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Newspaper Training Program Shows Gains in Social Media

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This article reports the results of a training program developed and delivered under a state grant by the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota for the news and advertising employees at the St. Paul Pioneer Press.

In early 2008, Newspaper Guild representatives from the St. Paul Pioneer Press and the Duluth News Tribune contacted the authors at the University of Minnesota School of Journalism and Mass Communication about the possibility of developing a training program for newsroom and advertising sales staff. The Guild had just completed a round of contract negotiations at two newspapers it represents, and the need for staff retraining emerged as a significant component. Newspaper management at both newspapers agreed to pay staff for training time and were willing to partner with the trade union and the university to apply for a state training grant. Forum Communications, owner of the Duluth newspaper, withdrew from the project before the training program was implemented after reneging on the pledge to pay workers for training time, but the Pioneer Press in St. Paul fully engaged throughout.

This article reports on the results of the training program. Specifically, the report on self-assessment includes findings from the newsroom and advertising sales staff of their mastery of work proficiencies before and after the training program. Some of the unique characteristics of this partnership and the training that was implemented are also discussed.

The Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) encourages state businesses to partner with state educational institu-

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tions to develop and deliver training for employees through a program titled the Minnesota Job Skills Partnership (MJSP). State funds flow directly to educational institutions, and participating businesses must agree to pay their employees during the usual workday for their training time. Historically, the companies that took advantage of this program were manufacturing entities partnering with local vocational, technical or community colleges. The unique nature of this application from the University of Minnesota on behalf of newspaper professionals intrigued the state grant decision makers. The proposal was presented to and approved by the state in late 2008 for implementation from February 2009 to June 2010.

The State of the Newspaper Industry

Changes in business models, audience expectations and internal processes have upended "business as usual" for both the editorial and business sides of the newspaper industry. On the editorial side, the skill sets of the past—writing, research, reporting—are still critical. It is their application that is unclear in a communications environment that has an array of delivery platforms, evolving software applications and new digital storytelling forms to consider. News staffs are struggling with the many methods for telling stories in this new environment. They need to understand when and how to deploy appropriate storytelling forms, and how best to use the skills of the news staff given the wide variety of options their audiences are using to be informed. "Traditional" reporting practices must evolve to manage a variety of "information communities" and take advantage of the benefits of aggregated reporting in the news gathering process.

On the business side, the upheaval in the news industry has changed the very nature of how advertising sales are conducted. In the past, advertising personnel relied on a "personal sales" model to sell well-defined advertising opportunities in the print newspaper. They could give their clients a call and routinely sell ad space. Now their clients have an array of advertising options—many of which cut out the "middleman," and these options are often less expensive than newspaper advertising. Classified advertising, a previously stable and reliable source of income for newspapers, has decreased significantly with the popularity of free online services such as Craigslist where people sell directly to one another. It is clear that in the new advertising environment, the notion of what services newspapers are providing advertisers requires re-thinking.

Because news organizations have never been consistent investors in the ongoing training of their employees, this cooperative training program between a university School of Journalism and Mass Communication and a newspaper union offered a unique opportunity to effect real change. In the current environment of budget cuts and sweeping changes, investment in training is often one of the first things to go. But never has training in both new technology skills and new conceptual mindsets been more critical to the success of the
newspaper industry. News organizations require editorial and ad sales staffs able to understand people’s news and information consumption habits and change their sales approaches and editorial output based on these new realities.  

**Review of Scholarship on Training Programs**

In the review of professional and scholarly literature related to retraining, many of the studies found addressed the economic conditions of the newspaper industry on an institutional level. Trade publications and research journals include studies of the changing news environment and its relationship to the practice of journalism. This research includes how to best prepare journalism students for the profession with an emphasis on multimedia training. One study suggests that educators redirect teaching practices from an “industry-centered model” to a “community-centered model” and adapt curriculum to reflect a world where information is no longer considered to be “scarce.” Many studies found that media professionals still emphasize the importance of teaching long-standing skills such as writing and research. The best practices in teaching recognize that new media technologies, such as Twitter, can expand a journalist’s influence beyond local media markets and increase the spread and speed of news and news delivery.

Negotiating the roles of both online and “traditional” newsrooms was another recurring theme in the literature. Only a few short years ago online staffs were often considered subordinate to the print staff in newsrooms. The changing roles, expectations, career satisfaction and job performance of journalists were other topics addressed in the literature. Examination of emerging “citizen journalists” also stands out, as both professional and scholarly articles address the efficacy of the citizen-as-journalist. Changes in newspaper content in relation to new media practices at newspapers are also addressed in the literature.

Many organizations that support the media industry have ongoing training programs. For example, the websites of both the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) and The Poynter Institute offer self-guided training and tips for navigating social media. SPJ’s website features a “Journalist’s Toolbox” with links to online resources for different beats and resources to help journalists follow social media trends. Poynter is dedicated to training journalists and offers online tutorials, webinars and in-person seminars. The American Press Institute’s “Newspaper Next” offers “tailored programming” for individual news organizations. Their traveling programs offer newsgathering strategies for reporters, tips to increase sales force effectiveness, media management consultation and strategies for developing and executing new revenue streams. Online training sites such as KnowledgeWebb.net provide self-directed classes, training videos, webinars and live chats to teach subscribers about the latest trends and opportunities in social media, website development, starting small businesses, digital content and more for media professionals.

For-profit media companies like Gannett Company, Inc., recognized back in
2006 the need to re-imagine the newspaper business. It began transforming 85 daily newspaper newsrooms into “Information Centers” and training reporters to contribute content to the web with 24-hour news, videos, databases, maps and community interaction. Gannett has invested time and resources to transition “traditional” journalists into “backpack journalists” who can shoot, edit and upload still pictures and video in addition to their writing duties.

Scholars have recommended that media organizations think about long-term training programs as a part of a larger business strategy. For example, the work of Lee B. Becker et al. examines the system that produces media professionals in the United States and examines the practices of for-profit media organizations and the related educational programs that turn out journalism graduates.

Method

There is a huge literature on learning theory and how it applies to adult learners. How this material applied to adult learners in a work or professional setting was an interesting question. An approach called “Learning Paths” was developed by a company called Learning Paths International based in Minnesota. The Learning Paths approach asks employees to develop the definition of a “proficient” worker and identify the methods by which proficiency is demonstrated for a particular job or activity. It treats the trainees as partners in the learning process and is designed specifically to allow for ongoing, continuous training and development. It also builds assessment into every step of the training process.

Initial introductory sessions were held with key advertising and editorial department personnel at the Pioneer Press to explain the training grant and to enlist participation in the first step of the Learning Paths process, which was the creation of a list of proficiency statements.

The sessions to develop the proficiency statements started with brainstorming a list of general categories that define the work of the department. For example, advertising sales categories included prospecting, calling on new businesses, making presentations and closing sales. Editorial categories included developing sources, cultivating communities of interest, editing and multimedia storytelling.

Once these general categories were listed, teams of members from each department created “proficiency statements” that describe specifically what members of the department should be doing, not just be “able to do,” if they were operating at peak levels of proficiency. Each of the team members was assigned to discuss the list of proficiency statements with their colleagues to ensure that all of the departmental responsibilities were well represented.

Analysis of the proficiency statements led to the creation of a list of learning modules focused on developing personnel skills. A grid mapping the learning modules to the proficiency statements was created.

For example, the learning module for the advertising sales department on “Finding and Qualifying Clients Through Social Media Channels” mapped to
two proficiency statements: a proficient ad salesperson "creates and implements a plan to use social media to keep current with and communicate with high value customers" effectively and "designs a communications plan to stay in touch and build relationships with customers and keep them informed about industry sector news through blogs, alerts services and other appropriate methods."

For the newsroom, the learning module on "Research methods for source development" mapped to three proficiency statements: a proficient newsroom staffer "develops five new sources a month through networking, forums, databases, websites and other research," "finds and uses appropriate internal and external databases to share information and develop sources" and "uses social media and other technology to identify, build and maintain connections with key sources and to develop story ideas."

The next step was to develop an assessment tool to be used in guiding employees to the right training modules. The ultimate goal of the training was to move all employees, no matter where they started, a step closer to proficiency in the areas defined by each department. The assessment tool helped employees determine their current level of proficiency for each of the skill areas. It helped us determine the number of sessions needed to deliver the required training. We also intended this pre-training assessment to be delivered again post-training to determine whether the training sessions were effective in moving the department personnel closer to confidence in their respective proficiency areas.

There were two categories of questions in the assessments. The first category was a series of "yes or no" questions asking respondents to indicate whether they used certain kinds of social media or technology in the course of their work. (Examples of questions include: "Do you have a Facebook account?" and "Do

The new economic reality requires that the newspaper industry "adapt or die," as the often-used mantra warns. Retraining programs like the one developed under this state grant offer a way to help advertising personnel address their clients' advertising needs more effectively and for reporters and editors to better provide the news and information citizens need in their daily lives.
you use RSS feeds?”) The second category of questions asked participants to rate their levels of proficiency in targeted areas on a scale of 1-5.

For the advertising sales department, there were a total of 39 assessment statements to which the employees responded. Of the 106 employees, 66 filled out the pre-training assessment. Examples of the proficiency assessment statements for the advertising side include:

- I use alert services, RSS feeds and other information resources to track news about individual current and prospective clients.
- I have the information I need to explain to clients how the news organization’s changing media environment can serve their needs.
- I can make a PowerPoint presentation to clients about how the news organization’s changing media environment can serve their needs.

For the newsroom, there were a total of 30 assessment statements, and 74 of the 145 newsroom employees completed the pre-training assessment. Examples of the assessment statements for the newsroom include:

- I use social networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter to find relevant and diverse sources.
- If the story requires it, I can capture audio components that might be used.
- I monitor and search public records databases to generate story ideas.

For each statement, the respondents could choose one of five responses:

1. Not applicable to my job
2. No, I don’t think it is important.
3. No, I don’t know how
4. Yes, but I could know more
5. Yes, with confidence.

Participation in the survey and, for that matter, the training opportunities, was entirely voluntary on the part of the employees. The reliability of the responses is difficult to determine, because these were self-evaluations and no skills testing was done to determine proficiency levels objectively for each respondent. The same was true for the skill levels indicated in the post-training assessment.

Seminars, hands-on workshops and one-on-one training sessions were all held at the worksite. Advertising department training took place during the staff’s normal morning meeting times. Newsroom training sessions were offered twice—once for the “day-side” staff and once for the “night-side” staff.

Findings

After five months of training by University of Minnesota educators and outside specialists, post-training assessments were administered to both newsroom and advertising department employees to gauge their levels of attained proficiency in the targeted areas. Thirty-two news department employees and 42 advertising department employees responded to the post-training assessment.

Employees’ responses to the first category of questions about use of social
and new media (a series of five questions seeking "yes-or-no" responses about respondents' use of Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, RSS feeds and alert services) displayed notable improvement on the post-training assessments. [See Figures 1 to 5]

Employees' responses on the 1 to 5 scale to the second category of questions measuring their proficiency in targeted areas were treated as equal-appearing intervals for the sake of analysis. Individuals' responses to identical questions on pre- and post-training assessments were entered as separate variables, and the mean proficiency scores for the pre-training and post-training conditions on each variable were compared, using a paired t-test for both the advertising department and the news department. Several of the variables displayed sta-
Figure 3
Pre- and Post-Training Use of Twitter

Figure 4
Pre- and Post-Training Use of RSS

Statistically significant improvements in proficiency scores.

T-test results comparing pre-training assessment scores to post-training assessment scores showed marked improvement for the ad sales staff. The advertising sales staff averaged an improvement of .45 points on the 5-point scale for the second portion of questions on the assessments. For example, statistically significant improvement (at .05 or better) was reported on the following questions:

- I can get my foot in the door to talk with ‘fringe clients’ about how we can help their business succeed.
- I can show how the media products we have will pay out for my clients.
- I use alert services and RSS feeds to stay current about the industry sector I sell.
Figure 5
Pre- and Post-Training Use of Alert Services

- I use alert services and RSS feeds to track news about current and prospective clients.
- I can make PowerPoint presentations for clients about how the newspaper can serve their needs.
- I have the information I need to consult with clients about the newspaper’s advantages over other media options.
- I have the information I need to discuss clients’ individual needs and offer them an array of options.
- I can use Excel to ‘crunch numbers’ needed to build an effective business case.
- I have the skill to present the business case for a particular client.
- I have a communication plan using social networking techniques for keeping in touch and building client relationships.
- I monitor our products for our clients’ and their competitors’ news exposure and advertisements.

The newsroom staff showed less marked, but still notable, improvement. Newsroom staff averaged an improvement of .25 points on the 5-point scale for the second portion of questions on the assessments. For example, statistically significant improvement (at .05 or better) was reported on the following questions:

- I deliver my news content appropriately across multiple platforms.
- I use social networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter to find relevant and diverse sources.
- I use social networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter to spot trends and track local events/issues.
- I monitor local databases and websites of interest to get story ideas and track issues.
- I set up RSS feeds and/or alert services to track other media for interesting story ideas that we could localize.
- I monitor and search public records databases to generate story ideas.
- I can edit audio for use in a story.
- In my work, I create must-read content for the newspaper.
- I coordinate with stakeholders in other departments to develop new products.
- I re-purpose existing materials for use in other products.
- I stay current on trends in the news industry.

Discussion

While both advertising and newsroom staff displayed improvement on the five-point response scale to the proficiency statements from the pre-training assessments to the post-training assessments, advertising staff employees showed greater improvement. Their mean improvement on the second portion of questions on the assessments was higher than that of the newsroom employees (.45 and .25, respectively). There are several possible explanations for the greater improvement among advertising employees. Advertising staff employees attended more course sessions, overall, than newsroom staff employees. Although both evening and day courses were made available to newsroom employees, the difficult and time-consuming nature of newsroom employees’ jobs may have made it hard to attend course sessions. The same factors may have contributed to the lower response rate to the post-training assessments among newsroom employees.

The most statistically significant improvements in the post-training assessments for both the advertising and news department were those that measured social media skills, usage and knowledge, which suggests that this training program was most successful at encouraging social media use and educating newspaper employees about ways in which social media and new media can be used to further both the quality of their content and their business interests.

The editor of the newspaper at the time, Thom Fladung, said that he was skeptical going into the training program but that the “program had more direct and wider impact on changing the way a bunch of journalists do their work than any training program he’s been involved with.” One impact of the newsroom training was not measured in the post-training assessment but may, in fact, be the project’s most significant contribution. As a result of the training project, newsroom leadership recognized that guidelines for the use of social media were lacking. By the end of the training, a newsroom social media policy had been written, distributed, discussed by newsroom staff and managers and, most importantly, adopted and implemented.
Summary and Conclusion

The outcome seems clear from our training efforts at this large daily newspaper: Employees generally want on-the-job training and want more of it. Analysis of the survey results supports the assertion that newspaper owners and workers need to embrace ongoing training to keep up with the expectations of their readers and their advertising clients. The new economic reality requires that the newspaper industry "adapt or die," as the often-used mantra warns. Retraining programs like the one developed under this state grant offer a way to help advertising personnel address their clients' advertising needs more effectively and for reporters and editors to better provide the news and information citizens need in their daily lives.

The hope is that this research and the training approach that was developed for the newspaper in this market might inform the important discussions newsrooms and advertising sales departments need to have regarding the re-skilling and ongoing training of their employees. As was seen, it was not only hands-on skills and grounding in the use of new technology and communications tools that was needed. In many cases, it was giving employees an opportunity to develop a conceptual framework around new ways to think about what their work entails, what their customers need and the opportunities that exist for evolving both editorial work and advertising services in light of the new digital publishing environment.

Notes


5. The articles and authors cited are not an exhaustive list but rather representative of the body of literature available.


8. See Joyce Y. M. Nip, "Exploring the Second Phase of Public Journalism," *Journalism Studies*
7, no. 2 (April 2006): 212-236; King, “The Role of Journalism History, and the Academy, in the Development of Core Knowledge in Journalism Education.”


13. This example lists resources for Twitter: <http://www.journaliststoolbox.org/archive/twitter-resources/> (Aug. 11, 2010).


15. For example, AIP offered what they call “5 key programs” to California in the fall of 2010: <http://www.newspapernext.org/2010/06/api-brings-5-key-programs-to-california/> (Aug. 11, 2010)


19. Personal communication with Hansen, 2-2-11.