Flamingo Journalism

In 1990, the Knight Ridder corporation poured millions of dollars into The Boca Raton News, a small south Florida newspaper with a circulation of twenty-five thousand, in an experiment to see if the application of marketing principles to newspaper design could boost readership. Readers were surveyed in an attempt to discover what they wanted in a newspaper. The News went full color and sported a hot pink flamingo logo. Stories got shorter, snappier, and never jumped to another page. A strong effort was made to include more positive news and human-interest stories. There were graphs, charts, and maps à gogo (Kodrich).

After hiring a market research firm, conducting thirty focus groups, surveying three hundred readers, and spending $3 million in Boca Raton, Knight Ridder launched the new and improved News with a huge advertising campaign, an expanded staff, and coverage and commentary from the national media. Readers said they loved the new paper, but ten years later, paid circulation is right where it was at the beginning: twenty-five thousand (Kodrich).

Background

Thirty or forty years ago, newspapers were essentially monopolies in their little piece of the world: they were often the sole source of news, with radio as the only legitimate competition. Today the situation is different; the local population has many more options for getting information with the advent of television and the relatively recent emergence of the World Wide Web. At the time of the Boca Raton experiment, newspaper circulation had been declining nationwide for twenty years. It still is, both in total copies sold (down from 62.3 million annually in 1990 to 56 million in 2000) and in household penetration (from more than 80 percent in the 1960s to nearer to 50 percent in 2000) (Fee).

In an effort to stanch the bleeding, newspapers have increasingly turned to the marketing tactics most other businesses use to sell their products and services. This movement began in the 1970s, picked up steam in the 1980s with the launch of USA Today, and was in full swing during the 1990s as papers tried to reinvent themselves to compete with cable television and the Internet. By identifying the wants and needs of their customers and then meeting those needs, editors and publishers believed they could bring the people back to the paper.

As readership continues to shrink, many papers assume they are losing readers to other media such as television and the Internet. This has led many papers to become more like television, focusing on more exciting and colorful designs, shorter stories, and more entertaining
content (It is interesting to note that in McManus’s case study, TV news editors combed newspapers for story ideas and expected the papers to provide the in-depth coverage their newscasts didn’t.). But others argue that a newspaper is an imperfect imitation of television at best and is not likely to cause television viewers to change their medium (Meyer). It can also be argued that those who want to read a newspaper are not likely to find television to be a good substitute, either. In fact, some researchers believe that asking readers what they want in a newspaper may be pointless (Underwood). Unlike breakfast cereal or washing machines, the news is not a standardized product. The news, by definition, is what you don’t know.

**Research Trends**

The trend thus far in researching market-driven journalism has been to focus primarily on the conflict between the values of traditional journalism, where reporters and editors decide what the news is, and those of market journalism, where the interests of the readers determine what fills the paper. There have been a number of works—surveys of journalism professionals, case studies, exposés, and editorials—written to castigate one view or to try to reconcile the two. Large-scale academic studies that examine the interests of readers, determine the effectiveness of newspapers in responding to those interests, or measure the results of newspaper marketing have simply not been done.

Newspapers are big business with profit margins only dreamt about by other industries. In fact, it is the desire to protect these margins that many critics blame for the slide in readership. Even researchers like Kramer and Meyer, who are bullish on marketing’s potential, agree with Coyle, Underwood, and Kodrich who believe that newspapers are “cheaping out” on content, filling space with wire service and syndicated copy instead of paying reporters to go out and dig up the news.

What if instead of trying to be more like television, newspapers focused on becoming better newspapers? Kramer tells us that newspapers that do a better job of writing, reporting, and telling stories will draw readers back to the paper, a position that contradicts current trends toward shorter stories and providing readers with nuggets of information. I agree and believe that newspapers should do a better job of satisfying newspaper readers rather than trying to court fans of other media.

**Research Problem**

I have put myself in the position of marketing director for a midsized metropolitan newspaper with no significant competition in its area of distribution and a circulation of 200,000. I am aware of the philosophy of market-oriented journalism, but I question the wisdom of making radical changes in an attempt to lure TV viewers and Internet users to the paper. Our subscriber
base, like that of the rest of the industry, has been shrinking over the past decade. Some in the company say that we should go in the direction of USA Today or the Boca Raton News, but I believe that doing so will only alienate our existing customers without guaranteeing that we will pick up enough new ones to offset the loss, much less increase our subscriptions.

I want to know how people who subscribe to a newspaper differ from those that don’t. I want to know what elements of the paper they appreciate most in an effort to identify and reinforce those qualities in each day’s paper. For simplicity’s sake, I am declaring that my paper offers only one type of annual subscription (there no choice between weekday, weekend, or Sunday only). I am also interested solely in the print edition of the paper, as the online edition is not where we make our money.

**Research Question**

How do newspaper subscribers’ expectations of a newspaper differ from people who don’t subscribe? I will try to answer this question by determining what kind of information readers expect the newspaper to provide and measuring their perception of how well the newspaper is doing in meeting those expectations. I will also be interested in what other media subscribers view or read and will explore whether readers expect a newspaper to play a role in a community that they do not expect of other media.

**Hypothesis**

This study will demonstrate that there is a marked difference in subscribers’ attitude toward newspapers compared to nonsubscribers. Subscribers will show stronger support for traditional journalistic values. Subscribers expect in-depth coverage of important issues. Accuracy of facts and quality of reporting and writing are prized more highly than entertainment. They will not appreciate efforts to simplify information or to supply more soft news (lifestyle and how-to-cope stories). Subscribers also expect a newspaper to take a more active role in the community rather than passively recording events. Subscribers will spend less time watching TV news coverage than nonsubscribers.

The null hypothesis is that subscribers do not support a newspaper that adheres to traditional values any more strongly than do nonsubscribers.

**Design**

I propose a survey of subscribers and nonsubscribers to be conducted by mail. The nonsubscribers will server as the control group. I believe an incentive will be needed to encourage participation. Subscribers to the paper will be offered a free two-month extension of their subscription for completing the survey. Nonsubscribers will be offered restaurant gift certificates. The restaurants will receive free advertising space in exchange.
The paper will randomly select a group of survey subjects from its own pool of subscribers. Surveys will be mailed to 800 hundred people. We will use a direct-marketing firm or online mailing-list service to create a list of 1600 people for the nonsubscriber group. Approximately 50 percent of the people in our area subscribe to the paper, so by matching this list to our subscription roles, we should be able to eliminate the half that already subscribe, thereby creating a list of nonsubscribers.

With a 50 percent response rate, I will have a sample of 400 individuals in each group and will be able to draw conclusions with a margin of error (i.e. confidence interval) of approximately 5 percent at a confidence level of 95 percent.

Likert ratings. I believe that a survey that asks people to make yes or no choices is to limiting, especially if you are asking them is they would like to add features. Would you like to see more travel coverage? Yes. Would you like to see more decorating tips? Yes. Would you like to see summaries of the main articles on the front page? Yes. Only by asking people to choose between two items can you really tell where their preferences lie. However, the choices do not have to be black or white, yes or no, right or wrong. There is plenty of space in a newspaper for different offerings so participants can choose a lot of one thing and a little of another or choose a more equal mixture. I will be asking participants to balance competing statements using a Likert rating form to measure the strength and direction of a respondent’s preference. For example:

A newspaper usually contains a mix of local news gathered by the paper’s reporters and national and international news from various wire services. What do you believe is the appropriate mix of stories? On a scale of 1 to 7 with 1 meaning mostly local news, 7 meaning mostly national and international news, and 4 meaning a balance between the two, circle the number that best describes what you believe is the ideal mix of stories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local news</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>National/international news</th>
</tr>
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</table>

Analysis. By placing the traditional values at the low end of the scale and marketing values at the high end, it should be easy to track the views of the participants by simply adding up the numbers circled and dividing by the number of questions to create a mean score. An f-test will be used to analyze the variance between the two groups on each question and to determine whether the difference is statistically significant. The same could be done to compare various demographic subgroups within the main groups or to compare the same subgroup between the
two groups if desired.

**Variables**

The variables in this study are all of an independent nature as I am observing an existing condition rather than introducing any new ones. The primary variable is subscriber status. Demographic variables—such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, income, education, religion, and location (zip code)—can also be included to flesh out the results. Collecting this information is not necessary when looking at subscribers as a whole, but it would provide insight into how varying demographic characteristics affect a person’s view of the role of a newspaper. However, information about demographic subgroups will be less reliable because of the smaller sample size and the resulting higher margin of error.

**Conclusion**

I believe this survey gathers the information I am interested in while remaining within the scope of what is possible in this course. Ideally, a longitudinal online study in which participants rate an issue of the paper and selected stories each week might provide more valuable data. This allows the respondents to evaluate the paper over time and provide a way to study the pattern of responses from individual respondents. However, creating such an Web-based mechanism is beyond my abilities.
Coyle, Joseph S. “Now, the Editor as Marketer.” Columbia Journalism Review. 37.2 (July/August 1998): 37–41.


Kramer, Mark. “Narrative Journalism Comes of Age.” Nieman Reports. 54.3 (Fall 2000) 5–9.

