

New Newspaper Group 'Fights Back' in Print Ads, Web Site

By William B. Ketter
CNHI News Service

Newspapers and their online offspring combined are more popular than ever imagined and yet media reports nearly always paint a portrait of an industry gasping for air in the digital age.

This wrongheaded perception stems from the economic recession that's affected all advertising-based businesses, and from the myth that newspapers no longer attract the public support they once enjoyed.

But the biggest contributing factor to the distorted picture of the industry's condition just might be us, to paraphrase Pogo, the comic strip character.

With that irony in mind, a group of concerned newspaper executives has decided to fight back against the misrepresentation of newspapers and their continuing importance to the public, to the marketplace and to democracy. The name for the grassroots crusade is the "Newspaper Project."

They've created a Web site – www.newspaperproject.org – that will feature stories and commentary about the value of newspapers, and share tips on how they can cope with the tough times.

Monday, the group launched a series of print and online ads telling, among other facts, the story of how American newspapers and their Web sites daily reach 100 million people, more than watched Sunday's Super Bowl.

The ads appeared in major newspapers, including the New York Times and the Washington Post, and also in scores of community dailies, including the 89 owned by Community Newspaper Holdings Inc.

"The roar of misinformation swirling around newspapers is deafening," said Donna Barrett, CNHI's president and CEO. "We must cut through the noise to set the record straight."

The group's message, said Barrett, is straightforward:

- Newspapers are very much alive and growing when you consider the print and online audience together. And they talk to far more people than their radio, television and Internet competitors.
- Newspapers have earned the public's trust because they employ professional journalists to verify news for truth, accuracy and context, and they are usually the first source of local news.
- Advertisers continue to invest in newspapers because they deliver results. They still move goods and services more reliably than other forms of promotion.
- Newspapers remain essential to our democratic system of government, serving as a watchdog against crime and corruption, and a guide dog for information that allows the public to make informed decisions on the issues of the day.

"Newspapers don't have an audience problem," said Barrett, who is also president of SNPA. "Newspapers have a revenue problem, driven primarily by the recession."

In addition to Barrett, leaders of the public outreach campaign include Brian P. Tierney, publisher and CEO of the Philadelphia Inquirer and Daily News; Randy Siegel, president and publisher of Parade Publications; and Jay Smith, former president of Cox Newspapers.



More People Will Read A Newspaper Today Than Watched Sunday's Big Game.

NP newspaper PROJECT
www.newspaperproject.org

As of Tuesday morning, 899 hits had been recorded at the location on the SNPA Web site where these ads could be downloaded for publication in SNPA member newspapers.

“A lot of people, both in our business as well as media decision-makers, are frustrated with the lack of perspective and the inability to get the full story (about newspapers) out,” said Tierney in an interview with the Philadelphia Inquirer.

“Because journalism is so essential for a democracy, we really need to tell this story ourselves in a more aggressive way. Rather than wait for everybody to get together, an insurgent group of folks decided to do it on our own.”

In doing so, the group said, it is not diminishing the serious challenges facing newspapers, other media and every other business during the current economic ferment.

“We acknowledge the challenges facing the newspaper industry in today’s rapidly changing media world,” said Barrett. “However, we reject the notion that newspapers – and the valuable content that newspaper journalists provide – have no future.”

Barrett said newspapers are adjusting to the economic and industry conditions, making changes aimed at keeping them profitable and informative.

There’s no question newspaper content and appearance are being reexamined and rapidly overhauled to meet smaller budgets and the changing requirements of the public.

Management structures and sales practices are also changing, with the emphasis on fewer executives and more soldiers in the trenches.

But what hasn’t changed – and what the Newspaper Project wants to burn into the public psyche – is the primary function of newspapers: to inform and to connect readers to the world around them.

Nobody does that better than newspapers, and because of this crucial function, they expect to weather both the recession and the digital age, despite the media pundits who bellow otherwise.

William B. Ketter is vice president of news for Community Newspaper Holdings Inc., a Birmingham, Ala.-based information company with news outlets in 26 states.

SNPA eBulletin 2-5-09