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Check readers cheaply

By Ronald T. Farrar and Will Norton, Jr.

Newspaper readership is in decline throughout the country. Circulation, though increasing, is not increasing as rapidly as new households are being created. People who do buy newspapers seem to spend less and less time reading them. There is, in short, profoundly serious competition for the reader's time and the advertiser's dollar, and a number of newspapers—notably afternoon newspapers in major markets—have been, or are being, overwhelmed.

One by-product of this struggle for readership has been the development by many publishers of a deep and respectful

... intelligent newspaper research ... can be done for community newspapers ...

interest in research. Virtually every major metropolitan daily newspaper now employs a research director—or an expensive outside research consulting firm, or both—to engage in a systematic monitoring of reader reactions and attitudes. Such studies often lead directly to improved newspapers; indeed, it is at least arguable that many American newspaper products are more useful, livelier, and certainly more responsible than ever before in their collective histories.

The purpose of this article is simply to suggest that intelligent newspaper research need not be limited to the metropolitan markets. Well conceived studies can be done for community newspapers with excellent results for relatively little money.

Two examples will be described here.

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One study concerned a tri-weekly operation in the mountains of Virginia, the other a country weekly on the edge of the Mississippi Delta. One study was done by a self-taught newspaper executive with some part-time telephone help; the other was done by four graduate students in journalism. One study led directly to a 15 per cent increase in circulation (net gain of more than 1,000 copies per issue) and huge increases in advertising lineage. The other study convinced the publisher he had saturated his market and that he worried too much about some competition he really didn't have. One study entailed field costs of about \$700—and pointed the way to substantial profits that are now being realized. The other study, which cost about \$100, bought the publisher some peace of mind.

The *Galax* (Va.) *Gazette* serves an area encompassing about 14,000 households in the rugged mountains of Southern Virginia and extreme northeast North Carolina. Although unemployment in the *Galax* area usually stabilized between 3.8 per cent and 4 per cent—lower than the national average—the region is not a prosperous one, and has enjoyed little economic growth in recent years. Even so, the community of *Galax* (pop.: 6,278) is clearly the trade center for this somewhat isolated region, and the *Galax Gazette* is the logical vehicle for circulation and advertising leadership. However, the *Gazette's* circulation had gone into a decline and some of the leading advertisers were expressing dissatisfaction with the coverage.

Landmark Community Newspapers, Inc., headquartered in Shelbyville, KY., owned the *Galax Gazette* and was concerned about the paper's declining readership—so much so that there was active consideration of a plan to cut the issues per week from three to two. In a memorandum, issued in June, 1977, Larry R. Coffey, Landmark's vice president for operations, asked why "the primary question of the (*Galax Gazette*) circula-

tion drop over the last six months is left unanswered." He directed Larry Paden, the company's marketing manager, to conduct a marketing survey of the *Galax* area, taking up such questions as: Is a tri-weekly publication desired in the area? The indications are that it is not...

Another question to be answered was: If it should be determined that a tri-weekly publication is less desirable than the semi-weekly publication; would a revision to a semi-weekly publication with a supplemental twice-a-month shopper be effective?

Paden's research was to be in two parts. The first was a series of face-to-face discussions with retailers in the *Galax* area. These interviews revealed no major advertiser dissatisfaction with the *Gazette's* service, though the coverage—especially in one or two outlying communities was regarded as weak and ineffectual.

The problem, then, clearly became one of circulation, and the second phase of the study was a telephone survey—some 551 interviews representing selected households throughout the *Galax* region. The respondents were randomly selected from all telephone numbers available in

One study entailed field cost of about \$700 ... the other cost about \$100 ..

the region, weighted according to the number of telephones in operation in each exchange. The interviewers, local residents hired on a part-time basis, identified themselves as being from "Valley Opinion Survey," a fictitious name chosen to avoid any bias that might be associated with the newspaper. The questions were asked during July, 1977, and tabulated and analyzed by computers belonging to the Landmark parent company.

The most startling finding was that of all the respondents who did not presently subscribe to the *Galax Gazette*, some 22 per cent at one time *did* take the paper. Their subscriptions lapsed, there was no follow-up on the part of the paper. Therefore many residents did not resubscribe largely because they had not been asked.

Another segment of the population felt there was a predictable sameness to the paper—that one could buy the Wednesday copy, for example, and feel nothing had been missed in the Monday or Friday editions. The news selection and emphases tended to be alike. Clearly, the need for some changes in content and presentation was indicated in the survey.

The concern about the cost of the paper—there had been circulation price increases in recent years—proved to be unfounded. Indeed, poorer families—those who might not normally be expected to afford to buy the paper—nevertheless did buy it for shopping information; lower income families in the Galax region were found to be price conscious

... many residents did not resubscribe . . . because they had not been asked.

and the *Gazette* permitted them to do comparative shopping.

The executive editor of the Landmark Community Newspaper, George Trotter, had long felt the *Galax Gazette* needed to change the way it covered and presented the news. His judgement confirmed by the survey, then, he rapidly brought about a number of editorial improvements—adding some departments (business page, farm page, etc.) and modernizing the format (to six columns from nine columns), added one reporter to the staff, pushed for more and bigger photographs, and substantially increased the

number of locally oriented features.

This effort was coupled with an aggressive circulation campaign—sampling in target areas, followed by telephone solicitations to potential new subscribers.

The results were encouraging, as reflected in these total paid circulation figures for six months of 1977: July, 7,342; August, 8,060; September, 8,295; October, 8,412; November, 8,386, and December, 8,426.

Advertising volume rose steadily, although the increase lagged about two months behind the upturn in circulation. The net increase, reflected in the first quarter of 1978, showed advertising up a solid 16 per cent. There is no thought now of cutting back from three issues to two per week; to the contrary, the owners now are convinced the *Galax Gazette* can be developed into a daily.

Actual interviewer costs ran to about \$700. The salaries of George Trotter and Larry Paden from the Landmark central office are covered by a management fee assessed by Landmark against all 14 of its community newspapers. Computer time, again, was absorbed by the home office in Norfolk. Whatever the costs, Landmark executives consider the investment an excellent one. The research obviously did not, in and of itself, bring about circulation gains and bigger profits; the findings did, however, provide the confidence necessary to spend the money for editorial changes and for a circulation campaign. *Galax Gazette* subscribers now are getting a much more interesting and readable product, and advertisers are finding in the *Galax Gazette* a far more effective marketing vehicle than they had ever enjoyed previously.

The Tate County Democrat is published in Senatobia, Miss., an agricultural community on the edge of the Mississippi Delta and about 40 miles south of Memphis. A long established county seat weekly, *The Tate County Democrat*, had been turned over to a new editor who was

then largely unknown to most of his readers. *The North Mississippi Times*, published in Hernando—about 20 miles away—was at that time mounting an aggressive news and circulation effort in Tate County. *The Tate County Democrat* editor was anxious to know the extent of his competition and what, if anything, he should do about it. He called upon the department of journalism at the University of Mississippi for help.

Under the general supervision of Dr. H. Wilbert Norton, Jr., four graduate students in journalism at the University of Mississippi designed a questionnaire

A long-established paper's editor worried about competition from a nearby county.

and administered it to 183 randomly chosen respondents in Tate County in February, 1977.

The *Democrat* was concerned with keeping costs at a minimum; and a telephone survey is much cheaper than any other means. However, Tate County is a poor one and only 65 per cent of the households have telephones in them.

The validity of the sample in reflecting the households with telephones, however, was confirmed with a variety of tests—these comparing the number of copies of the publication found in the survey with the number that should have been expected, based on the publisher's actual sales.

The questionnaire the interviewers used was described as coming from the journalism department at the University of Mississippi; nothing was said to connect the survey with *The Tate County Democrat*. Mike Craft, then a graduate student at Ole Miss and now with the research department of *The Des Moines Register and Tribune*, was in charge of the project in consultation was Dr.

Norton of the journalism faculty.

The survey found that *The Tate County Democrat* was not being badly hurt—at least in terms of readership—by the attempts of *The North Mississippi Times* in Tate County. Of the *Democrat* readers, 38.2 percent read the *Times*, but fully 98 percent of the *Times* readers continue to read the *Democrat*. This shows that many households get both papers, but 76.5 percent of those who get both, prefer *The Tate County Democrat*. This performance held both for news/editorial content and shopping information (retail and classified advertising).

Further, the finding convinced the editor that—given the high incidence of poverty and illiteracy in Tate County—that he had about all the circulation he could realistically expect. He now feels that as the local economy improves, the people become better educated, and the population grows, *The Tate County Democrat* circulation should increase accordingly.

His approach to his job was also modified. Before the survey, he had been reacting too much to the offensive being waged by the weekly in the adjoining county. Now he feels more confident in his own newspaper's value to his readers and can edit the paper with a surer hand, on a basis similar to the theory that the best politics is good government.

Moreover, by showing the survey results to several advertisers who were thinking of cutting back and to several potential advertisers, he was able to increase his advertising inches 12 percent. However, he believes that figure could have been much larger if he had taken more time to sell. He explained that the survey was helpful in two ways: It provid-

ed information that made it easier to know how to approach the advertiser, and it told him where the customers were shopping.

This survey cost about \$100—the amount the editor paid out in mileage and meals for the four journalism graduate students. “Free” computer time came out of the journalism department's allotment from the University.

Neither of these studies, obviously, represents a methodological breakthrough—nor even a radical departure from established techniques. Though soundly conceived, both studies nevertheless were direct and inexpensive—indeed, well within the economic means of all but the humblest community newspapers.

Another similarity—and a most heartening one at that—is that both studies were drawn in some measure from expertise provided by universities. The Tate County project was done entirely by graduate students at the University of Mississippi. Landmark's Larry Paden, a former city editor, had developed excellent and methodological skills largely through his own reading and through personal associations with professors at the University of Kentucky. The lesson here—that higher education can play a valuable service role in working to im-

prove community newspapers—is of the first importance.

Readership studies can provide the information, and in some cases, the confidence—community newspapers need to do their jobs in these intensely competitive times. The community newspapers can adapt proven research techniques to their own situations. As has been suggested here, the research doesn't have to be expensive to be good. □

[Editor's Note: More information on the questionnaires used and the specific procedures may be obtained by contacting Dr. Norton at the department of journalism, The University of Mississippi, University, Mississippi 38677.]

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