Publications' need for revenue threatens public relations efforts

Personnel announcements used to be one of the most reliable and easy forms of publicity for a company. In the years I worked at PR firms, we always sent out these type of announcements, usually including a headshot. Eventually, most of them would end up in the business section of the local newspaper, or within specialty newspapers or magazines.

Getting personnel announcements in print was a good way to keep companies in the public eye, and also served as a morale boost to the new or promoted employee. Even 20 plus years later, I still have the clipping from *Adweek* showing my appointment to Boston ad firm Houston Effler (now defunct).

Apparently, those days of easy publicity are coming to an end. A few weeks ago I noticed that the *Washington Business Journal* changed its personnel announcement page (called "People on the Move") to show the words "paid advertising" at the top. Effectively, the *Business Journal* had started charging companies in order to publish these announcements.

As someone who has worked in communications for more than 20 years, I am not surprised that this is happening in 2017, but

I am disheartened, and pessimistic about the future of media relations.

It’s not surprising simply because print publications are struggling with declining subscriptions and reduced advertising, and they are looking for additional revenue. Charging for personnel announcements seems harmless, and if companies want to highlight their new hires, perhaps they won’t hesitate to spend a few hundred dollars (the Business Journal is charging $350 for an “enhanced” profile that will appear online and in print).

It’s disheartening because it has further blurred the line between advertising and editorial content, and opens the possibility up that companies will be willing to “pay to play.” If there is money to be made from charging for what was previously known as earned media, then there is no incentive for publications to cover any press release or announcement unless it is major (e.g., new iPhone).

The pressures on print journalism have been covered before. We know that people are not buying or subscribing as much to print, and we know that publications are asking fewer reporters to produce more content, more often, and with fewer resources. Most publications have a digital presence, and many struggle with instituting a pay wall for readers to access their content.

It may seem trivial for a publication to charge for personnel announcements, but it points to a much larger problem and also to serious consequences for editorial integrity. It’s not only happening in print. Broadcast also seems to require more revenue than what it is getting from traditional advertising. More people are getting news from websites and social media sites, and fewer are watching the evening news. Over the past several weeks, I’ve noticed a trend in which national restaurants are getting local news to cover food and drink specials, not only on air, but on social media channels.

For a specific example, just last Friday, I noticed that WJLA (the ABC affiliate in Washington, D.C., owned by Sinclair Broadcasting) re-tweeted one of its local reporters, Kevin Lewis, discussing a special on a drink offered at Applebees, the national restaurant chain. Lewis included a link to the “news” about this special on the WJLA website, which then linked to a press release directly on Applebees website. At no point did the words “sponsored” or “paid advertising” show on the tweets or on the press release. If the WJLA news team thinks that sharing drink specials from a restaurant is actual news, they are not familiar with real journalism.

In this era where journalism is being called “fake news” whenever it digs up inconvenient information for a politician, it is not a good look to get money to run publicity, without even acknowledging that it is paid.

Is the Washington Post trying to alienate subscribers?

Over the past five years, since I moved to Washington, I have seen the Washington Post decline as its price continues to climb. When I got here, you could get the paper for 50 cents. Now, it is 75 cents. Subscription costs also continue to rise. And yet, the paper gets smaller and more irrelevant. It's almost like the Post wants to get rid of its subscribers and print edition readers.

Here are several questionable moves the Post has engaged in over the past couple of years:

- Increased subscription rates and got rid of the ability to pay for more than 8 weeks at a time (there used to be an option to pay for 12 weeks, etc., thus locking in a price)
- Made TV Week opt-in and then charged 15 cents for each copy
- Got rid of separate business section and folded it into front section
- Created Capital Business "for subscribers only" and is charging $50 per year for it
- Posts print content online a day or two before it is published, effectively making newspaper content available sooner to the entire world for FREE.
- Cut back substantially on copy editors and other newsroom personnel, making the newspaper rife with errors (grammatical, spelling and factual)
- Publishes the Express, a smaller version of the Post, for FREE

All these moves seem (with the exception of publishing all content online for free) seemed to be designed to increase the Post bottom line AT THE EXPENSE OF ITS BASE. The most loyal

readers are those that pay to get the newspaper, and yet, the Post is basically screwing those readers by charging them MORE to get what others get for free.

Clearly, it is not a financially wise move to subscribe to the Post, so why do we continue to subscribe? Often, it is because of habit. Many of us still like reading a paper newspaper with our morning coffee. And some of us love the puzzles. Otherwise, the printed Washington Post has NO value. Everything in the printed edition is available online, for free. If I want to take it with me, I can pick up an Express. There is absolutely no financial incentive to subscribe. And the Post seems to be doing everything in its power to get me to stop subscribing.

If the Post continues down this path, it will reduce its circulation numbers substantially, which in turn will affect the amount of money they can charge advertisers. As ad revenue goes down, along with subscriber revenue, the newspapers bottom line will suffer. And then they will want to charge for online content. Online readers will probably not pay since plenty of other quality content is available elsewhere for free.

Can the Post reverse course? Probably not thus leaving us with a crappy newspaper we are paying more for…good thing some of us have birdcages to line.

Share / Save ...

Editor & Publisher to shut

down

What does it say about the publishing industry when the venerable, 108-year-old trade journal covering the industry is folding?Read the story here.

It seems inevitable that we will see continued downturn in the magazine market. More and more, people are turning to digital media for all their news and information. And why not? It is there, at your fingertips. It is continually updated and often, you don't have to pay for it.

Magazines are starting to seem as quaint as LPs (vinyl records for those who don't remember).

Numbers don't lie

Newspapers are in decline. It's a fact.

This is the first paragraph from a Washington Post article entitled "The accelerating decline of newspapers by Frank Ahrens:

> *"U.S. newspaper circulation has hit its lowest level in seven decades, as papers across the country lost 10.6 percent of their paying readers from April through September, compared with a year earlier."*

The numbers were released by the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC), which measures circulation for print media across the United States. Some interesting (and sad) facts from the study:

- 30.4 million Americans buy daily newspapers, 40 million on Sundays
- Daily circulation has been declining since 1987
- In 1940, 31 percent of Americans bought a newspaper. Today, it is 13%.
- The top five newspapers are: Wall Street Journal, USA Today, New York Times, Los Angeles Times and The Washington Post (all except the Journal have lost readers)
- USA Today suffered the highest reader loss, declining by 17.2%, due in part to a decline in the travel industry

As fewer people buy print newspapers, fewer advertisers will pay fewer dollars for the chance to display their ads therein. What will happen to the industry? More cuts and less paper, that is for sure. The New York Times recently announced another round of layoffs from its newsroom. The Washington Post is desperate to reinvent itself and recently went through a complete redesign.

Is there a solution? Your thoughts?

What does the folding of Gourmet and Modern Bride mean?

Yesterday came the news that Conde Nast will be folding its long running and popular publications Gourmet and Modern Bride. A few other magazines are also ceasing publication, resulting in more people being laid off at Conde Nast. The reason? Decline in both ad sales and circulation.

What does it mean?

It means that print is on its last legs. With advertising down across the board, and people abandoning print for various reasons (cost, environmental concerns, can get content online), I see a not-so-distant future where there will be no print magazines at all. The costs to print will outweigh the revenue generated, as was the case with Gourmet and Modern Bride.

Even with loyal readers, quality content and a weighty history, Gourmet will print its last issue in November. For now, C-N plans to keep printing Bon Apetit. Modern Bride's last issue is the current one. Brides will up its printing to monthly. Mergers in the print world mean less choice for advertisers. We may see ad prices jump. And then, will advertisers stick with print? Doubtful.

What are your thoughts?

Why bother with print?

A Caffeinated Op-Ed

Today I want to question the Washington Post. Specifically, I want to know why it bothers searching for subscribers, and indeed, printing its newspaper every day. It seems to me, more and more, that the Post wants to get rid of subscribers and concentrate on giving away its content for free.

I often visit washingtonpost.com to see the weather, latest news, blogs, etc. I also get a subscription to the paper because I like to read printed material with my morning coffee. Today, as I was checking the WaPo website I saw that

they have redesigned the Sunday magazine. And this is the kicker—all of it is available online for free, two days earlier than subscribers get the same material.

Subscribers PAY. Website visitors do not pay. Why on earth would you make MORE content available earlier at NO COST? How is this a smart business decision? Why would you not embargo content until paid subscribers can access it?

It seems to me that the Post is doing what it can to make sure people do not buy or subscribe to the printed newspaper. Anyone looking to save 75 cents per issue can just log on to the website and get all the content of the printed piece plus early content and not pay a cent. That translates to at least a $6.00 per week (the Sunday paper costs $1.50).

Should I cancel my subscription? I ask that to the Washington Post. Why on earth should I continue to pay for something I could get for free????

How Newspapers Are Killing Themselves

We can dub it newspaper suicide when newspapers do things that are guaranteed to reduce subscription rates, and I don't mean by endorsing an unpopular candidate or showing bias on their pages. It is by cannibalizing their own print readers.

Let me give you a case in point about my local newspaper, the fabled Washington Post. Last Friday, I am checking the weather and blogs on the Washington Post website, and lo and behold, I see columnist Mark Fisher's LAST column. I read it to learn that he is leaving the Post, why, etc. Fast forward to Sunday.

I settle in with my ever-thinner newspaper, and guess what, I see Mark Fisher's last column in PRINT. Now let me rephrase this in monetary terms. I read Mark Fisher's column on Friday online for FREE, and I read the same column in print for a price. (P.S. you can read lots of Sunday print columns online, on Friday).

Then, if this is not enough to get me thinking that I am a sucker for paying to have the newspaper delivered to me when all I have to do is turn on my computer to read the same stuff online, that I see that TV Week has now become an opt-in to the paper, meaning I have to actually call the Post to tell them that I want to continue receiving this handy-dandy TV guide. Let me repeat this again: I have to tell them to deliver it.

A couple of months ago, the Post folded its printed Book World supplement, making it online only. And in fact, if you want a listing of paperback bestsellers in the DC area, you have to go online, because the printed edition just lists the hardcover bestseller list.

And here's another piece of the suicide pact that the Post seems to have: they are now touting a special online only investigation on the front page of the printed paper. So, it seems, they want me, a reader of the print version, to go online. If I haven't been online before, then I will realize that the entire newspaper plus much more is available for free.

In effect, the newspaper is driving me to go online. Special investigations, columns available before their print date, up to date event reviews, blog posts, discussions….why would I want to pay to get a newspaper delivered? I am asking that every day, and I bet a bunch of people are too. The thing is the paper is still making money from subscriptions and print advertising, right? So why are they not giving subscribers more not less????

In my opinion, this is a conscious attempt to drive people to the online version so that they can stop issuing a print version. Then, they will save printing and delivery costs, and finally, start charging for the online version once the printed version disappears. You will only pay for something if there is no alternative, right? The Post has been doing this piecemeal, but we are seeing the effects in a much reduced printed version, a heftier online version and a mandate for all reporters to blog, Tweet, and have a Facebook page. Obviously, the future in online.

What do you think?

The defense of newspapers

It was a matter of time, I suppose. The newspaper industry has finally woken up and realized it needs to defend itself. It is as if the newspapers industry decided to say to the world, much like Mark Twain did, the rumors of my death are greatly exaggerated.

Today (which is Memorial Day), buried in the Style section of the Washington Post (which makes me wonder) is a half-page ad entitled: The Reality About Newspapers, paid for by the Arlington, VA-based Newspaper Association of America. The ad attempts to defend the viability of newspapers. It proposes to set the record straight about the following “myths:”

1. No one reads newspapers (they say more than 104 million people read every day –in the US? Worldwide?)
2. Young people don’t read newspapers (they say 61 percent of 18-24 year olds read a paper or visit a newspaper

website)

3. Newspaper readership is tanking (They say newspaper readership declined a “mere 1.8% compared to 10% decline in prime time TV viewership)
4. Many newspapers are going out of business (they say newspapers remain profitable????)
5. Newspaper advertising doesn’t work (Google research says 56% of consumers researched product that they saw in a newspaper)
6. No creative options in newspapers (says who?)
7. If newspapers close, you will still be able to get news from other sources (newspapers are the premiere source of journalism—no quibble there)

The ad concludes with the idea that the newspaper industry is transforming itself, and invites you to visit www.newspapermedia.com.

I am not sure that these are all “myths,” or that they are widely held, and I am not sure the ad did a good job of refuting them. The facts don’t all add up and they don’t clarify who is reading newspapers and where. Additionally, the placement day and place within the newspaper makes it highly unlikely that many people will see this. Besides, isn’t printing an ad about defending newspapers in the newspaper preaching to the choir?

It was time to hear the newspaper side of the story. But the facts are there: several newspapers have closed their doors in the past few months and many are seeing falling ad revenues and decreasing readership. If the Newspaper Association wants to salvage its industry it must do a better, more clever job of getting its message across. This may be one of the lamest ads I have ever read, and I read a newspaper every day!!!!

The opinion ad

Newspapers are in a downward spiral

Every day there is more bad news for the newspaper industry. The *New York Times* will eliminate its City section, Chicago Sun-Times is filing Chapter 11, *Washington Pos*t is offering its fourth buyout in 6 years, and on and on. Even CBS Sunday Morning covered the coming "death" of newspapers.

Paid opinions

One area that is fairly unique to newspapers is the paid opinion ad. Usually a full page, this ad will carry the unadultarated opinion of an organization, group, industry or even individual. The target is public opinion and/or lawmakers. We've seen "it's our fault" ads and "you're wrong and here's why" ads. In fact, this is a time honored way of getting opinions across without the filter of an editor or a reporter.

Where will they go?

Sure there is advertising on the Internet, between pop ups and banners, we're often inundated with advertising messages. However, we can pretty much ignore these ads. Only if we are in the market for say, acai diet supplement, do we click to find out more. Opinion ads use the full page newspaper format because they need the space to communicate a complicated message. It's not about a sale or product attributes. I can't see how these type of ads will subsist in an Internet-only market.

How Not to Make Friends

Well folks, Facebook has done it again. It has irritated its legions of users by changing its layout. Apparently the folks at Facebook are not too savvy when it comes to public perception. If this was the first time, then we could let it pass. After all, Matt Zuckerberg is all of 12 years old or something such. But this is the upteenth time the company does something that alienates its core public, and thus creates NEGATIVE publicity for itself. Case in point, read this blog entry in the Huffington Post. Facebook has been down this road before. And it doesn't learn. I really wonder if Facebook understands anything at all about public relations. I don't expect Zuckerberg to understand, but he should know enough to hire somebody that can provide him with communications counsel. If the company keeps doing stuff like this, it will become the Tylenol Poisoning example for the next generation (you know, how Tylenol dealt with crisis back in the 80s when someone tampered with its products…). This is not a crisis, per se, but it creates ill will. Some people will use Facebook less, and that translates into fewer eyeballs for its one major source of revenue, the ads. And do I have to spell out what less revenue means? If so, let me introduce you to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, now online only.

It is ironic in the nth degree that Facebook is an online meeting place for friends. Friends like each other, generally speaking, and I am not liking Facebook right now.