

Annual readership study shows good news for small papers

Did you know that 80 percent of America's newspapers have a circulation of 15,000 or less?

Did you know that there are about 8,000 community newspapers in America that fit that description?

Did you know that 86 million Americans read those community newspapers every week?

Yet if you read the "the newspaper industry is failing" stories online, in the major daily newspapers and on television, it'd be a good guess that those reporters and bloggers don't have a clue, don't care, or can't be bothered.

Those stories tend to be based on readership and advertising numbers for the major daily newspapers in America, usually the top 100, sometimes the top 250. Yes, absolutely, those are big papers, important papers. But they are not the whole story.

The National Newspaper Association, working with the research arm of the Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism is completing its fourth year of research on the readership patterns of America's community newspapers.

The early data indicates fairly consistent findings all four years:

- 81 percent of those surveyed read a local newspaper each week.
- Those readers, on average, share their paper with 2.36 additional readers.
- Community newspaper readers spend about 40 minutes with their paper.
- 73 percent read most or all of their community newspaper.
- Nearly 40 percent keep their community newspaper more than a week (shelf life).
- Three-quarters of readers read local news often to very often in their community newspaper while 53 percent say they never read local news online (only 12 percent say they read local news often to very often online).
- Of those going online for local news, 63 percent found it on the local newspaper's website, compared to 17 percent for sites such as Yahoo, MSN or Google, and 12 percent to the website of a local television station.
- 60 percent read local education (school) news somewhat to very often in their newspaper while 65 percent never read local education news online.

- Nearly half read local sports somewhat to very often in their newspaper while 70 percent never read local sports online.
- 62 percent read editorials or letters to the editor somewhat to very often in their newspaper while three quarters never read editorials or letters to the editor online.
- Three quarters of readers have read public notices in their community newspaper.
- 68 percent have never visited the website of local government.
- 47 percent say there are days they read the newspaper as much for the ads as for the news.
- 30 percent do not have Internet access in the home.
- Of those with Internet access at home, three-quarters have broadband access.

The local community newspaper is the primary source of information about the local community for 60 percent of respondents: that's four times greater than the second and third most popular sources of local news (TV/14 percent and friends and relatives/13.4 percent). Readers are 10 times more likely to get their news from their community newspaper than from the Internet (5.8 percent). Less than 5 percent say their primary local news source is radio.

Watch for additional information, charts and presentations from the survey in future issues of Publishers' Auxiliary, and on NNA's website.