict of interest. Moreover, the front page is the public face of the newspaper. Readers place an intrinsic value on front-page news.

“ . . . putting an ad on the front page is not like putting an ad on page A11. Let me cast it this way: Putting an ad on the front page is the equivalent of Tom Brokaw starting his newscast by saying, ‘This is the NBC Nightly News brought to you by Pizza Hut.’

“I've heard some editors argue that front page ads are common in European newspapers, so why not in American newspapers? My counter is that some European newspapers also run pictures of topless women, and I don't think we want to do that.”

Bill Kunert, publisher of *The Daily Record* in Ellensburg, Wash., believes morale is an issue. “Although front page ads may not bother the readers as much as we may think, it does become a morale issue with the news staff,” he wrote. “There's a sense that the paper has sold out and that advertising is more important than the news. It may

also affect recruitment as a journalist would think twice about going to a newspaper which runs front-page ads.”

“I have worked at a newspaper that had front-page ads -- and staffers regularly cited it as a reason for their departure during exit interviews,” wrote Ken Robertson, executive editor of *The Tri-City Herald* in Kennewick, Wash.

While this study showed much diversity of opinion, there was great agreement that journalists are not neutral about front-page ads. Nearly 93 percent of 242 respondents strongly disagreed (191) or somewhat disagreed (33). The average response rate was 1.4 (strongly disagree).

Strongly disagree -----	191 (79%)
Somewhat disagree -----	33 (14%)
Neutral -----	3 (1%)
Somewhat agree -----	3 (1%)
Strongly agree -----	12 (5%)

No. 10 – Front-page ads pander to advertisers.

One of the arguments against publishing front-page ads has been that they pander to advertisers. The context, some suggest, goes as far as to border upon the definition of one who procures customers as a prostitute, in this case a newspaper selling its character or soul for significant profit.

Doug Cabral, editor and owner of *The Martha’s Vineyard Times* in Vineyard Haven, Mass., doesn’t believe front-page ads pander to advertisers. “I think the use of front page ads is merely a matter of taste,” he wrote. “I don’t like to give up the news and picture space, so I don’t use them. I don’t think there is any journalistic morality involved, and I don’t think the placement of front-page ads is a symptom of pandering. If the news coverage and editorials are plainspoken, tough, and straight, readers will have plenty of

reason to respect the paper, front-page ads or no. If the coverage is wishy-washy, keeping ads off the front page won't help.”

Others, and a high percentage in this survey, feel ads pander to advertisers.

“I am not ready to prostitute the news by selling out the front page,” wrote Debbie Berto, publisher and vice president of *The Issaquah Press* in Issaquah, Wash. “Readers should be demanding more news of their newspapers, not less. Keep front-page ads to post-it notes and plastic bags.”

Fifty-one percent of 241 respondents strongly agreed (30 percent) or somewhat agreed (21 percent) that front-page ads pander to advertisers. Thirty-three percent, however, strongly or somewhat disagreed the ads pander to advertisers. The average response rate was 3.3 (neutral).

Strongly disagree -----	34 (14%)
Somewhat disagree -----	46 (19%)
Neutral -----	38 (16%)
Somewhat agree -----	50 (21%)
Strongly agree -----	73 (30%)

No. 11 – Newspapers lose independence by publishing front-page ads.

The argument is often made that if a newspaper publishes front-page ads, it will be less aggressive in pursuing truth in stories where those advertisers may be involved. While the survey didn't suggest a significant concern in this regard, some comments were certainly cautionary.

“In this country, the front page says what you're about as an enterprise,” wrote Dave Zeeck, executive editor of *The News Tribune* in Tacoma, Wash. “If you're using that space to sell ads, that tells you something about the underlying values of the company.”

Tom Lawrence, editor of *The Pilot* in Whitefish, Mont., doesn't believe ads should be a part of the front-page equation as "the front page is where we place the most important items in the paper."

"I believe the front page should be sacrosanct," wrote Tony Doderer, editor of *The Daily Pilot* in Costa Mesa, Calif. "The money gleaned from advertising does not make up for the loss of perception among readers that the paper has sold out. Also, once we start selling even a sliver of the page, what's to stop an advertiser from asking for more -- one third or even one half. Unless we can provide research that shows readers are apathetic toward front-page advertising, or even find it useful, I really believe newspapers should declare the front page off limits."

But Mark B. Evans, editor of *The Northwest Explorer* in Tuscon, Ariz., doesn't believe a lack of independence is linked to publishing front-page ads. "To say that front-page ads affect credibility is to say that all ads on inside pages affect the credibility of the stories on those pages," he wrote. "That's nonsense. News credibility is only affected by advertising when stories are softened or killed to please an advertiser, or written to please an advertiser."

"I do not believe that readers will look at an ad on the front page and assume that the advertiser has bought and paid for those stories, any more than they believe an advertiser on B-4 has paid for the stories on that page. I suspect that readers who have a cynical belief that their newspaper will never bite the hands that feed it, probably have a good reason to believe that about the newspaper they read, which means that newspaper has a far larger credibility problem than the debate over front page ads."

"Credible newspapers that write news stories without regard to political or economic influence, or the size of an advertising contract, should have nothing to worry about if they choose to put ads on the front page . . ."

More than 55 percent of 240 respondents strongly (33.7 percent) or somewhat (21.6 percent) disagreed newspapers lose independence when publishing front-page ads. Thirty percent, however, found this as a concern, 17 percent in strong agreement and 13 percent somewhat in agreement. The average response rate was 2.6 (somewhat disagree).

Strongly disagree -----	81 (34%)
Somewhat disagree -----	52 (22%)
Neutral -----	34 (14%)
Somewhat agree -----	32 (13%)
Strongly agree -----	41 (17%)

No. 12 – Front-page ads devalue front-page news.

Some claim front-page ads cheapen the news; the significance of “real” news – the value – goes down when the two are mixed. This statement, maybe more than any other, demonstrated a great divide on the issue, possibly pointing to the fulcrum of the debate.

“I think that front-page ads devalue front-page news and the newspaper loses credibility,” wrote Jay Lee, editor of *The Democrat* in Senatobia, Miss. “Newspapers who run front-page ads are prostituting their papers.”

“It’s a misuse of ‘reader space’ and devalues the newspaper and its credibility,” wrote A.L. Alford Jr., editor and publisher of *The Lewiston Morning Tribune* in Lewiston, Idaho.

“ . . . the newspaper, first and foremost, is an information source,” wrote Terry Greenberg, editor of *The Truth* in Elkhart, Ind. “News and advertising are both equal and important in terms of information. But the front page has historically been a place for news. Advertising has many other choice positions throughout the paper. My concern about front-page advertising, though, is not that most of us have never done it that way,

my concern is once you start, where do you stop? And can you get enough money to make it worth your while to establish that precedent. I think not.”

Susan Pryce, advertising director of *The Fauquier Citizen* in Warrenton, Va., wrote: “While reporters and editors feel that advertising on the front page devalues front page news there is little real evidence to support that myth.”

More than 50 percent strongly (26.6 percent) or somewhat (23.7 percent) agree that front-page ads devalue the news. But, more than 43 percent strongly (25.8 percent) or somewhat (17.5) disagree. The average response rate was 3.1 (neutral).

Strongly disagree -----	62 (26%)
Somewhat disagree -----	42 (17%)
Neutral -----	15 (6%)
Somewhat agree -----	57 (24%)
Strongly agree -----	64 (27%)

No. 13 – Newspaper credibility becomes a concern with front-page ads.

Losing credibility and finding ways to restore it have been major considerations for newspapers over the past decade. Some claim front-page ads are a credibility concern. Others don’t agree. The survey, again, demonstrates the great divide.

“Many papers have them and it does not seem to make any difference to readers,” said Thomas Kelsch, publisher, *European and Pacific Stars and Stripes*, Washington, DC. “Objection to them is mostly an internal journalism issue. I have worked at papers that had them, had healthy readership, and no complaints about them. Our credibility or lack thereof comes from a lot of things — accuracy, objectivity, awareness of community — but I see no evidence it comes from front-page ads. Our paper does not allow them, but I don’t fear any serious repercussions (outside the newsroom) if we went to them. Quality of news coverage is a much bigger issue than where the ads are. Unfortunately, in many cases, coverage is sloppy at best.”

John Cate, editor of *The Cleveland Post* in Garner, N.C., believes newspaper credibility is a concern with front-page ads. “The front page of the newspaper is for news, not for advertising,” he wrote. “My newspaper is a free publication, but even we would not consider running ads on the front page. Those who do run a serious risk of loss of credibility with their readers and this is the most important thing a newspaper must possess. It's simply not worth it for the premium cost of running an advertisement on the front page.”

“I find it interesting that we treat the news on the front page differently from the news inside,” wrote Cindy Tucker, advertising director of *The Athens Banner Herald*, in Athens, Ga. “It is as credible as we are and we have always been a credible news source. *The National Enquirer* does not place advertising on its front page, does this make its news credible?”

Forty-six percent of 242 respondents strongly (27 percent) or somewhat (19 percent) agreed that newspaper credibility is a concern with front-page ads. But a large number – 42.5 percent – strongly (26 percent) or somewhat (16.5 percent) disagreed. The average response rate was 3 (neutral).

Strongly disagree -----	63 (26%)
Somewhat disagree -----	40 (17%)
Neutral -----	26 (11%)
Somewhat agree -----	47 (19%)
Strongly agree -----	66 (27%)

THE SURVEY

A 14-question survey was sent via e-mail in the spring of 2001 to 1,005 e-mail addresses at newspapers across the United States. One hundred and five could not be delivered, reducing the sample to 900. Two hundred and fifty-six individuals responded,

for a return rate of 28 percent (survey results were tabulated from 244 responses, however, for a 27 percent response rate, as 12 arrived after coding was well underway).

The survey was sent to individuals at newspapers who held the titles of publisher, editor or advertising director, or had a different title, such as general manager, assistant advertising director, business manager, executive editor or managing editor. The survey sought input from those with the primary job function of a newspaper top executive, top editorial and advertising managers.

The National Newspaper Association (NNA) Web site lists 409 newspapers with Internet links (80 would not open). Several did not identify avenues of e-mail correspondence, or that information could not be found within a reasonable time check (up to three minutes). More than 300 e-mail surveys, however, were sent to individuals at NNA member newspapers.

The *Editor & Publisher Newspaper Sites in the United States* Web page lists more than 3,200 daily and weekly newspapers. A random pattern of selection was used, approximately every 10th newspaper on the alphabetical list. Approximately 500 e-mail surveys were sent to individuals at more than 300 newspapers.

An additional 123 e-mail surveys were sent to 72 newspapers in the state of Washington, from *Editor & Publisher's Media Links Online Media Directory*. The respondents were included in the general population, but were also broken out for a look at a specific state's front-page newspaper advertisement direction. For comparison, only 19 percent of Washington newspaper respondents are publishing front-page advertising.

In total, 900 e-mail surveys were sent to individuals at more than 600 newspapers (daily and non-daily), with 256 individual responses.

THE RESPONDENTS

Of 244 coded responses, 177 were from males, 58 were from females and nine did not identify gender. The average and median age was 47, with the youngest

respondent being 25 and the oldest 65. The age distribution between males and females was fairly equal.

One hundred and three editors responded, followed by 88 publishers and 47 advertising directors. Six did not identify job title or area of responsibility.

Gender response by title/job function included:

Advertising Director -- 22 females and 23 males (two declined to indicate).

Editor – 16 females and 86 males (one declined to indicate).

Publisher – 19 females and 66 males (three declined to indicate).

Unknown/Other – 1 female and two males (three declined to indicate).

While the average and median age of all respondents was 47 (23 declined to indicate age), the following is average age by title/job function:

Advertising Director – 43.3 (three declined to indicate).

Editor – 46.85 (six declined to indicate).

Publisher – 48.61 (10 declined to indicate).

Unknown/Other – 37 (four declined to indicate).

Average age by gender was 44.35 for females (three declined to indicate) and 47.44 for males (11 declined to indicate age).

Nine respondents did not give age or gender.

As well as simple survey prompts, respondents were allowed one open-ended question: “Share your thoughts about front-page ads.” Seventy-seven percent commented (187 of 244). The responses totaled 20 pages of quotes – more than 15,000 words. The longest response was 1,048 words. The shortest was one word. In a business that traditionally has shied away from anonymous comments, nearly half asked for anonymity (92 of 187).

THE NEWSPAPERS

The highest number of responses (67 percent) came from individuals working at a daily newspaper (163). There were 64 responses from those working at weekly newspapers, 10 from those working at newspapers published twice a week, four from newspapers published three times a week, one from a newspaper published four times a week, and two from newspapers published once every other week.

One hundred and sixty-eight responses (69 percent) came from individuals who work for newspapers owned by a group. Seventy-six responses came from individuals working at independently owned newspapers.

The average circulation of the newspapers where respondents worked was 39,053, skewed slightly upward by a handful of responses from newspapers with extremely high circulation. The median circulation of respondent newspapers was 20,500. Respondents worked at newspapers ranging from a 1,850-circulation weekly to a 765,000 daily. Response by newspaper circulation included:

DAILY

9,999 and under – 24 – 9.8 percent

10,000 to 19,999 – 31 – 12.7 percent

20,000 to 29,999 – 36 – 14.8 percent

30,000 to 49,000 – 30 – 12.4 percent

50,000 to 99,999 – 24 – 9.8 percent

100,000 to 499,999 – 17 – 7 percent

500,000 or more – 1 – 0.4 percent

Total – 163 – 66.9 percent

WEEKLY / OTHER

4,999 and under – 15 – 6.2 percent

5,000 to 9,999 – 35 – 14.4 percent

10,000 to 19,999 – 13 – 5.3 percent

20,000 to 49,999 – 9 – 3.6 percent

50,000 or more – 9 – 3.6 percent

Total – 81 – 33.1

While 76 responses came from individuals working at independent newspapers, the highest number of responses from major newspaper groups came from Gannett with 12, followed by nine from Morris Communications, eight each from MediaNews Group and Lee Enterprises, seven from CNHI, 5 from Scripps, and four from McClatchy. Three each came from Knight Ridder, Copley and The New York Times, and two each came from Cox and Freedom Communications, Inc. Ninety-four others came from regional or lesser-known groups. Eight respondents did not identify themselves as independent or with a group.

The only states not represented by individual respondents were Delaware, Maine and North Dakota. The highest number of responses – 42 – came from the state of Washington. The high rate can be attributed to the fact that 123 e-mail surveys were sent to a majority of newspapers in the state in an effort to get a more comprehensive look at one individual state.

The second highest number of responses from a single state came from California (17), followed by 10 each from Minnesota, Oregon, Texas and Wisconsin, and nine from Indiana.

A remaining state-by-state breakout follows: Kentucky, North Carolina and New York (seven); Connecticut, Idaho, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio (six); Colorado, Kansas, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania (five); Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska,

Oklahoma, (four); Arizona, Mississippi, Montana, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah (three); Alaska, Georgia, Iowa, South Dakota, Virginia, Vermont, Washington, D.C., Wyoming (two); Alabama, Hawaii, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, West Virginia (one).

THE GOOD

Mark E. Laskowski, publisher of *The Potomac News/Manassas Journal Messenger* in Woodbridge, Va., believes front-page ads are a significant step for the industry. “The time has come to provide our readers with the best local information we can and that includes advertising,” Laskowski wrote. “While I do not think front-page ads should decrease front-page news hole, they can be tastefully presented in the nameplate or in a banner at the bottom of the page without compromising the news.”

“I have no problem with front-page ads,” wrote Pete Van Baalen, regional advertising director, CNHI Newspapers, Anderson, Ind. “We have positioned them in such a way that they do not dominate the front page, and are generally tasteful. They do not hurt the integrity of the paper any more than ads on any other page would throughout the paper. The first advertiser to purchase the ads was a local liquor store. We did make it clear that if a serious drunk driving accident occurred and was to be on our front page, we reserved the right to pull his ad. That client completely understood our position and agreed.”

Front-page advertisements bring a significant amount of revenue, and advertisers are often required to sign a 13-, 26- or 52-week contract. The ads can bring double, triple or more than the usual advertising rate. In difficult economic times, it is much needed revenue, and can make the difference in annual profit margin demands, possibly eliminating layoffs or other cutbacks. Demand for front-page ad space has been so great at some newspapers that advertisers are being turned away. “It’s one way for

journalists to keep their jobs and readers to keep their news, but both groups give the practice a mixed reception.”⁴

Richard D. Hall, managing editor of *The Deseret News* in Salt Lake City, Utah, understands the economics and realities of the issue. “I don't think readers care much either way,” he wrote. “But journalists, of course, care greatly. The front page is very valuable real estate. Because it is so valuable, in a perfect world it should be reserved for news only. But the world is not perfect and I like getting a paycheck as much as the next guy. Therefore I can live with having a small piece of split section fronts sold -- maybe two or three times a week and at a premium price.”

Howard Kleinberg, a former *Miami News* editor and now a columnist for Cox Newspapers, wrote the following about his local newspaper, which had advertised on its front page a coupon booklet claiming more than \$500 in savings:

“That the newspaper used part of its front page for promoting advertisement is an issue between the various departments of the newspaper, and its publisher. The sad truth likely is that more readers turned to that coupon-filled booklet than to the editorial page.”⁶

“I doubt if readers care that much either way,” wrote Scott Sines, managing editor of *The Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, Wash. “There will be some who already think the newspaper is too influenced by advertisers and some who don't care. Many international newspapers have front-page ads today.”

Most newspapers formulate strict policies for front-page ads. For instance, “price-point” pitches to promote a sale or price are usually banned. And, many policies lean heavily toward institutional advertising and away from what some could consider controversial products, such as alcohol and/or adult entertainment.

Tom Callinan, editor of *The Arizona Republic*, wrote in a story in his newspaper on Jan. 28, 2001: “I assure you that these front-page ads in no way affect the journalistic

integrity of *The Republic*. Working with our advertising department, we've developed strict guidelines that will dictate the content and look of the front-page ads. The layout or typefaces will not mimic editorial design. The copy will be tasteful, and the design will be compatible with the front page."⁷

Karl Ziomek, managing editor of *The News-Herald/Heritage* in Southgate, Mich. believes journalists are too concerned about advertising content and placement in general. "We have never seriously considered front-page advertising," he wrote, ". . . but I feel that journalists have to understand that advertising is a key ingredient of any newspaper and, therefore, should have significant space and placement. Does that include the front page? It might, depending on the venue and the ad itself . . . The bottom line is that anything, given enough thought, can be tastefully done. And if it's done properly, the editorial on the page should not be effected."

THE BAD

"The front page really is the sacred document of the newspapers," said Ken Bode, dean of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. "We all know about the pressure for profits, but is the added value of the front-page (ads) so important that you give that up?"⁴

Is the front page sacred? Geneva Overholser, a syndicated columnist for the *Washington Post* Writers Group, former editorial writer at *The New York Times*, ex-editor of *The Des Moines Register*, past ombudsman for *The Washington Post*, and nine-year Pulitzer Prize board member, has a slightly different view.

"Having an ad on the front page may look tacky," she wrote. "It may take away news hole. But it is not corrupting; It's straightforward, not deceitful. The public likes ads. They also like news, of course. And they want clarity about which is which. Beyond that, our conventions about where ads appear are just that: our conventions. Protecting them may suit our fancy; it doesn't maintain our credibility."⁸

A clear negative to publishing front-page ads is newsroom staff morale. Mixing news with advertising disturbs many reporters and editors. And, many are concerned that a relatively small ad will eventually grow.

Neil Pinchin, newsroom team leader for innovation at *The Orange County Register*, tried to calm those fears when his newspaper began running a front-page coupon as part of a redesign in March 2001. He defended the move as part of making the paper more useful and rhetorically asked: "Will it grow and become this enormous thing? No, it won't."⁹

Mike Shepard, publisher of *The Walla Walla Union-Bulletin*, in Walla Walla, Wash., isn't a fan of front-page ads, but he has a realistic view. "This is more a debate about aesthetics and perceived encroachment on editorial independence than what readers think," he wrote. "Readers know the difference between advertising and news content. A newspaper's editorial integrity doesn't ride on this issue. Will it be the end of the world if we put ads on our front page some day? No. I just don't like how they look."

Kelly Hawes, managing editor of *The Facts* in Clute, Texas, wrote: "I'd just as soon not have advertisements on my front page, but it's more a matter of aesthetics than ethics. I honestly can't say that there is a journalistic reason for keeping the front page free of ads. I'd like to keep the front page free of ads, but as long as we don't start selling sponsorship of specific stories, I don't see an ethical issue."

"Our largest advertiser (a very strong local bank) has approached us about running front page ads," wrote Norene Prosocki, publisher of *The Ozark County Times* in Gainesville, Mo. "We've put off making the decision to go ahead because we do have a vague feeling of losing our independence and credibility. Being able to buy the front page just feels wrong. I'm tempted to charge an astronomical amount just so they won't buy it. The whole idea bothers me and infuriates my editor, but truthfully with the economy going the way it is, I feel like it's a no-brainer. We should sell the space."

THE UGLY

Kim de Bourbon, editor of *The Pocono Record* in Stroudsburg, Pa., wrote about front-page ads: “Not a good idea. I will fight them to my death.”

Her publisher,Carolynn Allen-Evans, agrees. “We plan to avoid them at all cost. There are far more innovative ways to speak to the needs of the advertiser, without introducing front-page ads and we have the brainpower to develop those initiatives. Loyal and fringe readers, as well as management and employees, believe front-page ads would indicate a sponsorship of the news and most certainly harm the credibility of one of the three pristine news pages. If it undermines the credibility of those pages, it would seem it would do the same to the newspaper as a whole.”

Rufus Woods, publisher-editor of the *Wenatchee World*, in Wenatchee, Wash., was clear in his statement about front-page ads: “In my view, front-page ads make perfect sense in a world in which journalism is only a means for making money. I don't think they necessarily upset readers, but it lends a commercial air to the product that I find distasteful. Isn't it interesting that in these ‘economic times’ newspaper chains are making 20-plus percent margins and laying off staff? God help us!”

“Page 1 ads are like Dan Rather reading the evening news wearing a John Deere baseball cap and drinking a can of Pepsi,” wrote Teresa Tsalaky, publisher of *The Daily Triplicate* in Crescent City, Calif. “As ridiculous as that sounds, it will happen some day . . . Dollars talk loudly. But higher profits can also be generated by improving the credibility of your brand. If readers perceive that advertisers control you, regardless of whether it's true, you'll lose market share.”

Jay Thorwaldson, editor of *Palo Alto Weekly* in Palo Alto, Calif., is concerned about perception. “A huge percentage of readers (increasingly non-readers?) see papers as being advertiser-dominated already, and some papers are in fact so dominated. I think this would drastically further that perception. When readers lose trust in the

integrity of the editorial product then there is usually a decline in readership, or in the importance readers attach to a paper's content . . . I think this is a very crucial question.

“ . . . slapping ads ‘in your face’ on the front page smacks me as way over the line if you want to sustain credibility and the perception that you are putting out something in the readers' interest, as opposed to the advertisers' interest.”

“When asked how much it would cost to put an ad on the front page, I've told them they would have to buy the newspaper first,” wrote Peggy Parks, publisher and editor of *The Challis Messenger* in Challis, Idaho. “I don't believe they belong there under any circumstances.”

“I consider them an error, a giant leap backward to the days when yellow journalism proclaimed with a nod and a wink that it didn't really matter if there were ads on the front page since neither the advertising of that period nor the journalism felt any serious obligation to truth,” wrote George Pica, editor of *Business Examiner* in Tacoma, Wash.

But Nancy McGuire of *The Nome Nugget* in Nome, Alaska, summed up “the ugly” best when she wrote: “Front-page ads suck.”

The Conclusion

Laurence J. Peter, in *The Peter Principle*, wrote, “Competence, like truth, beauty and contact lenses, is in the eye of the beholder.”

Front-page newspaper advertising has been presented by many as an issue of integrity. Some would go as far as to claim those that publish front-page ads are not competent, or truthful with readers. Others claim front-page ads aren't esthetically pleasing.

It is truly a matter of “the eye of the beholder.” Some are so strongly against the movement they have made powerful statements. Others seem resigned to what appears to be a new way of life:

Frank Fellone, deputy editor of *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* in Little Rock, Ark. feels front-page ads are a bad idea. But, he wrote, “we’ll see more of it because chain newspapers dominate the landscape, and bean counters dominate chain newspapers.”

“I’d rather not have them, but they help pay the bills,” wrote Jennifer Schartz, managing editor of *The Great Bend Tribune* in Great Bend, Kan.

“News, information and advertising — that’s what newspapers are all about,” wrote Larry Atkinson, publisher of *The Mobridge Tribune* in Mobridge, SD. “Ads can be run on the front without detracting from the news.”

“Our competitors (broadcast) have done it for years,” wrote Steve Beasley, ad director of *The Globe-News* in Amarillo, Texas. “I think it’s an idea whose time has come.”

“We’ve been publishing front-page ads for several years and the sky hasn’t fallen,” wrote Terry McCollough, publisher of *The Daily Dispatch* in Brainerd, Minn. “A few news staffers see them as a sell out, but most don’t see the harm; nor do I.”

The front-page advertisement revolution will continue. The number of newspapers publishing front-page ads has grown over the past decade, dramatically over the past two years.

The debate, like most, has strong positions, points and voices on all fronts. There is formidable opposition, but even so, it is unlikely it will be able to withstand the proponents’ momentum and the bottom line – which is the bottom line. The trend is likely to continue for several reasons, including five key ones — group influence, premium

prices, current economic climate, annual profit margin expectations and readership acceptance.



¹ The Washington Post, *Skeptical of Regulations That Seek to Keep People in the Dark*, Excerpts from the opinion of Justice John Paul Stevens in the case of 44 Liquormart v. Rhode Island, May 14, 1996, pg. A04.

² The New York Times, *The Media Business; USA Today To Run Ads On Front Page*, Felicity Barringer, May 6, 1999, sec. C, pg. 8.

³ The Quill, *Gannett leads trend of front-page ads*, Anonymous, Jan./Feb. 2001, pg. 6, Odds & Ends.

⁴ The Christian Science Monitor, *Get used to it, readers: page 1 ads, rising costs and demand for greater profits muscle ads onto front page*, Kim Campbell, Jan. 25, 2001, pg. 15.

⁵ Editor & Publisher, *Cover ads raise profits, hackles; Gannett the biggest fish in bottom (of page) feeding frenzy*, Lucia Moses, Oct. 20, 2000, pg. 26.

⁶ The Baltimore Sun, *Extra! Extra! Coupon offers, strings attached*, Howard Kleinberg, March 7, 2000, pg. 19A.

⁷ The Arizona Republic, *Front-page ads won't compromise integrity*, Tom Callinan, Jan. 28, 2001, pg. A2.

⁸ Columbia Journalism Review, *Front-page Ads and Other Supposed Threats to Credibility*, Geneva Overholser, September-October 2000, pg. 72.

⁹ Presstime, *Readers Guide Design Changes*, Anonymous, April 2001, pg. 19, Marketing/Readers.