

from the snpa president

Let's Set the Record Straight:

The Crisis Facing Newspapers is Not an Audience Problem; It's a Revenue Problem



By Donna Barrett
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Enough already. Partial facts and misinformation about newspapers are distorting the view for everyone, including readers and advertisers.

Let's set the record straight: Newspapers still enjoy considerable readership and deliver strong results for advertisers. More Americans read printed newspapers than own dogs. More Americans read printed newspapers than watch the Super Bowl. Newspapers and their Web sites reach a larger audience than ever before.

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The crisis facing newspapers is not an audience problem. It is a revenue problem.

Newspapers deliver vital information to communities, as they have since this country was settled. But something has to pay for all of that news. Advertising has traditionally supported the valuable content provided by newspapers. Two developments have devastated that revenue.

The first is the recession. Newspapers are no different than television, radio, Internet, Major League Baseball, NASCAR and all businesses that rely on other businesses for money from advertising and promotion. The recession has led to a significant decrease in ad spending. Everyone is hurting. Newspapers just talk about it more.

Free Internet sites such as Craigslist are the other factor. These sites siphon off considerable classified advertising.

It is tough to compete against free, and free doesn't pay for journalists.

There is no shortage of other theories on why newspapers are hurting. Most come from those without direct responsibility for the financial health of a newspaper. Some popular explanations:

- Newspapers are too liberal and drive off readers as a result.
- Newspaper publishers are slow to embrace new technology.
- Newspapers are losing readers to the Internet.

As my father used to say, they don't know what they don't know. In reality, none of these theories is responsible for newspapers' woes.

Overall readership is growing. Most publishers embrace technological advances to serve their audience, but they face a real-world problem that these advances usually provide much less revenue than their core business.

Finally, newspaper companies are losing classified revenue, not readers, to the Internet. In one of life's ironies, newspapers are growing audience through the very outlet that takes away so much revenue.

Newspaper publishers face many challenges in a changing world. They must answer some important revenue questions if their newspapers are to continue serving our communities as effectively as they have for more than 300 years.

The least we can do is make sure the issues are not distorted and misinterpreted.