

## Wilson Paper Introduces New Name, Morning Publication and New Look

By Sean Ireland  
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The Wilson Times of Wilson, N.C., unveiled a new name, a morning publication schedule and a new look on Tuesday – changes that are making its advertisers very happy.

The name change – from The Wilson Daily Times to The Wilson Times – takes the paper back in history to the name it carried in 1986. It also reflects the fact that the paper and Web site keep readers up-to-date 24-7, not just daily, says Publisher Morgan Dickerman.

Similar to many other newspapers that have recently undergone redesigns, The Wilson Times spent a great deal of time researching what its advertisers and readers liked, what they didn't and what the reactions would be to changes the newspaper was considering, including switching to a.m. delivery and front-page and section-front advertising.

Several studies conducted with advertisers – including an Urban Cash Analysis, Urban Marketing Study and Urban Advertiser Satisfaction Study – shed light on some more troubling trends. "(It) told us that advertisers liked us, but they felt they were not getting the results they needed from us," Dickerman said.

With that piece of information, The Wilson Times began the process of overhauling itself with one guiding principle that took precedence over all others: making the newspaper a better vehicle for advertisers.

"On April 27 and 28, newspaper readers in Wilson were shown a prototype of a redesigned Wilson Times. They hated it," said Alan Jacobson of Brass Tacks Design, the consulting firm that helped the newspaper repurpose itself. "But the redesign launched (Tuesday) in spite of their objections. Why? Because the leaders of The Wilson Times had the courage to do what needed to be done – even if they had to defy readers to reach their goal. According to Gayle Smith, Wilson's sales and marketing director, this redesign should boost ROP revenue by at least 10 percent."

Dickerman said readers' objections were to the front-page ads going down the right column. "Based on their objections, we decided to 'inch into' the front-page ads in the right-hand column on the front page. We now have two and will soon have two more filling up the right side of the front page." He said the paper has these same ads on the right side of most section fronts. "The readers do not object to these ... only the ones on the front page."

Jacobson's guidance for The Wilson Times on the redesign project springs from his belief that the biggest problem facing the newspaper industry is one of falling revenue, not falling readership. "If newspapers want to address their revenue crisis, they need to pay more attention to the folks who provide the revenue: advertisers," he said.

"(Tuesday's) redesign of The Wilson Times is the first to address the revenue crisis in the only way that makes sense – by making advertising revenue the one and only goal."

Having defined advertisers as the target audience on the redesign project, the newspaper found first that they wanted the paper to switch to morning delivery. The Wilson Times also learned that while its advertisers liked the newspaper and the customer service they received from it, they were disappointed by the results of their ads – particularly small-space advertisers, Jacobson said.



Based on the research, Dickerman and his management team at The Wilson Times decided to switch to morning delivery in spite of what readers were telling them about their desire for an afternoon paper.

They also decided to change the advertising content and ad placement in the paper. All ads now emphasize the advertisers' value proposition and competitive advantage, and include a call to action. "Surprisingly, we found that most of Wilson's ads emphasized the name of the company, years in business and local ownership rather than the businesses' benefit to customers," Jacobson said.

Now ads are being stacked from the top of the page to the bottom in a single width along the outside edge of each page, rather than stacking across the bottom in multiple widths. In addition, ads appear on the front page and section fronts in the same top-to-bottom configuration. "So far, our advertising focus groups have liked it very much," Dickerman said.

Readers have been less welcoming. According to research, subscribers hated the ads on the front page and sports front. They said the ads crowded news off the front page and made the paper look cheap, less authoritative and like a shopper. "However, not one reader said they would cancel their subscription because of the front-page ads," Jacobson said.

"While they hated the ads, readers liked everything else about the new design, including the cleaner layout style, simplified typography and ragged-right text type, which they said was easier to read."

According to the research, advertisers who read the paper reacted like readers: They liked the design changes and disliked the front-page ads. But as advertisers, they welcomed the opportunity to advertise on the front page and other section fronts, and they liked the cleaner ad stacks on the inside pages. Advertisers who did not read the paper loved the opportunity to advertise on the fronts. They also offered to buy positions they saw in the prototype.

"From these tests we learned that we could increase ad revenue without losing subscribers," Jacobson said.

"We have had push back from the ads on the front page," Dickerman said. "These ads are the crux of, as Alan says, a 'bold fresh approach for a newspaper helping their advertisers,' so we are going to keep them but have only two when we launch and introduce the others gradually.

"Alan says we will get more calls on this than anything we have ever done, and that I should be prepared. (We) are prepared for the negative and positive responses. But we are confident that we will not lose many, if any, subscribers, and that this is what a newspaper should look like in this day of Internet and new media."

As of yesterday, Dickerman reports that no readers have dropped their subscriptions and that the paper has, instead, picked up some additional subscriptions.

He said that, contrary to early fears, the new design is being well received by the community.

Dickerman said the paper could have not accomplished this total makeover, without the "brilliant" work of Alan Jacobson and the full support of the newspaper's staff, especially: Tim Rogers, editor; Drew Small, [wilsontimes.com](http://wilsontimes.com); Gayle Smith, sales and marketing; and her assistant/classified director, Karen Boykin; Tim Haywood, production director; and his assistants, Royce Goff and Larry Sullivan; Frank Heacox, circulation director; and Perry Griggs, the paper's new pressroom supervisor. Dickerman also said that "alot of my conception of the way I wanted to transform The Wilson Daily Times to The Wilson Times Company – with The Wilson Times and [www.wilsontimes.com](http://www.wilsontimes.com) – came from attending many SNPA seminars."

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