

Small newspapers adapting to industry changes

While there may be some truth to the common thought that the print newspaper is dying, this statement carries more truth for some news sources than others.

In the age of digital media, newsroom cut-backs, and a general cloud hovering over the jour

nalism industry as a whole, small newspapers claim that they are carrying on almost completely as they had before.

Their gimmick? An ability to adapt to an ever-changing news world, coupled with a market that knows who they can trust.

Newspaper job cuts surged in 2011 by nearly 30 percent according to Newsosaur, an online blog that has been tracking the human toll on the industry for the past five years. Erica Smith, author of the "Paper Cuts" blog, has found more than 3,775 newspaper jobs were eliminated in 2011 nationwide. Small newspapers seem to be handling the situation much better than the larger sources.

"I believe 100 percent that small papers are doing better than the larger publications," said Michael S. Miller, editor-in-chief of the Toledo Free Press (circulation 100,000 plus). "We aren't lighting cigars with twenty dollar bills or anything, but we are doing fine because we have adjusted to the digital age. We have adjusted our circulation numbers, employment, added more local content and have added local talent to provide crosswords and games, which saves us money."

Many papers agree that the ability to appeal to their market has allowed them continued success.

Geoff Ritter, editor of the Carbondale (Illinois) Times, a

weekly community paper with a circulation of 4,100, referred to his paper's small-town feel as a major positive toward success.

"We cater to a local audience and that plays a big role toward the vitality of our paper," he said. "We provide more of a niche product. If you want to know what the president is doing, you can find 500 papers that will tell you. If you want to know about the Carbondale city council meeting, then you come to us."

While the biggest news papers cannot account for this sense of closeness, they have taken on their own means of adaptation, a digital product.

The Bivings Report, another blog that focuses on news media, found that each of the top 100 news sources currently utilizes a Twitter account, sending out an average of 11 tweets per day. Papers such as the Boston Herald, send out over 95 per day. While this strategy is effective for posting news more quickly, it has shown mixed results in terms of accuracy and money-making aptitude.

Most small papers are using Twitter as well, but many to much less of an extent, which still encourages readers to pick up a newspaper.

Gary Sawyer, Editor of the Decatur (Illinois) Herald and Review, said his paper has a strong online presence, but has not overcome print, as the H&R Online is the second most-used news source in its area, only behind the H&R's print paper. To Sawyer, the age-old saying, "the customer is always right," rings true, and the size of his paper allows for the Herald and Review to appeal to the customer's various wants and needs.

"The key is to report local news, and you have to deliver it the way the customer wants," he said. "Maybe that is through print, maybe that is through digital media. You have to

continue to give the customer the news they want, the way they want it.”

Another strength of the small paper is that journalists who work for them have learned and attained strengths in multiple areas. Without a specialty, small newspaper’s workers are comfortable in many different facets of the business and can continue to provide a quality product, something that the big news sources sometimes struggle with, according to Ruth Campbell, managing editor of the Fort Scott (Kansas) Tribune (circulation 2,500).

“The bigger areas had more people working for them to begin with and couldn’t carry the load,” she said. “The smaller papers have always had to do more with less.”

Campbell said her paper has continued to try to deliver a fresh product, and the addition of a stronger focus on digital media has helped. Campbell said a major part of her paper’s switch to online media is to make sure the news posted digitally is not only fast, but valid.

There is no doubt that the newspaper industry is changing and shrinking. In fact, nearly 1 in 3 newsroom jobs have been eliminated since 1989, the peak of the journalist market, according to an annual survey by the American Society of News Editors. But while the bigger papers have struggled to adapt, the small papers have had an easier time, focusing on giving their readers the product that they want, with fewer workers doing so.

These are the very strengths that small newspapers have hung their hat on from the very beginning.