

Pro sports, every single league, from the NFL to NBA to MLB to MLS to NHL need newspapers. This need exists because of what internet sports reporting has become, and how LOCAL team fans have evolved to use the net.

There is no shortage of coverage of professional sports on the webs. There is a long list of sites, large and small that provide the same "sports site essentials". Scores, news, columnists/blogs, rumors, stats, video interviews and highlights, standings and discussion forums, with a focus on the "outrage of the day". Then of course there are the league websites that provide much of the same in a sanctioned and sanitized version. In essence, the home pages of these network sites have become exactly what the 6pm CBS Network News was. A compendium of what the editors think are the major stories of the day. Just as reporters were assigned by CBS to cover "whats important", the sites assign columnists to cover "whats important". Unfortunately 'whats important' means we are condemned to T.O., Sean Avery and Stephan Marbury's contract status all the time. Of course the net has the advantage of unlimited shelf space for each team, but the reality is that individual team or player coverage is nothing more than aggregation of other sources and stats unless something they consider newsworthy happens.

Bottom line is that despite the huge volume of sports coverage, the local coverage of teams for the most part sucks. There is little depth and certainly not the consistent coverage of a newspaper with a team beatwriter or 2. Thats a bad scenario for sports leagues. Teams in every league need as much local coverage as we can get. The more stories that are written by sportswriters and columnists, the more opportunities for fans to connect and stay connected to our teams.

The natural response of course is to write more on the team website and to create and support local bloggers who write about your team. Which is exactly what most teams do. The mavs have mavs.com, mavswiki.com, friends.mavs.com and we support a variety of different blogs. We have internet and mobile editions and are expanding all the above. The reality however, is that if you count the entire universe of LOCAL Mavs fans that go to these sites, they are a fraction of people who read about the Mavs in the Dallas Morning News and the Ft Worth Star Telegram print editions.

More importantly, those fans that go to the national sports sites, the local team website and blogs are our customers and hard core fans. While we will do everything possible to keep them happy, they are easy to reach. The newspapers reach our hardest to connect to customers, the casual fan.

I'm a fan of the Dallas Stars, the Cowboys, Rangers and the Burn. I have never been to the website of any of them. I get my scores and AP summary for my favorite teams on My Yahoo page. Any timely or topical information I get from the Newspaper. Its just easier for me to pick up the sports page and see at least something about each team.

The Dallas papers have about 500k unique print readers every day. Figure about 70pct read the sports page on any given day. Those 350k users are more than the daily unique local users of most if not all teams in our market. More importantly, from a business perspective, because their customer base skews older, they dont use the net as a primary source of data, they have more disposable income to buy tickets and merchandise for themselves, their businesses and their families. In other words, their customers pay our bills.

The problem of course is that newspapers are pushing themselves to the point of irrelevancy. They have cost structures that dont support the business they think they are in. They don't have a vision on what a profitable future might look like. They are getting crushed by disappearing advertising revenues. They are doing what anyone in their position would do, they are cutting every penny they can and praying for divine intervention. Professional Sports Leagues and teams, if we want to continue to connect to our local casual sports fan, needs to work with our local papers to try to keep them alive as long as possible.

The question is how ?

In the technology business, when a company wants its retail products to get visibility and sales among shoppers, its not unusual for the vendor to pay for a salesrep to be on the retailers salesfloor exclusively selling and promoting their products. When a vendor wants to get shelf space in other retail environments, it buys endcaps. Often through softmoney which are in the form of rebates to the retailer. Its time for the pro sports leagues to take a page from that playbook and expand our newspaper shelfspace.

My suggestion to the powers that be in the leagues I have spoken to is to have the leagues work together and create a "beatwriter co-operative". We need to create a company that funds, depending on the size of the market and number of teams, 2 or more writers per market, to cover our teams in depth. The writers would cover multiple teams and multiple sports. They will report to the newspapers where the articles will be placed, who will have complete editorial control. In exchange, the newspapers will provide a minimum of a full page on a daily basis in season, and some lesser amount out of season. That the coverage will include game reporting that is of far more depth than is currently in place, along with a minimum number of feature articles each week in and out of season. And most importantly, these articles will be exclusive to print subscribers. They can do all the ad supported short summaries online and minute by minute blog posts and tweets they would like. To make this work, print editions and subscriber only online sites have to become the defacto destinations for in depth and unique coverage. They have to become the local version of ESPN.com's for pay "ESPN Insider"

Buying anything more than small ads in papers to promote price promotions for the Mavs has not worked for us. I would far rather subsidize in depth coverage of the Mavs, even without any editorial control then spend more money on advertising. Im a firm believer that there is a foundation of readers who use the sports pages as their primary source of local team information. That number may not be as big as it used to be, nor will it be as big in the future. Thats ok. The numbers may not make the newspaper shareholders happy, but they are of sufficient numbers to have an impact on the local sports market.

Taking a cooperative approach could create a win win for leagues, teams and newspapers. Letting the newspapers go belly up and depending on our own websites, blogs, newspaper websites and national sports websites to communicate with our fans, in particular our casual fans, IMHO, is a recipe for disaster. The cost to reach those fans in a newspaperless world over the next 5 to 7 years will cost us far more than working with newspapers today to try to help them.

The math is pretty simple and straight forward. If there are 32 top markets, with an average of 3 teams, thats 96 teams. If you need an average of 3 writers per market, thats about 100 writers. Pay them 65k per year, plus 10k in benefits, and thats 75k per team per year. Index that by market size and team revenues, and that means the biggest market teams probably pay 150k per year, and the smallest markets pay 50k per team per year. Thats not far out of line with what you would pay to get an experienced sportswriter for your website, with a lot more payoff. For the newspapers, its a way to get employees off the books, retain good writers that have a history with the papers and teams, and actually improve their publications. For the price of 2 pages of newsprint a day.

I know this is in violation of all previous principles of editorial church and state, but then again, watching papers going out of business and not even being able to give themselves away means its time to start a new branch of that church. Having the world of professional sports realize the value of locally created content, available in an offline format, might just be a proactive step that saves us a lot of money in the long run

At worst, its a starting point for discussion

Let me also add, that with the recession and the downturn in advertising for the online marketplace, while not nearly as bad as the newspaper business, the online sports marketplace is starting to have its challenges as well. Traffic, particularly domestic traffic is not really growing for traditional sports sites. Advertising for all but the biggest sites are falling. The same problems that are trashing newspaper profitability are creeping up on websites. To have any dependency on independent websites for coverage of our leagues and teams, could turn into a big problem for us if the blogs and websites we think help us, disappear.

The leagues and teams depend on quantity and quality of coverage. We need to recognize the weaknesses of those we depend on and start addressing them today

Update: If you are interested in the newspaper publishing business, [this is the most interesting article I have found so far.](#)