

Newspaper Launches 'Jobless in Greer' Site as Community Outreach

By Sean Ireland



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Newspapers are always searching for ways to connect with their readers, and as difficult as the economic recession has been on the newspaper industry, that basic need hasn't changed.

Hard times or not, newspapers must keep finding ways to build strong connections to their audiences, be it in print, electronically or through nontraditional products.

In fact, the recession has spurred one newspaper into discovering a new way to reach out to its readers. By following [The Greer \(S.C.\) Citizen's](#) example, other newspapers may find they too can provide hope, help and inspiration to those whose lives have been turned upside down through the loss of their jobs.

There is no corner of this country that has escaped the economic downturn, but the upstate area of South Carolina has been hit particularly hard. Greer, S.C., located just northeast of Spartanburg, has been run down by the auto industry's difficulties. BMW Manufacturing in Greer cut 700 jobs just before the holidays, and a major sector of the local economy – auto parts suppliers – has seen business drastically affected by the troubles of American carmakers. With double-digit inflation in South Carolina, second worst in the nation, Greer is hurting.

It would be easy for the city's twice-weekly, 10,000-circulation newspaper to try to downplay the difficulties, or sterilize the news by reporting raw recitations of impersonal unemployment and economic statistics. After all, who wants to make it tougher to sell advertising by reminding people that times are tough?

Rather than shying away from the bad news however, The Greer Citizen has turned reporting on the local economy into a community service outreach effort aimed at turning it into good news. It's an effort called "[Jobless in Greer.](#)"

"We launched 'Jobless in Greer' in early April," said Editor [Jim Fair](#). "We heard about so many people being out of work that we figured we would use the power of the press and all its resources to tell their stories – in print, on the Web and with a Facebook page. And the stories would bring the human aspects of joblessness into the souls of the readers instead of just being a statistic among millions."

There are several components to the campaign.

At the Citizen's Web site, [greercitizen.com](#), unemployed readers can post their resumes, photos and e-mail addresses for free, and they can join the newspaper's online networking group on Facebook. It's a quick way for employers to find newly unemployed workers who might have just the right set of skills to fill a need.

"It was an extension of having people looking for work networking on a designated site in the community they lived and wanted to remain working in," Fair said.

In print, individuals are profiled in feature stories, with details about their previous jobs and why they were laid off. There are sidebars providing financial and medical advice, job interview and resume tips, and primers on accessing government aid. There are links provided to the online information.

"The stories are human and thus provide the personal and emotional feelings of the people," Fair said. "It's a way to show that the people who are losing jobs, through no fault of their own, are our friends, associates, neighbors and acquaintances."

"We've learned that our readers and community are sending notes of encouragement, trading stories and offering services directly to the laid-off workers," he added. "The jobless' e-mail address is published, and this is how the networking is done. For example, one person we featured received a call from a local pharmacist committing to free medicine for their children until a job was found. We've had about a dozen inquiries. It's too early to tell if we helped anyone find a job, but those that do provide tips on how they were persistent in acquiring one."

So far, handling the information has not required too much staff time. "We get information by word of mouth, mail, e-mail and phone. I handle all the correspondence so far," Fair said. "It takes about a half a day at this point, but we will commit to everyone who wants us to help them tell their story and use our resources to find a job or aid."

Fair offered a few tips for putting together the stories of the unemployed, such as publishing family photos of those being featured. "Let people tell their story," he said. "Don't clutter a good story by trying to overwrite. Children will tell the most astonishing stories how they intuitively help their parents during this family crisis. When people call or write and ask for help and you can provide them an outlet to share their stories, it is rewarding."

"We ask for resumes so that we can contact former employers or references as a ways of checks and balances in legitimizing the integrity of the people asking for our help," he added.

"I hope other newspapers get involved (in a project like this) because it hits at the heart of our communities," Fair said. "Our industry's philosophy has always been that everybody has a story to tell. Well, every layoff is a personal story of hardships and heartbreaks. Some are also inspirational in their determination to weather a difficult time in their lives by turning to faith, family or friends. I don't pretend to believe that we will gain substantial readership – that's not the goal. We need to become partners in helping communities and cities survive this economic calamity – one job at a time."

For more information, contact Jim Fair at (864) 877-2076.

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This photo of Frank Duke and his children, Nicholas (bottom), Frankie IV (center), and Christopher (top), ran in The Greer Citizen as part of the newspaper's "Jobless in Greer" community service outreach. Duke lost his job recently and posted his photo, resume and e-mail address for free on the newspaper's Web site, greercitizen.com. He also was featured in the print newspaper.