



How New York Times vet Denise Warren is trying to modernize Tribune Publishing

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Few media companies could be in more dire need of a turnaround than Tribune Publishing.

The company's 11 metro and regional papers include some of the industry's most storied brands, including the Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune and Baltimore Sun. But newspapers are in free fall, and metro papers even more so. In the third quarter, Tribune's advertising revenue excluding acquisitions fell 9.6 percent year over year. And like other newspaper companies that have recently been spun off from their more lucrative broadcast and digital corporate siblings, Tribune Publishing under Jack Griffin's leadership has to make its case on its own in an unforgiving public market.

Scale is the cornerstone to modern publishing. In the case of a sprawling newspaper company serving diverse markets, the trick is to bring efficiencies to the operation while preserving papers' local distinction. Figuring that out falls to Denise Warren, who as a 26-year vet of The New York Times helped build its paid subscription strategy. In her

first extensive interview since starting in May, Warren — who is digital president as well as CEO of the East Coast papers — talked about how she’s trying to transform the company.

Pushing paid

Tribune Publishing has 81,000 digital-only subscribers, up 37 percent year over year — which sounds impressive, but it’s less than 0.2 percent of Tribune’s overall digital audience, which is less than papers of comparable sizes. “We know we can do a lot better,” Warren said.

Part of the reason was the failure of the company’s past paid model, where sites sold premium content. But it was confusing to readers, especially when they’d land on a site from a side door and didn’t have any context for what made a piece of content “premium.” A metered approach, on the other hand, Warren said, “enables the user to decide what’s important to them; it really puts the power in users’ hands.”

So Tribune plans to roll out metered paywalls across the company next year. Unlike at the Times, Warren has to figure out how to tailor the offer to multiple markets. Tribune also hasn’t done a good job getting print subscribers to authenticate their digital access: only 40 percent do, compared to some 90 percent at the Times, according to Warren. Promoting that ability will be important, as the more products people use, the more likely they’ll be to renew.



Elevating technology

Tribune’s sites all use the same digital CMS, but it isn’t built for the modern newsroom’s need for speed and editorial flexibility. The CMS also needs to work equally well for the company’s big metros and regional papers, some of which require specific features, like the L.A. Times does for its entertainment coverage. Overhauling it falls to Rajiv Pant, former CTO at the Times and Tribune’s first chief product, technology and user experience officer. His goal is to tailor the

CMS to meet different use cases, like the reporter who's trying to file a story quickly and an editor who needs to use more functions, such as adding tags. At the L.A. Times, for example, "there are a lot of rich features, but a lot of people using them on a daily basis didn't need them or didn't need them all the time," he said. Beyond catching up, he also wants to make the CMS easily accessible on mobile devices. "I don't know of any large, mainstream company that does that well," he said.

Getting efficient

To keep costs down, Tribune Publishing has to spread the cost of services across its papers. Warren is centralizing functions like audience development, digital strategy and business development that can work across the papers while leaving locally driven functions like editorial direction and paid subscription execution to each market. The future CMS will be designed to facilitate articles to be shared across papers, but she stressed that content-sharing wouldn't be mandated or with an eye to cutting staff (concern about that would be understandable, given the state of the business; cuts are already underway at the company through a recently announced buyout).

"Nobody's going to know [the markets] better than the editor of a particular paper, so I want to leave the customer-facing opportunity in the local market but support it with centralized infrastructure," she said.

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Putting mobile first

Like nearly all publishers, Tribune's digital audience, at 49 million monthly uniques in October, is growing faster on mobile than on desktop, with more than half now coming to the papers on mobile devices. Now the organization has to catch up in its thinking.

Warren is trying to instill a mobile-first culture, through hiring execs with a mobile track record, making the CMS mobile-friendly and emphasizing mobile, not desktop, in new product development. "If we're going to talk about a product redesign, I want to see the mobile version first," she said.

Distributing on platforms

Publishing today requires reaching the audience where it is. But publishers have to weigh the benefits of distributing off platforms with the need to get readers back to their own sites, where they can control their brand experience and better monetize readers through advertising and in Tribune's case, paid subscriptions. Given those concerns and the importance of digital subscriptions to its future, Tribune has taken a measured approach. When the Apple News app came out, for example, Tribune got on board but decided to limit its distribution, to 10 articles a month. Tribune also has not joined the publisher stampede to get on Snapchat, whose young audience isn't the core newspaper reader. Users often don't recognize the publisher brand on platforms because it's not well identified, Warren said. "But," she said, "we can't operate in a walled garden."

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‘We’re not afraid of emoji’: How the New Yorker speaks Snapchat

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In adapting its brand to Snapchat, not even the 91-year-old New Yorker is above using an emoji here and there.

Since launching its Snapchat efforts a year ago, The New Yorker has experimented with how to most effectively bring its brand, values and overall aesthetic to the messaging app. On paper, it feels like an odd pairing. Where The New Yorker’s stodgy print brand has been built on long reported pieces and literary criticism, Snapchat is all about quick content consumption, video rather than text, and, yes, emojis.

But The New Yorker’s approach to Snapchat has been to focus less on where its brand doesn’t fit and more on where it does. This means focusing heavily on the brand’s visual elements, such as its cover, cartoons and the people behind the bylines, said Nick Thompson, editor of NewYorker.com.

“We’re not going to be telling a 20,000-word story on Snapchat, but the same things that inform those stories will inform how we approach that platform,” he said. “We’re trying to take what’s essential to our brand and bring it there.”

At the same time, the magazine isn’t shying away from speaking the language of Snapchat itself. In adapting to the Web, The New Yorker has had to tweak its formula for the reading habits of online readers (<http://digiday.com/publishers/new-yorker-digital->

strategy/). It's taking a same all-in approach to Snapchat, where it regularly uses emojis and many of the platforms other visual elements and features. "We're not afraid of emoji," said Thompson. "But we haven't worked out our emoji policy with the copy editors. We're looking forward to that conversation."

The New Yorker has already made headway when it comes to attracting younger readers. Millennials make up 42 percent of the magazine's online audience, up from 36 percent a year ago. NewYorker.com reached 11.4 million unique readers in January, up 30 percent from the year before. (All data according to comScore.)

The New Yorker: Cover Story



The New Yorker, while not a Snapchat Discover publisher, has still made a concerted effort to create consistent programming on the platform. Much of its Snapchat strategy is built around giving Snapchat followers a look at what goes on behind the scenes at the magazine and website.

Each week, usually on Monday or Tuesday, cover editor Françoise Mouly reveals the next issue's cover, along with background details about the cover's inspiration and creation. On Wednesdays, cartoons assistant Colin Stokes quizzes New Yorker cartoonists on their work. He's also helped bring The New Yorker cartoon caption contents to Snapchat, which the magazine uses to both solicit captions and announce contest winners.

NewYorker.com film critic Richard Brody makes his appearance on Friday to offer his Snapchat-sized movie reviews, which he gives as he walks around The New Yorker's office.

Thompson wouldn't detail exactly how successful the brand has been in growing its audience on Snapchat, though he did say that the magazine's follower count "is increasing at a solid rate" over the last year.

Like fellow legacy media brands including CNN and The Wall Street Journal, The New Yorker sees Snapchat as a viable way to not only reach a young audience that hasn't been exposed to its brand but also as another place to experiment in applying its brand to new platforms. Where that experimentation ultimately goes is still not clear, though. Snapchat has yet to let non-Discover publishers monetize their Snapchat stories. And the audience journey from New Yorker Snapchat follower to New Yorker magazine subscriber still feels more theoretical than real.

But those kinds of open questions, which are common among publishers embracing new platforms, should not prevent publishers from trying new things, said Nick Cicero, CEO of Snapchat creator network Delmondo.

"Marketing in tech today, even if you're a publisher, is all about experimentation. The people willing to experiment with new tech and platforms and taking small risks are going to see those bets paid off more than not," he said.