

Smaller-market newspapers get creative in providing staff training opportunities

Training

In an industry that prides itself on breaking the big story, newspaper executives were caught by surprise three years ago when a landmark study found that lack of training was the No. 1 source of job dissatisfaction—ahead of salary and benefits—among U.S. journalists.

The study, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International in Princeton, N.J., and funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation in Miami, highlighted serious gaps in the way newspaper employees and their bosses viewed training. Most bosses gave their companies excellent training report cards, but half of their staffers gave grades of C,

D and F. Nearly half of all staff members surveyed said they received no training.

Publishers moved quickly to provide professional development training to employees in all departments. But while large, financially flush newspaper companies had a relatively easy time identifying those opportunities, smaller-market papers struggled to balance their limited resources with the needs and desires of staff.

Enter intra-industry collaboration.

In 2002, Seattle-based Pioneer Newspapers Inc., a chain of 17 smaller-market papers in Oregon, Utah, Idaho, Montana and Washington state, partnered with Swift Newspapers Inc. in Reno and Pulitzer Inc. in St. Louis to offer three-day customized training programs at Swift's headquarters.

All programs were created with input from publishers, who were asked to identify specific areas where training was most needed. Based on publishers'

by Teddi Dineley Johnson

A photograph of a conference room. On the left, a whiteboard on a stand is positioned against a wood-paneled wall. In the center, two wooden chairs with dark red seats are visible. On the right, a grey suit jacket is draped over a chair. The floor is covered in a patterned carpet. The word "Days" is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif font across the bottom half of the image.

Days

feedback, sessions have targeted new ad representatives, reporters, circulation district sales managers, entry-level sales managers and veteran sales staff members.

"Just because we are smaller doesn't mean we don't need to be better," says Mike Gugliotto, vice president and chief operating officer at Pioneer Newspapers, which has continued the program. "So, we have to be resourceful."

Bob Scaife, NAA vice president for smaller-market newspapers, has been among the leaders on that front.

NAA's Smaller-Market Newspaper Symposiums typically cover such topics as marketing, advertising, circulation and readership, and serve dozens of employees at a time. Scaife's team delivers similar symposiums during state press association programs around the country. "I call it a mini-marketing conference," Scaife says of the one-day events.

At \$60 for Federation members and \$90 for nonmembers, registration costs are minimal. For information, go to naa.org and enter code 5516 in the Article Quick Link box at the bottom of the page.

The Atlanta-based Southern Newspaper Publishers Association also has created low-cost training programs that meet the special needs of member papers: easy to get to, of a high quality and short in duration. With a grant from the Knight Foundation, SNPA's Traveling Campus was born in late 2001. Co-branded with state press associations, the Traveling Campus has trained more than 20,000 newspaper employees from nearly 900 papers in the southeast. Eighty percent of SNPA's 420 member papers have circulations of less than 40,000.

Each Traveling Campus offers a broad range of courses over a three-day period. However, each program is designed so that no employee attends for more than one day. "There is something for everyone, in every department," says Edward VanHorn, executive director of SNPA and the SNPA Foundation, which is close to completing a \$10 million endowment campaign.

Employees can sign up for classes



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PIONEER NEWSPAPERS INC.

in basic editing, headline writing, spelling skills, ad design, marketing, customer service, subscriber retention, home delivery, single-copy sales, production and technology. Advanced courses also are offered in areas such as readership and leadership development. SNPA relies on veteran industry trainers to hone the content and deliver the programs.

"We are reaching a level of employee who does not have the opportunities that bigger newspapers have afforded to them," says Graham Kimbrough, assistant director of the SNPA Foundation.

Because employees at newspapers within 100 miles of a Traveling Campus program are invited to attend, large newspaper chains—often composed of many small papers—also take advantage of the expert advice.

In 2002, for example, when Traveling Campus first hit the road, Gannett Co. in McLean, Va., and Knight Ridder in San Jose sent 672 and 178 employees, respectively. Those attendance numbers have remained consistent through the years, VanHorn says.

On the Road Again

Attending an American Press Institute training seminar in Reston, Va., has become a rite of passage of sorts for newsroom, circulation and

advertising employees. Certificates and group photographs of smiling API grads decorate cubicle and office walls at newspaper companies throughout the country.

At smaller-market papers, however, such mementos are becoming harder to find.

"People love API seminars," says Brian Steffens, executive director of the National Newspaper Association in Columbia, Mo., which represents about 3,200 community newspapers in the United States. "But many smaller newspapers simply can't afford the day to get there, the day to get home, plus the money it takes."

Steve Buttry, director of tailored programs at API, acknowledges that high-quality professional training doesn't come cheaply. With early registration, the average price of one of the 34 residential seminars offered this year is about \$1,500 per person, or about \$1,800 without the early registration discount. But to meet the needs of an industry facing declining advertising revenue and circulation, API has broadened its offerings in recent years.

"More and more, we are hearing from newspapers and newspaper companies that they want to get several dozen employees trained in the same subject at the same time for the same cost as sending one or two employees off to one API program in Reston," Buttry says.

Tailored programming is just that. "API will tailor or customize programs...and will take the training to them," he says. The fee for tailored onsite programs varies based on the client's needs and wants, Buttry adds. "Because these are tailored, we will work within your budget and come up with a deal."

If, for example, a cluster of small newspapers in Michigan requests training for circulation district sales managers, API will hold a regional workshop in a location convenient to all participants. If the training is for a cluster of newspapers, and one of the papers has a facility that can accommodate it, publishers can save on the cost of an outside meeting room.

For a typical one-day tailored program, consisting of five sessions, the fee is about \$7,500. Buttry says API hopes to eventually subsidize its tailored programs through endowments.

The Inland Press Association, a newspaper training and research organization in Des Plaines, Ill., is another place to find affordable professional development opportunities. Inland, which has about 870 members, is known for crafting training programs where gaps exist.

In August, for example, the association will offer human resources training for newspaper employees, as well as a compensation-planning workshop to help managers set wages fairly and judiciously, a co-op advertising workshop, and a family owners workshop—an exclusive annual reunion for family owners of newspaper companies.

Inland keeps its costs low by subsidizing training programs through

its foundation. Programs generally cost \$150 per day, per participant, and run from one to four days, says Inland Executive Director Ray Carlsen. Nonmembers pay a slightly higher rate. Each year, almost 1,500 people take advantage of Inland training, much of it at hotels near Chicago's O'Hare International Airport.

Digital Training

As the media landscape shifts and competition swells, publishers and editors are gazing into cyberspace for answers to training needs. News University, a free online learning portal launched in April, is among the latest solutions.

Supported by a \$2.8 million grant from the Knight Foundation and operated by The Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, News University provides interactive e-learning programs to reporters, journalism students and educators. Within a mere minute of

clicking on newsu.org, users can register, enroll and begin working through courses such as "Lousy Listeners: How to Avoid Being One," "Beat Basics and Beyond," or "Math for Journalists."

As of June 1, 19 courses were available free of charge, and more than 4,500 people had registered for classes, says Howard Finberg, director of interactive learning at The Poynter Institute and the unofficial dean of NewsU.

Other online offerings include faculty-moderated seminars that can be accessed at the users' convenience and live e-seminars broadcast over the Internet. Classes take about one to two hours to complete, and grades are not given.

"It's all about getting smarter," Finberg says. "It's not about a grade, not about an application, not about a certificate. It's about learning and, ideally, the kind of learning that's important to your job."

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NewsU's existence and philosophy, Finberg adds. To develop the e-learning modules, Poynter tapped the knowledge and expertise of such partners as the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Asian American Journalists Association, the National Association of Black Journalists, the Society of Environmental Journalists, the Association of Health Care Journalists and the American Copy Editors Society, among others.

Online training is not altogether new to the newspaper industry, though. Since 2002, NAA in Vienna, Va., has "enrolled" members and nonmembers in Newspaper University, naauniversity.org, the Association's anytime, anywhere e-learning portal that brings online training to budget-conscious newspapers.

Now featuring more than 2,000 courses, Newspaper University is comparable to the comprehensive Intranet training sites of large newspaper chains.

Newspaper University's 11 "Learning Centers" offer classes in most every discipline—advertising, circulation, marketing, newsroom training, finance and accounting, human resources, information technology, production and online publishing. Prices range from \$15 to \$250 per person, per course, or \$30 on average, says Ken Columbia, NAA director of industry staff development. NAA members receive a 20 percent discount.

Through Newspaper University's live, one-hour Webinars, managers can train an entire department during lunch hour in the comfort of a conference room. As with all Newspaper University courses, the Webinars are affordable, Columbia says—as low as \$99 for Federation members—and topics cut across all disciplines.

For employees who missed the original presentation, each Webinar can be purchased on CD-ROM or accessed through a "Play-On-Demand" feature that allows managers to stuff the conference room with staff members and replay a particular Webinar as many times as they want



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— HOWARD FINBERG, NEWSU

during a one-day viewing period.

"Our primary market is small newspapers," Columbia says. "We're inexpensive and...you don't have to lose staff members for a day or two. They can sit at their desks for an hour and complete a course without having to go anywhere."

Measuring ROI

In its 2004 "State of the Industry Report," the American Society for Training & Development in Alexandria, Va., said U.S. organizations continue to maintain their investment in employee learning. But the return on investment is hard to measure, and ASTD devotes sizable resources to teaching skill-building exercises in ROI evaluation.

The good news: Cognizant of the need to justify training expenditures, newspaper industry trainers and executives are discovering new ways to measure training ROI. At The Daily Herald in Provo, Utah, for example, President and Publisher Albert J. Manzi sees a spike in revenue each time

he brings in a sales trainer for an intensive week with inside classified ad reps.

"The first time we trained these people on a weeklong basis, our revenue rose by \$5,000 the first week," he says. "And without fail, we have seen revenue growth every time we bring in a sales trainer."

Because of the training and the culture cultivated in Provo, sales reps quickly begin to realize the revenue potential of selling the Web and other special programs. "As a result, our classified and Web revenue have continued to grow substantially over the last two years," Manzi says.

API's Buttry says newsroom trainers can measure ROI by counting the number of words in leads. In workshops, Buttry stresses the importance of writing short, well-focused leads. "That's something you can measure."

More importantly, VanHorn says, good training should not be viewed as an expense but as an investment. "You get every dime of the money you spend for training back, and more," he says.

Despite the benefits, many managers remain reluctant to send employees to training for fear they will be recruited by another newspaper. "Some managers are loath to send anyone to training because they think there is a lot of poaching at conferences," VanHorn says. "But a well-trained manager should understand that productivity on the job depends on good training."

Adds Buttry, "If somebody takes advantage of your training to go off to a bigger newspaper, they are going to go off to that bigger newspaper with good feelings for your paper because of the opportunities you provided. Some of those folks will leave anyway, but the people who stay will do a better job of serving your readers and are more likely to stay if they feel they can develop.

"That old notion that we will lose people if we send them off to training is backwards," he says. "We are more likely to lose them if we don't train." □

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