



Community Newsroom Success Strategies

BUSINESS – AN EVERYDAY BEAT

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DEVELOPING POLICY: THREE STEPS

Set policy:

What is news and what is advertising?

Are there standard policies for standard items?

Who sets the policy? Are news and advertising departments aligned?

Implement policy:

Once policies are in place, stick to them. Exceptions should be rare. Be open to review.

Make decisions based on the “what” and not “whom.” The biggest advertiser should not warrant special treatment.

Explain the policy:

Be proactive and not reactive.

Make the case internally as well as externally.



ELEMENTS OF BUSINESS COVERAGE

- Think beyond the chamber of commerce newsletter
- Prepare for interview
- Write for your readers
- Create prototypes for standard items
- Develop regular presence in newspaper
- Report good news and bad news

THINK BEYOND THE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE NEWSLETTER

Reject the “red coat” photos. Focus on the business.

Embrace the networking among variety of business leaders.

Seize everyday business news opportunities. Regular connection can help identify local economic pulse.

Developing relations can be springboard for other stories.

PREPARE FOR INTERVIEW

Prep yourself just as you would for covering a city council meeting.

Understand the dynamics of an industry.

Present a balanced story. Avoid single-source stories, especially when the topic warrants, invites other voices.

Ask the question if you don't understand something.

WRITE FOR YOUR READERS

Avoid business jargon. If you don't understand something, readers will not either.

Distill corporate releases.

Always find the local angle.

CREATE PROTOTYPES FOR STANDARD ITEMS

Business openings are news when they open the doors, not when they celebrate a grand opening weeks or months later.

Establish guidelines for anniversaries.

Identify when a business closing is news. Be aware of possibly setting precedent.

DEVELOP REGULAR PRESENCE IN NEWSPAPER

Business people in the news. Use photos when appropriate.

Devote a section or page. Packaging business news, just like sports or lifestyle items, brings greater attention.

Profile businesses on a regular basis.

Solicit items.

REPORT GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS

Press your case. News about employers often has greater impact on communities than does a local government action.

The truth squelches rumors.

Understand the dynamics of labor disputes and identify, report the benchmarks.

Businesses that share the bad news will lay the groundwork for pitching good news.

Newspapers and businesses share the responsibility of communication. Editors will have better luck prying bad news from a company if they have cultivated solid coverage of local business.

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Proclamations alone are not news. Events such as Manufacturers Week or Small Business Week or Nursing Home Week present opportunities, but stories must be substantive.

Reporting on management/labor disputes is tricky at best. Company leadership is typically tight-lipped, while the union volleys a steady dose of press releases. It's a great exercise to review and evaluate coverage after the issue is resolved.

Circumstances are all too familiar. A business seeks preferential treatment on the basis that he or she is a personal friend of the publisher or is a major advertiser. Apply guidelines uniformly if you are to have credible coverage.

Opening the letters column to comments critical or complimentary of business can be a slippery slope. It's difficult to say "yes" to one and "no" to another. Among your criteria, make the distinction between public and private issues.

GENERATING STORY IDEAS

Localize. Statewide, national – even international – news has an impact on local communities.

Put faces behind the statistics. It's always more interesting.

Convene a Readers' Board to solicit ideas.

ONE LIST OF IDEAS

Premise: Newspapers, large and small, should spend as much time brainstorming ideas for business news as they do for other areas of coverage. The lists below are by no means exhaustive. Take baby steps and embrace those ideas that fit your circumstances. Some are easy to do; others take more research and time. The range of stories is limited only by staff resources. As with any beat, newspapers will soon discover that the more attention devoted to the broad definition of business news, the more ideas that readers will forward.

COVID-19 STORIES

The pandemic has placed extra attention and interest on the economy and employment, generating spot news and features. Some topics may be one-time stories; others can be revisited throughout the course of the health crisis. For example:

Identify financial assistance programs for employers and employees. Interview winners, losers.

Many companies have pivoted their operations to fill a void in the supply chain for products suddenly in demand, resulting in growth and new revenues. How have local companies adapted?

How has the pandemic affected operations at elderly-care and child-care facilities? What is the impact on affected families?

Nonprofits are the fabric of life in many communities. How are local nonprofits coping?

Will the pandemic have a lasting impact on the local business landscape?

STATISTICAL SNAPSHOT

Federal and state agencies regularly release a variety of economic statistics. Identify a handful and regularly publish them. Select those where you can compare local numbers with state numbers; list comparable figures from a year ago. Analyze figures for potentially an accompanying story.

Here is one newspaper's "economic snapshot":

Consumer price index (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics); gasoline prices (AAA); jobless rates, claims filed for unemployment insurance, employment by industry sector (appropriate state agencies); commercial air passengers; single-family home sales, average home sale price (Realtors associations); single-family home construction permits issued (city, county); net hotel-motel tax collections and net sales-tax collections, if applicable (city finance departments).

Analyze the statistics and identify stories to illustrate any significant or surprising trends.

LOCALIZE STORIES

Here is one list of recent stories covered by a metropolitan newspaper that could be a springboard for local stories:

"Buy local movement saved many small Minnesota retailers" – The buy local movement that crystallized during the holiday season saved several small retail shops in Minnesota that had dismal years because of the pandemic.

How did your local retailers fare? Did local chambers of commerce spearhead any initiatives? Are there similar plans going forward into 2021?

"Pandemic has more Twin Cities home buyers looking outward" – The COVID-19 pandemic is turning the housing market in the Twin Cities inside out, with remote work lessening downtown's appeal.

What's happening in your communities? Are larger cities experiencing population loss? Are other communities seeing an influx of new residents from urban centers?

"Why some Minnesota companies are ditching the office and going remote, forever" – As weeks turned into months for office workers staying home during the pandemic, the leaders of Qumu Corp., a Minneapolis company that sells video-conferencing services, took stock and then made a leap.

What is happening among local companies? Is the trend more common among certain business sectors? Do companies anticipate temporary measures to become a permanent fixture with fewer in-office workers?

“For GameStop day traders, the moment they’ve dreamed about” – They’ve endured a financial crisis. Two deep recessions. Mounds of student debt. Stagnant pay. Costly health care. Dim job prospects.

Did any local residents play the market and trade GameStop stock? Any big winners or losers? Losers are not as likely to share their stories. What kind of activity did local stock brokers and investors see?

“Twin Cities construction plunged again in December” – Construction starts across the Twin Cities plunged 27% in December as nonresidential building projects continued to decline amid the global pandemic, according to a report released Thursday by Dodge Data & Analytics.

Construction and real estate figures are always a great opportunity to check in and see what is happening in your region. How do your statistics compare, contrast with state and national trends?

“Sun Country sees travel rebound ahead, plans 16 new routes” – Executives at Sun Country Airlines believe a travel rebound is in sight, announcing Monday more than a dozen new routes for the summer season and nine new airports to be added to its network.

Are local travel agents seeking a pickup in airline activity – leisure and/or business travel? Have local companies resurrected their travel, or are they still relying heavily on videoconferencing? What are the projections for returning to some kind of normalcy in air travel?

THINK BEYOND THE NORM

How important are exports to the bottom line of businesses? Provide a local perspective into the global economy, profiling local companies that are developing international markets.

Profile local companies that face international competition. Who are the winners and losers in international trade negotiations and pacts?

How many people work in their homes? Feature someone and include sidebar on state statistics.

Survey local business owners on their response to legislative proposals for business taxes, business subsidies.

What is the impact of an airline strike or a natural disaster on local commerce? Disaster may be miles away but still can have impact on delivering products or receiving raw materials.

Detail job-training programs and profile participants who are switching careers.

What are companies doing to combat rising health care costs?

More high school graduates entering college require remedial courses. What do local employers say about the quality of job applicants?

Fall crop harvest – provide pulse of the local agribusiness economy.



Call travel agencies in the dead of winter. Are people seeking getaways? What are the hot spots?

Take the pulse of your winter tourism. Are you still a popular destination for snowbirds?

Do companies provide on-site child care? Share the best practices.

Has the role of long-term care facilities changed as people live longer and programs are in place to help them stay in their own homes?

How important is e-commerce locally? Are companies hindered by broadband access? How are businesses best getting messages to customers? Facebook? Web? Phone? Videoconferencing?

Compare and contrast local employment with statewide statistics. Take it a step further, and identify a feature story representing specific trends. Present the trends and data in graphically pleasing, easy-to-understand formats. If online, make the data interactive, searchable and alive.

What sustainability measures are companies implementing to respond to consumer demand for a green economy?

Is your community facing a workforce shortage? What steps are companies taking to attract and retain qualified workers?



GENERATING REVENUE

Devote space to employer/employee news, and businesses will notice. It's no different than dedicating sections to sports or food or travel news.

Explore special sections. Paying regular attention to employer/employee news can be a springboard for selling special sections.

Create your own event. Partner with organizations such as the local chamber of commerce or other groups to recognize the contributions of employers and employees.

Coordinate, communicate coverage with advertising staff.

Events are most successful with close coordination between news and advertising staffs.

Column: What constitutes business news?

Red Wing Republican Eagle

By Jim Pumarlo
Editor

A store is opening. Another business is expanding. An agency is relocating. A firm is carrying a new product. A company's named a new president. An annual open house is planned. A local person wins in a national sweepstakes.

All of these items are interesting. But which of them are legitimate as R-E news stories?

Business news continually demands more space in the Republican Eagle and we frequently package such news together with similar items. The increasing volume of business news has brought questions about what constitutes a news story. Following are a few guidelines.

A new business most definitely warrants a story, so how do we cover the opening?

We aim for fresh news. It's unfortunate, but we do not always hear of a business opening immediately. We rely on a variety of channels; sometimes the new owner simply calls. When we do hear about it, we try to act as soon as possible.

The timing of our news stories does not always correspond with the store's plans. It's common for a business to be open weeks or even months before a grand opening is celebrated. We try to coordinate news coverage with the grand openings if the events are close together. Otherwise, grand openings and the like must be publicized in our advertising columns.

The R-E publishes few photos of ribbon-cuttings or ground-breaking ceremonies. Neither will our cameras be around when the Ambassadors of the Chamber of Commerce visit in their red coats. We prefer to show a nice interior or exterior photo of the store, instead of a lineup of basically the same people who participate in all such official photos. Such photos are excellent when hung on a store's walls, but are not news.

A variety of other business items falls into our news columns. Many appear under Business Briefs. But there are restrictions.

Anniversary celebrations and customer appreciation days will not be reported routinely. The same goes with retirements and open houses. Naturally there are exceptions, and each case must be scrutinized on an individual basis.

Promotions or hirings of key management, officers or partners will be announced. On occasion, we've noted a new department or service. But we'll not market a company's new product; that's appropriately handled through advertising.

Best described, the item must be somewhat distinctive to deserve news coverage. If it occurs routinely year after year, it probably will go unreported.



Column: Take complaints directly to business

Red Wing Republican Eagle

By Jim Pumarlo
Editor

A woman called People's Platform last week with a complaint against the Salvation Army Store in Red Wing.

Her comments will not be published but have been passed along to the store manager. The comments overstepped the bounds of the Platform on a couple of counts.

The Republican Eagle has a pretty strict policy against publishing comments about private businesses – whether the comments are in the Platform or a letter to the editor, whether the comments are positive or negative.

That's fairly standard policy among newspapers. Comments typically are out of order unless the business or issue happens to be in the public arena. For instance, we have published comments about Super Valu's expansion and its effect on downtown traffic.

The Salvation Army is nonprofit and in some respects a quasipublic operation. As such, we gave consideration to printing the comment.

But our underlying message is that individuals should take complaints directly to businesses. It probably has a greater chance of spurring action.

A personal call or visit to the store will give the opportunity to discuss the complaint. Though this particular comment concerned a private business, we encourage callers with complaints about public agencies to first contact those entities as well.

Publicly "branding" a company – public or private – might result in embarrassment and give the caller some self-satisfaction. But it doesn't really lay the foundation for meaningful resolution of problems between customer and business.

Column: Favorite stores won't be debated

Red Wing Republican Eagle

By Jim Pumarlo
Editor

It's a legitimate question: Should the Port Authority be doing anything to draw another discount retail department store to Red Wing? That question was raised in People's Platform Wednesday.

But we'll not permit a public debate on whether Target is better than Wal-Mart or Fleet Farm. Or which store has the best customer service. Or which stores have the best buys on a particular product.

The rumors about stores opening, closing or relocating have reached a new high ever since Pamida Discount Center announced it is closing. We've tracked down just about every one. As expected, they have proven essentially groundless.

The latest lobbying for local retailers arose when Kwik Trip approached the city Planning Advisory Commission Tuesday night with its proposal to erect another convenience store on the lot now occupied by Corner Grocery. The proposal generated many phone calls to the Platform urging the plan be rejected; only one was printed Tuesday.

The topic was fair game because it was a formal agenda item for the Planning Commission. Indeed, a story in today's paper notes that a petition with 140 signatures was presented in opposition to the project.

We placed restrictions on what comments we would publish. Most importantly, they had to speak to the general issues surrounding the conditional-use permit, but we would not let this page become a forum lobbying for one business or another. People had that opportunity by signing the petition or attending the public hearing.

Our decision to limit comments and require them to be signed has nothing to do with the merits of the Kwik Trip plan. Rather, we are concerned that if we let discussion take that direction, soon the Platform will become a free-for-all for just about any private business.

We already receive an array of such comments. Over the years, people have called in with everything from compliments for their favorite store clerks to complaints about restaurant service or return policies to gripes about a company's salary bonus plan.

These types of issues are best handled internally, by taking the complaint directly to the source. If the person still is not satisfied, there are other avenues such as the Better Business Bureau or a variety of state or federal agencies which deal with employee-employer disputes.

We welcome a healthy discussion of issues and ideas on this page, but, naturally, there must be limits. If you don't see your comment printed, please give us a call and we'll explain our position. There still might be a way of getting a point across without referring to a specific business



Column: Base business coverage on ‘what,’ not ‘whom’

By Jim Pumarlo
Community Newsroom Success Strategies

Readers want assurances that stories are accurate, fair and not tainted by ethical lapses. A single error in judgment – especially by journalists on the national stage – damages the believability of that newspaper and all the press in general.

Yet, for many readers, the national headlines of journalist indiscretions generate a brief uproar that fades quickly.

That’s not the case when the lapse occurs in your own back yard under your own watch. Community newspapers arguably are held to the highest standards. You live and work on a daily basis with the subjects of your stories. If you stumble, your newspaper may pay a severe price.

One of the most sensitive areas is business coverage, and at the top of that list are advertisers who have direct access to publishers.

How many customers have asked: “Could we get some news coverage on this? We’re taking out an ad.” On another front, how many have heard the cynical comment: “You won’t read that in the newspaper. After all, it’s about one of the newspaper’s biggest advertisers.”

Advertiser ultimatums and the resulting predicaments cannot be brushed aside, especially at small-town newspapers where every advertising dollar is important. Editors are right to weigh requests. But news decisions should be made within the context of underlying policies, and guidelines should be in writing. Owners and publishers also must think of repercussions to the credibility of their products if news decisions are altered on the basis of whom instead of what is the subject.

The potential confrontations are varied:

- An advertiser forwards a letter from a customer who gives rave reviews regarding the store’s service. A few weeks later, the advertiser catches wind of a disgruntled customer who threatens to write a letter to the newspaper. The owner calls the editor in an effort to stop publication.
- An advertiser requests a news story on the opening of its store – standard newspaper policy. Three months later the store has its grand opening – a promotional event – and the owner presses the newspaper for another story.
- An advertiser is issued a citation for selling tobacco to underage youths. The newspaper is asked to look the other way.

The cause-effect relationship with some advertisers is quite direct. Print a “negative” story about their business, and they threaten to withdraw their advertising. Other requests can be more subtle but just as troublesome for editors. Consider an advertiser who seeks publicity – “just this one time” – on something that normally would not be reported.

The biggest fallacy is that overlooking a sensitive item – or making an exception and publishing something – can be dismissed as a harmless oversight. More often than not, decisions to look the other way will come back to haunt editors, especially in small towns where word circulates. The information eventually surfaces. Newspaper reputations are tarnished, and the affected individuals are embarrassed.

Confrontations with advertisers are among the most sensitive and challenging circumstances that face newspapers. They also demand that newspapers stick to their ethics. Exceptions should be rare and, then, only with strong justification.

The steps for dealing with business coverage are similar to so many other areas of coverage in your newspapers. No. 1, develop the policy. No. 2, implement the policy. No. 3, explain the policy. Newspapers build stronger relationships with their readers if you explain the hows and whys of coverage.

Not all policies will have unanimous approval within the office. At the same time, those individuals who explain and implement policies must be of a united front when interacting with readers. The message must be shared and endorsed by everyone, beginning with top management.

News and advertising departments must operate closely – but independently. Advertisers should expect professional and courteous services and a good return on their investments. But there should be no link between how much advertisers spend – or how influential particular individuals may be in a community – and how much news coverage their corresponding businesses or their missteps receive.

Just as advertisers are entitled to courteous service by their advertising representatives, they should expect and receive from editors a courteous and clear explanation of a newspaper's separation between news and advertising,

JIM PUMARLO

Community newspapers, at their best, are stewards of their communities. The news columns are a blend of stories that people like to read and stories they should read. The advertising columns promote and grow local commerce. And the editorial pages are a marketplace of ideas.

Jim Pumarlo understands that energized newspapers are at the foundation of energized communities. His message is straightforward: Community newspapers – whether delivering information in the print or on the web – must focus on local news if they are to remain relevant to their readers and advertisers.

His seminars and training workshops are practical and interactive, including handouts that participants can use to tailor policies and procedures to their operations. In addition to his standard menu of seminars, he works with newspapers to provide custom training for their needs, including individual writing critiques.

He worked nearly 27 years at daily newspapers in International Falls and Red Wing, Minn., the last 21 years as editor at Red Wing. He resigned in 2003 and served 16 years as director of communications and media relations at the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, the state's largest business advocacy organization.

He released a book in 2005, "Bad News and Good Judgment: A Guide to Reporting on Sensitive Issues in a Small-Town Newspaper." His second book, Votes and Quotes: A Guide to Outstanding Election Campaign Coverage," was released in 2007. His third book, "Journalism Primer: A Guide to Community News Coverage for Beginning and Veteran Journalists," was released in 2011.

He remains involved in the Minnesota Newspaper Association as a member of its Journalism Education and Legislative committees. He is a former member of the Minnesota News Media Institute, the training arm of the Minnesota Newspaper Association. He served on the hearing panel for the Minnesota News Council, which promoted fair, vigorous and trusted journalism by engaging the news media and the public in examining standards of fairness.



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