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ENGL 7301 Project 2
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Newspaper Readership Survey

Do Readers Support Traditional Journalistic Values?

As newspaper readership shrinks, many papers assume they are losing readers to other media such as television and the Internet. Many papers have tried to become more like television, focusing on more exciting and colorful designs, shorter stories, and more entertaining content.

But others argue that trying to lure TV viewers to the newspaper is a hopeless cause and by trying to do so, papers risk offending those who do want to read a newspaper. What if instead of trying to be more like television, newspapers focused on becoming better newspapers? Perhaps readers really want to see newspapers that do a better job of writing stories and reporting the news instead of offering news summaries, shorter stories, and lifestyle and entertainment news.

Research Problem

The Middleburg Post is a midsize metropolitan newspaper with a circulation of 200,000. Its subscriber base, like that of the rest of the industry, has been shrinking over the past decade although Middleburg has grown. Papers that have not changed with the time are losing readers, but so are the papers that have. Marketing principles tell us that readers are choosing other media because those media better meet their information needs.

Having had ten to fifteen years to watch what other newspaper have been doing, the Post wonders if it might not be better to put out a paper that appeals to people who buy newspapers rather than appealing to those who don't. The paper's editors believe that moving in the direction of USA Today and similar publications will only alienate their existing customers without guaranteeing that that the paper will pick up any new ones. The editors believe that people who subscribe to newspapers do so because they appreciate the traditional strengths of newspaper. To that end, the paper has commissioned a survey to find out if people who subscribe to the newspaper differ from those who don't.

Research Question

Are newspaper subscribers more supportive of the values of traditional journalism than those who don't subscribe? The survey will try to answer this question by determining measuring the attitudes of subscribers compared to those who do not subscribe.

Hypothesis

This study will demonstrate a marked difference in subscribers' attitude toward newspapers compared to nonsubscribers. Overall, subscribers will show stronger support for traditional journalistic values and for a newspaper taking an active role as a community problem solver. In the analysis, this support will manifest a higher average score for subscriber responses than for nonsubscriber responses

Compared to nonsubscribers, subscribers will

1. show stronger support for in-depth coverage of important issues,
2. show a greater trust in the accuracy of newspaper reports,
3. demonstrate a greater faith in the professionalism of reporters and their ability to determine what stories are reported,
4. not appreciate efforts to summarize information or to supply more "soft" news (e.g., lifestyle or how-to-cope stories) at the expense of "hard" news (e.g., government or environment stories),
5. expect a newspaper to take a more active role in the community rather than passively recording events,
6. expect a newspaper to fulfill the role of adversary to the powers that be (government and business interests), and
7. see newspapers as superior to other media in gathering and reporting news.

The null hypothesis is that subscribers do not support a newspaper that adheres to traditional values any more strongly than do nonsubscribers.

METHOD

The method used to gather information in support the above hypotheses is a written survey of subscribers and nonsubscribers conducted by mail. The nonsubscribers serve as the control group. An incentive will be offered to encourage participation. Subscribers to the paper will be given a free two-month extension of their subscription for completing the survey. Nonsubscribers will be offered restaurant gift certificates. The restaurants will receive free advertising space in exchange.

SAMPLE

The paper will randomly select a group of survey subjects from its own pool of subscribers. Surveys will be mailed to 800 hundred people. A mailing-list broker will create a list of 1600 people for the nonsubscriber group. Approximately 50 percent of the people in the area subscribe to the paper, so by matching this list to subscription roles, we should be able to eliminate the half that already subscribe, thereby creating a list of 800 nonsubscribers. A 50 percent response rate will provide a sample of 400 individuals in each group and generate conclusions with a margin of error (i.e. confidence interval) of approximately 5 percent at a confidence level of 95 percent.

SURVEY

Participants will be asked to agree or disagree with a statement that supports or is in opposition to traditional journalistic values. They will be asked to indicate their response by circling a number from one to seven with one meaning “I strongly disagree,” seven meaning “I strongly agree,” and four indicating a neutral position. For example:

Statement: Investigative reporting is important job of a newspaper.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

The survey will close with a request for various demographic data. While the survey is anonymous, participants will be given the opportunity to become eligible for paid focus group by providing their contact information. The survey is not confidential; each document is tagged with a respondent ID number. At minimum, this number is needed to extend the subscriptions of participants.

ANALYSIS

Each question will generate a score of from one to seven. A high score indicates agreement; a low one, disagreement. There are two types of statements (one type supports traditional journalistic values and one opposes them). If one wanted to create an overall score to compare the responses of the two groups, one set of responses will have to be inverted so that the responses for all statements can be directly compared. For example, a response of 6—which indicates fairly strong agreement—to the statement “It is important for a newspaper to cover entertainment news” would become a 2 because traditional journalistic values would consider Hollywood gossip and movie reviews to be much less important than “hard” news. This step is not a necessity, however, as analysis will measure the differences between the two groups of respondents on a question-by-question basis.

Once the data is collected and compiled, an f-test will analyze the variance between the two groups on each question and determine whether the difference is statistically significant. The same could be done to compare various demographic subgroups within the main groups or to compare the same subgroup between the two groups if desired.

The Middleburg Gazette Newspaper Survey

(Instruction Set 1: For subscribers)

This Survey is Worth \$25!

Get the Gazette free for two months.

Complete this survey (answering all questions and returning this form in the included postage-paid envelope), and the *Gazette* will extend your subscription by eight weeks at no charge to you. This is a \$25 value.

Completing this survey also makes you eligible for participation in focus groups conducted later on. In a focus group, you will meet with group of survey participants and a discussion leader for a few hours to talk about the issues covered by this survey. You will be paid for your time if you are selected and choose to participate.

(Instruction Set 2: For nonsubscribers)

Eat Out on Us!

Complete this survey and we'll send you a \$20 gift certificate to a great local restaurant.

If you complete this survey (answering all questions and returning this form in the included postage-paid envelope), the *Post* will send you a \$20 gift certificate to one of the following restaurants of your choice: Outback Steakhouse, Chili's, or Applebee's.

Completing this survey also makes you eligible for participation in focus groups conducted later on. In a focus group, you will meet with group of survey participants and a discussion leader for a few hours to talk about the issues covered by this survey. You will be paid for your time if you are selected and choose to participate.

2004 Middleburg Gazette Readership Survey

Agree or Disagree

Please read each question carefully and circle the number that matches how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. The lower the number you circle, the more you say you disagree with the statement. The higher the number you circle, the more you say you agree with the statement. Circling 4 means you neither agree nor disagree.

1. A newspaper is a part of a community's character.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

2. A newspaper should observe and report what happens in the community without ever getting actively involved.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

3. Local television newscasts and cable news networks have made newspapers less important.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

4. The newspaper is the best overall source of news.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

5. Other media, such as the local television news, do a better job of covering events and issues in the community.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

6. A newspaper should play an active role in improving the community sponsoring community forums on important issues.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

7. Investigative reporting is the most important job of a newspaper.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

8. I enjoy reading in-depth coverage of local issues.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

9. It is not the job of the newspaper to try to solve the problems of the community, only to report them.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

10. I prefer to get news in summary form containing only the most important information with few details.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

11. I trust the newspaper to weigh the issues and decide what is important for me to know.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

12. In general, newspaper reporters are fair people who keep their personal feelings out of the stories they write.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

13. Newspapers reporters should be suspicious of legislators and other government officials.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

14. There are better ways of finding out what is going on in the community than the newspaper.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

15. It is important for a local newspaper to cover local news (examples: nearby events, local government and schools).

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

16. It is important for a local newspaper to cover national news (examples: the federal government, the U.S. economy, events in other states).

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

17. It is important for a local newspaper to cover international news (examples: international conflicts, events in other countries, the United Nations).

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

18. It is important for a local newspaper to cover local business news (examples: openings and closings, layoffs, area companies).

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

19. It is important for a local newspaper to cover sports (examples: high school, college, and pro games; box scores, hunting and fishing).

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

20. It is important for a local newspaper to cover books and the arts (examples: books reviews, gallery openings, interviews with authors and artists).

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

21. It is important for a newspaper to cover entertainment news (examples: Hollywood, celebrities, and gossip).

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

22. It is important for a local newspaper to cover recreation, travel, and leisure activities (examples: movie and music reviews, calendars of events).

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

23. Newspaper reporters could learn more if they weren't always so distrustful of people, especially those in the government.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

24. The newspaper does a good job covering issues that are important to me.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

25. The Internet has made newspapers less important.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

26. Reading is one of my favorite pastimes.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

27. The newspaper does a poor job of staying objective and covering both sides of an issue.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

28. The role of a newspaper can be said to be to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable."

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

29. The newspaper can be an important force in solving community problems.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

30. The newspaper is my most important source of news.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Agree

Please tell us a little about yourself.

Fill in the circle that describes you best.

What is your gender?

- ☐ Male ☐ Female

How old are you?

- ☐ Less than 18 ☐ 18–25
☐ 26–35 ☐ 36–45
☐ 46–55 ☐ 56–65
☐ 66–75 ☐ Older than 75

Of what race do you consider yourself?

- ☐ White/Caucasian
☐ Black/African American
☐ Indian or Alaskan Native
☐ Asian
☐ Hispanic or Latino
☐ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
☐ Other

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ☐ High school graduate
☐ Two-year/associate's degree or some college
☐ Four-year or bachelor's degree
☐ Graduate or master's degree
☐ Professional degree
 (for example, MD, JD, DDS, PharmD)

☐ Postgraduate degree or PhD

What is the combined income of the adults in your household who are working?

- ☐ Less than \$20,000
☐ \$20,000 to \$30,000
☐ \$31,000 to \$45,000
☐ \$46,000 to \$75,000
☐ More than \$75,000

This survey is confidential and you need not provide any personally identifiable information. However, if you would be willing to participate in a paid focus group, you must complete the following. The information will be used only to contact you in the event you are selected. It will not be saved nor used for any other purpose nor will it be given to anyone outside the Gazette.

Name _____ Phone number _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

E-mail _____

For completing this survey, you are entitled to a \$20 gift certificate to one of the restaurants below. Please circle your choice.

Outback Steakhouse Chili's Applebee's.

Thank you for your time. Once you have completed the survey, please return it to us in the enclosed postage-paid envelope to

Survey, Middleburg Post, PO Box 9382, Middleburg XX 12345