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Putting Readers First

Preface: What You'll Learn in This Report About Reader Orientation

An important finding of the Impact study of readership is that newspapers that operate in ways that put a high priority on readers and customers have higher readership scores. That's a fine statistical result, but for busy newspaper people it immediately raises the question, "So what can we do about it?"

We at the Readership Institute were keen to find out what the most reader-oriented Impact newspapers do, on the job, every day, that is different from their peers. What do they look like, feel like, behave like? How did they move from an internal to an external focus?

The pages that follow give some answers to those questions. Researchers Richard Somerville and Todd McCauley interviewed key personnel at the 10 newspapers that scored highest on the Impact study's reader orientation survey. They also paid a site visit to *The Idaho Statesman* in Boise to look at how reader orientation plays out in routine work life.

The top 10 newspapers shared many practices in common – the pre-eminent one being that the publisher and his or her executive team are wholly committed to putting readers and customers first. This commitment permeates the whole organization, from the overall mission to, in some cases, individual performance goals; from the way operating committee meetings are conducted to discussion about the next-day's paper around the newsroom conference table.

The newspapers have many more "best practices" in common, practices that may give other newspapers ideas they can adapt and use to become more reader-focused.

Becoming more reader-oriented means hiring and training people who want to be and are capable of being reader- or customer-focused – something that has not been a priority until now at many newspapers. As one editor at a readership seminar said: "I want to hire reader-oriented people, but where do I start? What do I look for?" A companion piece, "How to Hire 'Reader-Oriented' People," online at

What is Reader Orientation and Why Does It Matter?

Reader orientation refers to the degree to which newspapers are focused on understanding and meeting the needs of their reading customers.

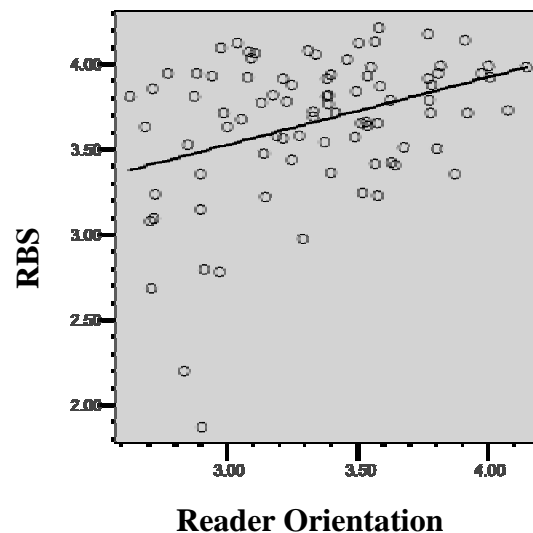
The Readership Institute measured the reader focus of newspapers participating in the Impact study using a tool – the Reader Orientation Inventory – adapted from one that has been tested in other businesses. (See Appendix B for full details. See also http://www.readership.org/culture_management/reader_orientation/readertest/main.asp if your newspaper would like to assess its reader orientation.)

It covered four broad components:

- The newspaper makes a point of getting to know everything it can about readers and the marketplace.
- The information is shared widely throughout the newspaper.
- The newspaper develops plans to meet the needs of readers and the changes in the market.
- The newspaper implements the plans well and in a timely manner.

The inventory measured how well the newspaper felt it was doing, and how it would ideally operate if it were fully reader-focused. It also looked at differences between newsroom and business-side responses.

The most powerful finding emerged, however, when we compared reader orientation results with newspaper Reader Behavior Scores. There was a clear and strong linkage – as newspapers became more reader-oriented, their readership also tended to rise (see chart).



Being able to assess whether your newspaper is reader-oriented is one thing; figuring out how to become more so is quite another. The “what to” and “how to” intrigued us, so we identified the Impact newspapers that scored in the top 10 percent in the Reader Orientation Inventory. Other than their reader orientation scores, there seemed to be no common pattern among these newspapers. They reflect all circulation sizes (from 11,000 to 350,000), and all regions of the country, from South Carolina to California, and Florida to Idaho. They include family-owned papers and those belonging to large, publicly traded chains.

We conducted in-depth interviews with about 50 managers at those newspapers to learn how a focus on readers and customers plays out in the day-to-day activities of every department, and in planning and implementation.

The results of those investigations are in the following chapters.

Reader Orientation Starts With the Publisher

If we could deliver only a single message from our research, it would be this: Making a newspaper more reader-oriented must be championed by the publisher and embraced by his or her executive team.

At the top 10 newspapers the Readership Institute examined, the publisher and other senior executives are insistent and vocal advocates for readers, urging employees to make sure they have “checked with the reader first” before making important decisions. Having a champion in the publisher’s office is a necessary pre-condition for getting the rest of the organization focused and acting on readers.

We heard this many times and saw it in action. For instance, Michelle Krans, market development director at the *Palm Springs (Calif.) Desert Sun*, said: “Our publisher (Bob Dickey) sets the tone for all of this. He’s not what you’d call a traditionalist – he’s really an innovator. I don’t know where it comes from, but so often when you delve into papers that are really trying to be out there and try new things and working well together, it all seems to come down to a publisher that wants it to happen. Then in turn, he hires people who have the same mindset.”

Keeping the entire management team on the same page is crucial. “We know what we’re trying to do in terms of news content, we know what the goal is, and we know what the market is,” said publisher Arnold Garson of the *Sioux Falls (S.D.) Argus Leader*. “And we pursue it with rather single-minded determination.” Garson’s former executive editor, David Ledford (now at Springfield, Mo.), said: “Day in and day out, it’s about leadership. With Arnie and I, there was no ambiguity about what kind of newspaper we wanted. The Operating Committee met every morning for about 30 minutes. That is a culture that some editors and other newspaper executives might groan about, ‘Oh, no, a meeting every day.’ But we really knew what each of us was doing. And when an opportunity rolled by, everybody was on board and we made the most of it.”

For Carol Washburn, the editor of *The Idaho Statesman* in Boise, publisher Margaret Buchanan “is incredibly significant, because she created a process, and she is the discipline and she is the glue. She is the one who keeps her head above the clouds and makes sure that while the rest of us are busy with the crisis of the moment, we never lose track of the big picture. And almost all of our job performance goals are tied back to the strategic planning process.” (See “*Putting the Elements of Reader Orientation into Practice*,” p. 34.)

In Dubuque, Iowa, publisher Tom Yunt at the *Telegraph Herald* builds an atmosphere that puts both external and internal customers first. “I believe it starts from the top, and we have that firmly in place,” said promotion director Connie Gibbs. “Then we hire people with passion who believe in team building. We work very well interdepartmentally – very well. And I think it goes back to how people are managed and how people are respected.” People alignment also is number one for editor Ron Jenkins

of *The Gleaner* in Henderson, Ky.: “The most important thing I do on this newspaper is hire people.”

And long-term commitment is important, too, said Tom Lasley, market development director for the *Rockford (Ill.) Register Star*. “We’ve had support from our former and our current publishers.” *Kansas City Star* publisher Art Brisbane said his successor as editor, Mark Zieman, has kept the key results of a major readership research project “very much in front of people.”

“All our eggs are in that reader basket – it’s a big deal,” said publisher Steve Austin at *The Gleaner*. “Our internal philosophy is, ‘Readers drive everything.’ It drives advertising success, circles around and finances news quality. It’s really part of the culture.”

Building a culture around readers isn’t always about what is said in planning meetings, but in the ways people are expected to behave. At these newspapers, the readership goals are listed on the walls, promised to readers, and included in performance evaluations.

“Just about every position here has performance goals,” said Rockford circulation director Mike DiMaria. “Our customer service reps are incented on a monthly basis for things like lost call volumes, vacation packs that they’re able to secure, customer saves, all kinds of things. They directly benefit financially from putting forth that extra effort.”

In Boise, reporters are rated on community awareness, developing sources, and contact with the public, while circulation workers’ evaluations look at such behaviors as following up on customer complaints. Dubuque editor Brian Cooper said a key element that employees are rated on at his paper is “a customer-comes-first attitude.”

Reinforcement of reader-oriented values every day signals their importance. The first thing a visitor to the lobby of *The Idaho Statesman* sees is the newspaper’s vision and mission statements, prominently displayed on the reception desk. Circulation employees can’t miss the list of “Customer Service Standards” when they enter their office, and the number one item on the “People Pledge” expected of managers at the newspaper is, “My employees will know what is expected of them.” (See “*Putting the elements of reader orientation into practice*,” p. 34.)

At Rockford, the *Register Star* is two years into what is projected as a five-year process on changing the culture to be more constructive and reader-oriented. “This is a long process,” said executive editor Linda Grist Cunningham. “You’ve got to teach people how to be part of the mission.” For example, Cunningham brings together young newsroom leaders once or twice a year for 10 one-hour workshops on management and leadership issues, many of which are related to readership focus. “We’re continually looking for ways these potential new editors can learn about the community,” Cunningham said

Step One: Gathering Information About Readers

Elements of Reader Orientation

- **The newspaper makes a point of getting to know everything it can about readers and the marketplace.**

Information about readers and the marketplace is shared widely around the newspaper.

The newspaper develops plans to meet the needs of readers and changes in the market.

The newspaper implements the plans well and in a timely manner.

Regularly seeking out information about readers, the community and the marketplace is the foundation of creating and implementing a reader-based strategy.

All of the most reader-oriented newspapers used a variety of methods to collect information about their marketplaces – formal and informal data-gathering, advisory groups, town halls and the like.

Other methods were less overt and more indirect. The newspapers talked about the importance of a

deep-seated connection with their community that keeps them aware of market changes and opportunities, and about how certain hiring, training and development practices can keep the affinity strong.

Quantitative data-gathering

Several newspapers have extensive methods for collecting reader input, some of which involved serious research investment. People at the *Kansas City Star*, for instance, are proud of the range of methods they use: market and reader surveys by Knight Ridder, MORI, and their own research department; traditional focus groups; and innovative ideas adapted from other industries, such as the “inundation study.” (See “*The Inundation Study*,” p. 14.) “We’re eager for reader research,” said executive editor Mark Zieman. “And while we feel we don’t have anywhere the amount we need, I’m surprised how much it is compared to what other newspapers have.”

The *Rockford Register Star* prepared for a reader-oriented redesign and reformat in 1999 by first looking at readership data trends from earlier surveys, then developing a set of single-copy prototypes intended to appeal to young non-subscribers. A series of focus groups with the target demographic revealed such enthusiasm for the prototypes that it was decided to test it on current subscribers as well. Based on further positive data, the redesign was launched in May 1999 for both single copy and home delivery editions, and reader reaction in subsequent surveys has been positive.

Before launching a five-year strategic plan in 2000 focusing on improving reader satisfaction, *The Idaho Statesman* started with existing data from three corporate surveys in 1993, 1996 and 1998, added market information from Media Audit and Claritas

research, then conducted a detailed 1999 survey covering 100 content areas to pinpoint reader interests (not just “health,” but women’s health, fitness, pediatrics, etc.).

Newspapers don’t have to be large to benefit from quantitative surveys of their readers. *The Gleaner* commissioned market research from American Opinion Research every two years before its sale to E. W. Scripps Co., which now does an annual study.

Smaller newspapers concerned about cost can still tap into reader opinion through mail-in or call-in surveys, although they sacrifice scientific rigor by doing so. When the *Bluefield (W. Va.) Daily Telegraph* began a major redesign, they ran full page questionnaires asking readers what topics they were most interested in, and which proposed ideas they liked best. Several hundred readers cut the survey out and mailed it in.

Some newspapers seek feedback from subscribers by including a quick survey on their billing statements. They ask every member of the public who comes to the newspaper office to fill out a customer response card. At *The Appeal-Democrat* in Marysville, Calif., data from multiple reader sources is gathered in a systematic way. (See “*Gathering Feedback*,” p. 15.)

The *Desert Sun*’s circulation director sends a survey to a different ZIP code monthly. While it’s geared to service issues, customers can add comments on any aspect of the newspaper, and rate the paper on a scale of poor to excellent. Results are passed along to relevant department heads throughout the paper.

Database technology is used to track and use information about individual readers. At the *Greenville (S.C.) News*, each reader is assigned a “loyalty code” that describes how long he or she has been continuous subscriber. These loyalty codes are the basis for the SMART (Strategic Marketing and Retention Target) program, a method for developing targeted subscription plans to better fit readers’ lifestyles and reading behaviors.

The Kansas City Star collects survey data on its new subscription starts, asking subscribers about their interests and seeking permission to contact them with special offers as part of Star Rewards, a loyalty program. Circulation director Lisa Parks calls this “targeted loyalty”: “If you say you’re interested in NASCAR, then when we do a loyalty reward for you, it will be NASCAR related. If you say you’re a book reader, then we’ll try to let you know when there’s book-related content, and we’ll try to get you special deals with regard to books.”

Circulation departments at a number of the papers learn by methodically tracking single-copy sales and front-page headlines. *The Idaho Statesman*’s single copy sales manager notes the spikes and dips of single copy sales daily, developing a database showing that increases of 2 percent to 3 percent on a given day can be attributed, at least in part, to story play, and what kinds of stories are likely to spur sales spurts. She attends every editorial meeting, providing input on what front page stories are likely to sell the most

papers, and provides input on which stories are promoted in the “skyboxes,” the promotional layout at the top of Page One.

The Bluefield (W. Va.) Daily Telegraph tracks single copies in a similar way, logging rack sales for specific days and reporting the lead headline each day. This enables the news department to get a sense of the impact of the headlines and the lead stories.

Qualitative data-gathering

But none of the newspapers relied on large-scale research alone – each used a variety of ways of getting to know more about readers.

- **Town meetings**

Many newspapers run regular or *ad hoc* town meetings to gather community feedback. *The Idaho Statesman*, reacting to reader research, ran a multipart series of stories on the problems facing rural communities, and then gathered more reaction by co-sponsoring a two-day conference with the Andrus Center for Public Policy in Boise.

In Rockford, the *Register Star* organized a series of five “Pride of the Rock River Valley Breakfasts” in the fall of 2000, inviting key leaders from a four-county area to discuss the issues facing their communities and the region. Out of the breakfasts came a consensus about issues, from which the newspaper developed an editorial agenda for the following year.

- **Reader advisory groups**

Regular use of reader panels is a common technique used by these newspapers. For instance, the *Palm Springs Desert Sun* has created five advisory boards made up of invited community members, and has opened daily newsroom meetings to the public by invitation.

The *Dubuque Telegraph Herald* has a single panel, in place for about four years, that includes both volunteers and people asked at random to join. “It’s a varied demographic group,” said editor Brian Cooper, who moderates a monthly two-hour meeting. “Male, female, young, old, long-time Dubuquers, new Dubuquers. We have two high school kids.” The first hour is a presentation from a newspaper employee about their responsibilities and challenges. The second half is feedback for the editor, and panelists aren’t shy about saying what they think.

“These people do their homework,” said Cooper. “They bring clips with them, and question news judgment. We have run ideas for new products by them. And the reaction isn’t unanimous, which is an eye-opener for some who find out that not all readers think alike, and that it isn’t necessarily that easy to put out a community newspaper.” And between meetings, Cooper often will get a phone call or e-mail from panelists with story ideas, questions or concerns.

- **Reader representative/ombudsman**

A few newspapers have permanent “reader representatives” or ombudsmen to listen to readers’ suggestions, kudos and complaints, and to explain the workings of the newspaper to readers. The reader representative for the *Kansas City Star* every month invites 20 to 30 guests to the newspaper and gives them a tour, including a visit to the daily news meeting. After the meeting, they spend an hour with the editor discussing news issues. The reader representative writes a Sunday column, and produces a weekly note to the entire news staff – as well as to department heads around the building – about every reader complaint and comment.

- **Training for “hearing”**

Including reader orientation in a newspaper’s training program not only reinforces the emphasis from the top, but also offers employees the tools to follow through. The *Appeal-Democrat* of Marysville, Calif., hires an outside consultant to train every new employee on listening to the customer and focusing on customer satisfaction. And after a flood of phone calls resulted from *The Idaho Statesman’s* efforts to make employees more available to readers – especially in the newsroom – a trainer showed all departments how to deal with the new job stress and turn it into a plus by getting feedback and ideas from readers and customers.

- **Employee resources**

Some papers tap into in their own employees for feedback, especially when speed is of the essence. This method should be used with care because of the danger of biased data. But it could be effective with a workforce that reflects the community’s demographics. Boise editor Carolyn Washburn is a firm believer in the technique: “We found that employees, and especially those outside the newsroom, really reflect our market research. So we use employee surveys, formal and informal, when we need quick feedback or can’t afford to do research on the entire community.”

- **Affinity as a source of knowledge**

The most powerfully reader-oriented newspapers strongly believe that a deep personal connection with the community is part of their reader orientation. However, this affinity with the community is just a part of being reader oriented – quite possibly a *result* of being reader oriented rather than the cause of it. In any event, the examples of affinity cannot be substituted for, nor will they work without, the formal qualitative and quantitative elements of information gathering. They work only if included in an integrated reader-orientation package.

Leaders at all of the newspapers we talked to described this affinity. However, as shown in the case study from Boise (“*Putting the elements of reader orientation into practice*,” p. 34), historical bonds won’t protect a newspaper or any company that does not

continually nurture the reader connection. *The Idaho Statesman's* strategic plan launched in 2000 came after it recognized that the relationship had worn dangerously thin.

On her arrival in Rockford from New Jersey, editor Linda Grist Cunningham found “a deep visceral attachment between this newspaper and its community that I haven’t felt anywhere else. We joke in the industry about people saying ‘It’s *my* paper,’ but here they really, truly mean it.”

Kansas City Star editor Zieman shares the same feeling. “The *Star* has been here 120 years, and we’ve probably been the dominant paper in our region for 110 of them. It’s a tangible thing that you can grasp, and it’s a connection to the community that you can’t invent.”

(Both the *Kansas City Star* and the *Dubuque Telegraph Herald* have used their community roots, knowledge and expertise to develop book-publishing enterprises that draw on contributions from readers and play to their love of the community. (See “*Tapping into History*,” p. 16.)

- **Hiring link**

Community affinity is seen as so important at some papers that they give hiring preferences to area natives, or to those with local or regional connections. A result is that the newspapers have long-term employees in key roles who have developed deep knowledge and understanding of the community.

Boise editorial page editor Kevin Richert, a longtime Idaho journalist, is a recent hire. “Five years ago, I don’t know that the people in charge here would have thought it an asset to have somebody with Idaho experience. Which goes back to your community disconnect – the perception out there was that the paper is bringing in somebody from somewhere else in the country that really didn’t understand Idaho. That perception is changing.”

Dubuque editor Cooper put it this way: “If we have a job applicant who used to live here, or grew up in the area, or maybe even went to college at one of our area colleges or universities, we’re mentally giving them extra points. Because there’s more to it than just the job – it’s that they cared about the community even before they got on staff. Over time, that sends a message to the readers that we think that what goes on in the community is important.”

- **Longevity link**

While bringing in fresh blood can help generate fresh ideas and spark needed change, the top reader-oriented newspapers also value long-term employees who are carriers of community memory.

At *The Gleaner*, Ron Jenkins has been editor for 30 years. When Steve Austin, the

current publisher, was a teen, Jenkins hired him to cover local sports. Jenkins' wife, a columnist, has been at the paper for 39 years, with time off now and then to raise four children. "Our business editor and our features editor, another husband-wife team, have been here for 21 years," Jenkins said. "We have at least 10 people on our staff of 20 that have been here 15 years or more. We have very little turnover in part because of our reputation for having pretty high standards for a small community paper."

If somebody goes to Dubuque just to work at the *Telegraph Herald*, Editor Cooper believes, their tenure tends to be only half or two-thirds as long as people who have some other tie to the community. "We've suffered some of the same turnover issues that a lot of papers have," he said. "But we have some employees who have been here 30-plus years and some even longer than that. We stay connected with our retirees. We value longevity, at a time when a lot of papers don't anymore – where it's almost a negative to be someplace for a long time. Let's face it, if you've got to live with people in the community and care about them, and you also know that you're going to be here for a while, that can affect in a positive way your balance and fairness in how you do the story."

- **Diversity link**

The *Kansas City Star* formed a diversity committee nine years ago. Originally it was a grassroots group of volunteers in the newsroom, but has since spread throughout the company, with a committee in every department and building-wide diversity events. "It's been very good in two ways," said editor Zieman. "One, they bring in guest speakers, as well as take groups of employees out to the community. Two, it's focused on the product – just as externally focused as it is internally focused. We do audits of the product to make sure that what we're reflecting in the paper is reflective of our community."

Rockford, Ill., last year emerged from a 12-year federal school desegregation order, and the news staff at the *Register Star*, in brainstorming a response, saw the occasion as more of a beginning than an end – an opportunity for the community to move forward, with a new superintendent, to create a world-class education system. Publisher Fritz Jacobi: "We've invited key players to four different breakfast sessions and said, 'All right, now that we're out of this thing, what do we do, where do we go, what's your opinion?' Based on that feedback and interaction, we'll do follow up stories and enterprise reporting on what we're hearing out there, not only with people directly involved, but the pulse beat of the community."

- **Community involvement link**

At these newspapers, participation in local organizations and events is seen as an important way to tap into the concerns of readers and customers.

"Being a small community helps," said *The Gleaner's* publisher, Steve Austin. "You'll see our people at the Lions Club meeting at noon, or in the stands at the Saturday soccer

game. It comes from folks being volunteers in the community.” *Gleaner* editor Jenkins said, “Talk about focus groups and readership surveys and marketing studies – a lot of our people do them every day, because every time we walk in a restaurant or a store, somebody will have a comment or suggestion about the newspaper.”

Dubuque publisher Tom Yunt encourages his employees to be involved in the community. “I know some newsrooms believe that if you’re involved in anything, it’s a conflict of interests. I don’t see it that way. My feeling is that we gain more than we lose. We need to be aware of those conflicts and avoid them. But we think that you end up getting more sources and better sources. And I think people in the community see, ‘Hey, people down at the *TH* are involved. They’re not just like vultures sitting on the branch waiting for somebody to screw up so they can swoop down and write a story.’ ”

Speaker’s bureaus are another way that newspapers both reach out to the community and bring back information. The one at Palm Springs involves all editors and reporters, who are expected to report back on the “headlines” of what they hear when they go out to talk to groups in the community.

“The Inundation Study” – *Kansas City (Mo.) Star*

Hallmark Cards had once been a client of the *Star*'s research and database manager, Mark Whitaker, before he joined the newspaper. A similar challenge facing both the greeting card and newspaper industries is having a product that has been around for a long time and that people – particularly younger people – may not see as being needed any more.

“Since Hallmark is right across town, and we use the same focus group moderator, we did some brainstorming and adapted a research methodology they use called the inundation study, which has been a big thing for us,” said Whitaker.

“We brought in a bunch of women who were not regular readers of the paper, and who were actually negative about newspapers,” said Whitaker. “In a focus group, we learned how they gathered and used information in their lives. In one exercise, the moderator showed them pictures of people and asked, ‘If the newspaper was a person, who would it be?’ As they left, they were given a free subscription for a month and were asked to scan through the paper every day, keeping a journal on what they found interesting – what they liked, what they didn’t like.

“They came back a month later and shared their experiences, and the picture exercise was repeated. The first time they were asked, the predominant picture chosen to represent the newspaper was a businessman –in a suit, real formal. After they had experienced the paper, the main picture that jumped out for them was the one of four women sitting around having a conversation, which was dramatically different.

“There were still some hurdles, but we found what we were looking for – the bullets. What are the things that make people have a better experience with the paper? And we found that it was stuff having to do with utility. How could the paper be useful to them? Anything that was local basically had meaning to them, along with what I guess you’d call a “feel good” component – some uplifting, positive stories. We found that during those 30 days if there was even one time that they were able to take a story out of the paper and share it with someone, to make it actionable, it made a big difference.

“We had one lady who saw an article in the paper about the very topic that she’d been discussing with her son the day before. She was able to take this article and say to her son, “See, it’s not just mom saying this.” One woman talked about how reading the paper helped her feel more knowledgeable about sports during happy hour at her bar. Several others said their parents seemed more proud because they were following current events.

“Now, they weren’t necessarily going to continue reading every day after the inundation experience was over, but they had a better impression of the paper, and we had learned a lot about making content and design more relevant and useful to more readers.”

“Gathering feedback” – *The Appeal-Democrat*, Marysville, Calif.

The Appeal-Democrat, led by publisher Olaf Frandsen, has a voracious appetite for reader feedback. In addition to traditional market research surveys, focus groups and reader panels, the newspaper also uses the following devices:

The Bureau of Accuracy: Each month, the newsroom sends out a letter signed by the publisher to 20 randomly selected people who appeared in stories or photographs. Respondents are asked how the reporters treated them, whether their name was spelled correctly, and if they were quoted accurately in the paper. The circulation and advertising departments also send mini-questionnaires to 20 randomly selected subscribers and advertisers with questions about satisfaction, complaints, comments, etc. Response rates range between 50 percent and 75 percent.

Customer Response Card: Visitors to the newspaper are asked to fill out a customer response card asking them how they were treated and if their request was handled in a satisfactory manner.

Tip Request Form: Story tips or information from callers or walk-in visitors to the paper are computerized and sent to the appropriate newsroom person. They can be tracked and monitored when people call in to ask the status of their tip. Editor Laura Nicholson explained the process, which was developed to deal with an “It’s not my job” problem:

“All of our community briefs – our community calendar, our obituaries, our school menus, our classroom notes – along with any tips all go through a clearinghouse handled by our news assistants. If I’m out in the community and someone gives me something, I give it to the news assistants. Whoever files it puts their initials on it. And from there, the community editor puts it into the various slots of people who will be responsible for getting it into the paper. I would say 90 percent of the information that comes through the door is going to make it in the paper somewhere. I’ve seen too many people call the newspaper and get no response. Worse yet, I met them in the community and they tell me that nobody responded to them. It’s much different now.”

“Tapping into history” – *Dubuque (Iowa) Telegraph Herald* and *Kansas City (Mo.) Star*

Both the *Dubuque Telegraph Herald* and the *Kansas City Star* have leveraged their historical links with their communities to create book-publishing businesses that foster reader and customer interaction.

Dubuque publisher Tom Yunt said the niche publishing business, with four successful pictorial history books out so far, has built on the *Telegraph Herald's* brand while bringing the newspaper in contact with a whole new constituency of readers. “They literally have to bring photographs to us. We hear their story on the history of the photograph, and we’ve really made a different connection.”

Connie Gibbs, promotion director, heads up the effort. “We have really struck a chord with our readers. The newspaper is positioned so well in the community to preserve Main Street, and we’ve had the trust and the credibility over the years to be able to pull something like this off. Making an average of \$100,000 per book is very important, but to me the human connection is paramount.”

The latest book is *Hometown Heroes: Dubuque Remembers World War II*. On the phone with the Readership Institute during the book’s preparation, Gibbs said “I have 15 veterans in the room next door right now, filling out details of their photos for this book, because today’s the deadline. People trust us with their treasures, these photos. That says a lot. They trust us with documenting history. And who better than a newspaper to do that? And that positions us positively in many readers’ lives. Not just the older market, but their children’s children have come forth.”

Because the books are limited editions, they are becoming collector’s items. Gibbs said editions of the first book, *Dubuque, the Birthplace of Iowa, Vol. I*, are going for more than \$200. (The new ones cost \$20-25.)

In addition to selling the books through the newspaper and its Web site, the *Telegraph Herald* enhances its relationship with advertisers by offering them a chance to sell the books or to use them for promotions, sharing the profit. Also, Gibbs is considering a *Hometown Heroes* CD-ROM, or spin-offs for circulation premiums, such as a set of historic coffee mugs, photo note cards, or a calendar. Adding to the future marketing potential are the names of 5,000 buyers in a database.

Gibbs has been so successful that the paper has created a consulting business, too. She travels around the country, using two-day training sessions to show other newspapers how to do the same thing in their communities.

At the *Kansas City Star*, history also plays a large role in its book-publishing

connection with readers. As editor Zieman said, "The history of Kansas City is the history of the *Star*. It's interchangeable. There's no other source for it, really."

From 1928 to 1961, the *Star* published *The Weekly Star Farmer*, which went to half the states in America for \$2 a year. Published every week was a quilt pattern sent by a Plains or a southern farm woman, along with the woman's story about why it was a favorite. Each pattern would be given a name, such as Crazy Ann or Kansas Sunflower.

Collectively called "The Kansas City Stars," these patterns "became the treasure trove of quilt patterns in America," said Zieman. "In the last couple of years, we reawakened that sleeping dragon, and now we have a whole quilt publishing business – quilt book after quilt book. And we still have 1,400 patterns left from the *Weekly Star Farmer's* archives. People love them."

Riding a new wave of interest in quilting, the *Star* doesn't just redraft the patterns, but adds historical photos and references about the era and people who created these quilts. And after a 40-year hiatus, the *Star* is publishing a new line of patterns, based on Kansas and Missouri wildflowers, by a nationally known designer.

"The book hasn't come out yet and we've already sold hundreds of copies," said Zieman. "It's different, it draws on the great history that we have, and it's a real feel-good image for our newspaper."

Step Two: Sharing Reader Information

Elements of Reader Orientation

The newspaper makes a point of getting to know everything it can about readers and the marketplace.

- **Information about readers and the marketplace is shared widely around the newspaper.**

The newspaper develops plans to the needs of readers and changes in the market.

The newspaper implements the plans well and in a timely manner.

From our interviews with the most reader-oriented newspapers, it is apparent that having a process for disseminating information is key. The process ensures that information is driven throughout the organization on a regular basis – not just when a specific project or crisis arises.

One of the advantages of an information-rich organization is that people at all levels see the “big picture” regularly and, as a result, feel engaged with the newspaper’s goals and how their jobs contribute to the whole.

We found several key indicators that show there is a process in place to

ensure that reader and market intelligence gets shared around the organization:

- The paper has made a systematic effort to make sure the right people get the right information.
- Cross-departmental cooperation and information-sharing is the norm.
- Information is disseminated throughout the organization. People at all levels are brought into forums that consider the information and plan strategies.

- **Right information to the right people**

Readership research at these newspapers is not limited to a few top executives, but is rolled out in a formal process. At Kansas City, research results usually are outlined by the research manager, first to senior management, followed by separate, customized presentations to managers in advertising, editorial and circulation.

Information that is gathered daily, weekly or monthly is posted for all to see, reinforcing progress or problems. In the Palm Springs circulation department’s customer service area, key statistical information for the period is posted on a board: penetration, starts and stops, churn and volume growth by ZIP code. That same information is shared with the Operating Committee weekly. At *The Gleaner*, their arrangement with an outside researcher included briefings in all departments, as well as assistance in developing targeted content and advertising based on the feedback.

- **Cross-departmental cooperation**

One of the barriers to information-sharing is the invisible but very real silo structure and turf-protecting culture of newspapers. These barriers are seldom found at the most reader-oriented organizations. At Palm Springs, for instance, a major collaborative program has been set up with a major goal of facilitating decisions that are good for customers, the company and employees. (See “*Everybody CARES*,” p. 20.)

At the *Dubuque Telegraph Herald*, as at many of these papers, a circulation employee takes part in the daily news meeting and has become a surrogate reader representative. When editors disagree on story play, she is often asked to put in her two cents’ worth. Says editor Cooper: “She’s just purely reader interest. I like having her at the table.” The newsroom returns the favor by sharing with the other departments any relevant comments that arise from their monthly reader panel.

Mark Whitaker, research and database manager at the *Kansas City Star*, said it is routine for editor Mark Zieman to call for help in the newsroom planning process. “He’ll ask, ‘What do the numbers say on this?’ or ask about the readership of different sections.” It works the other way, too. “I might share with him some things that jump out of the data – say, reference back to earlier research to point out that this result showed up elsewhere, it’s not a one-time finding.”

In Rockford, circulation director Mike DiMaria has his new hires spend time in other departments to get a feel for how a newspaper works. And he often invites people from other departments to answer phones at the circulation complaint desk to hear what customers are saying.

- **Wide dissemination and discussion**

Some newspapers share everything with everyone in the building to reinforce strategic goals. At Boise, the editor sends a weekly e-mail to the editorial staff about everything she has heard from the other departments, and forwards to other departments a list of news projects for the coming month. Meanwhile, the publisher sends a monthly e-mail to all employees, updating them about financial results, delivery complaints, on-time press starts, and advertising volume. Each quarter she and the Operating Committee hold multiple hour-long employee meetings, including one for the night shift, that include give and take. In all cases, the information is tied back to how *The Idaho Statesman* is serving the reader. (See “*Putting the Elements of Reader Orientation into Practice*,” 34.)

Two “State of the *TH*” meetings are held annually by Dubuque publisher Yunt, looking back at the past six months and then looking forward to the upcoming six months. The meetings, which are mandatory for all, cover financial results, ESOP stock prospects (employees own part of the newspaper), and events on the horizon that can impact the paper’s strategy.

“Everybody CARES” – *Palm Springs (Calif.) Desert Sun*

The Desert Sun has built reader/customer feedback into an interdepartmental program called CARES, which circulation director Greg Castro, the program’s leader, says stands for “Commitment to product and process, Accountability for actions, Rewards for achievements, Excellence of service, and Success – if we do all of those things correctly.”

There are five CARES teams, each led by an operating committee member and made up of individuals throughout the newspaper at all levels. They address five key areas: communication, ad quality, recruitment and retention, culture, and news credibility. All have major elements of reader and customer orientation.

For instance, the Communication Team developed a quarterly newsletter that includes company performance and customer research information, and it coordinates customer service training. The group audits and assesses all customer touchpoints, and holds customer focus groups to determine market perceptions. It also has created a “Get It Into Your Life” program designed to help employees turn customer service issues into positive actions. All employees are empowered to promise concerned customers that an executive will call them by the end of the next business day; to grant up to two weeks’ credit for unsatisfactory service; and to offer non-subscribers a special introductory subscription. Each employee carries a foldable, wallet-size card to facilitate the program.

The News Credibility Team has arranged for error audits by 10 to 15 community volunteers, who critique the paper each day and provide feedback on everything from grammar and punctuation to historical perspective. This “Community Credibility Task Force” also meets monthly for chats with small groups of newsroom employees. In addition, members of the community are invited to daily news meetings, and reader advisory boards have been created in specific coverage areas to help staff members generate story ideas, stay in touch with the communities, and build relationships with community members.

The Culture Change Team seeks to create a workplace that fosters openness, innovative thinking and adaptability. Among its nine initiatives are efforts to enhance customer service and establish lines of communication. One example is a model that includes strategic planning sessions to improve communication between departments, to foster buy-in on top company priorities, and to facilitate project execution. Also, the group created an outreach program that includes an employee speakers bureau to appear at community events, meetings and other engagements; a Student Newspaper Group to serve as a forum for teen journalists at area high school newspapers (which the *Desert Sun* prints); and an Ambassador Group of staff members willing to serve as *Desert Sun* representatives in community-based groups and organizations.

“Making decisions that are for the good of our customers and the company and each other – that is a large part of what CARES is really all about,” says Castro. “We have over 360 employees, and there are nine departments that can sometimes operate as if they’re not part of a whole. You have folks that work at night and folks that work during the day. And people in the newsroom traditionally have a different take than the rest of the newspaper. We’re really trying to bring all of that together through CARES.”

Step Three: Planning a Response to Reader Needs

Elements of Reader Orientation

The newspaper makes a point of getting to know everything it can about readers and the marketplace.

Information about readers and the marketplace is shared widely around the newspaper.

➤ **The newspaper develops plans to meet the needs of readers and changes in the market.**

The newspaper implements the plans well and in a timely manner.

Armed with widely shared reader and market intelligence, high-performing newspapers then create a response to customers' needs.

Among the leading reader-oriented newspapers, these frequent practices emerged:

- Employees at all levels are expected to take feedback seriously and act on the information they receive.
- Strategies are based on quantitative research and/or reader feedback, not just hunches, and they are tested with readers before

implementation.

- A wide variety of people at all levels of the company are brought into the planning process early, not just to review plans that have already been formulated.

Here are some ways these practices are manifested:

- **Employees expected to act on feedback**

At the *Appeal-Democrat*, all department heads meet for brainstorming sessions to develop a strategy framework based on data from readership surveys. Then the top managers explain the framework in their departments and ask employees to help develop ideas for specific responses.

For example, Laura Nicholson, editor at Marysville, pulls every employee's name from a hat and creates groups of three. Each group is given the task of developing ideas in strategic areas that will help readers, either content or processes. Then each group's ideas are posted on an internal chat board and employees are asked to critique and polish the ideas.

After Kansas City gathers its rich research data, the next step is to summon the Interface Group, with representatives from the newsroom, circulation, advertising, and production, to work on new products or changes to existing ones. "We have a history of launching products with full support of the other departments," said editor Zieman, "and we don't

go into our budgeting suggesting or proposing new products without talking to the advertising folks beforehand, and vice versa.” (See “*Focusing the Strategy*,” p. 24.)

- **Strategies are based on research, and tested with customers**

These newspapers know they can't be and do everything for all readers, so they use research to help focus their efforts for the most impact. The *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* has a 54,000 daily circulation, but is the largest newspaper in the state. “We try to be a newspaper for South Dakota,” said publisher Arnold Garson, “but we also understand that's a larger focus than we can execute with any great degree of consistency. So we pick our spots with it. And we try to go more for the stories and the news situations that make a difference to our readers and the issues and the subjects that they care about, based both on our research and on our own feedback from the market. And that's an important combination.”

The papers we interviewed cited several examples of new practices or products that came as a direct result of reader feedback.

For instance, at the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, a sports reporter was assigned to ferret out what sports fans wanted more of in the newspaper. His simple but effective method was to sit down at local delis, grocery stores and other gathering places and ask people about their interests. The most powerful answer that came back was NASCAR racing. The *Daily Telegraph* decided to start doing its own stories, in addition to using racing news off the wire, and the idea evolved into a monthly magazine that is now syndicated to other papers. Its circulation is about 60,000 – double that of the paper itself. And staffers continue to test how they are doing through the “sit down and chat” method.

A young bride's complaint resulted in the change of a longtime wedding-announcement policy at Marysville. “If you wanted your wedding photo and story in the paper, you had to bring it in within 30 days of the wedding or else we weren't going to publish it,” said *Appeal-Democrat* publisher Frandsen. “After some discussion, we realized that the policy is stupid. I mean, what difference does it make? So we just dropped that policy altogether. There is no deadline. If you got married a year ago and you haven't had a wedding story or photo in the paper, we'll still publish it.”

- **Wide involvement in planning**

Making sure that all employees' perspectives are included in the strategic process can avoid the “flavor of the day” syndrome that often sours attitudes. If employees are genuinely involved in the process, they are less likely to see the results as directives from management that are likely to be replaced by an entirely new set of directives in a few months' time. At the *Greenville News*, it took a few years to develop a process that worked effectively. (See “*Getting Everybody's Input*,” p. 25.)

At Boise, the customer service outreach manager, who reports directly to the publisher, coordinates customer service across all departments. She has developed an internal

survey where departments evaluate each other on a series of key measures, including customer focus. The results fuel a dialogue that has turned into innovations, such as new ideas for community outreach. (See “*Putting the Elements of Reader Orientation into Practice*,” p. 34.)

At the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, six or seven people from each department have been designated as a team of key customer service “experts.” Cross-trained throughout the building on service issues, they ensure that customers are directed to the right helpers. Because these individuals are familiar with all the departments, their success in planning and implementing responses to readers’ needs is highly effective.

Several papers based extensive design changes on reader information. The goal of *Rockford Register Star’s* effort was not only to make the paper friendlier to current readers, but also to appeal more to the time-deprived. “The whole company was involved in the design,” said Tom Lasley, marketing development director. “And right before we launched the new newspaper, we did a newspaper-wide branding workshop, looking at what our core values were as a community newspaper in Rockford. We saw that it would make sense to tie that in with the changes we were doing in the newspaper to make sure we were branding ourselves correctly at the same time.”

“Focusing the Strategy” – *Kansas City Star*

In mid-1997, the *Kansas City Star* commissioned an outside consulting firm, the Cambridge Group, to try to distill what was most important to readers, and then help establish internal mechanisms to act on the research.

Publisher Arthur Brisbane called the effort a branding initiative, but with a twist: a way to deliver on the promise that the *Star* wanted to make to the community about what the paper is all about – what it delivers. Editor Mark Ziemann described it as “a long series of focus groups internally and with readers, repeated to distill the essence of what people thought we were doing well and what they thought we were doing poorly. And then on the ones rated poor, what ones were actually important to readers and what ones weren’t? It was an opportunity to throw in things we always thought were important and hear back the truth, up close and personal. They pulled some surprises.”

The planning process then started in the newsroom at the front line, said Ziemann, with the reporters, photographers and editors discussing what makes the paper valuable. Out of the research and debate came a set of “antes” – things the *Star* was doing well, and needed to continue to do well because they are important – and “planks” – six areas readers said were important to them but were not being well-executed. They said they wanted a newspaper that:

7. Identifies problems and dangers to me and my family.
8. Keeps me connected to my community.
9. Gives me a positive balanced newspaper experience.
10. Delivers practical, everyday information.
11. Makes it easier to get what I want.
12. Provides objective and factual reporting.

“We printed these planks and distributed them,” says Brisbane, “and when we do our research every year, we ask questions around the planks to see how we’re performing against those particular objectives. Over a three- to four-year period, we have these six focal points. They are posted on the walls, we keep them in mind; and when we make changes to the paper, we try to do things that address those points.”

Also, the project led to a complete redesign of the newspaper, and an *ad hoc* marketing group was turned into a consumer marketing division, which has since been more tightly linked to the circulation department.

“Getting Everybody’s Input” – Greenville (S.C.) News

John Pittman, editor of the Greenville News, explained how he brought the readers’ perspective and his staff’s perspective into strategy development at his paper:

“We have evolved over the years, from me every year bringing in the research, sitting down with the staff and then telling them ‘Here’s what the research says, here’s the plan.’ If they didn’t like the plan, they attacked the research.

“We started first by simply listening to their suggestions in a group meeting. However, some felt like they didn’t get a chance to speak. So the next year we started what has been the pattern for the last several years. I sit down with a group of no more than about eight or nine staffers and listen to their ideas. We spend one hour each, and it takes me two or three days to go through this process. And every staffer here is given an opportunity to speak on anything they want to speak on.

“If you look at our reader input, the staff gathers the vast majority of it. They’ve been listening all year, so now it’s time for them to tell us what we ought to be doing, what are the big priorities we should focus on next year.

“Well, the first year we did this, two or three years ago, it was so nebulous that I was just overwhelmed and fell right back into looking at the overarching readership survey, and focused on it, with a few staff ideas plugged in when they fit.

“This year, we did the survey and, with the Operating Committee, identified what we thought were the critical issues. And then we took the critical issues back down to the staff and focused them on Pier One instead of on the waterfront. Then they were able to speak deeply about specific issues.

“As a result, we get the input of 100 staffers on a dozen or half-dozen critical issues. I’m as proud as I can be that the staff suggested every single initiative on the critical issues. I have never had that happen, and I feel like it’s the culmination of five years of trying to make this process work.

“And I’m not suggesting for a minute that 100 people agreed on every point. They didn’t. In some cases it may have just been one or two people who had the presence of mind to lead them to the specific initiatives that we thought were critical. But it doesn’t matter. When I put that plan together this year, rather than taking it to OC and to the publisher, I sent the doggone thing to the staff, the staff critiqued it, and they had an opportunity to review my plan before it was submitted. It’s their plan.”

Step Four: Implementing a Plan

Elements of Reader Orientation

The newspaper makes a point of getting to know everything it can about readers and the marketplace.

Information about readers and the marketplace is shared widely around the newspaper.

The newspaper develops plans to meet the needs of readers and changes in the market.

➤ **The newspaper implements the plans well and in a timely manner.**

At the implementation stage, reader-oriented newspapers turn the knowledge into action in a timely way to satisfy readers.

As the performance of reader-oriented newspapers shows, this can take the form of a new or improved product or an improved process that serves readers/customers better.

Often underpinning the action is a reallocation or refocusing of resources that makes the changes work.

- **New and improved products**

The *Rockford Register Star* reacted quickly to new data by beefing up local news coverage in regional geographic targets, improving coverage about and for families, and targeting coverage about and for Generation X, including young leaders and leaders of color. New “Life & Style” and Business sections target two of the top five readership content drivers: “home, health, food and garden” and “business and personal finance.” The core reader goals, through building-wide task force committees, have been tied into a mission statement, an annual operating plan, as well as to performance appraisals. (*See “Tying It All Together,” p. 29.*)

Research done for the 11,000-circulation *Gleaner* in Henderson, Ky., found that readers wanted more coverage of leisure-oriented activities. Thus was born the “Variety Pack,” an eight- to 12-page Thursday section that includes entertainment, movies, dining, travel, “even Nintendo,” said editor Jenkins. “Readers said they wanted it, so we gave it to them.” (The ad department makes use of the reader data, too, including it on rate cards and creating sales brochures.)

Dubuque aimed at younger readers by launching a four-page technology package within its business section.

These papers also use research data to adjust what they’re already doing. “The last survey we did,” said *The Gleaner’s* Jenkins, “we found out our growth in female readers was up, but we were losing male readers. They wanted more business and economic news, so we expanded our Sunday business section to eight pages, with a local column by

the business editor each week and several cover stories a year. We also enlarged our sports section to four sports pages daily and eight to 10 on Sundays.”

In Baltimore, to tap into a reader desire for “life event” coverage, *The Sun* assigns reporters to cover more such events, such as college graduations. “We really try to say ‘yes’ to people who think they have a story,” said publisher Mike Waller. “Big papers say no 90 percent of the time.”

“If you believe that local news is your franchise, and you believe it’s the most relevant thing to your readers, you really need to have a good zoned operation,” said Kansas City editor Ziemann. While other newspapers have given up on zoned neighborhood sections, *The Star’s* 13 sections have thrived. They are financially successful and highly read. “People see themselves in it,” said Ziemann. “They exist solely to put people’s names and faces in the paper and cover the news at the smallest level we can.” (The paper’s inter-departmental Interface Group developed the logistics so that if readers on opposite sides of the street are in two different school districts, each gets a different zoned edition, even if the same carrier has to deliver it.)

- **New processes**

The *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* responded to complaints by developing a routing procedure for the telephone system so customers get real people and are not transferred multiple times. Each department now has a designated contact person who is trained to answer most questions.

Looking for ways to make it easier for the customer to deal with them, Rockford has launched an interactive circulation service section on the newspaper’s Web site. Customers can stop their subscription for a vacation, check the status of their subscription, or send e-mail.

In Marysville, Calif., circulation director Ron Whitenack took all the complaint calls when he first arrived, because he wanted to connect with customers and learn what the problems were. Out of that, he recently developed a system that ties the customer service representatives, district managers and service runners into teams that work together to solve problems – particularly the repeat ones.

These papers also realize that new processes need to be coordinated and reinforced with training and rewards. At *The Sun* in Baltimore, each customer service employee is trained extensively on “legendary service” methods and is expected to implement them in daily work. (See “*Looking for New Opportunities*,” p. 30.)

In Boise, training in phone strategies was held for everyone after reader and customer interaction soared with the increased publication of contact phone numbers daily. (See “*Putting the Elements of Reader Orientation into Practice*,” p. 34.)

Beyond the formal reviews, employees are rewarded for exemplary service for adhering to the reader mission. In Baltimore, *The Sun* awards monthly “Publisher’s Awards” to exemplary employees, including gifts and cash.

Reader-oriented papers also know that it is important to develop a marketing and promotion plan that tells readers and customers what new products and features are there for them. *The Greenville News* works with two local radio DJs to weave key target content into their morning routines. “The news editor each night selects two or three stories that he thinks address that niche,” said editor Pittman. “We picked the station with the largest 25-to-34 female audience. This gives circulation and market development a sense that we’re not paying lip service to this initiative. We’re serious about it.” (See “*Hearing From Different Voices*,” p. 31.)

- **Allocation of resources**

Part of implementing reader-based initiatives often involves re-allocating human and material resources. *The Appeal-Democrat*, realizing that contacts with readers were being handled in a haphazard way, shifted three news assistants from elsewhere in the newsroom to the front desk. They escort visitors to their destinations and sort incoming information to ensure that it gets to the right person. They have developed a tracking system to provide quick answers for people who call to find out about the status of their tip, request, or reader-submitted content.

After research showed that *The Idaho Statesman* was not adequately covering an adjacent county with booming population growth, reporters were shifted to a new team to cover two cities, the school, and high school sports in the area.

At the *Greenville News*, a signal from readers that they wanted better business coverage resulted in a shift of staffing emphasis. Said editor Pittman: “The staff felt that we needed to really take ownership of business topics, and came up with very specific recommendations on business and how to expand it.”

The *Argus Leader* uses its reader knowledge in its goal to selecting major South Dakota issues on which to take an “ownership” role in coverage. (See “*Taking the Ball and Running*,” p. 32).

“Tying It All Together” – *Rockford (Ill.) Register Star*

The *Register Star* funnels information gathered from many community contact points to cross-department teams that implement the strategic plan. “We do research, focus groups, access groups, advisory boards,” said executive editor Linda Grist Cunningham. “We do internal and external marketing and branding. We constantly monitor our market.”

We asked her how all this information-gathering is used in practical ways.

“Let me tell you how it all ties together. Of the top five content drivers for the *Register Star* – identified through the Impact Study – four are common with the industry, but number five for us is business and personal finance. In addition, our own Gannett research has identified an enormous appetite in this market for business and economic news, personal finance, jobs, all that stuff. We also know from our own reader roundtables that it’s a huge, key topic.

“We take all three of those pieces of information and ask, ‘What do we do?’ We recently launched all new, redesigned business sections. And now my business editor has created a newspaper-wide task force that includes marketing, advertising, circulation and production, as well as news staff, to launch a new weekly business section this year.

“What’s odd about this is that it’s my business editor three levels down from me who is running this project, building-wide. She is telling the ad director what to do – and it works beautifully!”

“Looking for New Opportunities” – *The Sun*, Baltimore, Md.

Using reader input to drive activities at the paper doesn’t always take the form of a new editorial product. Under the leadership of circulation director Paul Barbetta, *The Sun* has implemented the “Legendary Service” initiative with current and new customer service personnel.

The first step is to classify a service problem using the following grid.

<p>3 Not newspaper’s fault High impact on customer Response: Our chance to be a hero</p>	<p>4 Newspaper’s fault High impact on customer Response: Roll out the red carpet</p>
<p>1 Not newspaper’s fault Low impact on customer Response: Customer seeks empathy</p>	<p>2 Newspaper’s fault Low impact on customer Response: Just fix the problem</p>

The system evolved from looking at and classifying scores of common customer complaints and the level of response appropriate to each – “1” representing an engaged but low-level response and “4” a pull-out-all-the-stops reaction.

5. **Provide empathy:** For issues that are low impact and out of the newspaper’s control, simply providing understanding is enough to solve the problem. For instance, a reader calls in to express dislike for a political figure after the paper runs a story about him or her. Providing a listening ear and making the reader feel important can build a relationship of trust that can be leveraged later if more serious service issues arise.
6. **Fix the problem:** For example, when the newspaper catches a billing error, it is the paper’s job simply to fix the problem and move on.
7. **Our chance to be a hero:** There are opportunities to create positive experiences out of problems created by the customers themselves. Barbetta has a personal example: When he arrived at the Kennedy Center to attend the opera, he discovered someone sitting in his seat. The usher looked at Barbetta’s ticket, apologized, and led him to a box seat. Only later did he realize that he had come on the wrong night. Rather than pointing out the mistake and causing a customer to feel foolish, the usher treated him as a special guest.
8. **Roll out the red carpet:** The issues that require the highest level of response are high impact events where the mistakes are the newspaper’s. Barbetta’s example is a misplaced advertisement for a local advertiser. For these events, he considers such things as buying a small gift, or an in-person apology.

Another big benefit of the process is that it helps the newspaper come away with a stronger position in the customer’s mind than if there had been no problem at all.

“Hearing From Different Voices” – *Greenville (S.C.) News*

“We’re developing content that is focused on trying to attract 25- to 34-year-old readers, based on our readership research,” said editor John Pittman. “So when our writers are writing a story, they’ll seek out somebody 25-to-34 to include in that story. And then depending on what they say, we will include that quote.

“It’s one of the touchstones that they’re expected to touch as they put their stories together. The question is, “Do we have a 25-to-34 angle here that we can bring into the story?” We do this in all sections, but it needs to be more prominent than just buried in the story. To me, a good front page, if I’ve got a 25-to-34 initiative underway, is to have a young face and a young voice prominently on the page somewhere.

“We will also develop new content for 25-to-34. Last year, we formed a reader advisory group that has been ongoing, telling us what they want in an entertainment section. Their job is to come in every Tuesday and critique the section fronts from two days’ newspapers. And it’s very invigorating.

“That committee is composed of 10 to 14 people from the circulation and market development departments. We bring the section editors in, and they’re allowed to sit around the outside of the room but are not allowed to talk until we ask for feedback. We just let the kids chew us up. They actually have been involved in brainstorming story ideas and all those kinds of things.

“So it’s all about growth from that group, and it’s just continually churning and creating new ideas.”

“Taking the Ball and Running” – *Sioux Falls (S.D.) Argus Leader*

After reader research led the *Argus Leader* to a strategic decision to focus on harder news issues that were relevant to the entire regional market, they looked for opportunities and found two issues that fit the bill.

“Juvenile corrections became kind of a cornerstone issue for us that we covered very heavily,” said publisher Arnold Garson. “We were able to really put an imprint on that issue for the state and for the region in a way that no other news organization could.

“And we’ve done a lot on race relations, fueled by a U.S. Civil Rights Commission investigation relating to Native Americans in South Dakota. We’ve covered a lot of coverage that nobody was doing before, particularly on living conditions on reservations far away from Sioux Falls, because that is a South Dakota issue.

“Both of those issues are interesting because they’re hard news and not the typical stuff that shows up in readership surveys in terms of a topic of interest. But they served our strategic plan, and in both cases we simply picked up the ball and ran as far and as long as we knew how to run.

“We felt that if there was a way to strengthen our franchise on a region and statewide basis, it was by projecting ourselves into a position where nobody could touch us on some important and key issues – that we could truly take ownership of them. We didn’t go out and find those two issues, or make them. The news made them. But we certainly drove them beyond that, realizing that they fit our goals, and by staying with them.”

In Conclusion

Two things struck us after talking extensively with reader-oriented newspapers. The first was the intense commitment that their leaders had to readers and the way in which this imperative pervaded the whole organization.

The second thing was that reader-oriented newspapers are successful both at staying well informed about their readers and markets and acting on that intelligence. (By contrast, another group of newspapers in the Impact study were good at gathering market intelligence but failed to act on it; and still another group acted expeditiously on poor intelligence.)

Other studies in other industries have established that knowledge of what needs to be done is often sabotaged by failure to take the next step – transforming knowledge into action. These newspapers have made that step, and are seeing results in enhanced readership.

Previous pages have picked the reader orientation process apart to give a variety of short examples of what reader-oriented newspapers do. But the most reader-oriented papers are high-performers in all parts of the process and act them out in an integrated way. In the next section we show how all the pieces fit together in everyday work life at one newspaper, *The Idaho Statesman*.

Putting the Elements of Reader Orientation Into Practice: A Case Study

In Boise, The Idaho Statesman builds thinking about readers into everyday routine.

Long-time employees at *The Idaho Statesman* in Boise can't say for certain when the disconnect between readers and the 137-year-old newspaper began. Some say it goes back to the 1960s, when the family that owned the paper for 70 years sold it to a small chain, while others point to 1971, when that group merged with the Gannett Co. One reporter believes the *Statesman* misapplied Gannett's "News 2000" project, focusing more on a corporate guideline than on listening to readers. A few think an aggressive editor from the East Coast rubbed readers the wrong way, while many blame a content strategy that targeted newcomers at the expense of traditional subscribers.

But whatever the causes, it was plain by 1998 that there was a serious chasm between the *Statesman* and its readers that was creating a significant erosion of profits. Market penetration plunged by more than 12 percent daily and 9 percent Sunday between 1990 and 1998, at a time when Idaho was ranked third in the U.S. in population growth (22 percent) and the *Statesman's* MSA (metropolitan statistical area) grew 33 percent.

Market research showed reader satisfaction scores dropping steadily in the '90s to among the lowest of all Gannett newspapers by 1998. And it wasn't just unhappiness with content – circulation complaints were as high as eight per thousand deliveries daily and 12 on Sunday. Despite several efforts to restore credibility, readers increasingly felt the paper was not connected to the community and didn't represent Idaho values. They said the reporting was not balanced or fair, and wasn't relevant to their lives.

Those who were most unhappy were 25- to 49-year-olds, people with household incomes over \$50,000, the college-educated – in other words, the most desirable readers for advertisers.

In a state capital with minimal media competition – home to several Fortune 500 corporate headquarters, and with an MSA exceeding 430,000 – advertising revenue was up, but an estimated 10 percentage points short of its potential because of reader dissatisfaction. That was nearly \$17 million in lost revenue. One analysis noted that Boiseans wanted the newspaper to succeed, but had almost given up hope: "They have learned to live without us."

Margaret Buchanan, publisher in Elmira, N.Y., was named publisher in Boise in 1998 and launched an in-depth process to rebuild the connection with readers. A task force of 35 key managers first met to review the reader dissatisfaction research (it was the first time most of them had seen the details) and to examine market trends and projections. They also completed a SWOT analysis of the *Statesman's* strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

By the end of the first session, the group had identified three key strategies, the primary one being to “improve credibility and satisfaction among readers.” (The others, growing out of the primary goal, were to improve circulation penetration/volumes and advertising market share/volumes.) They developed a mission and vision statement and – importantly – identified critical measurements to track success. They tested the plan with six community focus groups before the final version of *The Idaho Statesman’s* 2000-2004 strategic plan was adopted and launched by representatives from all departments.

The key reader/customer targets:

- Raise reader satisfaction from the bottom to the Gannett average
- Reach a daily circulation of 82,300 and a Sunday circulation of 106,188
- Achieve complaints-per-thousand goals of 2.0 daily and 3.0 Sunday
- Provide 20 hours a year of formal training for employees
- Outperform the retail market growth on average of 1.7 percent annually

To assist in these endeavors, Gannett committed an additional \$31 million for new resources over the next five years.

The *Statesman* was one of the Impact newspapers that scored highest in the Readership Institute’s Reader Orientation Survey, which assesses the degree to which newspaper executives say they focus on and respond to their readers, and the ideal practices that they think should be in place. After extensive discussions, it was selected for a site visit in November 2001 to see how reader orientation plays out in daily working life.

The *Statesman* occupies a sprawling one-story building near downtown Boise, built in 1972. A receptionist greets visitors as soon as they walk into the roomy entry area. On her counter is a copy of *The Idaho Statesman’s* vision and mission statements. To the left of the reception area is the circulation and classified counter; on the right, the publisher’s office.

In the newspaper’s conference room on a Thursday morning, 10 department heads and other key managers settle around the table for the weekly Operating Committee meeting. Publisher Buchanan tells the group that increased readership because of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and the war in Afghanistan is helping the newspaper meet quarterly goals. So far, no budget cuts, she reports, but warns that the squeeze is on and urges those around the table to re-read the operating plan to see where to “do more with what we have.”

That plan, with its focus on readers and customers, is reflected as department heads give their reports.

Human resources director Keith Bulling describes a successful round of training in five departments on telephone technique. The five-year strategic plan calls for at least 20 hours of formal training per employee each year, which – while far below the “best practices” level of 35-40 hours in other industries – is more than Boise had offered in previous years. In this case, sessions were customized for each department. For instance, newsroom employees were dealing with a surge of calls since phone numbers and e-mail addresses were included on section fronts and at the end of stories. Included was training in real-life situations, followed by group discussions to brainstorm ideas for improvement.

Buchanan asks that the ideas be circulated to all departments, and she wonders what other kinds of training would be useful. Ideas tossed around include team building for the customer service center and circulation district managers; ethics refresher sessions for the newsroom; and classes for top managers on reader issues, communication, and project management.

Bulling also reports that the newspaper was 100 percent in compliance for on-time employee performance reviews. He passes out a monthly reminder sheet showing which employees are due for reviews in November, and the deadline. Timely feedback and appraisals are important, because part of the *Statesman's* strategy is to lower the annual turnover rate to 14 percent – keeping the best while bringing low performers up to standards, or letting them

The Idaho Statesman

Vision Statement:

The Idaho Statesman will satisfy the high expectations of our communities by providing credible and relevant information and by contributing to positive change.

Mission Statement:

We will do this by:

- Identifying key communities of interest, reaching out and listening to them, and thoroughly covering their news and information, celebrations, and issues.
- Identifying high potential market segments and directing strategies to those niches that expand our customer base.
- Maximizing current resources and identifying critical new resources and new technology to aggressively add value to our information and distribution network.
- Establishing, communicating and committing to high standards of performance with emphasis on valuing employees, teamwork, diversity, customer satisfaction, and innovation.
- Providing a fair return to our stakeholders.

Key Strategies:

- Improve credibility and satisfaction among readers
- Improve the circulation penetration and volumes
- Increase advertising market share and volumes

go. However, in the early stages of the five-year plan, there were many departures in all departments, particularly the newsroom, and in 2001 the turnover still was more than 20 percent.

Next to brief the committee is executive editor Carolyn Washburn, who already has e-mailed a one-month budget of news stories to department heads, and brings copies for other attendees. Washburn was an assistant managing editor at Boise who moved to managing editor in Rochester, N.Y., before being brought back by Buchanan. (Recruiting Idaho natives or those with Idaho experience is central to the newspaper's goals – they believe it will help build the newspaper's understanding of local interests and values, and improve its performance. That is happening, said several journalists. "I've always wanted to live in Boise," said one newly hired middle manager who has worked in top positions at other Idaho dailies, "but I was waiting for the paper to get better – and it has.")

Washburn's preview of what the newsroom plans to cover reflects the painstaking research that underpins the readership strategy: surveying readers about 100 topic areas; identifying high/low reader satisfaction by topic; and crunching the numbers by ZIP code, age, subscriber/single copy, and frequency of reading. It became clear that three demographics had the greatest potential for improvement: 25-to-49-year-olds, people with high education levels, and those with high income (\$50,000 or more).

The story list sparks a discussion around the table about tie-ins and promotions related to the upcoming coverage. For instance, a massive investigative project named "Rural Idaho," which had run earlier in the fall, has resulted in a national conference on the topic, due to take place the next week at a local think tank, the Andrus Center for Public Policy. On the lighter side, a kids' writing contest is proposed as a way to give away 50 movie tickets and tap into the high community interest in the Boise debut of the "Harry Potter" film.

The hiring of a new Boise school superintendent is a high-profile issue in the community, Washburn says, and she discusses ways to involve the public in the newspaper's interviews with the three finalists. She proposes that groups of readers who are stakeholders in local education – including students and parents – be allowed to participate in the Q & A sessions. She also suggests that audio of the sessions be available on the newspaper's Web site, with a printed transcript in the newspaper.

Tying into the *Statesman's* branding tagline, "Always Idaho," a special "Entertainment Idaho" ski issue, including a "win-a-snowboard" contest, is planned to kick off the snow season, and a series of features are slated leading up to coverage of the 2002 Winter Olympics, almost a local story for Boise.

Citing mixed signals from readers, Washburn asks her colleagues in other departments for employee feedback on the newspaper's terrorism coverage – had it been too much, or too little? (Research comparisons have shown that the *Statesman's* employees provide a fairly accurate reflection of community views, and thus are useful for guidance via

“instant polls.”). Washburn also is looking for fresh ideas from other departments on locally relevant coverage, and suggests that an employee focus group might be a good idea.

The editor reports that she has hired a new business reporter from Twin Falls, reflecting a new emphasis on hiring journalists with Idaho experience (it’s in her Management by Objective goals), and two reporters to cover Meridian, a high-growth community west of Boise. Since the launch of the strategic plan targeting the high-growth communities in western Ada County (Boise’s county) and in Canyon County, the news staff has grown by 18, and the newshole has grown by an average of 16 columns daily.

Next up at the Operating Committee session is Binna Jensen, a long-time employee newly appointed as customer service outreach manager. Readership Institute research has shown that employee satisfaction is related to reader and customer satisfaction, and publisher Buchanan recognized that in assigning Jensen to coordinate customer service across all departments, reporting directly to her.

Jensen recently organized a series of meetings between departments identified as “battlegrounds.” She reports that the sessions, moderated by a corporate consultant, smoothed out working relations and developed ideas for better communication, including an intranet accessible to all employees and a weekly e-mail list to all departments of all personnel and contact information changes. Also, a formal orientation process for all new hires was instituted that includes a building tour, a review of the paper’s mission and vision statements, and emphasis on customer service expectations.

Jensen also developed an annual internal survey that allows departments to evaluate other areas of the newspaper on such benchmarks as customer focus, cooperation, communication and deadlines. The results fuel dialogues that turn into innovations in training, monitoring of pay equitability, and community outreach.

Circulation director Janet Hasson, also the acting marketing director, tells the group that daily circulation is up 1.8 percent from a year ago and Sunday up 3 percent, despite the slow economy. She reports that a new home section, as well as the Idaho Outdoors and Scene magazine sections – all driven by readership research – drove the positive results.

The advertising sales manager chimes in to credit a boost in sales to advance briefings by features editor Vickie Ashwill about story topics. That prompted the circulation sales manager to ask if her staff could attend the briefings as well, because telemarketers are basing their sales pitches on content features. (“It’s an easier sell,” one telemarketer said later, “when you have lots of new features to mention that you know people will want.”)

Technology also is being put to work for customer satisfaction. Even though customers still will be able to talk to a human on the circulation help desk, the *Statesman* is installing a new system called Chatterbox that will allow the use of a phone keypad for multiple functions, including subscribing, complaining about delivery, or asking for a vacation stop. Similar online services are available, too.

On the delivery side, Ron Allen, the new operations manager, reports to the group that complaints per 1,000 deliveries in the previous month were 1.6 daily and 3.2 on Sundays. Some of that may have to do with discipline from all departments in getting the paper to the reader in a timely way. The last report before the meeting breaks up: 100 percent on-time press starts the past month.

For the next two days, Readership Institute researchers spent time in several departments to observe how employees on the front lines are actually doing their jobs differently in a reader-driven environment. They attended meetings big and small, and talked about readers and customers with dozens of rank-and-file employees.

It's clear that communication among departments isn't confined to Operating Committee meetings. Editor Washburn also distributes a weekly newspaper-wide e-mail about long-

<p><u>The Idaho Statesman</u></p> <p>PEOPLE PLEDGE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My employees will know what is expected of them. • My employees will have the materials and equipment needed to perform their work properly. • My employees will have the opportunity to do what they do best every day. • My employees will receive recognition or praise each week for doing good work. • My employees will know that I care about them as people. • My employees will be encouraged to develop professionally. 	<p>term content planning, while sharing with the editorial staff via e-mail a weekly summary about what all other departments and the corporate offices are up to. Publisher Buchanan sends a monthly e-mail to everyone about issues such as financial goals, customer service topics and circulation results, and she and the Operating Committee hold quarterly employee Q&A meetings for all shifts, in addition to two annual strategic planning retreats for managers.</p> <p>Another key contact point is the 24-34 Task Force, a cross-departmental group moderated by Washburn monthly to gather feedback from Generation X employees building-wide about coverage ideas for that key demographic. Assistant features editor Melissa Elston, a member, emphasizes that the committee is not just for show, but has a strong impact on decision-</p>
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making. In one case, it was proposed that the newspaper give away a bracelet as a prize in a reader contest. The consensus among the women on the committee was that the bracelet was "something my grandma would wear," and not appealing to a 25- to 34-year-old. Idea scrapped. Other issues the group has addressed include design changes and advertising campaigns.

Evidence of reader orientation was found everywhere. At a meeting about redesigning the newspaper's Web site, attended by both news and marketing people, plans went back

to square one after the designer – a new employee – hadn't adequately tapped into reader reactions to the proposed changes.

The key afternoon news meeting is regularly attended by the single-copy sales manager, who tells editors which stories are most likely to result in a run on the news racks, based on ongoing sales research. On this day she is absent due to illness. But the business editor fills in, in a way, by surmising that their friend from circulation would nominate

Customer Service Standards

We will provide our internal and external customers with the best service experience:

- We will greet our customers with a smile.
- We will be courteous and attentive to our customers.
- We will be prompt in serving our customers and follow through in a timely manner.
- We will project a professional image in our attire and actions.
- We will use common terms so as not to confuse people.
- We will strive to provide the highest quality work possible and do it right the first time.
- We will maintain confidentiality.
- We will be knowledgeable about the newspaper and its products.
- We will take pride in our facility by maintaining a neat work environment.
- We will thank our customers for doing business with The Idaho Statesman.

for Page One a story about rumored layoffs at a large local company.

(Ultimately, the story went on the business page because the company would not confirm the report.)

Reporters, marketers and circulation employees made it clear that they had a solid grasp of the *Statesman's* reader goals. It would be hard not to, as the Vision Statement, Mission Statement and Key Strategies are posted prominently in every department. Also highly visible on walls or desks are the Customer Service Standards (“We will greet our customers with a smile”) and the People Pledge for managers (such as “My employees will know what is expected of them”).

Columnist Dan Popkey, a 17-year veteran at the paper, is a part of the

paper's “Focus on the Future” program, launched last year to keep and develop talented employees in all departments. Those selected to participate attend three Operating Committee meetings, take a field trip together (in 2001 it was a trip to the headquarters of Micron, Inc.), and meet for an hour one-on-one with the publisher about career goals.

The editor persuaded Popkey to take the newsroom's first steps toward media convergence as a way to develop more avenues to reach readers. He has taped two "test" television features, working with a producer at a local station. Originally deeply skeptical, Popkey now sees how the newspaper can find different ways to present stories and connect with readers. "I'm already learning new things, even though we haven't put anything on air," he said. "TV can powerfully put you in a place, enrich a story, move it along, give it depth. Depending on the subject, it can even be more moving than the written word. I'm interested in seeing how that will translate to my writing."

The interest that the *Statesman* is taking in employees' professional growth has not gone unnoticed, said Popkey. They're holding people longer, he said, and there is less turnover, but not because job demands have gotten easier. It's because people know where they stand. "Performance reviews used to be haphazard until Buchanan arrived. Now you know they're going to be on time, and detailed."

It took some persuading to convince Rocky Barker, a prize-winning environmental reporter and book author, to leave another Idaho paper for Boise. "This paper was in its own little world, with no sense of community. Its leaders didn't ask questions, and the staff wasn't involved." That all changed with the arrival of Buchanan and Washburn, and with research that confirmed what Barker already believed strongly – that Idahoans wanted in-depth coverage of environmental and growth issues. "We've been set free to have a conversation with the reader," said Barker, whose stories about salmon vs. power needs have had impact on public policy throughout the Northwest. "This paper finally realized that to be a big paper, you have to act like a big paper." And the staff, he said, is avidly involved and challenged to build on what has been started.

Editorial page editor Kevin Richert is another Idaho news veteran who recently agreed to come to the *Statesman* after seeing the changes being made. "Five years ago, I don't think people in charge here would have thought it an asset to have somebody with Idaho experience." He was hired because the paper wanted a more relevant voice, not just in Boise but also statewide, he said. "Now we attend the daily news meetings and try to work in concert on projects such as the 'Rural Idaho' series."

Chuck Malloy, an editorial writer and an Idaho native who was hired from Indiana, remembers that *Statesman* editorials used to be shallow and poorly researched, often not in touch with Idaho issues. The proof that things are changing, he said, is that as he listened to a radio talk show on his way to work that morning, a *Statesman* editorial on the mayoral race was the heated subject of conversation. "The response in earlier years was usually ridicule," he said.

Ashwill, the features editor, also doubles as the newsroom's editor for training, as there was much to do when Boise launched its five-year plan. "The reader satisfaction research showed that we had real problems with quality," she said, "so the first step was to get the basics right before getting fancy." Since then, her features staff has redesigned the entire section and launched such reader-driven products as theme pages on food, health, homes and history – all with local angles, and often with reader involvement.

“We haven’t thrown a lot of new resources at this,” she said. “We’ve just started listening to readers, putting ourselves in their shoes, and they’re loving it.”

Mike Maharry was hired from Tacoma, Wash., to revitalize a moribund business section that was falling short of reader expectations. “This is one of the fastest-growing areas in the country, with a half-dozen corporate headquarters with dozens of spin-offs, and this paper had image problems with its coverage,” said Maharry. The reporting staff was beefed up to cover technology and growth and development issues, and the business section was redesigned to reflect the new thinking.

In the circulation department, Ron Allen credited much of the improvement in customer service to efforts to make the department a better place to work. In 2000, district manager turnover was 200 percent. In 2001 it has been 15 percent. His efforts to build unity and loyalty include goal-setting and social activities. Recently, when the staff met their complaint goals, all the district managers participated in a miniature golf tournament. For meeting another customer goal, he took them on a river-rafting trip.

Front-line employees in circulation also have become more pro-active in responding to missed deliveries. District managers personally deliver replacement papers, speaking face-to-face with customers during the visit if possible.

The improvement has been notable, according to customer service dispatcher Sandy Gooding, an eight-year veteran who has seen complaint calls drop dramatically in the last year. Increasing drop sites, using cell phones as well as pagers, enlarging routes to attract more adult carriers, improving the ease of phone and e-mail contacts – all are changes that have gone into getting the paper to the right place at the right time in the right condition, she said.

The RI researchers finished their visit by sitting for a while in the circulation sales room, listening to the pitches to potential subscribers. In the past, said circulation sales manager Steve Koppen, most of the chatter you’d hear would be pushing price. Today, Tracy is telling a woman about all the holiday features coming up, while Kendra describes “lots of new features” such as the Idaho Outdoor and Scene magazines. Nick senses a prospect is interested in “hearth and home” news, so he lists all the features of the *Statesman’s* new Homes section.

“It’s an easier sell,” said Kendra. “There are lots of things to mention, and it adds commitment to retention,” which is important now that sales reps get cash incentives if subscribers re-up after their initial 13-week introductory period.

The researchers’ experience in finding employees from top to bottom understanding the focus and goals of the *Statesman* did not surprise its publisher. Asked to compare the *Statesman* before the reader-driven strategic plan was launched and after, Buchanan said: “There is no comparison. I mean, if everybody were not talking and supporting and working with each other, they all would be doing their own thing and missing opportunities because the right hand wouldn’t know what the left hand was doing.”

Results So Far

At the same time the Readership Institute's team was in Boise, Gannett researchers were conducting a telephone reader satisfaction survey in the market. Their report, released early in 2002, said it was "the most encouraging study for *The Idaho Statesman* in the past 15 years." Overall satisfaction with the newspaper, its coverage of nearly all the news topics tested, and home delivery service all improved significantly.

Since reader satisfaction with the Monday-Saturday editions was last measured in 1996, the *Statesman's* score improved by 29 points, from 3.10 to 3.39. While the score was still below the average of 3.55 for the Gannett chain, the study showed readers were much happier with the newspaper than they were five years before. Sunday satisfaction was up, too, by 13 points, from 3.51 to 3.64.

Satisfaction with local news rose since the last measurement in 1998 (3.37 to 3.52). Other topics targeted in the five-year plan – such as important Idaho issues (3.57) and the local economy (3.71) – also scored high, although there is no previous research history on either topic. Coverage approval for outdoor recreation (from 3.49 to 3.67) and hunting and fishing (from 3.27 to 3.55) scored the highest of any other Gannett paper. Other reader-focused topics showing major satisfaction gains include environmental and natural resource issues (3.16 to 3.35), places to go and things to do in the prime coverage counties (3.52 to 3.65), state government and politics (3.39 to 3.48), and high school sports (3.23 to 3.47).

Like most newspapers, Boise continues to struggle with increasing the frequency of use by younger readers. "Yesterday" readership among the "Gen X" 25-34 age group remains a low 30 percent, compared with 46 percent for the other key target group, 35- to 49-year-olds. However, those 25 to 49 who earn at least \$50,000 a year and have four years of college or more increased their "past week" daily readership from 77 percent to 78 percent since 1999, and from 66 percent to 68 percent on Sundays. That is significant, researchers said, because this demographic market segment grew by more than 10,000 people in that time.

The Idaho Statesman's image has proved to be hard to change in a community with a long memory. It continues to be rated below average – especially for "accurately representing what's going on in the community," "influencing positive change" and "being a watchdog." (Noting that Boise readers historically have been conservative with their ratings, and that opinions of non-readers are more negative than that of readers, the researchers said that a better job of publicizing improvements may have an impact.)

Nevertheless, the readership trend has been turned around. Although penetration continued to decline slightly in this fast-growing market, the number of adults reading *The Idaho Statesman* increased from 113,255 in 1999 to 115,652 in Ada County, and from 14,838 to 16,983 in the adjacent high-growth Canyon County. Circulation has grown by about 800 daily (to 65,294) and 1,200 Sunday (87,246) since 1999.

Service satisfaction is high, with 65% of subscribers describing their delivery as excellent (the Gannett average is 53%). In 2001, net paid volumes increased by 1.3% daily and 0.9% Sunday, and new-start circulation sales retention increased by 3.0% (68.8%) while churn decreased 17.5% daily and 20.4% Sunday. On the service side, complaints per thousand decreased by 45% daily and 43% Sunday over the previous year, with repeat complaints falling 61.6%.

Among the human resources goals, turnover for full-time employees was 13% in 2001, down from 21% in 1999, and training hours in 2001 averaged 28 per employee. Both exceed the five-year target.

Editor Washburn commented: “We started with a clear mission – to serve the high expectations of our communities. But we quickly realized you can't serve them if you don't understand them. We did a ton of listening and dissecting what we heard so we could move forward with great confidence. We mapped out our five-year strategic plan based on what we heard, and it's working. We still have work to do, but we made dramatic progress in less than three years. And it's comfortable to have this clear plan. We don't flail, we don't overreact. We move with confidence and our readers are more satisfied. We all win.”

Appendix A: Conducting the Reader Orientation Inventory

Each of the 100 Impact study newspapers were instructed in June 2000 to have six of their top executives/managers complete a Reader Orientation Inventory, which consisted of descriptive statements about how the newspaper gathered and acted on information about readers and the marketplace. Participants indicated, on a 1 to 5 scale, how much they agreed with the statements as a description of how things are, and also how felt they ideally should be. No research or data was required.

The newspapers were instructed to distribute the inventory to three top news executives/managers, and three executives/managers from the business side, such as the publisher, directors of marketing, circulation and/or advertising. Responses were received from 89 of the 100 newspapers. Some newspapers had fewer than six executives complete the survey. The final sample was composed of the following respondents:

Editorial	249
Business departments	241
Administration	83
Publishers	31
Other administrative	52
Marketing	37
Advertising	67
Circulation	54
Total	490

The survey consisted of 32 questions, 24 of which are based on items used by other marketing researchers studying market orientation. The eight questions related to the “Coordination Among Departments” were unique to this survey, and were included to test some research hypotheses.

Appendix B: The Reader Orientation Inventory Instrument

We recognize that newspapers have two sets of customers, readers and advertisers. This survey is designed to focus on only one set of customers, readers. The following list of statements is related to the relationship between a newspaper and its readers. For each statement, please provide two ratings – the first for how much you agree with each statement for the current state of your organization, and the second for how much you agree with each statement for how it describes how you personally feel your organization should be. Please utilize the following scale when providing your ratings:

1 2 3 4 5
 Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

	Statement	Current State	Ideal State
1	Our newspaper regularly measures how well we are serving readers.		
2	We periodically review our product development efforts to ensure that they are in line with what readers want.		
3	In our newspaper, marketing personnel (or individuals performing a similar function) spend time discussing readers' future needs with different functional departments.		
4	There is close cooperation among the news, circulation, marketing and advertising departments about strategic decisions.		
5	The readers' interests always come first, ahead of the level of profitability.		
6	There is minimal communication between different departments concerning reader trends and developments.		
7	Editorial decisions on what stories to write are never influenced by other departments.		
8	Even if our newspaper came up with a great plan to build readership, we probably would not be able to implement it in a timely fashion.		
9	Internal politics drive the newspaper we sell more than reader needs.		
10	I believe this newspaper exists primarily to serve readers.		
11	Big decisions (e.g. about major changes to the newspaper, new products, new services) are made with equal input from all departments.		
12	Our newspaper is quick to respond to significant changes in our competitors' product or service offerings.		
13	Data on reader satisfaction are disseminated at all levels of the newspaper on a regular basis.		

14	We periodically review the likely effect of changes in our business environment (technology, competition) on readers.		
15	The quality of the newspaper is determined by its economic performance.		
16	Our business plans are driven by market research.		
17	Editorial and marketing and/or circulation staff interact on a daily basis about the content of the paper.		
18	Reader complaints fall on deaf ears at this newspaper.		
19	Several departments get together periodically to plan a response to changes taking place in our business environment.		
20	We are slow to detect fundamental shifts in our market (competition, technology, etc.).		
21	The business objectives of our newspaper are driven by reader satisfaction.		
22	When we find out that readers are unhappy with our newspaper, we take corrective action immediately.		
23	There is a history of people moving from news to the business side of the paper.		
24	Business strategies are driven by the goal of increasing the newspaper's value to readers.		
25	Principles of reader segmentation drive new development efforts in our newspaper.		
26	People from all departments get along well on a personal level.		
27	According to top management, serving readers is the most important thing our newspaper does.		
28	Our top managers are in close personal touch with the average member of the community.		
29	For one reason or another, we tend to ignore changes in our readers' product or service needs.		
30	Overall, editorial staff believes it has the budget and resources to serve its readers well.		
31	When we find that readers would like us to modify the paper, the departments involved make concerted efforts to do so.		
32	We are slow to detect changes in our readers' preferences.		

Respondent Information:

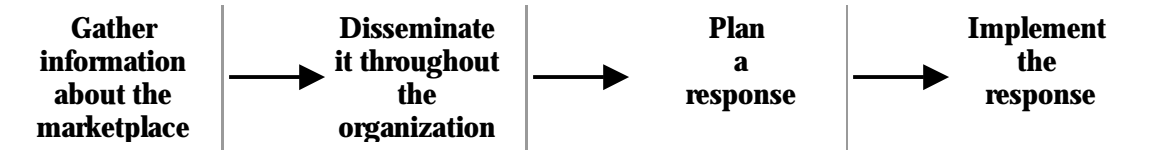
Department: _____

Tenure at current newspaper: _____

Tenure in newspaper industry: _____

Appendix C: Composite Results of the Reader Orientation Inventory

The survey is based on model of how organizations learn about and react to market changes:



Here are the average scores for all respondents in the four areas, based on a five-point scale:

	Average Score for "Current State"	Average Score for "Ideal State"	Difference Score (Ideal – Current)
1. Gather information about the marketplace	3.25	4.20	-.95
2. Disseminate it throughout the organization	3.10	4.21	-1.11
3. Plan a response	3.43	4.24	-.81
4. Implement the response	3.57	4.27	-.70

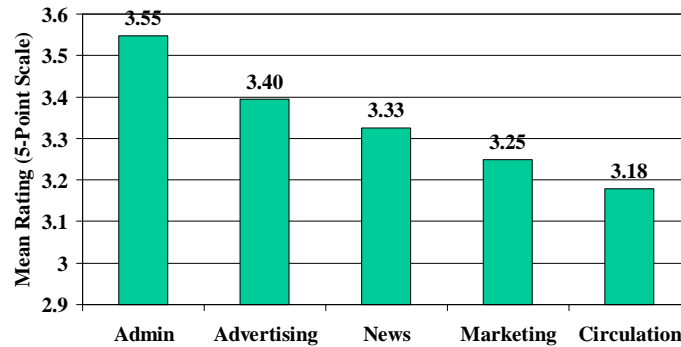
Average Rating by Department

Here are the scores for each of the four areas reported by department. (“Admin” includes publishers and other administrative personnel.)

	Admin	Advertising	News	Marketing	Circulation	All Respondents
1. Generate	3.47	3.29	3.23	3.21	3.06*	3.25
2. Disseminate	3.33	3.22	3.06*	3.04	2.98	3.08
3. Respond	3.62	3.52	3.45	3.32	3.26	3.45
4. Implement	3.77	3.55*	3.56	3.43	3.42	3.55
Total	3.55	3.40	3.33	3.25	3.18	3.34

* As indicated by the chart, the administrators report higher ratings than do other newspaper personnel for every reader orientation area. The asterisk indicates where, statistically, the scores are significantly lower than administrator's scores.

This chart compares the average rating for all statements by department (the “Total” Line in the table above)



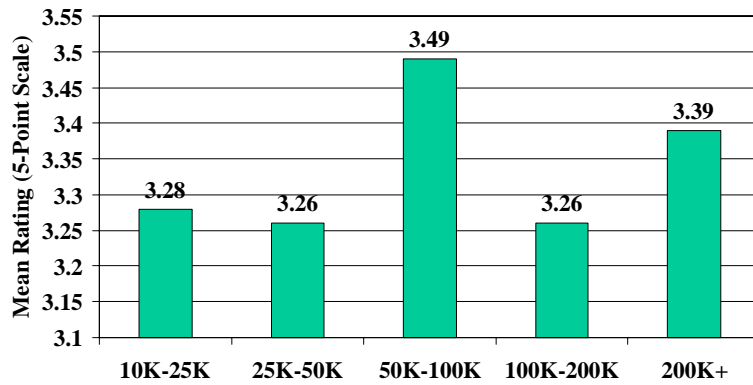
Average Rating by Circulation Size

Scores for each of the four areas reported by circulation strata.

	10K-25K	25K-50K	50K-100K	100K-200K	200K+	All Respondents
1. Generate	3.20	3.18	3.36	3.29	3.27	3.25
2. Disseminate	3.07	2.97*	3.25	2.90*	3.23	3.08
3. Respond	3.30*	3.31*	3.62	3.43	3.60	3.45
4. Implement	3.55	3.58	3.72	3.43	3.45*	3.55
Total	3.28	3.26	3.49	3.26	3.39	3.34

* As indicated by the chart, newspapers with circulation between 50,000 and 100,000 report higher ratings than do other newspapers for every reader orientation area. The asterisk indicates where, statistically, scores are significantly lower than the scores for papers with circulation between 50,000 and 100,000.

This chart compares the average rating for all statements by circulation size (the “Total” line in the table above)



Appendix D: Question-by-Question Results

Responses are reported as the percentage that disagreed (1 or 2 rating) or agreed (4 or 5 rating). Neutral responses (3) are omitted, so percentages do not always total 100.

Gather Information about the Marketplace

All the statements relate to the organization's external focus on its readers and the market it serves.

Generation of Market Intelligence Information		Disagree (1 or 2 rating)	Agree (4 or 5 rating)
Our newspaper regularly measures how well we are serving readers.	Current	27.60%	52.90%
	Ideal	0.20%	98.80%
The readers' interests always come first, ahead of the level of profitability.	Current	36.80%	31.50%
	Ideal	6.30%	76.00%
I believe this newspaper exists primarily to serve readers.	Current	18.40%	58.90%
	Ideal	9.20%	81.30%
We periodically review the likely effect of changes in our business environment on readers.	Current	32.20%	44.50%
	Ideal	2.40%	92.90%
We are slow to detect fundamental shifts in our market (competition, technology, etc.).	Current	53.30%	21.90%
	Ideal	80.50%	12.80%
We are slow to detect changes in our readers' preferences.	Current	44.80%	30.10%
	Ideal	77.70%	15.10%

Disseminate It Throughout the Organization

These items reflect the ability of the organization to communicate what it has learned throughout the organization and to incorporate reader satisfaction into its business strategy.

Dissemination of Market Intelligence Information		Disagree (1 or 2 rating)	Agree (4 or 5 rating)
In our newspaper, marketing personnel spend time discussing readers' future needs with different functional departments.	Current	40.40%	30.10%
	Ideal	1.60%	89.50%
There is minimal communication between different departments concerning reader trends and developments.	Current	49.00%	29.80%
	Ideal	76.50%	19.20%
Data on reader satisfaction are disseminated at all levels of the newspaper on a regular basis.	Current	51.10%	27.40%
	Ideal	3.20%	90.50%
The business objectives of our newspaper are driven by reader satisfaction.	Current	29.40%	38.50%
	Ideal	6.90%	79.20%
Business strategies are driven by the goal of increasing the newspaper's value to readers.	Current	19.60%	57.90%
	Ideal	2.00%	90.70%
Our top managers are in close personal touch with the average member of the community.	Current	25.40%	50.30%
	Ideal	1.00%	92.10%

Plan a Response

These items reflect the ability of the organization to respond to the needs of its readers and create a strategy from them.

Response to Market Intelligence Information		Disagree (1 or 2 rating)	Agree (4 or 5 rating)
We periodically review our product development efforts to ensure that they are in line with what readers want.	Current	21.50%	54.30%
	Ideal	0.20%	98.20%
Internal politics drive the newspaper we sell more than reader needs.	Current	72.40%	10.50%
	Ideal	91.90%	3.70%
Our business plans are driven by market research.	Current	29.60%	36.30%
	Ideal	5.30%	72.40%
Several departments get together periodically to plan a response to changes taking place in our business environment.	Current	21.10%	57.40%
	Ideal	2.00%	90.90%
Principles of reader segmentation drive new development efforts in our newspaper.	Current	23.20%	41.70%
	Ideal	2.30%	71.40%
For one reason or another, we tend to ignore changes in our readers' product or service needs.	Current	67.10%	12.50%
	Ideal	84.50%	9.20%

Implement a Response

These items reflect action taken by the organization based on information about its readers.

Implementation of Response to Market Intelligence		Disagree (1 or 2 rating)	Agree (4 or 5 rating)
Even if our newspaper came up with a great plan to build readership, we probably would not be able to implement it in a timely fashion.	Current	70.90%	15.60%
	Ideal	88.30%	8.90%
Our newspaper is quick to respond to significant changes in our competitors' product or service offerings.	Current	31.30%	39.90%
	Ideal	3.00%	86.40%
Reader complaints fall on deaf ears at this newspaper.	Current	86.50%	6.00%
	Ideal	90.30%	7.90%
When we find out that readers are unhappy our newspaper, we take corrective action immediately.	Current	25.80%	43.70%
	Ideal	4.70%	77.40%
According to top management, serving readers is the most important thing our newspaper does.	Current	14.10%	69.80%
	Ideal	2.80%	91.30%
When we find that readers would like us to modify the paper, the departments involved make concerted efforts to do so.	Current	17.40%	50.70%
	Ideal	1.60%	82.90%