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News groups must innovate or die

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News groups must innovate or die

Without dedication to and movement in innovation, the newspaper industry will surely die a slow and painful death

Curtis Carlson and William Wilmot of SRI International know a thing or two about innovation. SRI's innovations touch our lives every day. Among them:

- The computer mouse.
- High-definition television.
- The numbers at the bottom of your check that let your bank to keep your account balance accurate.
- The tracking system that enables the U.S. Postal Service to get mail to you from the millions of mail pieces sent daily.

Yet SRI experienced ups and downs in the world of innovation. That period of gloomy days led SRI to figure out what innovation was and how to create, sustain and repeat it. SRI understood that its livelihood depended upon its ability to create new ways of doing things consistently.

Their definition of innovation: the process of creating and delivering new customer value in the marketplace.

Innovation is something our industry struggles with, but most realize we must innovate or die. The American Press Institute launched Newspaper Next, a project designed to research and test new business models.

API is working with Innosight, a consulting and training firm founded and led by Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen.

Doing business the old way just won't do anymore. API and its Newspaper Next task force, Gannett and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution are examples of taking that realization seriously and tackling it.

In Atlanta, rather than tinkering with

the old model, the Journal-Constitution is starting over with four main departments: News and Information, Enterprise, Digital and Print.

In a memo posted at Innovation International Media's blog, Journal-Constitution Editor Julia Wallace said: "We have four clear jobs: Grow digital. Reinvent print. Create more regular local enterprise (distinctive content) that readers cannot get elsewhere. Improve our news and information gathering."

Then, you have the work of Gannett, with its Information Center that focuses on gathering information for readers, listeners and viewers and delivering it to them across multiple platforms. Gannett has seven key information-gathering areas: digital, public service, community conversation, local, custom content, data and multimedia.

Heaping praises upon their work, I still find the guidance of Wilmot and Carlson valuable and worth sharing. Here's a look at the five disciplines they say are necessary to create and sustain creation of innovation.

Focus on important needs: Work on important customer and market needs, not just what is interesting to you. Some elements of important customer needs: benefits, quality, convenience, costs and experience using the product.

Create value: Use the NABC (Needs, Approach, Benefits and Competition) system to create customer value fast. This system requires that you identify the customer's needs; develop an approach to satisfy those needs; evaluate the benefits per cost of the approach to satisfying

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"Innovation: The Five Disciplines for Creating What Customers Want,"

by Curtis R. Carlson and William W. Wilmot.

customer needs; and determine whether the benefits per cost are superior to the competition and alternatives.

So journalists become information gatherers who must figure out how to give people the information they want, packaged the way they want it and with an edge that's better and more affordable than they can get elsewhere.

Identify innovation champions: Be an innovation champion to drive the value-creation process. An innovation champion believes in the project passionately and will see the project through — and sell it to others — from beginning to end. Each newsroom would have to identify that person or group.

Use innovation teams: Use a multidisciplinary, team-based approach to innovation to create a collective, genius-level IQ. What key people or departments should be involved in this innovation project? Don't just think newsroom. Instead, think broadly to consider different departments, whether that's marketing, circulation or advertising.

Develop organizational alignment: Get your team and enterprise aligned to systematically produce high-value innovations. How does your newsroom have to change so that it continues to create innovations? And, then once in place, what organizational changes would need to occur to make the innovation work? ♦

Commentary by

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APRIL 2007 QUILL 37