

**“Who Needs Newspapers?” Report---Publisher’s Interview Questions
Columbia Missourian: Interviewed July 6, 2010
Completed by Dean Mills, publisher**

1.) **Digital commitment** -- What is the extent of your newspaper’s resources to support the delivery of digital advertising products?

We currently budget about \$150,000 per year for a Missourian Information Services department which combines traditional IT functions with digital planning and project management. That department contains a coordinator, a programmer and a traditional systems analyst position, but all three are cross-trained to be able to work in each other's roles to a certain extent. The staff works with both the newsroom and with business-side departments (advertising and circulation). It supports ad delivery on websites and also downloadable digital products, with future plans to add mobile devices and iPad applications as delivery platforms. Composing staff is tasked with uploading and maintaining ads, but the MIS department builds backend for content.

a.) Is your advertising staff able to provide competitive digital services to merchants? Yes

2.) **Results**

a) Does the digital reporting you deliver *match* the quality of your print reporting? Is it better? Weaker?

Our digital report is better. It has everything that’s in the print edition, and some things that aren’t. Regular reports are supplemented with multimedia; comments from readers become part of the report. Blogs on specific beats add to the quality of several topics, including politics and sports. We have original visual reports through video and through audio slideshows.

b) Revenue: Do your digital products generate revenue? Yes. How does that work? Mostly traditional Web ad formats. Do you have a pay wall? No

c) Profit: Can your digital revenues create sufficient revenue to finance a quality news operation? No, at least not yet.

d) Can digital revenues match current or previous print revenues? Not in the near term.

3.) **Guidance**

a.) What sources do you use to guide your operations, planning and marketing of digital news products? What are most useful sources and why?

Our MIS department looks to several places for inspiration. Keeping up with current news on Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc. is important, as is being plugged in with other digital managers around the country. Luckily we have alums at places ranging from the Beaumont (Tx.) Enterprise to The New York Times so we get a full spectrum of experience. The most useful sources are alums, who can give us specific feedback on what works and what doesn't at their sites. Our digital development director is a fan of ReadWriteWeb, Poynter training tools, Lynda.com tutorials, etc.

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Our general manager finds the International Newspaper Marketing Association most helpful for guidance and he continually monitors other industry and individual newspaper’s Web sites. He frequently talks with other newspaper and media managers throughout the industry.

4.) Future

a.) What role do you see for the delivery of digital news/information products for your news organization?

Our digital development director says:

It's going to be a major and growing role. I'm especially interested in future delivery of quick and relevant information on mobile sites and/or apps, push notifications, etc. The major question is how we monetize those items. Currently in the works for us are a new website built on semantic search; mobile sites for both our major publications; and an iPad app for delivery of our magazine content. Each of those supports advertising and/or paid subscriptions if we choose to go that route.

Our executive editor for innovation says:

News and information delivered digitally are the primary products for us. Web is first. Period. Case in point: In August we largely separated print production to a small staff of designers and copy editors. Everyone else – everyone – should be worrying about the website first.

Two other platforms still need serious attention: mobile and e-reader. We’re developing an iPad app for our weekly city magazine and planning to sign on with a mobile developer. We need to move quickly. We believe that the mobile phone could outstrip the Web as the primary platform within the next couple of years.

We’re also delivering news via e-mail, albeit not as aggressively as we might.

The print will be around for a long time to come. But we know how to do that. Our primary energies need to be and are directed to these digital platforms.

Our general manager says:

We have superb innovators among our faculty, staff and students. Our biggest challenge is deciding which of their great ideas the Missourian’s business side can support and develop. Some digital projects we will do simply because they are great journalism, especially in the service journalism vein. Others we will launch because they are great tests for the industry or perhaps solid revenue streams. The ideal, of course, is when we can monetize great journalism. We are “doing more with less” staff these days. But we must very carefully select among the many creative and promising proposals which ones to launch because we reduced our staffing by 40 percent 18 months ago.

b.) Do you expect that some news/information products will be delivered on newsprint for the foreseeable future? Why?

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Yes. Print revenue, and perhaps even print product frequency and distribution numbers, likely will continue to decline over the next several years. Print advertising revenue, however, will continue to be the newspaper’s largest revenue stream. But our general manager likens the balance of print and digital advertising revenue to that of a slow moving teeter-totter. As the print revenue, the high side of the teeter-totter, slowly declines, digital revenue will rise. The challenge is to grow digital revenue at least equal to the slippage in print revenue.

A common fallacy in thinking among some in the industry, he believes, is that a single digital product or technique can make up for the lost print revenue. Rather it will take a variety of digital products and platforms to substantially grow digital revenue just as it takes display, classified, preprints, legals and other print revenue categories to produce the overall print revenue stream.