

Engaging with local readers, serving the community can be profitable too

“This is an excellent opportunity to invest in a xxxx press at value added pricing! This is a one owner press installed on a single level. The press is shafted with a full array of automation including a number of recent upgrades. NYT print quality!” A message I received by email this morning. I didn’t realise companies were resorting to hard sell in this fashion. I get the feeling that printing press manufacturers are going through tough times. A couple of senior executives I spoke to recently, both with years of print industry experience behind them, echoed similar views. There are hardly any machines being sold these days and even the big ones are finding it difficult, one of them said. Advertising has fallen and what was once a PR barrage has reduced to a trickle. With newspaper reading habit hitting a plateau virtually everywhere, and owners, publishers and editors still juggling with the print-digital conundrum, there doesn’t seem to be much light at the end of the tunnel for press manufacturers.

Sufficiently engaging with local readers is now said to be the key to attract readers to a newspaper. Writing for *The Conversation*, Rachel Matthews, who has worked in the regional newspaper industry for 15 years and is a lecturer in Journalism at Coventry University, the UK, says that the national press is given more attention by both academia and industry despite regional titles dominating in terms of local readers and profits for much of UK newspaper history. A significant point she makes is: profit and community benefit are not incompatible. “Now, with cost cuts, digital editions and other concerns, it can be just as easy to forget about this community role which local newspapers have made their own – but equally, it needn’t be a choice between revenue and serving a community. The future of the local newspaper lies in it working in a way which supports its role as watchdog. By investing financially in and articulating clearly that it provides a service to the community, local newspapers can weather any changes,” she explains.

Matthews points to the new generation of ‘socio-local’ newspapers that would put community benefit

on an equal footing with an element as important as circulation. It is not some distant dream or academic hypothesis, she says, providing the examples of the family-owned Isle of Wright County Press and the cooperative-run West Highland Free Press who “have written this relationship into their business model, and are working to preserve community values while turning a profit”. “If these newspapers are to have a sustainable future, they need to be rescued from the tug of love battle between profit and community which has beset them for 70 years.”

A report prepared for the Geraldine R Dodge Foundation by Jessica Crowell and Kathleen McCollough talks about the importance of running focus groups in the local news community.

As newsrooms reinvent their business model, design new products and services, and invest in community engagement efforts, it is critical that they listen deeply to their communities, they suggest. According to them, focus groups are one model of listening that can be very effective in gathering feedback from a cross-section of people who represent different voices and stakeholders in an area. “The feedback gave newsrooms the confidence to test new ideas and take risks that otherwise might have seemed like blind experiments. We believe that these kinds of focus groups can be important tools for newsrooms to listen to their communities.”

Steve Gray, VP of Strategy and Innovation at Morris Communications in the USA, writing for the WAN-IFRA website, says that as the relentless decline in ad revenues empties more and more newsroom desks, there’s been a little-noted side effect: waning commitment to locally written editorials. Gray intends to make the case for strong local opinion-writing as a key element of community journalism, which creates value. Narrating his experience as an editorial writer, he says she came to understand that the most important editorials were those that unravelled community issues with a combination of facts and logic borne of a desire to raise the common good.

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