

February 2004

## Getting Traction on Readership

By Vivian Vahlberg

### For more information:

Vivian Vahlberg, [v-vahlberg@northwestern.edu](mailto:v-vahlberg@northwestern.edu), 847-467-1790

Mary Nesbitt, [m-nesbitt@northwestern.edu](mailto:m-nesbitt@northwestern.edu), 847-467-4285

### Executive Summary

Newspapers report that building readership is a hard, never-ending job that requires the wholehearted commitment, focus and involvement of all parts of the paper.

But many report the numbers are moving in a positive direction with increases — some slight and some substantial — in readership, circulation, ad sales, single-copy sales and/or web traffic as a result of their readership work. Others have at least seen the circulation losses decrease.

Some even say that the newspaper readership battle is winnable.

These are among the findings of a survey sent by the Readership Institute (RI) to publishers of every daily newspaper in the United States. They were asked to report:

- What they have done in the last four years to increase readership through changes to content, service, brand and internal culture;
- What initiatives have been most noteworthy;
- What they have learned;
- What results they have seen;
- What more they'd like to do and what they need to accomplish it.

Responses were received from 112 newspapers — a good mix of small, medium and large markets. They listed a wide range of actions to increase readership, from doing more in-paper content promotion to making it easier to find things in the paper to improving service.

When asked to pick the most innovative, successful or noteworthy thing that other newspapers might want to emulate or learn from, a high percentage of the responses centered on three things: intensifying the local focus of the paper, increasing the attention given to “ordinary people” and changing the culture of the newspaper.

Almost all of the major content recommendation of RI's Impact study are being implemented somewhere, and many of them are being implemented widely, at newspapers large and small across the country. Adoption of recommendations on brand, service and culture was not as widespread.

When asked what they most want to do on readership that they haven't done, more research, more and better promotion, improved local coverage, more features and more efforts to attract younger readers were at the tops of their lists. The biggest barriers to doing more, they report, are lack of time, money or space, followed by the need to change the newspaper culture.

More highlights from the study follow in this report. (To view all responses from all newspapers to all questions, go to [www.readership.org/readership/responses.asp](http://www.readership.org/readership/responses.asp). You can view results by newspaper or by question.)

## **Lessons Learned**

(To view all newspapers' answers to this question, go to [www.readership.org/readership/lessons.asp](http://www.readership.org/readership/lessons.asp).)

Four years of readership work have taught newspaper people the importance of listening to, reacting to and being involved with their communities; of good marketing, promotion and targeting; of taking risks; of being relentlessly local, local, local.

They've learned that building readership is a hard, never-ending job that requires the wholehearted commitment, focus and involvement of all parts of the paper. But at least some of them have also begun to believe that the battle is winnable. Hear their voices.

- **Newspapers must listen to their communities:**

- “The most important lesson I have learned is to throw out all my preconceptions as a journalist and listen to our readers.”
- “We need to listen to our readers and see what they want. Sometimes their idea of news and the idea of us ‘professionals’ is not the same.”
- “To effectively address readership issues, you need good consumer research.”
- “We weren't listening to readers enough. Editors thought they had a better handle on what readers wanted when, in truth, we had no clue.”
- “Make your news staff get out of the news room to talk to people.”
- “Don't assume you know what the readers want.”
- “The readers know a lot more about what they want than we do and are willing to pay for it.”

- “Listen to your market. If you don’t hear anything, that is an indication that you are becoming irrelevant and unnecessary. If you don’t hear anything, ask. Then be prepared to act on what you are told.”
  - “We need to eliminate the ‘elitist’ attitude — WE know what’s best for the reader.”
  - “Readers don’t think like journalists...If we are to be successful, we need to start thinking like readers.”
  - “Stop writing what you think readers want. Ask your core readers.”
  - “Steer clear of traditional thinking and ground your decisions instead on what works for readers.”
- **Newspapers must be involved with their communities:**
    - “By becoming part of the community, you instantly gain respect as a newspaper that cares.”
    - “News is a commodity, so people need to think of the newspaper as a partner in many facets of their lives.”
- **And they must react to what they learn:**
    - Newspapers need to “act more swiftly.”
    - “We have to respect our readers’ time and make it easy for them to consume our paper.”
    - “Pay attention to the readers. Give them what they want, need and expect. But give them all three.”
    - “The most important lesson I have learned is the importance of listening to what people say...and to react quickly in an appropriate manner. If something needs to be changed, fixed or acted upon, we do it.”
    - “Give it to people the way they want it, not the way we find easiest.”
- **Good marketing, promotion and targeting are important:**
    - “Know your niche. That way, you understand your potential readers and they are easier to find.”

- “Just changing the newspaper is not enough...You also need to continually market and promote content and services. We need to continue to do more to market the newspaper to targeted segments and areas.”
- “More strategic targeting — up to the household level, and based on lifestyle, income and other data — produces the most favorable result.”
- “There are many different reasons people read or buy the newspaper. We have to employ as many types of media promotions as possible and use each one effectively.”
- “We learned we are too modest and are becoming better at self-promotion. The market does not know what we do unless we tell them.”

- **So are taking risks and trying things:**

- “We must not be afraid to try new things. Our older readers are still valuable and we don’t want to offend them...but they are quite open to changes that we are making in our quest for young readers, infrequent readers and newcomers.”
- “We have also learned to be bolder and more daring...In the various enhancements we have made, we have realized that we often need to be bolder than we first thought we could be. We have learned to take more risks.”
- “We have to take chances with content presentation. We have to pull out all the stops in making the paper easy to read.”
- “You have to be flexible to change...We can take risks and try various promotions. If they don’t work, change and move on to another one, but always have something going.”

- **Newspapers must be relentlessly local, local, local:**

- It’s important to be “local, local, local...and with emphasis. Also more local news.”
- Readers “enjoy local columns and first-person stories.”
- “I was surprised that our Neighbors section was rated so highly by readers — but it’s all local. It’s incredibly time consuming to produce, but it was ranked highest in our studies. Instead of it being the ugly stepchild in the newsroom that no one wanted to work on, it suddenly has value.”

- **Growing readership is hard work:**

- “There is no magic pill. It takes patience, commitment and resources to gain and sustain readership.”
- “It takes a while when making changes to ‘retrain’ readers to see and understand them.”
- “The most important thing I’ve learned is that there is no most important thing. There is no silver bullet.”
- “Readers don’t respond as quickly as I had thought. They’re creatures of habit.”
- “Extraordinary results only come about because of an extraordinary commitment to change and improve.”
- “The most important lesson...is how challenging it is to respond to the changing market and demands of the new media.”
- “Changing people’s perceptions is hard work.”

- **So is cultural change:**

- “At the department-head level people resist and often fear change.”
- “Culture and old school ways of thinking are formidable obstacles.”
- “We were surprised by the amount of time it took to build interdepartmental consensus for change.”
- “This will require some structural changes, as well as additional cultural change.”
- “It will take a concerted effort to get every employee to focus on readership as a measure of our success rather than to rely solely on circulation volumes.”
- “Repetition and constant training are needed to reinforce the underlying strategy for building readership throughout the organization.”
- “You don’t change a newsroom culture overnight. Getting a traditional newsroom to view readers as customers has been quite challenging.”
- “Cultural change is difficult, and is multiplied when all departments are not involved, or do not think it is their job.”

- “It takes a lot of effort to get a company educated and focused on a goal.”
- “Communicating the priorities effectively and often is huge.”

- **It requires eternal vigilance:**

- “Addressing readership issues is a constant need and must be a long-term commitment.”
- “Readership development is a process of continuous improvement.”
- Leaders “have to keep preaching the imperatives to the entire staff for it to become a habit.”
- “It is a never-ending fight.”
- “Readership is a moving target and ...we need to move with it. We can’t build a model and use it indefinitely. It must constantly change.”
- “Increasing readership using the RI model is a long-term effort. It resists churn-and-burn tactics...”
- “Readership is a journey, not a destination.”
- “It’s never done. The market keeps changing and you must stay with it.”
- “You have to work on building readership every day or you lose focus.”
- “Growing readership is a marathon, not a sprint, and is a marathon that we plan to win.”

- **It requires wholehearted commitment and focus:**

- “A management culture of total involvement is an important ingredient...”
- “My leadership is critical...It takes my urging, encouragement and pressure to keep them moving forward.”
- “We must get our own people committed and believing in what we are trying to do before our readers will see an improvement in our product.”
- “Results do not come easy...Efforts must be constant, consistent and very focused. Any initiative that does not further these efforts must be considered very seriously, in case that might drain needed resources.”

- Newspapers should “always keep the word ‘readership’ in front of us. Everything we do affects readership.”

- **It demands involvement of the whole paper:**

- “Implementation of ALL imperatives is critical to our overall success. Focusing on only one or two areas will not increase readership.”
- “This is a companywide initiative that will fail unless the entire company, every employee, is fully versed in readership and embraces it.
- “Every person at the paper can make a direct contribution to readership.”
- “Every department can have a positive impact on readership.”
- “It’s everyone’s responsibility.”
- “We have learned how critically important collaboration is to grow readership. Readership does not stem from the work of any single department. The news content is obviously critical, but so is the advertising content. The same can be said for the way we promote and sell the newspaper and the work culture we have fostered.”
- “Readership growth is a company-wide issue and it needs the support and understanding of all departments of a newspaper not just editorial, marketing and circulation.”
- “Readership needs to be a company-wide focus.”
- “It takes all departments at the newspaper — News, Circulation, Marketing and Advertising — working together to build readership. That means developing long-term plans together, building teams to create new products and keeping in constant communication.”
- “It takes major work across departments. The silos have to come down.”
- “All departments must be involved in all efforts, preferably in all stages, from planning to execution.”
- “It needs to be driven from the top of the organization but also requires the integrated efforts of all divisions.”
- “Readership...includes equal parts editorial content, advertising content, circulation and advertising customer service.”

- “Increasing readership is the responsibility of every department at the newspaper.”
- “Growing readership is a total team effort and requires all departments to work together to be successful.”
- ”Growing readership must be a whole-newspaper effort. Newspapers that leave it just to the newsroom — who do not give new content initiatives promotional or advertising support — are just shooting in the dark.”

- **But the battle just may be winnable:**

- “The war is winnable.”
- “You can grow it if you want to.”
- “The suggestions do work with persistence.”
- “Newspapers are a growth industry, not a declining one. We are well positioned for growth as part of the information sector because of our local connection. We can grow profitably if we go for it and build on our competitive strengths. Don’t rearrange deck chairs. Make a better, faster ship.”
- “What we see put simply is the decline of print readership is offset by the increase in readership of our online product... We see a promising clue that we are continuing to reach readers.”
- Only two responses were pessimistic about the prospects of increasing readership, with one respondent reporting learning that “the demands of the readership far exceed the resources of smaller papers” and the other reporting, “It’ll break your heart. We have never tried so hard only to get minimal results and the feeling that it might be a losing battle.”

## **Evidence of Success**

(To view all newspapers’ answers to this question, go to [www.readership.org/readership/success.asp](http://www.readership.org/readership/success.asp).)

What evidence do newspapers have that their readership-building efforts are having any impact? Almost all (94%) of the responding newspapers reported some indication that their efforts are having an effect:

- More than a quarter (26%) reported “soft” indicators of impact — increases in positive feedback or letters to the editor or improvements in operations, culture or content.
- Almost two-thirds (64%) reported increases in hard numbers as a result of their readership building efforts (increases in circulation, penetration, readership, Reader Behavior Scores, single-copy sales, web traffic, ad sales or ad volume.) Many of these also reported softer signs of impact.
- An additional four percent cited hard numbers that represented progress but that weren’t increases, including three papers that slowed circulation losses and one that held circulation steady despite job losses and price increases.
- The remainder either didn’t yet know whether their efforts were having an effect (5 papers) or reported only circulation losses (2 papers).

Most didn’t give figures documenting the hard increases they reported, so comparisons among respondents aren’t possible. But among the improvements reported by those that gave statistics are these:

- A 17% increase in daily readership 1994-2001 and a recent decrease from 2.4 to 0.9 home delivery complaints per thousand: *Burlington Free Press* (VT);
- A 21% increase in seven-day reach 1999-2003: *The Desert Sun* (Palm Springs, CA);
- A 9% increase in daily readership 1999-2003: *Detroit News and Free Press* (MI);
- An 18% growth in readership and 3% growth in circulation in 2002: *East Valley Tribune* (Mesa-Scottsdale-Tempe, AZ);
- A 10% increase in daily circulation and a 21% increase in ad revenues: *Herald-Banner* (Greenville, TX);
- A 9% increase in daily home delivery despite increased competition: *Norwich Bulletin* (CT);
- An RBS increase from 3.71 to 3.96: *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (VA);
- A 10% increase in newsstand sales: *The Daily Times* (Farmington, NM);
- A doubling of ad volume: *Times Herald* (Port Huron, MI).

Some papers cited as evidence their above-average Reader Behavior Score (RBS), penetration or other measures. In this category were the *Anchorage Daily News* (AK), *Evansville Courier & Press* (IN), *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (WI), *The News Enterprise*

(Elizabethtown, KY), *North County Times* (Escondido-Oceanside, CA); *The Roanoke Times* (VA); *The Robesonian* (Lumberton, NC); *The Sacramento Bee* (CA); *The State-Journal Register* (Springfield, IL).

Some papers noted changes that were dramatic in other ways. *The Journal Times* (Racine, WI) reported reversing nearly a decade's decline in circulation. And the *Crossville Chronicle* (TN) managed to grow its circulation despite "a very sour economy" and a population that is dying at record rates.

Many newspapers cited more subjective indicators of impact such as increases in positive feedback to increased reader contact with the paper, more letters to the editor, and improvements in internal culture. Examples:

- "Readers tell us the newspaper has improved:" *Clinton Herald* (IA);
- "We get regular feedback from readers about the Health & Fitness section and the Business section. Readers always mention the local nature of the sections:" *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY);
- "There is more of a buzz in the community about our paper:" *The Daily News* (Longview, WA);
- "Our reader comment cards, filled out by re-subscribers, have gone from being overwhelmingly negative to overwhelmingly positive:" *The Union* (Grass Valley, CA);
- "Our Letters to the Editor and Readers Speak submissions have increased dramatically:" *The Edmond Sun* (OK).
- "I see and hear people discussing items related to readership and service. Those discussions, at least among staff, never used to happen before:" *The Norman Transcript* (OK).

## **Actions to Emulate**

(To view all newspapers' answers to this question, go to [www.readership.org/readership/successful.asp](http://www.readership.org/readership/successful.asp).)

As reported below, newspapers report an amazing abundance of readership-building activities. To narrow their responses to the most significant, newspapers were asked to pick what they considered the most innovative, successful or noteworthy thing they have done on readership that other papers might want to emulate or learn from.

Their answers ranged across the gamut of RI recommendations — from doing more in-paper content promotion to making it easier to find things in the paper to improving service. But a high percentage of the responses centered on three things:

- Intensifying the local focus of the paper;
- Increasing the attention given to “ordinary people;”
- Changing the culture of the newspaper.

Many considered most noteworthy their efforts to implement RI’s recommendation to produce a more intensely local, people-focused newspaper. That meant expanding local coverage, paying more attention to the schools, adding more community columnists, starting daily story obits, creating special weekly sections of community news and listings, packing pages with more local names, running more high school sports, and intensifying zoning and micro-zoning efforts.

The array of new “ordinary people” features mentioned was wide. Some examples:

- A daily “Portraits of the Past” feature with photos from Aiken County’s past, many of them submitted by readers, in the *Aiken Standard* (SC). “The response was overwhelming. We soon had a backlog of well over a month...Readers constantly remark about photos...A lot of them are baseball team pictures, family portraits or photos of old buildings that no longer exist. But most readers look at the pictures each day,” the *Standard* reported.
- A “Fifteen Minutes With...” feature in the *Anderson Independent-Mail* (SC) highlighting ordinary people in a photo and Q & A format. “It has allowed us to bring new faces and short stories about people of color, small business owners, hobbyists, homemakers and other relatively unknown personalities with interesting stories and backgrounds into our readership mix. It balances the day-to-day coverage we provide on other community and business leaders,” the *Independent Mail* reported.
- A front-page “Proudly Serving” feature during the Iraq war in the *Crossville Chronicle* (TN) honoring a service man or woman. “It was a good move because families with loved ones received community response when it became widely known that their loved one was in harm’s way,” the *Chronicle* reported.
- A weekly six-page “Snapshots” section in *The Desert Sun* (Palm Springs, CA), filled entirely with photos of local community events and everyday life shots, from ballet recitals and soccer matches to fun at the doggy park. Not only have single copy sales gone up 3 percent on the day the feature runs, the paper has received “a significant amount of positive feedback from community members, moms, and even school-aged kids who see themselves in the paper more often,” *The Sun* reported.

- A significant increase in the number and play of letters to the editor, with *The State-Journal Register* (Springfield, IL) running photos with some letters and *The Gleaner* (Henderson, KY) doing frequent profiles of “letter to the editor” writers. *The North County Times* (Escondido-Oceanside, CA) likes its “unfettered” letters section where they “print every letter you can legally print.”
- A standing feature recognizing one reader a day on the front page in the *Record Searchlight* (Redding, CA).

Many papers pointed to changes in attitudes, processes and priorities within the paper, from *The Baytown Sun*’s adoption of a “just say yes,” “can do” mentality to the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*’s extensive “quest for reader feedback” as it planned and launched a new entertainment section to the *Austin American-Statesman*’s innovative newsroom training program.

A number of newspapers said they considered most notable their efforts to organize their work around the recommendations of the Readership Institute:

- Placing every employee, both full and part time, on one of four committees dealing with RI’s four cornerstones of readership “gave them the opportunity to be part of the goal setting process for improved readership,” said the *Corsicana Daily Sun* (TX).
- Broad-reaching and inclusive multi-departmental, volunteer task forces, built around the eight imperatives, help build a more constructive culture and encourage buy-in from every department, said the *Daily Camera* (Boulder, CO).
- “We built our strategic focus around the four cornerstones of readership. Top level executives clearly and consistently communicate the plan and our readership focus. This is a consistent theme and we walk the talk as well as talk the talk,” said the *Milwaukee Journal* (WI).
- “We feel following the Readership Institute’s imperatives for growing readership has helped us to build a solid foundation for further readership growth,” said the *Sun-Sentinel* (Fort Lauderdale, FL).

Other notable comments about changes in culture and process:

- A readership committee at *The Daytona Beach News-Journal* (FL) identified changes that could be made without additional newshole or staff, and then identify changes that would require money. This led to quick implementation of many of the recommendations, which “inspired the staff internally, plus are motivators to help build readership.”
- The *East Valley Tribune* (Mesa-Scottsdale-Tempe, AZ) considered most noteworthy “the cultural shift in defining our market, studying our market, interacting with our market and then reshaping the newspaper section by section, page by page to serve

readers in the community with the thought of how we can make readers more successful in their own lives and better able to shape their community.”

- “Perhaps the biggest change is in mindset, deciding to publish a newspaper that offers different or unique content rather than following the pack by merely taking the top of the wires, thereby offering most readers what they probably already know from other media,” said *The Journal Times* (Racine, WI).
- Naming of a Readership Editor at *The Union* (Grass Valley, CA) “has reaped benefits in so many areas relating to all areas of readership growth.”
- Efforts to build organizational culture “have been very worthwhile. It has helped employees buy into what we are doing and feel a sense of ownership in our newspaper” at the *Altus Times* (OK).

And taking heed of RI’s recommendations to become more customer-oriented and better attuned to their communities, newspapers reported getting managers out into the community more and inviting readers in more, taking steps to get readers more involved in the paper, and the paper more involved with reader concerns.

## **What Have Newspapers Done on Content?**

(To view all newspapers’ answers to this question, go to [www.readership.org/readership/content.asp](http://www.readership.org/readership/content.asp).)

Newspaper publishers were asked to detail the major steps they have taken in the last four years to increase readership. They were asked to organize their responses by four types of initiatives: content, brand, service and culture.

Reading their answers on content makes it clear that almost all of the major content recommendations of the Readership Institute are being implemented somewhere, somehow in the United States, and many of them are being implemented widely, at newspapers large and small across the country.

Just as RI recommended, newspapers report that they have:

- Greatly increased their emphasis on intensely local, people-focused news that is personally relevant to readers;
- Done far more stories about “ordinary people,” more “chicken dinner” and other hyper local news, more feature-style stories, more story obits and more lifestyle news;
- Provided more “go and do,” “actionable” information;

- Focused more on content areas RI identified as “high potential;”
- Worked to make their papers easier to read and to navigate;
- Boosted the amount of in-paper content promotion;
- Tried to do something on RI’s least-followed content recommendation — to improve the attractiveness of advertising content.

One of the most striking things about their reports is the level of experimentation and innovation. Newspapers are trying many new things — new columns, features, pages, sections and even publications.

Here’s just a sampling of the plethora of new columns, many of them very local, that newspapers report launching:

- A Caring Community column about local volunteers, a Law Beat column about people in the justice system, and a Campus Notebook column about people working and living in the region’s universities and colleges, in the *Times Union* (Albany, NY);
- Fishing and skiing columns in *The Union* (Grass Valley, CA);
- A “From the Publisher” column that humanizes the paper, explains decisions and introduces newspaper people; a video games column and a local history column in the *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver, CO);
- Two columns written by and for young adults in the *Record Searchlight* (Redding, CA);
- School news and motor sports columns in *The Reporter* (Vacaville, CA);
- A business names and faces column in the Money section and a Taking Names local celebrity column in the *Orlando Sentinel* (FL);
- A locally written auto column in the *Montgomery Advertiser* (AL);
- A Steamed column to allow readers to vent and a Street Smarts column alerting readers to road work in *The Herald-Sun* (Durham, NC);
- A local music column, a food column and a Sound Money business column in *The Gleaner* (Henderson, KY);

- A locally written business column that gives investment advice with a humorous slant and a weekly reader-feedback sports column in the *Anderson Independent-Mail* (SC).

And here's a sample of the new features:

- A "What It Would Take" series to look at the county's thorniest issues and what it would take to fix them in the *Monroe Evening News* (MI);
- Daily Look Ahead feature in the *Tri-City Herald* (Pasco-Kennewick-Richland, WA);
- A daily Community Almanac; weekly "Portfolio" page of investment advice and profiles of local companies; Monday Capitol People profile, with a bio and Q & A of an ordinary local person in state government; and a Faces of Faith feature doing the same thing about someone in religion in the *Times Union* (Albany, NY);
- Snapshots of Day, birthday calendar, First Person, Meet Your Neighbor, Community Connections page, Diamond Gems, Favorite Teacher Contest features in the *Thomasville Times-Enterprise* (GA);
- A Questions of the Week feature on the editorial page with local photos and answers in the *Stanly News & Press* (Albemarle, NC);
- An accuracy watch feature, correcting errors on the front page of the section where they occurred, in *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, WA);
- A Weekend Wallet feature of how-to stories about home chores, Weekend Blitz high school sports wrap-up, a Weekend Rap sports "editorial page" feature, and a series of regular "rails" that emphasize reader participation, from The Gallery which gets readers to share stories on a topic, "In Search Of" which seeks submissions about the ugliest car, best DJs, etc.; a weekly Terrific Teen feature highlighting good things young people do, a rural life page, and a series of 54 consecutive Census tract packages on every neighborhood in the county in *The Saginaw News* (MI).
- A local cook of the month and student "man-on-the-street" features and a local man-on-the-street opinion section in *The Robesonian* (Lumberton, NC);
- A weekly Everyday Heroes feature on local volunteers; a Just Life feature on slices of life from around the region; a "cheeky" weekly "What's On Your Mind?" Q & A feature answering reader questions; and story obits about ordinary people who left a significant, if not traditionally newsworthy, imprint on the region in *The Roanoke Times* (VA).

- A Family Weekend Planner of information about what to do with kids on weekends; Day Trips feature about nearby places to go; Crime Beat series giving a behind-the-scenes look at the criminal justice system; and a “Tales of the Hudson Valley” feature on local history, in the *Poughkeepsie Journal* (NY);
- A Snapshots photo and article about an ordinary local person and an anchored Takes Five daily Q&A in the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* (WI).
- A weekly crime-tracker map showing where crimes occur in *The Edmond Sun* (OK).

Newspapers have also added lots of new pages, sections, and even whole newspapers, including:

- A Learning Page, Business Page and Golf Page in *The Union* (Grass Valley, CA);
- A weekly health page and a weekly “escapes” page of “go and do” information in the *Thomasville Times-Enterprise* (GA);
- A weekly Spanish language newspaper, *el Sentinel*, by the *Sun-Sentinel* (Fort Lauderdale, FL);
- A weekly home and garden magazine in the *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR);
- Sixty five special feature sections to cater to the needs of various segments, such as annual *Healthcare, Finance and Nostalgia sections* in *The State-Journal Register* (Springfield, IL);
- Weekly baseball, football, outdoor adventure, and High Country winter recreation sections, a Weekend@Home section to reflect activities that don’t involve going out, and weekly perspective and motorsports pages in the *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver, CO);
- A new Outdoors section covering hunting, fishing, skiing and other activities; a 50 plus Fine Living section, a Personal Finance section, and a Personal Technology page in the *Record Searchlight* (Redding, CA);
- Five themed sports pages a week, including a Players section focusing on recreational sports and outdoor activities, a Without Limits page on extreme sports, a high school sports page, a New York pro sports feature enterprise page and an auto racing page, plus a new Verge page written by and for teenagers in the *Poughkeepsie Journal* (NY);

- A Sunday Brunch section featuring a weekly profile of a local person with an interesting background and a page of photos of local people in every-day activities in the *Herald-Banner* (Greenville, TX);
- A weekly Business Edge section with local cover stories, regional snapshots of economic indicators, a profile of a company that makes a product locally and a Leading Edge column that rounds up business expansions and moves in the *Fort Collins Coloradoan* (CO);
- Three daily @Issue pages of opinion, op-ed pieces and opposing views and Atlanta & the World section focusing on Atlanta’s growing international flavor and its business, political and cultural ties around the globe, in the *Atlanta Journal & Constitution* (GA).

A number of newspapers report making significant efforts to get readers more involved in the paper by including more of readers’ views, pictures and words. Papers from Atlanta, GA, to Cleburne, TX, are giving more space to reader opinions, through letters to the editor and guest commentaries. *The Buffalo News* (NY) is running more reader letters about arts coverage. *The Gleaner* (Henderson, KY) even profiled two dozen of its most frequent letter writers — which spawned new letter writers. *The San Diego Union-Tribune* (CA) zoned its editorial page, and in the process increased the percentage of readers reading those pages. And the *Knoxville News Sentinel* (TN) is emphasizing reader-generated stories, from reader answers to questions about their favorite foods to reader “vignettes” about their experiences during a local tornado.

Newspapers are also taking steps to try to attract younger readers. A number mention making changes in entertainment or feature sections to appeal more to younger audiences. *The Kerrville Daily Times* (TX) added a weekly page focused on readers aged 10-18, while the *Record Searchlight* (Redding, CA) now runs two to three features a week directed at school-aged kids.

Some newspapers indicate they are following RI’s recommendations concerning content that has high potential for driving readership. *The Times Union* (Albany, NY), for example, is realigning its daily feature sections to focus on issues identified as having the greatest potential to build readership — including health, style, home and garden, real estate, family and entertainment. “These themed daily sections will not only force us to focus stories on those topics, but also identify in readers’ minds the notion that the newspaper cares about those topics,” the paper reported.

Only a handful of papers report focusing on RI’s recommendations to improve the content of advertising as a way to build readership. *The Norwich Bulletin* (CT) redesigned its classifieds to appeal to young readers, *The Sacramento Bee* (CA) improved ad content in the entertainment section, the *Anchorage Daily News* (AK) got more small ads to improve the mix of ad content and the *Savannah Morning News* (GA) worked to increase the use of color in small space ads.

## Some Action on Service

(To view all newspapers' answers to this question, go to [www.readership.org/readership/service.asp](http://www.readership.org/readership/service.asp).)

Readership Institute research shows that improving service will help grow readership. But just tweaking here and there isn't enough. To really affect readership numbers, the research shows that newspapers need to produce truly outstanding service that significantly surpasses the expectations and experiences of their customers.

A number of newspapers appear to be making concentrated, multi-pronged efforts to reach for service excellence. Among them:

- *The Austin American-Statesman* (TX) moved to mandatory double bagging of newspapers on rainy days; transferred seasoned managers into difficult branches; instituted training programs; replaced carriers with service issues; conducted proactive periodic service surveys; conducted more verification of requested starts and stops. They also developed a training booklet and program on effective advertising and ad design, which they provide not only for staff but for small business owners too.
- *The Daily Press* (Newport News-Hampton, VA) provides comprehensive training on all aspects of the business to Super Customer Service Representatives, who are supposed to be able to work on any type of customer problem until the issue is resolved, and to follow up with the customer afterwards to make sure they're satisfied. They simplified route structures to make them easier for carriers to follow. And a cross-departmental team fixed problems with inaccurate billing, a major complaint-generator.
- *The Desert Sun* (Palm Springs, CA) addresses complaints from advertisers at weekly work-out meetings, following a problem to the root, uncovering the reasons for the complaint, and adjusting procedures accordingly. They give every employee the ability to give dissatisfied customers a subscription credit of up to two weeks, and they provide every employee current contact information for every department at the paper. They also provide telephone training for all departments.
- *The Fort Collins Coloradoan* (CO) improved on-time delivery to 95 percent; moved to a centralized distribution center which enabled the paper to quickly turn around potential problems; improved production quality; installed a computer system to enable ad reps to view PDFs and send e-mail proofs to customers; and installed software enabling customers to place classified ads around the clock.
- *The Anderson Independent-Mail* (SC) started a company-wide circulation task force on readership growth; began a telephone service improvement initiative; reduced lost calls by combining front desk and circulation call-routing loops; reduced carrier down routes; and corrected systemic billing problems.

Among the many types of actions newspapers have taken are these:

**Making it easier to deal with the paper:** Newspapers are trying to make it easier to subscribe, pay for, start and stop the paper, report a problem, tell the newspaper about an upcoming event, and place an ad. Some have lengthened customer service hours, offered EZ-Pay or credit card billing, spotted circulation kiosks in heavy-traffic areas. And many have increased use of the Internet for all these activities.

- One paper, the *Union* (Albany, NY) reports starting a “Take It to the Lakes” program where subscribers with second homes can have their paper delivered to the home on weekdays and to the vacation home on weekends.

**Improving home delivery:** Many newspapers have focused on delivering the paper earlier every day or getting it closer to the consumer (i.e. to the porch not the driveway, or to the driveway not the curb, etc.).

- *East Valley Tribune* (Mesa-Scottsdale-Tempe, AZ) “moved deadlines up and worked with production to create better page flow so that circulation could deliver most papers by 5:30 a.m.”
- *The Crossville Chronicle* (TN) “reinstalled the fear of deadlines so that all departments understand the importance of consistency in getting our papers in the newsstands and stores. Readers need to know that if it is 4 p.m. on Wednesday, the Chronicle is in the news stand.”
- And the *Burlington Free Press* (VT) increased the number of walking routes to provide more personalized service and reinstated porch service to some customers, while *The Daily News* (Longview, WA) is “going through our city routes one-by-one and converting them from tube to door-step delivery.”

**Improving phone response:** Many newspapers have instituted training programs in phone skills, trying to improve the response consumers get when they call the paper. A number are offering such training not only to customer service representatives but also to other departments, including editorial. Others have updated, improved or expanded their internal phone books and section/departmental descriptions to improve the probability that a customer who calls will get routed to the right place.

**Rewarding good service:** Some papers have instituted incentive, award or recognition systems to encourage employees to provide excellent service.

- *The Sun Sentinel* (Fort Lauderdale, FL) gives gift certificates to Blockbuster, Starbucks or Quizno’s to staffers for acts of over-the-top customer service.
- *The Wichita Eagle* (KS) ties district manager bonuses to the level of complaints.

**Improving editorial customer service:** A number of newspapers have tried to make the newsroom more accessible and calls there more positive.

- *The Atlanta Journal & Constitution* (GA) believes it has become more responsive to reader questions and more accessible, as the Public Editor role has evolved to become “the public face and name responsible for maintaining a constant dialog with readers.”
- At the *Sun Sentinel* (Fort Lauderdale, FL), the editor gets weekly reports about subscription cancellations; when the cancellations are content-related, the editor often calls the offended party.
- *The Houston Chronicle* (TX) created a full-time, editorial reader representative position to deal with reader complaints. The rep records and shares complaints with managers and responds, one-on-one, to every reader.

**Replacing or adding equipment:** Many attempts to improve customer service involved purchasing equipment:

- *The Observer-Dispatch* (Utica, NY) armed sales reps with cell phones and laptops.
- *The Norwich Bulletin* (CT) bought new inserting equipment to solve late delivery problems that had cost the paper both readers and carriers.
- *The Buffalo News* (NY) added new presses to “give readers what they’ve been asking for, which is anchoring, better reproduction and no ink rub-off.”
- *The Poughkeepsie Journal* (NY) installed pagers in the field to improve response times on delivery issues.
- *The Daily Hampshire Gazette* (MA) installed a new platemaking system to produce better quality type, graphics and photos.

**Tracking performance:** Many papers followed the old adage that what gets measured gets done, by creating ways to track problems and measure performance:

- *Bucks County Courier Times* (PA) tracks bundle delivery errors, the retention rate of advertisers, advertiser satisfaction, and errors.
- *Traverse City Record-Eagle* (MI) conducted three customer-service surveys and implemented changes based on them.

- *The Pharos-Tribune* (Logansport, IN) began recording when the last truck leaves the mailroom and whether it was on time; the paper's on-time percentage has increased by 17 percent.

## Some Action on Culture

(To view all newspapers' answers to this question, go to [www.readership.org/readership/culture.asp](http://www.readership.org/readership/culture.asp).)

Many of the culture-change efforts newspapers reported revolved around four areas: increasing the organization's focus on readership; breaking down "silos" separating departments; reforming personnel management practices to better support readership goals; and becoming more outward-looking.

**Increasing the focus:** Some newspapers deliberately, systematically and publicly communicated that growing readership is now a high priority and set in place people or processes designed to follow through. Among them:

- *The Buffalo News* (NY) included readership on executive level agendas; had monthly readership sessions for employees; named an assistant managing editor for readership and devoted space to readership in its monthly employee newsletter.
- *The Norwich Bulletin* (CT) and *Times Union* (Albany, NY) both held newsroom retreats to set the stage for building adaptive constructive cultures. They shared information and discussed ways to collaborate with other departments. The *Bulletin* brought readers and community leaders in and followed up with a Newsroom Summit to share market data with the newsroom, review readership principles and outline the paper's "franchise topics." *The Times Union* found it had to replace key managers in its effort to remake the culture.

**Breaking down silos:** Many newspapers reported working to break down walls between departments and increase inter-departmental communication and cooperation. They instituted cross-training and job-shadowing programs to familiarize staffers with the workings of other departments; increased use of cross-departmental committees and teams to address key problems; started or improved inter-departmental management meetings, full-staff meetings, newsletters or other communications to share and discuss information and strategies. Two creative examples:

- *The Monroe Evening News* (MI) improved understanding between circulation and editorial by assigning reporters to their geographic counterparts in circulation and starting quarterly meetings to look at issues of mutual concern such as deadlines, breaking news, how the paper looks on the rack.

- *The Savannah Morning News* (GA) created a new forum for cross-department exchange by purchasing a popcorn machine and instituting monthly “Popcorn Fridays” hosted by a different department each month for employees throughout the paper.

**Reforming personnel practices:** RI urges newspapers to make sure that their personnel selection, compensation, reward and development programs support readership goals and encourage constructive cultures. Among the newspapers reporting such efforts:

- *The Houston Chronicle* (TX) developed a performance management program linking RI imperatives to job descriptions and evaluations, setting performance standards for salary increases, bonuses and promotions.
- *The Austin American-Statesman* (TX) studied RI’s culture findings and then developed a “Leadership Fundamentals” training program to teach all 236 of the paper’s managers and supervisors about constructive management styles and diversity. And the paper set aside a “substantial” and growing budget for extensive and varied newsroom training that has helped improve skills and morale.
- *Cumberland Times-News* (MD) made readership and service part of employee evaluations; rewarded advertising, editorial and circulation employees for readership results; and made readership “priority one” in weekly department head meetings.
- *The Bakersfield Californian* (CA) took “a new aggressive approach to improve and track culture in line with RI recommendations,” with emphasis on training, communication, compensation and performance management.
- *Montgomery Advertiser* (AL) is emphasizing on-time annual appraisals, instituting quarterly coaching sessions to increase feedback to employees, implementing succession planning and leadership training, and expanding its annual MBO (management by objectives) bonus program.
- *The Reporter* (Vacaville, CA) launched a game, called “Readership: Catch the Wave” in which teams of employees compete to earn points awarded for getting readership-growing ideas implemented. Winners get prizes ranging from fancy lunches to ice cream.
- *The San Diego Union Tribune* (CA) overhauled its performance management system; aggressively replaced poor performing employees with staffers who are regularly recognized as making significant contributions; emphasized promoting from within to create career paths for aspiring leaders.
- *The Daily Press* (Newport News-Hampton, VA) used a cross-company culture team to identify needed personnel policy improvements. As a result, the *Daily*

press revised its job-posting program, developed its own “rules of the road,” expanded management and employee development opportunities and improved communication to employees. It also is working on a long term workforce development plan to assess current skills and skills needed for the future, learn more about the market and demographics and create measurable goals to help them meet future business needs.

**Becoming more outward-looking:** Some newspapers took to heart RI’s strong recommendation that newspapers must become more reader-oriented. This requires developing regular ways to gather, analyze and share information about consumers; develop plans to address their needs; and then be able to act on the plans. Among those making progress:

- The culture of *The Atlanta Journal & Constitution* (GA) now encourages innovation and product development, with extensive research and development. In launching new entertainment offerings, they solicited consumer feedback with formal and informal focus groups throughout the development process, and they followed up after the launch with focus groups and telephone surveys to make sure they were hitting the mark.
- *The News Enterprise* (Elizabethtown, KY) has tried to become a better listener, conducting two credibility roundtables to emphasize the need to be more open to reader wishes.
- *The Pharos-Tribune* (Logansport, IN) started a source survey, sending out at least one survey per reporter per month to sources identified by the publisher, to get feedback on stories. It invited readers to a “Meet the Press” event (at a local restaurant called Bullshipper’s Café) to have coffee and a free paper with a team of newspaper employees. And, to encourage newsroom staff to see the paper as customers do, they installed a single-copy box in the newsroom filled with the current day’s edition.
- *The Record Searchlight* (Redding, CA) also stages “Meet the Newspaper” meetings four times a year in various locations, and *The San Diego Union Tribune* (CA) hosts periodic community dialogues and diversity sessions for readers to talk to newsroom leaders and staff.

## **What Have They Done on Brand?**

(To view all newspapers’ answers to this question, go to [www.readership.org/readership/brand.asp](http://www.readership.org/readership/brand.asp).)

In the last four years, newspapers report that they have been very actively trying to strengthen and promote their brands. They list many interesting ad and promotion campaigns, special events, sponsorships, contests, and redesigns. They report working to

define, control and better communicate their brands, and forming many internal committees to work on branding strategies and tactics.

Their answers indicate that with a handful of exceptions, newspapers are focused on what RI's parent organization, the Media Management Center (MMC) considers the third step of brand building (communicating the message). The challenge is to work on the vital first two steps in branding — discovering compelling experiences from consumers' perspectives and then becoming those experiences or brand.

MMC director John Lavine and Kellogg Graduate School of Management marketing professor Bobby Calder have pointed out that newspapers too often think of their brand in a limited way, as a name, a tag line, a positioning statement or a slogan that can be used to sell and promote the paper.

Lavine says the slogan is only a tool – albeit a useful one as part of the messaging step. The brand itself is an experience — defined by the consumer, not the newspaper. A brand isn't what a newspaper wants to be or thinks it is: a brand is how the consumer or reader perceives the paper, the images and feelings and meanings that are conjured up in their minds when they think about or look at the paper. To have a brand that can drive readership requires that newspapers BE an experience that is positive and relevant to the consumer. This requires activities designed to know the consumer, understand the consumer's perceptions and identify what the consumer needs.

Few newspapers reported such activities in their answers to the brand question, and the ones that did gave them only a brief mention. Among them:

- *The Burlington Free Press* (VT) and *The Norman Transcript* (OK) conducted focus groups;
- *The Daily Press* (Newport News-Hampton, VA) conducted branding research similar to the RI survey and plans to create an action plan for each department to “live the brand;”
- *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, WA) surveyed its market using the RI survey and refocused its promotion;
- *The Daytona Beach News-Journal* (FL) asked readers and non-readers their reactions to key marketing terms;
- *The Gleaner* (Henderson, KY) did face-to-face surveys in the community;
- *The Orlando Sentinel* (FL) completed a comprehensive brand study;
- *The Poughkeepsie Journal* (NY) used market studies to develop a brand identity.

However, that is not to say newspapers have not been intensifying their efforts to learn more about consumers; in answers to other questions, they report a variety of activities designed to learn more about readers and potential readers, and to tailor their activities to what they learn. But apparently, they just don't consider such activities to be brand efforts.

Likewise, only one newspaper, *The Sarasota Herald-Tribune* (FL) answered the brand question by citing adoption of one of four brand concepts RI developed to have high potential to drive readership among young readers. (The names of these concepts, described in more detail on RI's website, are Update, In the Know, Debatable, and Guide.) But in answer to the content question, three others reported adopting one of these brand ideas: *The Herald-Sun* (Durham, NC); the *Knoxville News Sentinel* (TN); and the *Manhattan Mercury* (KS).

Thus, it is likely that responses to this question don't present an accurate picture of the extent of consumer-focused activity and discovery that newspapers have undertaken. It is also possible that newspapers have done research in prior years that they are now acting on, or that they based the promotion campaigns they described on significant consumer research they didn't mention.

Among the slogans, positioning statements and brand statements newspapers report using are these:

- "Your Local Source," *Aiken Standard* (SC);
- "Together We're Building A Better Baytown," *The Baytown Sun* (TX);
- "A Local Custom," *Burlington Free Press* (VT);
- "Your Community, Your Newspaper, Our Commitment," *Corsicana Daily Sun* (TX);
- "Making a Difference," *Daily Breeze* (Torrance, CA);
- "Your Camera, Your News," *Daily Camera* (Boulder, CO);
- "Get It All," *Daily Hampshire Gazette* (Northampton, MA);
- "Real News...Real Local," *The Daily News* (Longview, WA);
- "Reliable Community News," *Daily Sentinel* (Rome, NY);
- "Get It Into Your Life," *The Desert Sun* (Palm Springs, CA);
- "Hunt County's Best Read Newspaper," *Herald-Banner* (Greenville, TX);

- “Trusted & Essential,” *The Herald-Sun* (Durham, NC);
- “Spotted Reading,” *The Houston Chronicle* (TX);
- “Serving Your Need To Know,” *The Manhattan Mercury* (KS);
- “For Your Life,” *News & Record* (Greensboro, NC);
- “Your Community, Your Newspaper,” *Poughkeepsie Journal* (NY);
- “It All Connects,” for online product of *Poughkeepsie Journal*;
- “Great Place, Great Paper!” *Record Searchlight* (Redding, CA)
- “Closer To Home,” *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver, CO)
- “Helping You Every Day,” *The Saginaw News* (MI);
- “The State DELIVERS,” *The State* (Columbia, SC);
- “What’s In It For You?,” *Sun-Sentinel* (Fort Lauderdale, FL);
- “We’re Your Source,” *Times Union* (Albany, NY).

### **What Else Do Newspapers Want To Do on Readership If Only They Could?**

(To view all newspapers’ answers to this question, go to [www.readership.org/readership/wishlist.asp](http://www.readership.org/readership/wishlist.asp).)

Newspapers were asked what they would like to do on readership that they haven’t been able to do — and why they haven’t done it.

At the top of newspaper’s cumulative wish list were more research, more and better promotion, improved local coverage, more features and more efforts to attract younger readers.

Among the research needs outlined:

- Research to establish how they’re doing and how readers respond to their efforts, such as their own Reader Behavior Scores, measures of customer service success and a daily computerized reader feedback instrument;
- Research, both local and national, to help them understand their markets and their readers: who they are, what they want, what they like and don’t like, what makes them

pick up the paper and what makes them stop, how they react to changes in the paper, how the Internet affects their use of the paper;

- Research to guide attempts to reach certain markets, such as Hispanics and people with long commutes;
- Content audits to understand their own products better.

Promotion was also high on the list — better promotion and more of it. They want to do all kinds of promotion — same day and upcoming, in-paper and outside. They want to promote editorial content and ad content — and they want to promote editorial content in the classifieds.

*The Milwaukee Journal* noted that classifieds are “major entry points among young light readers... We need to tell the young light readers in the classifieds that there is an article of relevance to them in another section of that newspaper and that an upcoming day’s edition will have a story that interests them.”

And the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* noted that it is “still after the under 35s. We have to reach them outside of the paper, and for that, we need promotion dollars. Radio is niche-suited, but to make a real difference, we need good commercials on television shows catering to this demo.”

Respondents mentioned lots of content improvements they’d like to make. High on their lists were more and better local news, new and expanded features, new efforts to attract young people, and changes in design to make the paper easier to read.

Among the local news desires expressed: more space, time and resources devoted to local news, more micro news, more coverage of the schools, more attention to adjacent towns and suburbs, more zoning and more in-depth reporting of critical local bread-and-butter issues.

Newspapers also want to do more with features — including doing more specialty pages, anchored feature pages, more people and heart stories, more stories personalizing routine or regular events, new sections, more “go and do” information and more entertainment news.

They talked about wanting to improve, expand or develop content or new products for specific target markets — particularly youth. Also mentioned were Hispanics and upscale suburban women. They spoke of wanting to improve youth-oriented coverage, add youth-oriented sections or pages create an alternative product for the college market and create a new product for Hispanic readers.

Newspapers also expressed interest in changing the culture of their organizations, particularly by pushing knowledge of and commitment to the readership imperatives deeper into the organization and deepening contacts with their communities.

## Barriers to Progress

Newspapers were asked why they haven't been able to do more of what they want to do on readership. The most common response was lack of resources, be it money, time, staff, or newshole.

Other impediments to progress mentioned were:

- The culture needs changing in order to progress, and that's hard work. As *The Bakersfield Californian* put it, "We suffer from a 'risk averse' culture where change comes slow. We are slowed by our own institutional biases. I wish we could move faster, in and out of the newsroom."

*The Buffalo News* (NY) wants to "implement strategies and tactics that may not have immediate quantitative results but would have a high probability for readership gains in the long run," but said "we haven't been able to do this because the culture is more focused on short-term solutions and ROI."

- There are too many competing priorities: "It's frustratingly hard to make progress when you have to put out a paper every day," said the respondent from the *Rock Island* (Argus, IL). "I told the publisher I could implement the improvements that he agreed we wanted, if he would let me do nothing but that for 9 months. Guess what ... that's not possible. So we prioritize and keep plugging away."
- It's hard to get answers: "We have tried to do local quantitative and qualitative (focus groups) research on this subject...but nailing down answers to these questions has proven to be very difficult," the *Lancaster New Era* (PA) reported. So did *The Manhattan Mercury* (KS); "We're still working on it; it's just that we haven't found the right formula yet."
- We don't have the right people: "Many of the content changes have been slow to come because of talent level of folks in our newsroom. I'm working to improve that situation with each new hire..." reported the *Altus Times* (OK). "Finding more experienced Hispanic reporters has been challenging," reported *The Desert Sun* (Palm Springs, CA).
- Other issues: system management constraints, infrastructure challenges such as press/color/newsprint issues that conflict with anchoring efforts, focus on the daily product at the expense of Sunday, the language barrier, white backlash against efforts to cover the diversity of the market, logistics and pricing issues, production limitations, waiting for corporate to develop standards, new telemarketing rules.

*The Readership Institute expresses gratitude to the McCormick Tribune Foundation for loaning Vivian Vahlberg, who was MTF's Director of Journalism Programs, to the Institute for three months to conduct and report on this survey.*