

Commentary

Your Adaptable Daily Press is Alive and Well



Digby Solomon

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“Is the Daily Press going to be OK?”

That’s the question of the day from everyone I encounter in my community.

It’s completely understandable, given the nonstop bad news surrounding the newspaper industry.

Several newspaper companies, including our parent company, Tribune, and the publishers of the papers in Philadelphia, Minneapolis and the Chicago Sun-Times, have filed for Chapter 11 protection from their creditors. The Hearst chain shut down its Seattle paper and Scripps Howard closed Denver’s Rocky Mountain News after 150 years. Other well-known dailies are reportedly losing money.

The perception of imminent doom is in part self-inflicted, given print journalists’ coverage of the subject – they don’t shy away from the facts, even if it hits close to home. Their counterparts at the television networks, by contrast, have said little about how network news audiences have dropped by half over the past decade, as cable fragmentation hit home. The ratings of some of today’s top network TV shows would not have been high enough to avoid cancellation in the 1980s.

Your local evening news on TV doesn’t say much about their own audience and revenue losses. Neither does radio.

In other words, the newspaper industry, like all media, is going through a fundamental business change – in the midst of the toughest economic climate our nation has faced since the Great Depression.

But most daily newspapers, including our own, still are profitable on an operating basis.

Yes, we’re making a lot less than we did last year, but that’s the product of a temporary recession that has hurt our major advertisers, including car dealers and real estate brokers.

As a result of the lower revenue, we’ve had to cut back expenses, notably staff and pages, which are very apparent to our long-time readers.

But to put things in historical perspective, most newspapers are still considerably larger than they were during the days when they were the only news game in town, 80 years ago.

Few of us are old enough to remember the salad days of the newspaper business. We base our comparison of the industry on a window of a few decades in the latter half of the 20th century, when newspapers enjoyed a short-lived lion’s share of audience aggregation and advertising. Ironically, that very profitable time came after a transition in the newspaper business, when many major cities saw all but one of their dailies disappear, and the evening TV news, coupled with longer commutes, tolled the death knell for many an afternoon newspaper. Industry doomsayers predicted the end of print media back then, too – but instead the number of daily newspapers actually increased, as new community papers sprang up in the suburbs and

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exurbs to satisfy changing American consumer habits.

Over-the-air broadcast audiences were a lot bigger in the late 20th century, too, when the average city boasted only three TV network affiliates and one independent. And I can remember when some of the larger radio stations in town fielded a full-time news staff, instead of relying on scraps from the newspaper. Cable, the Internet and satellite radio have fragmented the audience, and all media have adapted to survive.

Declining newspaper circulation numbers can also be misleading, because they don't show that most newspapers have actually grown their audience, in print and online. Much of the circulation that newspapers have shed came from highly discounted sales to people who really didn't engage with the newspaper, and probably were not the best prospects for our advertisers, either.

On any given day, my newspaper and its print and Internet divisions touch 78 percent of the adults in our market, and eight out of 10 homeowners. To match the reach of a handful of ads in our product, an advertiser would have to buy 5,000 prime time commercials on the leading network TV affiliate, or 145 morning drive-time ads on every one of the more than two dozen commercial radio stations serving our market.

Looking to the future, newspapers will thrive by focusing our print product increasingly on the needs of the specific adult audience that is most likely to read us – adults who are engaged in the community. These are the folks who vote, join the PTA, and volunteer in church or civic groups. No other medium covers the news they need to know, whether it's local government or family and health issues. And our sales staff are learning to sell this demographic reach to advertisers.

That's a sign of life, which requires constant adaptation, not of desperation, as some of our detractors would have you believe.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, who returned home from a trip abroad to find some papers had printed his obituary – the rumors of our demise are greatly exaggerated!

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