

Connecting with the community: Hiring the right "face" for the newspaper

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Introduction

Many newspapers are facing a triple dilemma -- an economy that has caused advertising revenues to decline, growing competition from Internet news sources, and a declining pool of students pursuing journalism majors. Although much of the focus on newspapers in major media has recently centered on bankruptcies, joint operating agreements and replacement of newsprint with on-line editions, many smaller papers are still surviving well and need a dependable supply of newsroom talent to gather local news and keep it flowing out to their communities. Readers of community newspapers hunger for local news — “the engine that drives circulation stability and growth” (Lauterer, 2006), but uncovering that news often means a reporter needs to spend more than a few months in the community to gain an understanding of what the “locals” really consider to be newsworthy, not to mention what sources can best provide that news. Having to hire and train new staffers, only to lose them before they even settle in and get to know their communities, is not conducive to good newsgathering.

The perpetual problem of “revolving-door” staffers — hired, gain a little experience and leave for other jobs — is not eased by the loss of student interest in small-town newspaper careers. A logical question to ask is how smaller newspapers attract, hire and retain newsroom staffers who stay around long enough to get to know their communities, and to let their communities get to know them. The question about hiring and retention policies and practices is an important one, because a smaller newspaper’s reporters in particular are frequently the employees the community most often sees. They represent the newspaper’s “face” in the community as they keep popping up at city council meetings, accident scenes, ribbon cuttings, county fairs, barn fires and

Friday night football games, then writing about these news events to keep the community informed. Hiring the right, or wrong, news staff can make the difference between a newspaper that is seen as an integral part of community life and one that is viewed as disconnected from the community — a feeling among readers that "the newspaper doesn't understand what I want."

Purpose of study

First, a caveat on what this study was *not*. It was not intended to sleuth out new, cutting-edge, high-tech techniques that take the risk out of the hiring process. Rather, it was a descriptive study designed to gain an up-to-date look at the state of hiring policies, practices and expectations of editors, publishers and other hiring personnel at daily and weekly newspapers in Minnesota during a time of stress in the newspaper industry. It sought to learn whether the changing face of the newspaper industry has led to new methods of finding the best "hire" or whether tried-and-true methods still dominate the hiring process. The study examined the role of these traditional hiring elements — applications, clips, references, interviews — in today's context of fewer journalism majors, lower revenues and mounting Internet competition. It also looked at similarities and differences in hiring between dailies and weeklies and at efforts by those responsible for hiring to make the best choice — find the best "fit," if you will — of the new employee, the newspaper and the community. The examination included a look at editors' and publishers' expectations and requirements regarding job interviews, references, clips, training, experience and community "connectedness." It considered not only what characteristics come together to get a candidate hired but also what characteristics lead to job-search failure. The ultimate audience for the findings of this study was not media scholars but, instead, journalism majors hoping to find work in the newspaper industry

and the publishers, editors¹ and others involved in hiring the best candidates for their newspapers and their communities.

Literature review

Joe Grimm, the recruiting and development editor at the Detroit Free Press, says the rise of e-mail has created what he calls “24-7” applications from around the world, many of which he discards (Grimm, 2008).

But at smaller papers, the story is different. Weekly editor Mike Buffington notes that “all weekly newspaper editors/owners have staffing horror stories” (Buffington, 2008).

One factor contributing to those “horror stories” is the declining number of job applicants at small and medium-sized papers for the past decade or longer. Says Scott Bosley, executive director of the American Society of Newspaper Editors: “Anybody who is an editor of a small newspaper ... will tell you that their biggest problem is finding anyone” (Porter, 2003).

The situation has been years in the making. Foote (1993) noted that by the early 1990s, the newsroom work force had peaked and begun to shrink. The Newspaper Association of America said that in 1998, only 8.2 percent of journalism graduates were looking for newspaper or news service jobs (Wood, 2000). Terry (1998) observed that newspapers face a “paucity of candidates.” Hickey (1999) noted the reluctance of young journalists to begin their careers in smaller markets. A 1999 survey of South Carolina newspapers showed weeklies in that state could no longer rely on the need for clips as an incentive for fresh journalism graduates to accept jobs at weeklies because of new

¹ Although hiring personnel at newspapers included in this study listed various titles -- editor, publisher, editor/publisher, general manager, managing editor, executive editor, personnel manager, human-resource director, etc., this paper will refer to those responsible for newsroom hiring as “editors,” because an editor under one title or another inevitably is involved in the hiring process, and the “editor” title generically well represents those involved in the process.

employment opportunities in other media such as Web publishing, public relations and newsletters (Wood, 2000).

Landon (2003) and Becker (2005) cite a similar shrinking pool of young reporters. The reason is often not only the small-town environment, but also relatively low pay at smaller publications, a situation that has been cited for decades as a problem in recruiting and retaining young journalists (Rich, 1990; Hood, 2000; Wood, 2000; Porter, 2003; Fuentes, 2006).

By early 2008, the applicant pool had not deepened. Weekly editors in rural areas reported that they continued to have difficulty finding good reporters, with help-wanted ads sometimes running for weeks without applications (Grassroots Editor, spring 2008; Crockford 2008; Buffington, 2008; Roelfsema, 2009). More-rural states where journalism opportunities are limited may find it hard to recruit employees because of the relatively remote nature of some communities (Crockford, 2008; Mehlsak, 2008). When applicants do appear, they may be people who are far from qualified for the job or who have different work values than earlier generations (Crockford, 2008; Marston, 2007; Brown, 1998).

The problem is not limited to U.S. newspapers. Community newspapers in Canada and Great Britain face a similar dilemma (Whitehouse 2008, Roelfsema, 2009).

One roadblock to easier recruiting may be recent negative publicity about the newspaper industry — “convincing folks that newspapers are not a dying industry,” as one news executive put it (Current, 2007). An annual survey of recent journalism graduates showed a flat job market for new grads through the first half of 2008 (Vlad, Becker, Vogel and Wilcox, 2008). Despite this apparently negative situation for the newspaper industry and for job-seeking journalists, 48 million papers are sold daily in the

United States and more than 45,000 people are employed in gathering and editing news (State of the News Media, 2009), meaning jobs are out there if editors and job-seekers can come together to find the right fit.

Beyond a smaller pool of job candidates, retention of newsroom workers at smaller papers is also a long-term, continuing problem, and high turnover of staff can lead to credibility problems with readers as new faces come and go on the community beats (Overby, 1998). Weaver and Wilhoit (1982-83) found low salary and poor benefits driving young journalists from the profession. A quarter of a century later, Everbach and Flournoy (2007) found women leaving journalism for similar reasons. In the years between, Rich (1990) noted that almost 80 percent of journalists in their 20s would consider changing careers. Wood (2000) found 22- to 33-year-olds were most likely to leave their jobs, with more than three-fourths of editors saying they were losing staffers from that age group; a quarter of those editors said their most-senior news employees had been with the paper for five years or less. Landon (2003) found only 19 percent of journalists under 30 planned to make newspapers a career. Victory (2003) cited unattainable career advancement at small dailies and weeklies as a cause of frequent staff turnover. “And the turnover wheel continues to spin,” he observed. Mostyn (2008) reported losing five reporters in five years at his weekly.

Editors and publishers understand the importance of good hiring decisions if such turnover is to be minimized. Recruiting and retaining the right people is an inherent challenge (Oickle, 2008; Current, 2007). “It’s hard to come up with anything that says more about a leader’s long-term influence on an organization than the people he or she hires,” says Poynteronline news director Scott Libin. “It would probably be possible to trace most of journalism’s epic failures on bad hiring decisions” (Libin, 2006).

Others agree about the importance of hiring. “Hiring a reporter is nerve-wracking business,” says Editor Richard Mostyn. “It’s never easy. And it’s the most important job an editor can do” (Mostyn, 2008). Oickle notes: “You cringe at the prospects of trying to find the right person because you know it won’t be easy” (Oickle, 2008). Among the challenges is attracting candidates with strong job skills. Hickey (1999) noted that editors were finding applicants with less knowledge of public affairs, weaker writing skills and lower motivation.

To find that “right person,” editors traditionally have relied on references, interviews and testing.

References have long been a staple in the hiring process across most businesses. A study by the Society for Human Resource Management showed that reference checks are likely in 80 to 90 percent of job searches to fill desk-type positions (Doyle, 2009). With some references becoming unwilling to give out anything but basic “date-of-hire” types of information, some editors have begun going beyond provided references to seek information. Pohjolainen (2008) tells of contacting an editor at a paper in competition with a job candidate’s own and learning the reporter had a reputation of being a weak performer.

Reference checks may lead to an interview, a key tool in determining a candidate’s skills and character (Alves, 2007; Current, 2007). Interviews help editors check the candidate’s potential fit in the organization and the community as well as his/her “hard” skills (e.g., writing, spelling, grammar) and “soft” skills (e.g., open-mindedness, flexibility, curiosity). Various types of tests are sometimes used as part of the interview to evaluate such skills in job candidates (Current, 2007; Coverdill and Finlay, 1998; Marsden, 1996).

Skills tests as part of the job application process have been a staple of newspaper hiring (Pierce and Miller, 2007; Engh, 2006; Gwin, 1998; Hipsman and Wearden, 1990). Becker, Fruit and Caudill (1987) found that about half of dailies used one or more tests during the application process. Basic skills (spelling, punctuation, grammar) often rank among the most important skills in a desirable employee (Pierce and Miller, 2007), along with critical-thinking ability (Lepre and Bleske, 2005; Pierce and Miller, 2007). But fit is also important, sometimes taking precedence over educational attainment (e.g., grade-point average) and personality (Bills, 1988) and even job-specific skills (Lowrey and Becker, 2001; Hollifield, Kosicki and Becker, 1997). Some editors eschew tryouts and writing tests altogether, relying instead on clips and interview performance (Mehlsak, 2008). And, as Grimm (2006) observes, “Some editors abuse tests, some never use them, and most aren’t sure just what they’re looking at when they scan the results.”

Methodology

To examine editors’ game plan for finding that often-elusive best fit, a 21-question survey was prepared for mailing to editors, publishers, human-resource people or others in charge of hiring newsroom staffers at daily and weekly newspapers in Minnesota. For a few of the larger dailies, the newspaper was contacted to get the name of a specific person to whom the questionnaire should be mailed. For the smaller dailies and the weeklies, the survey was sent to the editor or publisher as listed in the Minnesota Newspaper Association directory. The survey was pretested for clarity by faculty in the mass communications department at a state university.

The questionnaire and a stamped return envelope were mailed to all 26 regular daily papers in the state. (Two specialized dailies were omitted from the study.) It was also mailed to 52 Minnesota weeklies, which were chosen from the Minnesota Newspaper

Association annual directory using a random-number table as a starting point; that sample represented about one in seven Minnesota weeklies. Circulations of the newspapers ranged from 642 to 368,794, with all the papers except two Twin Cities dailies having a circulation of less than 48,000. After two weeks, followup phone calls were made to nonresponding papers asking them to return the surveys. After one more week, the researchers began making phone calls to nonresponding papers to administer the questionnaire by phone.

Results

Either by mail or by phone call, all 26 dailies in the state (100 percent) and 37 of the sample of weeklies (71 percent) responded to the questionnaire. The process of collecting data took a little more than five weeks from the initial mailing to the point at which it was decided no more responses would be forthcoming after at least four attempts had been made to contact each nonresponding paper by mail or phone call.

The researchers then tabulated the results,² which showed the following:

It is clear (but not surprising) that daily papers receive many more applications for job openings than weeklies, a situation that instantly gives dailies a greater chance to find the right person for the job. None of the dailies reported getting fewer than five applications for newsroom openings, but 41 percent of the weeklies said they get fewer than five. That contrasts with 38 percent of dailies getting more than 20 applications, but only 11 percent of weeklies having that luxury of choice among candidates.

The difference between dailies and weeklies was not so great when the number of candidates interviewed was considered. Dailies reported interviewing three to five candidates for an average opening and 62 percent of weeklies did three to five interviews.

² Three questionnaires were returned as much as five months after the instruments had been mailed, but these responses arrived too late to be included in the tabulation of data and were not included in the response rate cited.

The difference was also not great when it came to multiple interviews of candidates, with about half of the papers in each group (54 percent dailies, 46 percent weeklies) saying they interview a candidate more than once in seeking the right hire. When doing those interviews, more than 80 percent of the dailies say they have more than one employee involved in weighing the candidate's fit; 68 percent of the weeklies call on more than one person to do the interviews. And it is clear that in-person interviews are a vital part of the hiring process: 92 percent of dailies and 84 percent of weeklies said they never hire without interviewing the candidate in person (as opposed, e.g., to phone or e-mail interviews).

The size of the paper didn't seem to make much difference in the number of references contacted to help inform the hiring decision, with about half of the respondents (53 percent dailies, 49 percent weeklies) saying they usually check three to five references for candidates they are considering hiring. The favorite contact method for dailies and weeklies alike is the telephone, with 46 percent and 47 percent of dailies and weeklies, respectively, saying phone contact is No. 1. A handful of respondents from both dailies and weeklies indicated they go beyond listed references to check out job candidates. Said one: "We call past employers whether or not they are listed as a reference on a resume."

Regarding the qualifications candidates bring to the job, a journalism degree appears to be more important for landing a job at a daily than at a weekly. Among dailies, more than three out of four respondents said a journalism degree is an expectation. Only half of the weeklies agreed with that expectation, with several editors saying they are willing to train local residents who display potential for on-the-job training and already have the advantage of being familiar with the community.

Also a greater expectation among the dailies is hands-on experience (i.e., beyond classroom training). While only 4 percent of dailies said hands-on experience isn't a prerequisite, 28 percent of the weeklies said lack of hands-on work wouldn't preclude a candidate's hiring. About 10 percent of the dailies said they demand at least three years of hands-on experience in a candidate, but none of the weeklies reported such a requirement. Fresh journalism graduates who have gained student newspaper experience stand a chance of being hired at either a daily or a weekly, with 72 percent of dailies and 64 percent of weeklies saying they would consider hiring such a candidate.

It was interesting to note that an internship in journalism carried much more weight with both daily and weekly hirers. This was especially true at dailies, with 73 percent saying they preferred a journalism internship over student newspaper work. At weeklies, one-third said the internship was preferred, only 5 percent favored student newspaper work, but 57 percent valued the experience as equal.

In helping determine a candidate's qualifications, dailies are more likely to require formal skills tests of candidates. About 62 percent of the dailies said they ask the candidate to do a formal test, primarily via a writing assignment (35 percent of those requiring a test) or a test of spelling, punctuation and grammar (27 percent). A minority (43 percent) of the weeklies use formal tests, with 36 percent of those using tests asking the candidate to complete a writing assignment and 36 percent testing skills in mechanics.

Clips of previous work as evidence of ability and fit are important for papers large and small. A full 100 percent of the dailies say they won't hire without examining the candidate's earlier work, and 89 percent of the weeklies make that requirement. How many clips are enough? Fifty-eight percent of the dailies ask to see five to 10 examples,

and 31 percent require four or fewer. Among weeklies, 43 percent want five to 10 clips, but a close 40 percent will accept fewer than five.

Once a decision is made to make a job offer to a candidate, hiring personnel at both dailies and weeklies are likely to act quickly on their choices. More than 40 percent of respondents at both types of papers said a job offer typically follows the interview in one to two weeks, and about one-third of each type of paper makes the offer in less than a week. The offer is most likely to be made by telephone, with three quarters of dailies and 69 percent of weeklies listing the phone as their tool of choice. Weeklies were somewhat more likely than dailies to make an on-the-spot job offer to the right candidate, with 17 percent of weeklies saying in-person offers at the conclusion of the interview are common, compared with 7 percent of dailies that said a job offer immediately after the interview was likely.

Respondents were asked to rate the readiness of candidates for the job for which they were applying. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 meant poorly prepared and 5 meant very well prepared, almost half of the respondents at both types of papers gave a “preparedness” score of 3 (46 percent dailies, 49 percent weeklies). An additional 28 percent of dailies offered an even stronger score of 4. On the other hand, 16 percent of the weeklies gave a score of only 2. None of the dailies and only 3 percent of the weeklies gave the lowest score, a 1.

Respondents were also asked to explain why a person brought in for an interview ended up *not* being offered the job. The No. 1 reason for both dailies (45 percent) and weeklies (33 percent) was because the interview didn’t go well. Almost a quarter of the dailies reported turning down an applicant because of a “gut feeling” about the candidate’s fit in the job and community; only 6 percent of the weeklies shared that

feeling. But both types of papers (12 percent dailies, 14 percent weeklies) said the personality of the applicant factored into evaluating fitness for the job. Only 8 percent of the dailies and 4 percent of the weeklies actually stated that the candidate didn't seem to be "a good fit" for the paper, but those low numbers may be a matter of semantics — it is likely that such reasons as personality issues, weak interviews and gut feelings also might lead to a "bad fit" conclusion.

The final question of the survey allowed respondents to make other comments about the hiring process. A sampling of those comments is worth sharing.

A recurring theme among the editors at papers large and small was a lack of preparation for the job:

- "College grads always seem surprised at the amount of stories they have to write. We want quality and quantity. Later in their careers they can find positions with fewer stories."
- "Be able to take pictures! Be able to find local news. Know the community."
- "College journalists underestimate the necessity of hands-on experience."
- "Too many fresh grads have not completed an internship or worked on a school newspaper.... There is nothing to distinguish them from other applicants."
- "Do an internship at a real paper."

Several of the comments from editors focused on the professional appearance candidates bring to the interview:

- "Don't wear jeans to the interview."
- "Dress for the interview like you want the job. Don't come in jeans or baggy clothes. Suit and dress is still very respectable."
- "A smile and proper dress attire goes a long way."

- “Candidates need to dress the part. Professional.”

Some editors decried the penchant among younger grads to overuse e-mail:

- “A resume by e-mail won’t work.”

• “I find today’s journalism grads lack drive and ambition. Too many would rather do their interviews using e-mail rather than person-to-person.”(The editor was referring to on-the-job interviews of sources, not the job-application interview.)

Many of the editors’ comments simply had to do with using common sense in applying for the job:

- “Some people are slow to apply. Apply quickly.”
- “Respond to opening as soon as possible.”
- “Get names right; watch grammar in letters and resumes.”
- “Rarely do candidates write a thank-you.”
- “Common sense goes a long way.”

Discussion

The data gathered in this study suggest that weekly and daily newspapers face both shared and different challenges in hiring newsroom personnel. Dailies tend to have much larger pools of applicants from which to choose the “best face” to represent the paper in the public’s eye. Weeklies still face the long-standing, continuing challenge of finding and retaining applicants who will work for what some job-seekers see as low pay in a dull, unexciting small-town setting. The result is that reporters at many smaller newspapers seem to be continuing a “tradition” of taking a job to get some experience, then parlaying that experience into a job at a larger, better-paying paper, often within a year of so of being hired. This staff turnover, of course, makes it difficult for a paper to have reporters who stay around long enough to develop a sense of community, who come

to understand the specific needs of the community and who represent the newspaper well in the community's collective eye and are accepted by the community. (Acceptance of newcomers of any kind in some small, rural communities has always been an issue. [Kassover and McKeown, 1981; Harper, 1989]. Just ask a new reporter making a first appearance at a small-town city council meeting.)

The findings suggest it is not only newspaper hiring personnel who have to work tirelessly at finding the right fit for the new hire. Journalism-school graduates need to do their homework and tailor their job search to mesh with not only the type of newspaper (e.g., daily vs. weekly, urban vs. rural) to which they are applying, but also to the specific papers to which they are applying and to the specific communities in which those papers operate. And they must understand the demands of the job well enough in advance of actually applying to be sure they are prepared, through their education and experience, to handle the job should it be offered.

The data do provide a bit of sunshine for job-seekers in what is often today painted as a bleak and stormy era for journalists: There are newspaper jobs waiting out there, despite the economy and the new competition from the Internet. Those jobs may not be at the big-time dailies the job candidate dreamed about when entering J-school, but they are jobs that will provide not only experience but a decent living, and way of life, for those young journalists who are prepared to embrace community journalism and to become a vital part of that community.

Recommendations

American media are in a state of transition, with traditional media evolving and new media joining the game. The newspaper landscape is changing as part of the evolution of the larger media landscape. The ideas held by students seeking careers in journalism also

are evolving. Editors, publishers and others involved in hiring newsroom staffers need to stay aware of trends in educating future journalists as well as trends in media use in their communities so that new hires will be the best people to serve both their newspapers and their communities. Research into training these new journalists and into successful hiring and retention practices should be ongoing. The study described in this paper looked broadly at traditional hiring policies and methods. Followup research should focus on specific aspects of modern-day hiring — e.g., the efficacy of journalism job Web sites vs. traditional print advertising for locating candidates. An area in which more research would be useful is the use of and reliance on applicant-provided references vs. references the editor digs out on his/her own for help in making hiring decisions. Another area that cries out for research-supported information is how editors actually interpret and apply the results of the application tests they require, as well as how much validity those tests have in predicting the success of new hires. Yet another area for study is what new reporters themselves do to try to fit into their community (and how long it takes to feel accepted) in regard to their connections with both news sources and ordinary citizens; an angle on that direction of research might be an examination of how quickly and well those sources and citizens feel a new reporter fits in, and what they see as behavior that helps secure the fit. Future research should also examine the motivation behind students seeking careers in print newspaper work vs. Internet news work so that the “best and brightest” journalism students don’t so quickly gravitate toward the Internet at the expense of traditional newspapers.

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