

# Well-run Web site won't hurt print product

By Gary Sosniecki

I hear it time and time again when I talk to small newspapers that still don't have Web sites:

"I'm afraid a Web site will hurt my print product."

These publishers tell me they're afraid their newspaper will lose circulation if they start giving away content on the Internet. They also say they're afraid any online advertising they sell will cost them print ads.

What these publishers should be afraid of is what could happen to their newspapers if they *don't* have a Web site.

Remember the shopper invasion of the 1960s, '70s and '80s? Small newspapers that didn't take competing TMC's seriously often saw their ad bases erode. Smart publishers who recognized the threat started their own shoppers to keep advertisers from jumping ship to a competing shopper. Maybe their newspapers lost a little advertising, maybe they lost a few readers who were more interested in ads than news, but they lost them to their own shoppers instead of a competitor's.

The same is true with the Internet.

Today, a newspaper — even the smallest newspaper -- needs its own Web site to prevent readers and advertisers from jumping ship to a competing Web site.

Don't think you have online competition? Guess again. Go to your favorite search engine and type in the name of your town and state.

Scroll down the list of results and pick out the competitors. See the stories about your town on the local Topix site? See the community-calendar items from your town on the local American Towns site? See the ads local businesses are running with Merchant Circle? Craigslist may not be in your town yet, but Topix and American Towns are, and a few of your advertisers might be trying out MerchantCircle or something similar.

Even scarier are those towns where news-and-information Web sites have sprung up in competition with the local newspaper. I learn of another one almost every week.

So, yes, you need your own Web site. The key is to minimize its impact on your newspaper. The best weekly-newspaper Web sites *complement* their newspapers rather than compete with them.

If you update your Web site only once a week, you're competing with your newspaper. If you post too many of the same stories on your Web site, you're competing with your newspaper.

But if you're selective about what you post, if you don't duplicate too much of your print product online, if some of your online news is unique to your Web site, you will complement your newspaper and minimize any loss of readership.

Some suggestions for your main weekly update:

--Post major front-page news, two or three stories. Don't post routine crime news.

--Post your main editorial or personal column. Don't post letters to the editor or your "yesteryear" column.

--Post varsity sports from the local high school, but not junior varsity or lower.

--Post full obits. Don't post births, weddings and engagements.

Complement your newspaper by posting content you might not have room to run in print. Some examples:

--Post photos of your high-school sports teams and schedules at the start of each season. Leave them up all season. If you're really ambitious, update the schedules with the final scores as the season progresses.

--As candidates file for local elections – city councils, school boards, county commissions – update a master list online and keep it posted until the election.

--Post a transcript of local candidate forums. Even better, post a video clip of each candidate answering a key question.

Of course, nothing distinguishes your Web site from your newspaper more than the breaking news you can post online: Fires, floods, major storms, death notices, sports scores, boil orders, weather-related school closings, election results on election night. With each online update, remind readers that they'll get a full report in the next edition of your newspaper.

In 2001, I coordinated the launch of a redesigned Web site for a small daily in Missouri. Three years later, I launched the first Web site of a small weekly my wife and I owned.

Neither time did our newspaper lose any readers – or advertisers – because of our Web site.

I can't guarantee that your newspaper won't lose some readers or advertisers if you launch a Web site.

But if you do, you're better off losing them to your own Web site than to someone else's.

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