

**Developing the Community Newspaper Website:
Making It a Necessity
by
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In 1976, the citizens of a rural county seat town in eastern Iowa were asked if their community weekly newspaper was still necessary. (1) The study was done in the context of the prevailing thought of the time, that weekly newspapers in small towns were an endangered species.

The town in question (Marengo) was within 30 miles of two much larger cities (Cedar Rapids and Iowa City) and many of the residents of the community commuted to those cities on a daily basis to work. In addition each of those communities had aggressive and developing daily newspapers and the town had regular access to the “state” newspaper, the *Des Moines Register*. Surely, critics argued, the availability of such significant news sources as well as the growing presence of television news made the weeklies superfluous.

The study indicated a different opinion on the part of the residents of Marengo. The newspaper was considered a necessity by the majority of the respondents. The newspaper provided them information that was necessary and not conveniently available to them.

Elderly residents pointed to the fact that their mobility was limited. The newspaper was a significant part of their access to the community. For the commuters who spent hours every day commuting to a distant job, working, then returning to a hectic family life, the newspaper was the source of important governmental news. As one person pointed out, “I can’t be at all of the meetings that are held every day, especially those that are held in the mornings or afternoons. That’s the newspaper’s job.”

The key finding in the study was that the people were adamant that their weekly newspaper was necessary despite the prophecies of the “experts.”

(An unintentional “experiment” in the early 1990s emphasized the feeling. When a new editor took over a western Oregon community weekly, he boldly stated that his paper would be a good news newspaper. People, he said, were tired of the negative news of the world and they could get all of that they wanted from the dailies and television. His newspaper would tell people the good things about the community. Within a year, the circulation of the paper had dropped 30 percent. The paper was no longer “necessary” and people found it easy to stop paying the minimal subscription price for it.)

The challenge for modern newspapers (dailies as well as weeklies) trying to figure out what to do with their Web sites is finding a way to make the site something people feel is absolutely necessary, not merely convenient or trendy. It should be worth the time and the money. And, with most small newspapers this must be done in the context of resource availability or the ability to generate the resources to underwrite the costs of the site.

The Oregon Study

In the fall of 2002 the publishers of more than 30 Oregon weekly (and three twice-weekly) newspapers were surveyed about their newspaper(s)’ involvement with the Web. (2) The papers included suburban weeklies in the Portland area, weeklies in the resort communities along the Pacific Coast and weeklies in the sparsely populated central and eastern areas of the state. Ownership of the papers ranged from a metro chain of 15 weeklies in Portland to single-owner papers throughout the state. A few of the papers were owned by in-state groups with weeklies and dailies and others were owned by larger regional and national groups (particularly the Lee newspapers.)

Most of the publishers felt some sense of need for a Web site for their newspapers. As one publisher of two suburban Portland newspapers put it “We’re on the Web because we know the competition will be.” For others it was a matter of pressure from the ownership, usually without accompanying financial support. “We were told to do it,” said one publisher “and it has to come out of our budgets.” There was a sense that the Web was part of the future and something that would eventually be expected of the newspapers but two questions remained, how was the site to be supported and what was its purpose?

For most, the two seemed to go hand-in-hand. The focus of the Web site was generating advertising revenue which would, in turn, support the costs of the Web site. With that underlying principle, most of the limited resources available in terms of time and effort were used to build a financial base. Because of this, the tone of the Web discussion rested on how it could be used to generate money for the newspaper, much as it has with dailies around the country. While most of the publishers had given some thought to the journalistic role of their Web sites, few had been able to get a firm grasp on the concept.

Perhaps that is because of the lack of consideration that has been given to the idea. Historically, the role of the weekly newspaper in the American community developed over more than 200 years. The importance of the newspaper as a part of the democratic process cited by the citizens of Marengo mirrors the observations of Alexis DeTocqueville almost 150 years earlier. According to DeTocqueville, in the American system of democracy, the newspaper was one of the primary sources of political information. As communities became larger, the role of the newspaper in providing crucial information increased. Community merchants became dependent on the local newspapers as a main advertising outlet and its role as a source of political information also increased significantly.

In DeTocqueville's time, communities were more isolated and more internally focused and there were few competing media. Obviously, today there is a much larger number of competing media including daily newspapers, broadcast news and cable and Internet sources and society has become more national and international in nature.

Against this backdrop, some people are amazed that weekly newspapers still exist. At an international conference on technology and society in Berkeley, Calif., in February 2005 an observer in the audience of one presentation asked incredulously "do weekly newspapers still exist?" When told they did he asked for clarification. "Do you mean free circulation papers?" When told that there were more than 10,000 paid circulation weeklies in the United States today, he shook his head in disbelief.

This is a common misperception. Community weeklies have long been considered the low value (and therefore expendable) portion of the newspaper business by many people and not considered worthy of consideration in a journalistic sense. Some

university journalism programs completely ignore weekly newspapers, offering no classes in the discipline. Sometimes their quality is denigrated and students are openly dissuaded from considering them as a career. The feeling among some is that the only purpose for a weekly newspaper is to secure an entry level position to be abandoned as soon as “something better” comes along. Similarly, many weeklies expect to be treated as a stopover to something bigger and operate their papers in such a manner, doing little to induce young journalists to stay.

What has resulted is little concentrated study or consideration given to just what a community newspaper Web site should be and what it needs to be sustainable.

Another barrier to the use of the Web by smaller newspapers is the technology. Though it has become easier and easier, developing and maintaining a site can still be a complicated and time-consuming task. Most small newspapers don't have a person on the staff who can build a site and do not have the resources to hire someone to develop a site for them — and have only a vague idea of what that site should look like. Most journalists don't have the background to handle the chore — and few have the interest. They are taught how to use the Web as a journalistic research tool and little else. The designers, with no journalistic background, are often even more in the dark.

Because of this, many newspapers use simplified systems provided by vendors, allowing material to be easily downloaded to the site but providing little flexibility and offering no hint of what the content should be. The site becomes much like the software that many newspapers use to lay out their pages, a system focused on filling predesigned templates.

A few of the papers in the Oregon study did have additional resources. One group, which owned weeklies and dailies, had a Webmaster who administered the sites for all of the group's papers. What this meant for local editors and publishers was turning their content over to the Webmaster and allowing her to post what she thought was appropriate. Although some publishers did attempt to become involved in deciding which of the stories to post, the decision was generally left to her.

Much of the effort of publishers in the Oregon study was centered on selling advertising for their Web sites and few had much success with that. At the one end of the

spectrum was a newspaper on the coast — *Newport News Times* — that had managed to create a highly successful advertising base focused around the automobile and the tourist industries. The regional marketing center for the central coast had three automobile dealers that were heavily involved in the Internet and, once the newspaper was able to convince one of the dealers to advertise on the newspaper's Web site, the other dealers began advertising as a matter of marketing self-defense.

Similarly, the community relies heavily on tourism and seasonal vacation rentals. The newspaper was able to attract one real estate property management company and the others joined, again because of the threat of competition. As publisher Clark Gallagher pointed out, the newspaper was a portal to the town and people from outside, looking to find information about the community, frequently logged on to the newspaper's Web site. From there, they were able to move to the other, specific sites they were interested in, such as those advertising vacation rental homes. In addition, the newspaper was able to limit its expense of maintaining the site. The auto dealers maintained their own sites and the newspaper merely provided an identification ad with a link, requiring virtually no weekly maintenance. For the real estate companies, the newspaper devised a system in which the realtors were responsible for maintaining their own listings.

One advantage the newspaper had over most smaller community newspapers was it was large enough to have a full-time technology person devoted to the Web. Not only did this allow for the specialized expertise to create the program used by the realtors, but it also did not drain resources from the reporting or advertising staffs.

On the other end of the spectrum was the newspaper in the central Oregon community of John Day. An isolated county seat community in the middle of ranching country, advertisers saw little value in advertising on the Web. As publisher Diane Oster-Courtney pointed out, local businesses didn't expect people to travel from long distances to shop in John Day. The newspaper's competition for the limited advertising budgets of the local merchants was the school fundraising campaigns and signs at the school athletic fields. Additionally, the community was not large enough, nor did the ad sales people have the time, to attempt to solicit outside advertising aimed at local buyers. Oster-Courtney pointed out the limited nature of resources and the need to use them judiciously.

“I can’t ask ad sales people, who work on commission, to spend time going after ads that are highly uncertain. They want to spend their time where they have a more certain chance of making money,” she said.

Most of the newspapers in the state shared the same challenge of finding something special about their situation that translated into advertising dollars. One, the Community Newspapers Incorporated group of the Portland metro area, created the “green” classifieds for its print newspapers. People advertising in any of the group’s 15 newspapers had their ads printed in all of the papers for a nominal charge. This brought protests from many people using the classifieds — they wanted to advertise in their local community. What they had to sell, a used lawn mower or a second hand couch, wouldn’t cause someone to drive 50 miles to buy. The same type of resistance was likely with charging an additional cost for Internet advertising.

Obviously, there are some products and services that would benefit from a broader exposure but sorting those out added, however minimally, to the time and effort needed in producing them.

The effort spent on trying to figure out the financial side of the Web sites often left little time or resources to seriously consider the non-advertising role. First, many publishers were leery of the Web as a drain on their circulation, reluctant to post much of the paper’s content for fear of it resulting in declining circulation and revenue. This fear of the Web cutting into the importance of the print paper was a significant limitation for many papers.

Another limiting factor was staffing and time. Most papers had editorial staffs the publishers already felt were too small and overworked and could not justify changing staff members’ assignments to produce additional materials for the Web. As a result, most were limited to posting materials that came from the print newspaper.

There were exceptional situations in which the newspapers could see a clear sense of purpose.

Newspapers throughout the state posted regular updates during breaking news situations. For example, the newspaper in Sisters was a major source of information for local residents during a forest fire outbreak in the summer of 2002. It was a good example of being the best source of necessary local information. There was no local radio

or television station and the newspaper was the major gathering point for forest service, public safety, evacuation and other information. Like the newspapers of DeTocqueville's time and the midwestern weekly of the Marengo study, the newspaper was able to provide a needed service no one else could.

Obviously, the emergency situation was short-lived but it did exemplify a significant point in the development of the Web among weekly newspapers.

The key is to make the Web site necessary to the community.

Unfortunately, how to do that is still unclear.

Most weeklies do not want to — or can't — become dailies and don't want to be caught up in trying to provide breaking news on a regular basis. Not only do they not have the personnel resources but they also feel that it would erode readership in the weekly product. They also don't want people to become dependent on something they may not be able to maintain. Probably the best use of the Web as a source of breaking news is to alert the public to serious information and events with an additional understanding that the full story would be available in the next issue of the print newspaper.

Strangely, this was greatly limited with the Oregon newspapers. Many of the publishers were reluctant to aggressively cross promote the newspaper and the Web site.

One other use of the Web for breaking news was during the November 2002 elections when many of the newspapers provided up-to-the-minute results of local elections and issues. These, while of intense local interest, were not covered by the television stations from the larger cities that serviced the smaller communities.

This is an excellent example of the potential of small paper Web sites — if people become dependent on it for election returns, they will consciously seek out the sites during those times. The newspaper/Web site becomes necessary.

The riddle is finding ways to make Web sites necessary without a significant drain on available resources. Obviously newspapers are able to justify a mass effort once or twice a year for such things as elections but such an effort is not something that can be done on a regular basis.

Taking an organized approach

In the Spring of 2005, Community Newspapers Inc., a group of weeklies in the Portland, Ore., metropolitan area, began an ambitious effort to devise a program to make the Web sites of its papers valuable, both to the group and to the readers.

For the first time, the corporate ownership — which was centered on a twice-weekly urban Portland newspaper, the Portland Tribune, and a handful of radio stations — provided the weekly group, which was a separately-owned corporation, with technical expertise. Prior to this, each weekly newspaper was on its own in developing a Web site.

A committee of publishers, advertising representatives and Web developers virtually started from square one in figuring out what the Web sites should look like and what they should contain.

The project began with an analysis, by the Web developers, of what other newspapers were doing with their sites. This inventory was presented and discussed at the committee's first meeting. Other agenda items for the session included discussing available internal hardware (what existed and what was needed) and staff resources, identifying and describing desired site attributes, identifying revenue opportunities and establishing priorities and a schedule.

What became clear at the meeting was that there was much work to do before any site could be placed on line. It focused on developing an appealing, attractive, easily usable site, one that would be appealing for readers to access and use, creating content that would make the site something that people would want to use and would feel was necessary, and doing this within the available resources of the papers. None of these issues produced easy answers.

The first meeting of the group was May 5, 2005 and as of the date of the writing of this paper, July 1, 2005, no second meeting had been held — another example of fitting the required time and effort into schedules of very busy people.

Many general ideas were produced. On the advertising side, since the newspapers all existed within the Portland area, selling regional ads to businesses that attracted people from throughout the region emerged as an obvious target. Editorially, creating “news” features that would be provided by readers, directly, was one way to relieve the demand on staff time. For example, the return of the “community news correspondent”

concept, especially from smaller communities, was one of the options mentioned.

One small suggestion that emerged after the first CNI meeting was that the site should link with the school district for instant information about high school sports schedules. Given the unpredictability of Oregon weather in the spring, providing a place where parents and fans could obtain the most current information about the status of a baseball or softball game would be a very welcome service. This would provide the kind of information that might help develop a dependence on the site and, though not a major item, it showed the kinds of material that could be considered. Similar timely information, provided by the source and not requiring gathering by the newspaper, answers both the questions of consumer need and management of resources for the paper.

Links to other community sites — business, governmental and social — was also listed as an obvious addition as were items such as movie listings, sports schedules, community schedules and more. The bottom line was the more material that can be gathered without the need for major staff time or input was worth considering.

While many of these items seem either commercial in nature or hardly “significant journalism,” they are an extension of an axiom long held in community journalism.

Publishers for years have spent hours putting together the best newspaper they could with the most important community news available. Then a customer walks into the office on Wednesday morning, puts 50 cents on the counter, picks up a paper and turns to the classified ads. But what publishers realized over the years is that after the readers looks at the ads, he puts the newspaper under his arm and walks out, keeping the paper to be read later. One study conducted in Utah in the 1980s indicated the weekly newspaper stayed in the household an average of six days — until the next issue came. It was a reusable resource that was read at leisure and consulted repeatedly for necessary information.

The same psychology holds with the Web site. It doesn't matter why the readers log on, just so they do. Once they are there it is up to the newspaper to keep them there.

Despite the claims of the convenience of the Web, it is not, in many ways, as convenient as the print paper. It requires expensive equipment and available Internet access to reach the Web and lacks the flexibility of a print paper which can be read

anywhere.

The advantages of the Web lie in its ability to be timely and its ability to provide access to vast amounts of information and other sources. The task of the weekly newspaper editor/publisher is to find a way to best use these attributes, looking at it from the position of best use rather than ease of use. It means sorting through the pronouncement of theorists and addressing the topic from the perspective of the reader.

One concept that has been overlooked in trying to develop the newspaper Web site is the fact that the “necessary newspaper” mentioned above was the product of evolution, not preconceived design. Obviously, the thought of allowing the role of the Web to naturally evolve over another 200 years is not inviting. What publishers need to do it take the time to sit down and think about what the public would welcome and use on a Web site. Like the classified ads and movie listings cause them to pick up the weekly at the news rack, what kinds of materials, links, etc. would cause the same kind of dependent behavior with the Web.

The CNI development project is expected to take the better part of a year just to develop the look and general feel/content of the sites. After that will be experimentation in the variety of communities looking for those items that lure customers to the sites on a regular basis. What the newspapers need to do is look at their individual communities and decide what best serves their readerships. It will still be a matter of evolution but unlike past newspapers, it should be an evolution directed by careful thought of what the role of the Web in community newspapers should be rather than simply allowing them to grow and hope they turn out as well as they did in the past.

References

1. Cassady, Dave, *The Small Town Newspaper and Its Constituency*, Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Iowa School of Journalism, Iowa City, Ia., 1977.

2. For more complete discussion of the findings of the Oregon study see : Dave Cassady, “Oregon Weeklies and the Web: It's there, just not at the top of the list,” *Grassroots Editor*, Vol.46, No. 1, Spring 2005, pp.11-15.