

## **Reaching Out To Young-Adult Readers**

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“It’s just not right.”

Former Mayor Carty Finkbeiner, a commentator for Toledo, Ohio, television station WTVG gets on his high horse every Monday night and proclaims that something or somebody is “just not right.”

If he commented on the newspaper readership situation among young adults in the United States, I believe he would similarly proclaim that it, too, is “just not right.” But the rise of the mini-dailies and the mini-weeklies may be making it “right” again. Read on.

Young adults regularly pay \$100 a month or more for digital cable or satellite television service that includes movies and time-shifting capabilities.

Young adults are paying \$100 to \$300 for a little gizmo called an iPod so they can listen to their music and other recorded items – even news — whenever and wherever they want.

Young adults are paying \$100 a month or more for cell phones that not only let them talk to their friends but also send and receive text and video.

Young adults are paying \$30-50 a month for DSL lines to connect to their hundreds to thousands of dollars’ worth of computer gear that includes video linkups, game connections and maybe even access to gambling and porn sites.

Young adults are paying upwards of \$100 for satellite radio receivers and \$13 a month or more for programming while they are in their cars and homes.

Yet those same young adults assiduously refuse to reach in their pockets and pull out a lousy two quarters to buy a copy of a daily newspaper or six to eight quarters to buy the Sunday ink-on-paper product.

What is the matter with these kids? It’s just not right!

Is it the parents' fault? Studies show that 50 percent or so of the young adults' parental units are regular newspaper readers. It used to be that kids got the newspaper readership habit from their parents. Not any more. Only about one third to one fifth of the kids are chips off the old newspaper-reading parents' block. Of course, the parents did not have the cell phone, DSL, computer, iPod and other electronic distractions.

Is it the schools' fault? About 75 percent of high schools have a student newspaper and that percentage appears to have fallen from upwards of 85 percent a few years ago. Fewer than 30 percent of high schools that do have student newspapers have a teacher-adviser who is qualified to teach journalism and that percentage appears to be falling. Why the decline? The papers are victims of budget cuts and of principals, superintendents and school boards afraid of criticism and emboldened by the Hazelwood decision that permits censorship. Some schools are doing away with yearbooks as well.

On the other hand, Newspapers-in-Education (NIE) remains a strong program that can increase future circulation and readership by as much as 5 percent. Recent studies show that young people tend to get the newspaper reading habit during ages 12-14. Yet at least one major newspaper, *The Baltimore Sun*, reportedly has cancelled its NIE program.

A few hundred colleges and universities have copied the Dailies-in-Dorms program pioneered by Penn State University in 1997. Student newspapers remain popular on college campuses though readership of those free products appears to be slipping at universities with which I am familiar.

The newspaper industry has pumped a ton of money into school-based programs over the years with some success, yet the trendline of declining readership, especially among young-adult

readers, continues unabated. Sit at a table with newspaper journalists these days and you hear the same depressing refrain: Our readers are leaving and we can't seem to get them back, and the young adults are fundamentally rejecting us, having never given us a chance. How much longer can the newspaper industry sustain these losses before papers start going out of business?

Now let's get beyond what young adults should do. Of course, they should read newspapers. They should take the time to be fully informed about what is going on around them so they can make intelligent decisions at the polls and about their lives and be good citizens. They should eat their spinach, too, but they don't. What are we to do?

Here's what we know. We know that young adults love the Web. It has been said that they live on the Web. Most, but not all, newspapers make some if not all of their content available on the Web for free. We know that most of the news and information content that young adults get is from the Web, and that they get a substantial but lesser amount from cable/satellite TV. We know that young adults favor Google and Yahoo! as entry points to the Web along with cable/satellite TV brand sites such as CNN.com, MSNBC.com and ESPN.com. Newspaper sites such as [newyorktimes.com](http://newyorktimes.com), [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com) and [usatoday.com](http://usatoday.com) get some young-adult action but much less than the previously mentioned ones.

Web site advertising and paid search advertising, while growing, are not adding enough to the bottom line of newspapers – about 3 percent of revenue these days — to make up for the current and future loss of circulation and advertising revenue caused by the defection of young adults from print newspapers. Maybe someday newspaper Web site revenue will be substantial enough to offset print losses, but that appears unlikely in the near future.

We also know that young adults will read the print newspaper product under certain circumstances. Despite some slippage, free college newspapers are still popular with students (and advertisers catering to them). Interestingly, students rarely read their campus newspaper online, suggesting that the student newspaper's content displayed online is not compelling to the typical undergrad.

We know that alternative free weekly newspapers such as the *New Times* and *Village Voice* publications in big and medium-sized cities around the country are picked up by millions of young adults and are fat with advertisements.

We know that the Dailies-In-Dorms program — where papers are picked up free by students — caused a sevenfold increase in newspaper readership at Penn State when inaugurated in 1997. *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, and the *Centre Daily Times*, and the *Daily Collegian* enjoyed the spike in readership. Yet only a few hundred campuses have implemented the Dailies-in-Dorms program. Student newspaper advisers who fear the loss of readership and advertising revenue appear to be their biggest opponents — so much for the advisers' belief in the benefit of a fully informed student body and a wide dissemination of news and comment that the Dailies-in-Dorms program provides.

We further know that the mini-dailies aimed at young adults, originated by the metro folks in several European cities and that hit Boston and Philadelphia commuters five years ago, are sweeping the country. Two were started in Chicago in fall 2002, followed by Washington, D.C., New York, and Dallas. And mini-weeklies are springing up in cities like Miami, Cincinnati and Rochester. The mini-dailies (Monday through Friday) and the mini-weeklies (once a week) have the same characteristics: they're free and tabloid size, they have shorter, punchier stories,

lots of color and more graphics and pictures, and they're full of news that young adults are interested in (sweets) along with some stuff they should be interested in (spinach).

With more than one million copies of the mini-dailies being distributed daily already and several hundred thousand copies of the mini-weeklies going out, the readership of the minis more than offsets the loss of readership that traditional paid daily newspapers are experiencing. This is the great underreported positive development in the newspaper industry today. If advertising follows, the magic key to reversing the skid of the newspaper industry will have been found. We appear to be so used to reporting bad news about ourselves that we have overlooked the good.

Another related development is the rise of the free, targeted upscale home-delivered tabloid newspaper aimed at upscale young adults. Billionaire Philip Anschutz of Denver bought the old *San Francisco Examiner* and made it the free *Examiner*. Then he purchased a string of suburban newspapers in Washington, D.C., and made them a second *Examiner* that is delivered free to a quarter of a million upscale households in the DC suburbs. Anschutz owns the rights to the *Examiner* name in 60 other U.S. cities. In Toledo, Ohio, a free general interest newspaper called the *Toledo Free Press* was started in March 2005. (Disclosure: I write a column and an occasional news feature for the paper.)

So the sea change in the newspaper industry may well be under way. The change is from a largely paid circulation model to a largely free distribution model. This will cost you billions in circulation revenue, not all of which can be made up by advertising revenue, but it will keep the newspaper industry in business for as far as the eye can see. And both the news and advertising needs of the public will be better served because of this "free" development.

Distribution of newspaper products to people who are not interested and to those who lack sufficient economic well-being to be of interest to advertisers will be curtailed (such as Anschutz is doing in Washington, D.C.). People who get the paper on their doorstep largely will be the ones advertisers are seeking.

Remember, the premier advantage of newspapers over every other advertising medium has always been the efficient, relatively inexpensive ability to place a print package of news and advertising on the doorsteps of a desirable audience. Call it force-feeding if you will, but no other advertising medium can do the job. There are no spam blockers and immediate delete keys on people's doorsteps and apartment mail slots.

Today "it is just not right." But over the next few years, you will manage this transition and make it "right," not just for young adults but for all adults. The country always has depended on a Free Press. Now that the magic key has been found, it will come to depend on a *Free Free Press*.

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