Rethinking Newspaper Websites: We Got It Wrong. It’s Time to Fix It.

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There were some flaws in our thinking and our assumptions when community newspapers rushed to create websites 10 to 15 years ago.

Three of those flaws stand out:

- The decision that most of us made to give away our content for free. (We shouldn’t.)
- The expectation that a new audience would flock to our websites even though they were not reading our newspapers. (They won’t.)
- The belief that the increase in online ad revenue would offset the decline in print ad revenue. (It doesn’t.)

Today we are sadder, wiser and poorer.

So where do we go from here? For starters, we need to differentiate between community newspaper sites (weeklies and small dailies) and the industry giants like nytimes.com and usatoday.com. I’m concentrating here on the community newspaper sites.

Options for local news

The difference between small newspaper websites and larger ones is enormous, and it’s not just a matter of more visitors. Yes, nytimes.com draws millions of visitors each day while 5,000 or 10,000 views might be a good day for a little community daily’s site. The most important difference, however, is the type of news or information the visitor is seeking.

No one goes to nytimes.com to find out what happened at last night’s city council meeting in Peoria, Ill. They go to nytimes.com for the same things they find in the print version: national and world news, business news, lifestyle news, arts and entertainment news, cultural news, etc. They can get much of that same news – sometimes at the same time, and sometimes a day or two later once it has been picked up and rewritten – on the sites of other news agencies.

People living in Peoria can get all that news on nytimes.com, usatoday.com, msnbc.com or a host of other news sites. But if Peoria folks want news about last night’s city council meeting, the odds are good they will have to buy the Peoria Journal Star or visit its website, pjstar.com.

That localness – not the volume of traffic – is what distinguishes the websites. If The New York Times stops posting its news stories – or puts them behind a pay wall, as it is now doing to some extent – then people looking for news can still go to other news sites to get similar material. That’s not true for the Peorias of the nation.

The relative uniqueness of content is what gives community newspapers two very clear options for local news: either collect money somehow for it – or stop posting it (at least most of it).

Giving away the news we spend so much time and money to gather is counterproductive.

Who is reading that free news online? Our former paying customers, that’s who.

Look at the demographics of the visitors to the news portions of your site. You will find the profile is very similar to the profile of regular print readers. The reason they aren’t buying the newspaper as faithfully today is that we are giving them the news for free.

Meanwhile, those who don’t much care about the news – typically the younger people – don’t find it any more inviting online than it was in print.

Remember how we worried in the 1980s and 1990s that we weren’t attracting the younger readers? That hasn’t changed. But the issue was never that they disliked the delivery method (print). They simply didn’t care about the news.

Read sociologist Robert Putnam’s book Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community. The younger people (and there’s a distinct correlation to age) aren’t reading newspapers, but they also aren’t going to church, aren’t voting, aren’t participating in community organizations. It’s a generational issue, not a technological problem.

We don’t have to give up, however. There’s a way to keep our paying readers and attract our nonreaders.

Three websites in one

I propose that we think about our community news websites in three categories.

1. **Breaking news.** Free, fast and brief. Include the headlines and a paragraph or so of the top stories from that day’s (or week’s) newspaper. But don’t give the whole story.

   The Gannett Co.’s theory is to break news online and then come back the next day in print with more detail, context and analysis. It’s a good concept, and for the bigger newspapers on the bigger stories, that might be possible. For most newspapers on most stories, however, it’s unrealistic. News staffs have shrunk in the past few years to the point where
they have difficulty even covering that breaking news item the first day. They can’t go back and essentially rereport or rewrite it for the next day because they are already off and running on the next breaking story.

So the solution is to put the bare bones of the breaking story online immediately, followed by a teaser line saying, “Read all the details in tomorrow’s Daily Planet.” The news portion of the website in effect becomes a tip service on what’s happening, and at the same time it promotes the print product and paid portions of the website. The reason this works for a community newspaper – unlike the national news websites – is that there is seldom a competing news organization that can go after the local story.

**2. Full news report.** Paid subscription or pay-per-use. The only real question here is what’s the best way to get paid.

The easiest approach for most community newspapers is probably an electronic edition that’s an exact replica of the print version. It’s not hard to find a vendor who will take a newspaper’s page files and upload them into an e-edition. Print subscribers would get a password for the e-edition either at no cost or at a nominal additional fee. That gives them the option of getting their news and advertising however they prefer.

I would argue against a lower subscription cost for the e-edition alone (except maybe for out-of-area customers). A lower price would give readers an incentive to drop the print version. It would also undermine the newspaper’s efforts to deliver preprints to the readers. For the same reason, tablet applications should be priced in line with the print version.

Other pay-per-use options are gradually coming on the scene, and that pattern is likely to accelerate. The best option might be something along the lines of an iTune-like arrangement where an independent company handles all billing from a central location with a credit card already registered.

**3. “Eat, Shop, Play” package.** Free. This is where we bring in all the people who don’t really have much – if any – interest in traditional local news.


Most community newspapers do this badly on their websites. They simply pick up what’s in their weekly entertainment sections and post the package without any thought to links or enhancements.

There are some programs like Metromix that have good packages of this type of news, but they are focused almost exclusively on the major markets.

Community newspapers have the opportunity to own this line of information. With the right search engine optimization efforts, pages of this kind can also boost the newspaper’s website when visitors are coming to the area.

Unlike the more traditional news stories that draw the same profile of print readers and online visitors, an “Eat, Shop, Play” package can attract a much wider audience and offer a great opportunity for advertisers who want to reach that audience. Promoting this new and expanded portion of the website is essential. And the promotion can’t be limited to the existing newspaper and news website – that’s the old audience, not the new one.

It makes sense to do this portion of the site without a fee because the appeal goes far beyond the readership of the print products. It supplements print rather than competing against it.

**Looking ahead**

For more than a decade we have been steadily undermining our print products by devaluing the news and information they provide.

For community newspapers in particular, it’s time for a new approach.

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