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Claim: U.S. pubs falling behind world trends

By Chuck Moozakis editor-in-chief Jun 30, 2011



Sam Wagner

Photo: Mary Van Meter

U.S. publishers' increasing reluctance to invest in their print production facilities or to make changes in format or composition threatens to further widen the gap between American newspapers and their European counterparts.

So argues Sam Wagner, president of Web Offset Services, the Sarasota, Fla., consultancy.

"It's such a different world when you go across the pond," he said. "It's only an eight-hour flight, but it's so different."

Wagner, who has spent more than 50 percent of his time over the past 11 years working with Western and Northern European papers, said it's not just the culture and geography that distinguishes the two regions.

"Their culture, their cities, the infrastructure, is just much different. There's a city center, and everything is built around the center. Every little town and city is built the same way, so when it comes to distribution newspapers can be sold in newsstands and kiosks where the people are," he said.

"Europe also has much better technology supporting their cell phones and Internet. And despite these technology advances, newspapers by and large are still thriving."

Shaking up the brand

One reason for that, he said, is that European publishers are much more comfortable than their U.S. peers to shake up and reinvent their publications. Almost every major European paper, for example, is full-color. Many are printed on higher-quality stock and many are stapled or glued. Formats range from broadsheet and tabloid to Berliner with some papers sporting both broadsheet and tab pages as part of their daily editions.

At the same time, press facilities, on average, are much more automated, more technologically sophisticated and capable of churning out millions of papers each week.

Case in point: Denmark's Dansk AvisTryk, which now produces more than 6 million papers per week on a triplewide, four-tower, two-folder Koenig & Bauer AG Commander machine that has a singlewide superstructure positioned between the folders.

"The press is made in such a way that it can run as few as 5,000 copies (profitably)," Wagner, who consulted with the press' design and installation, said. "On a typical day, there are 24 to 26 makereadies, and these are makereadies that go beyond adding a new headline or a new page; we're talking switches in formats" and other attributes, he said.

Little change

Conversely, in the United States, the typical broadsheet paper is pretty much the same paper it was 40 years ago. It has more color and pages are narrower and shorter, but it's still printed on newsprint and it's still compiled in sections that tend to come apart while reading them on a train or outside on a windy day, Wagner said.

U.S. tabs, meantime, remain burdened with the stigma that they aren't serious papers. And although Gannett Co. Inc. did convert three of its U.S. papers to Berliner, only one other publisher, the Reading (Pa.) Eagle, followed suit. Finally, even as some U.S. publishers appear to be evaluating three-around press conversions that would dramatically reshape their broadsheets, nobody wants to be the first to do it, he contends.

"We seem to want to leave the broadsheet here to die; in the States nobody wants to take the chance to really shake up their product and really try to redo it, whether it's content, size or shape. Circulation is declining, page counts are declining, but people are afraid to change. To do nothing seems to be on a path to death to me. I don't want to be pessimistic, but what do they have to lose?"

Good example

Wagner, who has also worked with North American publishers including Independent Newspapers Inc. in Delaware, said U.S. newspapers should take a page from The (Toronto) Globe and Mail's redesign. The paper, which last October changed its format and design as part of going on-edition with KBA, Goss and manroland presses equipped with heatset and UV, has enjoyed increases in both circulation and advertising.

"If papers want to thrive and survive, they should use that as a guide. They did some things with quality and content. It's a package deal. You can't just do a format change or go full-color. You have to invest in content and quality and appearance," he said.

Wagner said he's currently working on projects with several publishers, including some in North America, to drastically reshape their publications in a way that would transform them into a daily news magazine.

"One of these we refer to as a 'Tmag,' for tabloid magazine, consisting of 11-inch-by-17-inch stitched sections with all pages in high-quality 4-color," he said. The concept is about four years old, he said, and has been adopted by at least one Danish publisher for the past two years.

Wagner is not naive; he concedes that European dailies, particularly those in the United Kingdom and France, are facing many of the same circulation and advertising pressures as U.S. newspapers.

"But we see publishers (overseas) producing more pages with fewer people and higher quality than here in the U.S.," he said. "Higher quality, faster deliveries at a better price. Those three components have enabled them to grow their business to where it is today.

"Here it seems most people are putting effort into putting up paywalls, but they aren't devoting as much energy or attention to reformatting or revitalizing their newspapers."

