



Planting New Ideas:

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What do you think?

MPA staff has been publishing Planting New Ideas for some time now, and we'd like to find out from our members how it's working.

Please e-mail us at readership@michiganpress.org and let us know what you think. What were some of the good ideas? What ideas could you have lived without?

We are also looking for other ideas to help newspapers all over the state grow their readership. If you've seen anything interesting in your travels, or have been doing something innovative at your paper, forward the idea to us and we'll get the word out.

Don't forget to visit our Web site www.michiganpress.org to find out what's new at Michigan's newspapers.

Get to know your readers

If you don't talk to your readers, you can't understand them. What do they expect of you? What do they like about you? What don't they like about you?

Many papers are using coordinated efforts to gather regular feedback from their readers—complete with schedules, lists and other symptoms of organization.

If your reader feedback is lacking, here are four ideas for digging in and learning

more about what your readers expect:

Reader advisory boards

A reader advisory board is a group of 10 to 15 average readers (not the mayor, not the Chamber president) that meets monthly for 90 minutes or so.

The individuals serve three- to six-month stints. In that time, the goal is to learn what people like and dislike about you, of course.

Continued on the back

Spring is in the air!

New seasons bring new opportunities for newspapers and their readers. Special sections are a great way to attract new readers and continue to keep old ones.

Spring offers several great reasons to produce stories that will appeal to a wide range of people. There are opportunities in sports, features, and community news to create sections for your newspaper that people will read themselves and pass on to others.

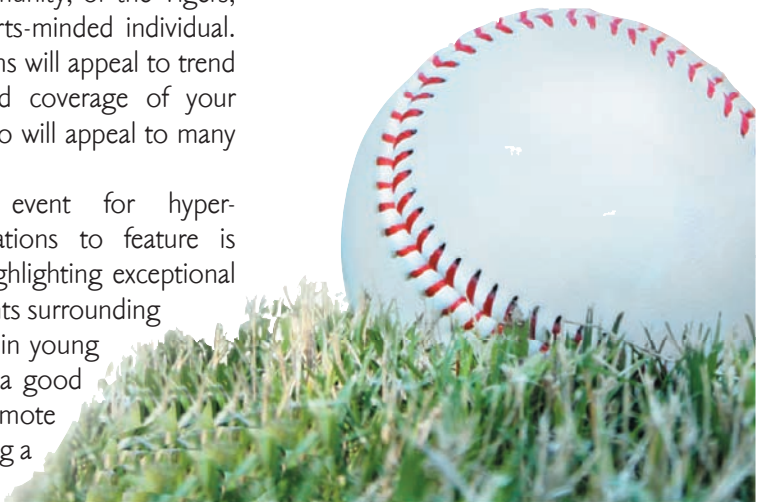
Baseball, be it local little league, the triple A team in your community, or the Tigers, will draw in the sports-minded individual. Spring fashion sections will appeal to trend watchers. Expanded coverage of your gardening section also will appeal to many readers.

Another great event for hyper-local-minded publications to feature is graduation time. Highlighting exceptional students and the events surrounding the season will draw in young readers. This is also a good opportunity to promote youth content. Letting a

high-school aged student cover the stories surrounding their high school graduation is a great way to make the stories more relatable for that age group.

You can view some great examples of special "Spring" themed sections at the following Web sites:

- sdunion.p2ionline.com/specialsections
- www.marshfieldnewsherald.com
- specialsections.mgnetwork.com/index.cfm?siteid=wsj&pobject=fashion



Get to know your readers

Continued from the front

But come to the meeting with focus and purpose. What are five burning questions you absolutely have to hear them answer? Or maybe you want to know how that new feature is going over.

To pull this group together, ask reporters for suggestions on average folks they've run into on their beats. Pull from the subscribers list. Pull from the ex-subscribers list. Promote the fact that you're seeking panel candidates prominently on Page One for a week.

You can have sub-groups for different demographics like Hispanic readers, teens, etc.

Town hall meetings

This doesn't have to be as formal as it sounds, but consider regularly scheduled meetings for the public. Maybe it's quarterly, or maybe annually.

Have the event off-site at the local high school gym, whatever is comfortable. Invite the community to come in and talk about the issues that most concern them. Invite them to talk about what they like or don't like about the newspaper.

These meetings are a great way to make the community feel they are part of the newspaper.

Educate the readers

For the most part, the general public does not understand the way we operate. Watch a designer explain to someone on the outside exactly what it is they do ("You write what for whom?"). Look for opportunities to educate the public on the news-gathering and decision-making process.

(Johnstown, Pa.) *Tribune-Democrat* Editor Chip Minemyer writes a weekly

column where he can explain decisions. Why do we generally not publish photos of dead bodies, then the Pope dies, and there's a dead body on the front page of every newspaper in the world?

Survey them regularly

Survey sites like Zoomerang.com make it possible to do quick and dirty surveys for free. Completely customizable, these surveys are a great way to get feedback from up to 100 people on a new column that's been publishing for a month, or that redesign you launched a few weeks back.

These aren't the only ideas out there for getting attuned to readers, but this also isn't multiple choice—"That one sounds good, I'll do that."



Instead, it's a well-rounded approach intended to get feedback while building your brand and trust in the community.

Entice readers by enhancing your Web site

(1) Start using tags. Newspapers aren't taking advantage of the opportunity the Internet offers to remix/categorize content. Using tags to complement traditional navigation is a great way to offer alternative views of content and better relate stories to each other.

(2) Provide full text RSS feeds. Newspaper should experiment with providing ad-supported full text RSS feeds. This is already common practice among blogs like Gawker (see right) and would satisfy the growing number of folks who want to read all their news in a single RSS reader.

SYNDICATION

-  [Full Content](#) (With Ads)
-  [Partial Content](#) (No Ads)
-  [Comments](#)

(3) Work with external "Social" Web sites. Newspapers should work with sites like del.icio.us as a way to promote and spread their content.

(4) Link to relevant blog entries. Sites like the *Washington Post* are already partnering with Technorati to show "Who's Blogging" about the story you are viewing. It is a great way to facilitate discussion about (and links to) your content. In addition, the "Who's Blogging" feature serves as a real time letters to the editor page.

WHO'S BLOGGING?

Read what bloggers are saying about this article.

- [Avant News - Deadpan satire from plausible futures - Avant News](#)
- [Wonkette, Politics for People with Dirty Minds](#)
- [The Pershing Republic :: Main Page](#)
- [Full List of Blogs \(10 links\) >](#)

Most Blogged About Articles

- [On washingtonpost.com](#) | [On the web](#)

POWERED BY
 **Technorati**

(5) Get rid of all registration. Registration prevents your content from being discussed and spreading online. It hurts page views too.

(6) Partner with local bloggers. Why not partner with popular local bloggers and create a "best of" blog feed for your city/region?

This seems like a good way to liven up your content and establish deep ties with bloggers in your region.

(7) Offer alternative views of your content. Editors are great gatekeepers and play an important function. But on the web why not give people a look at your homepage showing the most read stories? Or most blogged? Why not give people some choices as to how they look at your content?

(8) Modernize your Site's graphic design.

(9) Learn from Craigslist. Newspapers could learn lots of lessons by looking at the efficient way Craigslist presents its content. Like Google, it's brilliant because it is simple. Classified sections on newspaper's Sites are neither.

(10) Make your content work on cell phones and PDA's.

By Todd Zeigler in Design, Technology, Media, Blogs, Newspaper Study

