

Communities Without Newspapers are Costly Information Deserts!

In a company training session that I had the opportunity to participate in recently, the following question was asked, what happens when a community loses their local newspaper? That was followed with a secondary question being asked, how would that community then get their news? As can be expected, the answers varied from things such as social media, word of mouth, friends, neighbors, to answers such as other regional outlets and so forth. All of which are correct in one way or another, but in any event, it was agreed that the community would suffer from accurate, timely and first-hand information.

Yes, they would somehow get the latest business closings, violent crimes committed along with mostly not so pleasant news and information from social media, radio, friends, neighbors etc. And yes, they would get a bit of regional coverage for any high profile crimes and business closings. They might even get lucky (unlucky) and have a major news outlet like the NY Times or Washington Post swoop into town to do a feature story on another dying rural American town.

But who is consistently going to tell the community's feel good stories and convey all the great things happening locally to the outside world? Carrying this one step further, when potential new businesses looking to relocate to your community or that of a competing community, they will first Google's all the prospective communities or locations. What will they then find when they Google your town? They will see those business closings, crime stories, obituaries, and yes, that NY Times piece will appear at the top of their search as well. What impressions will they have of your community and what decisions do you think they will make? While I wish this was simply a “what if” situation, unfortunately, nearly two thousand communities across the country are experiencing this exact scenario today.

Local newspapers are the eyes into the soul of your community. The local newspaper is your community's ambassador to the outside world. If the local newspaper can't convey your community's positive message to the outside world, who then will be able to convey that message in a consistent and accurate fashion? Newspapers use to be the community's proverbial communication town square. In today's world of media fragmentation of potential information sources, capturing that role once again is more critical than ever. Small and mid-sized communities need every bit of help they can muster, having a local media presence is critical to the overall success and vitality of the community.

A recent Notre Dame study indicated that a community that loses their newspaper could expect the cost of local government to increase by 30% within five years. That doesn't mean that government is bad, it is necessary, but without oversight, they tend to spend more than they otherwise might. Regardless of the political leanings of the local newspaper, that simple act of oversight saves a community hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars.

Another recent poll showed that most local residents believe that their local newspaper is doing fine financially. While many newspapers are doing okay, it is safe to say that most are facing challenging and potentially crippling economic headwinds. It is no surprise that communities face these same economic challenges. The media company and the community need to work together to find the synergies that can be created to mold a foundation from which to build. For both to succeed, they need each other more than ever before.

When a community loses its newspaper, a part of that community dies. In addition to less civil engagement, it loses its identity. A quote by Portland State's Lee Shaker was recently shared with me. He said in a Nieman Lab report, *“If a community loses its newspaper, it stops being its own place. It becomes a satellite of something else, rather than having its own core identity.”* A community without a newspaper becomes a rudderless ship adrift in the treacherous economic currents of life.

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