

# READERSHIP INSTITUTE

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## How to Improve Obituary Coverage

Hatch, match, dispatch.

That's journalistic shorthand for the three circumstances under which ordinary people's names would appear in the newspaper: when they're born, when they marry, when they die.

Over the years, those opportunities to have one's name published have eroded. Space and cultural considerations have caused the decline of birth and wedding announcements in many U.S. newspapers, leaving the obituary as the last resort for public acknowledgement of an ordinary life. Space and revenue concerns led newspapers to run fewer, shorter obituaries, or shift them from a news item to a classified advertising revenue category.

Yet the Readership Institute's Impact study of readership shows that obituaries -- along with community announcements and stories about ordinary people -- have the highest potential of all news items to grow readership. In other words, if newspapers can do a "better" job in presenting this kind of news, they will see positive, overall readership results.

But what does "better" mean? And why do these commonplace items have so much potential?

Impact research shows that there is a strong reader appetite for news that is intensely local and personally relevant, such as obituaries. While it is true that in recent years, newspapers have focused increasingly on "local news," there is still a large, unrealized potential for this type of people-centered news.

They chronicle "life events" of the community, the circumstances that bind a community together. At their best, obituaries are engaging stories about ordinary people's lives; they enrich the community's sense of itself. This type of coverage frequently is missing or treated perfunctorily in contemporary newspapers, which have turned their focus over a period of decades to more coverage of institutions.

## **Current obituary policies**

A review of the 100 newspapers in the Impact study, plus a number of newspapers not in the study, reveals a wide range of policies and practices on obituaries. The nomenclature varies from paper to paper. “Obituary” at some newspapers indicates the free, newsroom-produced notice of a life that has passed and “death notice” is the paid advertisement written by the family or the funeral home. At other newspapers the definitions are reversed. For clarity’s sake, we refer to these two basic types of obituary as “news obituary” and “paid obituary.”

The range of policies:

- A few newspapers – both large and small – maintain a policy of writing news obituaries for every person with any connection to the circulation area, however tenuous. Some of these newspapers do not even offer paid obituaries.
- A few newspapers have transferred the obituary function entirely to the classified department where paid obituaries are sold, and no news obituaries are written at all.
- Most newspapers provide both news obituaries and paid obituaries with the length and detail in the news obituary varying from the barest essential facts (name, age, date of death, name of funeral home handling the services) to expansive chronicles of every life. Some of these papers publish a news obituary for anyone whose family submits the information; others are selective, with the news staff deciding which to publish and which to discard.

## **Best practices**

Given the power of obituaries to grow overall readership, what practices and approaches are associated with higher reader satisfaction?

The Readership Institute (RI) analyzed the 10 newspapers in the Impact study that had the highest reader satisfaction scores for their obituary coverage and compared them to the 10 that had the lowest satisfaction scores.

The top 10 share a number of common characteristics. Whether the obituaries are free or paid is *not* one of the commonalities. While this issue is of acute concern to newspapers internally, it is transparent to readers. What readers care about is getting this very important news.

The top 10 newspapers range from about 11,000 to 31,400 average daily circulation. (As mentioned below, RI also found examples of metropolitan newspapers outside the Impact sample that do many of the key things that Impact’s top 10 smaller newspapers do.) A few provide news obituaries of some length, including work history, social and civic affiliations, and extensive survivor lists. Many offer only the most basic news data, relying on paid obituaries to provide the lengthy exposition.

However, all of the top10 share the following practices:

- **Consistent, upfront placement of obituaries in news space.** Most of the papers publish their news and paid obituaries (as well as separate funeral listings in some newspapers) on A-2 or A-3. Others anchor them on a jump page in the A section.
- **Standard body type.** All run their news *and* paid obituaries in the same type face and size as used in other news stories. Some mingle news and paid together, making no distinction in print between the two.
- **Pictures.** All offer the opportunity to include a photograph of the deceased, sometimes in a news obituary, sometimes in a paid obituary.
- **The newsroom handles obituaries.** At all of these newspapers, both news obituaries and paid obituaries are produced by a newsroom employee – reporter or clerk – *not* a classified ad representative.
- **Some form of free obituary.** Even those newspapers that have shifted the function of the in-depth obituary to a paid obits feature still offer a free basic news obituary so every passing life is noted, even if the family cannot afford or chooses not to buy an obituary. (At least two in the top 10 will run the lengthy, family-written “paid” obit for free if the funeral home tells the editor the family cannot afford to pay for it. “Nobody gets left out,” one editor said.)
- **“Story” obituaries.** Regardless of their policy on paid or free obituaries, all of the top 10 write longer “story” obituaries on the passing of prominent people. These often appear on Page 1.

In addition to the practices that all 10 engage in, many of them also do these things:

- **Daily schedule of funerals and visitations.** Many run funeral services subsequent to the publication of the obituary for those in which there is a lapse between the date of the obituary and the funeral service. Some run the funeral service information only on the day of the service; others repeat the information every day between the publication of the obituary and the date of the service. One newspaper uses its audiotext system for repeat information on funeral services. It provides a free audiotext category for each local funeral home, whose staffs record their own services information.
- **Web site listing.** All include obituaries on their Web sites. Most maintain them in their Web site archives indefinitely.

- **Detailed regional breakdown.** Many of the newspapers that circulate in a wide or multi-county area give a detailed regional breakdown of obituaries, instead of a straight alphabetical listing, so readers can spot at a glance the deaths of people who lived near them.

### **The key: put the reader first**

The key to higher reader satisfaction seems to be that these newspapers recognize the importance of obituaries by their placement, type size, detail and use of photographs. The fact of being paid or free is transparent and irrelevant to the reader, who gets detailed exposition on the deceased and actionable information in the dates, times and places of services. The reader gets the opportunity to share the knowledge of lives lived with the rest of the community.

By contrast, newspapers that scored lowest in satisfaction with obituaries did not place much emphasis on content, design or ease of use. They shared the following common characteristics:

- **Small type.** In these papers the typeface was small, such as that used in classified advertising.
- **Alphabetical organization only.** No regional breakdowns to aid readers in finding people who lived near them.
- **No photos.** Photos were absent in both news obituaries and paid obituaries.
- **Minimal information.** Most of these papers published only the most basic information related to the death: name, age, place of death and information about funeral services.

### **Examples of best practices in small and large newspapers**

The most expansive news obituaries appear in both small papers such as *The Gleaner* in Henderson, KY and the *Greeneville (TN) Sun* (both Impact newspapers) and big papers, such as *The Oregonian* in Portland (not an Impact newspaper).

At *The Gleaner* (circulation 11,000), all obituaries are free news obituaries for anybody who has a local connection, no matter how tenuous. “I can’t remember every saying no to anyone,” said Managing Editor David Dixon.

John Jones, editor of the *Greeneville Sun* (circulation 15,000), says sometimes he feels like a dinosaur, but “the viewpoint the Sun has held over the years is that obituaries are important news stories. ... I feel very strongly about this. Obituaries are a way to build a bond with our readers. I don’t want to be in the position of making a commercial venture out of their deaths.

“I like to have a lot of biographical detail, usually more than the funeral homes get on the forms,” Jones said. He encourages families to add detail and to provide a photograph of the deceased. The *Sun* publishes the names of all direct survivors through great-grandchildren.

The *Sun* anchors its obituaries on the first of its two jump pages, where they have priority over other news. “There is no news story in our newspaper that is as important to our readers as the obituaries. If we have to leave out AP stuff or delay one of our local stories to make room for the obits, that’s OK,” Jones said.

Among non-Impact study newspapers, *The Oregonian* (351,000 daily, 430,000 Sunday) stands out. Dan Hortsch, *Oregonian* ombudsman, said his newspaper writes a news obituary for anyone who dies within the core circulation area.

In calendar 2000 *The Oregonian* published approximately 12,000 obituaries, Hortsch said. “Given the number, most are just a few inches long in order to maintain our commitment to running them.” The newspaper employs two full-time obituary writers and another part-timer. In addition, news clerks write a few each day.

*The Oregonian* also writes longer “story” obituaries on people of widespread interest three or four times a week, said Michael Walden, day editor on *The Oregonian*’s coordinating desk. Those of area-wide interest will be published ROP, but Walden said “we do have aggressive zoning, so we will sometimes do a story obituary that runs in a particular zone. For example, we recently wrote a story obituary on a guy who ran a popular diner in Milwaukie, Oregon. We did a story for that zone, and also ran a regular short obit in the rest of the paper.”

*The Oregonian*, like most large newspapers also sells paid obituaries in which families can say whatever they want. These are boxed and in a smaller typeface to distinguish them from the news obituaries. At the top of the obituary pages *The Oregonian* prints an index by last name that includes both paid and news obituaries.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC)* (396,000 daily, 640,000 Sunday) is another large newspaper that engages in a number of the practices that show up in the top 10 Impact group.

The *AJC* publishes both news obituaries and paid obituaries, a practice that goes back more than 50 years, said *AJC* obituaries editor Kay Powell. The short news obituaries are handled by editorial; the paid obituaries are done by advertising.

As in the top 10 papers, the *AJC* obituaries are in an anchored position, in this case in the metro section. Like *The Oregonian*, the *AJC* is also inclusive: “Our policy is that the list is open to anyone living or born in Georgia,” Powell said. As with many of the top 10 papers, the news obituaries are listed in a detailed regional breakdown for quick scanning, including a “Georgia” heading for those outside the metro area.

The *AJC* differs from *The Oregonian* in that its news obituaries are short, containing just the basic information: name, age, date of death, time, date and place of services. The *AJC* publishes 45 to 60 of these daily. However, in addition to the standard short news obituary, Powell and her staff of 2 ½ write a couple of longer “story” obituaries each day.

“We scan through the paid notices and the deaths and funerals list, and also get ideas through sources we have built through the years,” Powell said. “From those we pick one or two people that we’re able to write a column on each day.

“First and foremost, we look for an interesting story for our readers. That’s our first obligation, a good read,” Powell said. “We want to tell a variety of stories. We want to create a sense of community because we have so many newcomers. We have 360 new people every day coming to our community.

“We go for a good cross-section of readership. We write about every nationality and ethnic group you can think of. We look at women’s stories equally strongly. Our page is so democratic. You don’t automatically get an obit because you were an elected official or president of a company. Important doesn’t equate to interesting.”

Most important, she said, “the article is about how they lived, not how they died.”

Powell has saved letters from readers commenting on the obituaries, such as the one that said, “the memorial service for Heidi was last night ... and everyone was quoting from your obituary. ... Someone said ‘how can you keep up with Atlanta if you don’t read the obits.’ ”

### **Making changes based on the Impact study**

Some newspapers have begun to make changes in their obituary policy and practices as a result of the Impact study. Here is what some of them said:

#### ***Arizona Republic, Phoenix* (circ. 451,200 daily, 554,600 Sunday)**

Before February 2000, all obituaries were free and all went to editorial. However, editorial did not guarantee placement, which means they ran it when they had space, sometimes even after the funeral. If the obit didn't have complete information, they wouldn't run it at all.

Now, all obituaries go to classified. All are guaranteed to run when placed. If the paid obit has just the basic information – name, date, next of kin – it is free. If it has more detail, and pictures, the *Republic* charges on a per line basis. They also accept obituaries from outside the Phoenix metropolitan area, which was not the prior practice.

Also new after February 2000 is a section that features an interesting life. This is an expanded feature article about one of the people who appeared in the paper’s obituaries.

The paper reports “anecdotal satisfaction” with the changes. The Reader Advocate notes that there have been no complaints about charging for obituaries and that over all complaints have diminished, especially since problems with not guaranteeing placement and not accepting submissions from those outside the Phoenix metropolitan area were eliminated.

In addition, the number of *Republic* obituaries has increased, as has lineage. Before *Republic*'s policy changes in February 2000, obits ad count was less than 100 per month, and lineage was between 1,500 and 2,000 lines per month. Current ad count averages between 600 and 900 per month, and lineage is between 18,000 and 28,000 per month. The newspaper reports that “people appreciate, and recognize the value of, an opportunity to memorialize their loved ones in a public forum.”

***Modesto Bee* (circ. 85,300 daily, 91,200 Sunday)**

In May 2001 it added an "Area Deaths" directory on page A-2. Categorized by the counties that the newspaper serves, this daily directory lists the names of the individual obituaries in that day's paper, and provides the location within the newspaper where the complete obituary can be found. The newspaper reports that these changes were “done as a result of RI research, and so far is proving very popular with our readers.”

***Santa Cruz County Sentinel* (circ. 26,600 daily, 28,800 Sunday)**

The newspaper reports on one obituary a day. The *Sentinel* told RI “our readers like the change. In the past we just rewrote the information passed over by the funeral homes.”

***Houston Chronicle* (circ. 551,900 daily, 744,900 Sunday)**

In May 2001, the paper made the commitment to have at least one staff-written obit in the Metro section, along with a list of deaths elsewhere. If they run an obit in another section, they list it in “deaths elsewhere” along with a page refer to it.

While they do not yet have research on the subject, several editors reported positive, unaided comments about the increased attention to obits.

***Bradenton Herald* (circ. 40,300 daily, 47,300 Sunday)**

The newspaper is looking for more feature obituaries to headline. They report that they have not done enough yet, but their goal is at least twice monthly. Otherwise their obituaries are anchored on Page 2 of the local section. They are never broken into two columns, assuring that they're clippable. The *Herald* takes obits as long as they are from the area or have immediate family in the region.

***Telegraph Herald, Dubuque, Iowa.* (circ. 28,700 daily, 34,000 Sunday)**

The newspaper reports: “We are more inclined to do regular story obituaries on interesting or notable people than we were 3-4 years ago.”

## **A cautionary tale**

Some newspapers have been running paid obituaries for decades; others have made the switch recently or are contemplating the switch.

Most newspapers that have converted from an exclusively news obituary policy to a paid obituary policy or hybrid policy have done so with limited angst. However, John Kridelbaugh at the Sioux Falls *Argus Leader*, an Impact study newspaper, offers a cautionary tale for those considering the change.

“We had been doing free obituaries. We usually take one and feature it, a community leader or other interesting person and do a little more, say 10 to 12 inches. All the others ran about 5 inches,” Kridelbaugh said.

“We got a fair amount of complaints from readers who wanted more detail, or families who wanted to list second cousins as survivors or from funeral homes because we didn’t run everything they sent us.”

So the newspaper did some research and found that all the other dailies in the region were charging for obituaries. “So we thought we should do it. We thought it would please everyone. The families could put in anything they wanted. So we put together a package explaining what the new policy was and visited each funeral home. We found they approved, in fact many said they didn’t understand why we hadn’t done this years ago.”

On June 1, 2001, The *Argus Leader* converted to a paid policy, at \$35 a column inch. The paid obituaries were supplemented with a basic free news obituary for every death in the area, much like other newspapers run: name, age, date of death, time, date and place of the funeral.

“There was huge negative reader reaction,” Kridelbaugh said. “Radio talk shows talked about it for a week straight. Every TV station did at least one story, and one did three or four stories on the change. We had 100 subscription cancellations.

“The accusation was that we were being money hungry. One car dealer threatened to pull his advertising. He said he relied on the obituaries. He knew his customers, but he might not know a wife’s maiden name, which he learned from the obits, so he could send flowers when her mother died,” Kridelbaugh said.

After one week, the *Argus Leader* changed the policy. The first three inches are free, after that, it’s \$35 a column inch. They made refunds to everyone who had purchased an obituary under the new policy and gave free subscription extensions to all who had canceled to try to lure them back. Peace seems to have returned to Sioux Falls, Kridelbaugh said.

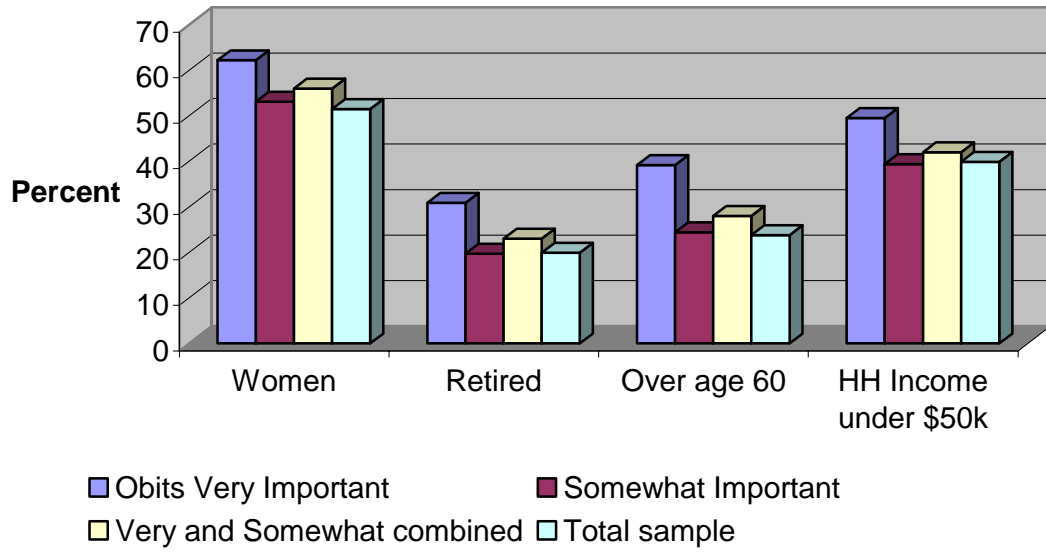
## **Appendix A**

### **Who wants to read obituaries?**

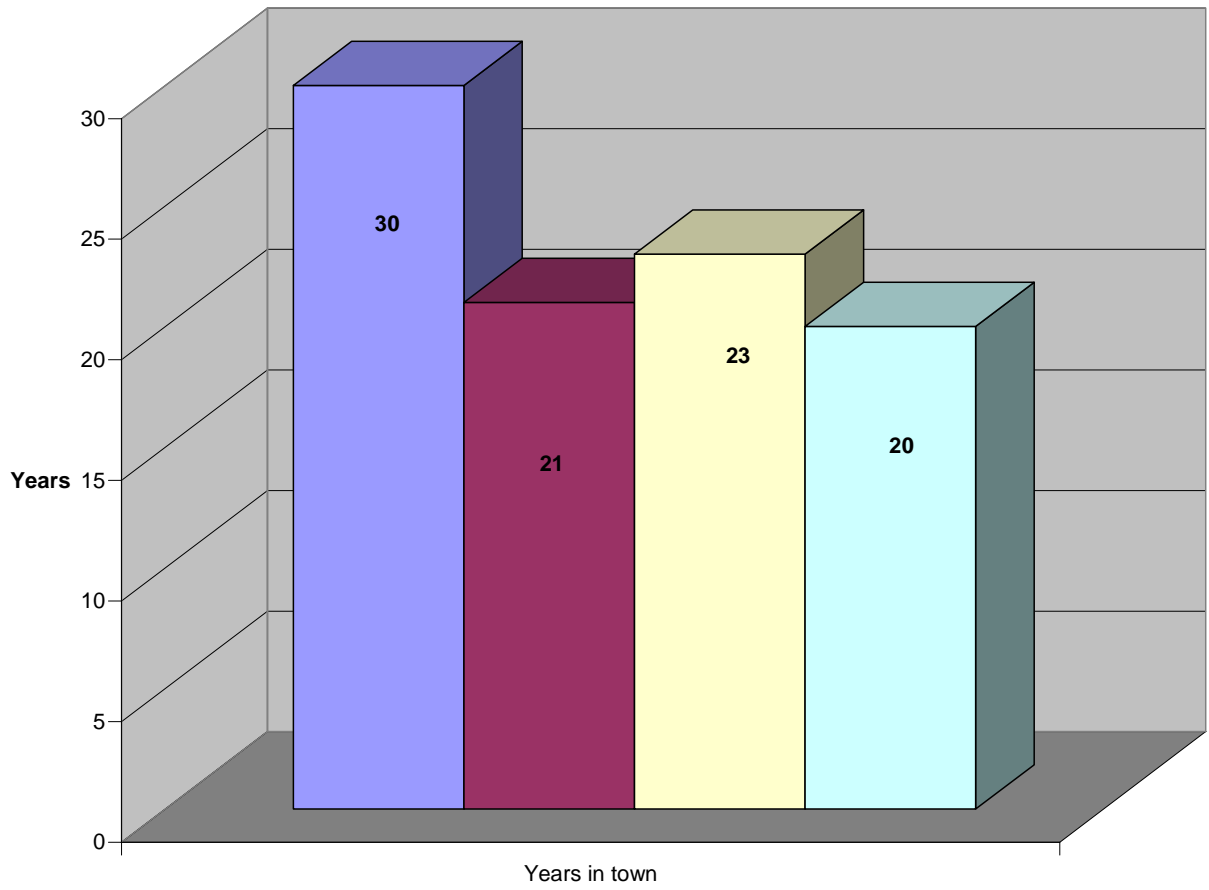
The Readership Institute's survey of 37,000 consumers in 100 newspaper markets found that 45 percent said newspaper obituaries were important to them -- 12 percent said "very important" and another 33 percent said "somewhat important."

This group tends to be more female, with at least a high school education and to have lived in their community somewhat longer than average. They are a little more likely to be older and retired than the average reader. They are more likely to be subscribers and they tend to spend more time with the newspaper and to read it more completely.

### Reader Demographics



### Length of Residency



■ Obits Very Important ■ Somewhat Important ■ Very and Somewhat combined ■ Total Sample

### Readership Patterns

