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L.A. Times Ripe for Some Advice on Reaching Local Readers

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MEMO

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Subject: Humble Ideas to Help the Los Angeles Times Succeed

Hello, Mr. Hartenstein. I want to congratulate you on your new job as publisher of the Los Angeles Times.

Many disagree on the congratulations part, believing that you have just volunteered to be captain of a newspaper Titanic. They are wrong. Despite all the cutbacks, the Los Angeles Times is still the most powerful institution in Southern California. You still have the largest newsroom in the western half of the United States, a monopoly on comprehensive regional print news, spectacular editors and reporters, and a hugely diverse population base. These chief assets can be leveraged.

As a longtime daily reader of the Times, I and hundreds of thousands of others want you to succeed. Southern California readers feel like collective investors in the enterprise and are "pulling in the same direction." We all want information relevant to where we live and supplied in a quick and convenient way. At its most fundamental, we all need and want information that we can use for our self-interests (e.g., How can I make more money? How can I protect my loved ones? How can I function better in my profession?). The availability of other news sources and platforms (e.g., TV, Internet, specialty publications, radio) has split our attention.

More competition has created challenges – and opportunities. You can hold and attract readers if your team creates compelling incentives.

For example, use technology to help readers save money. On the most basic consumer level, the Times provides value by supplying hard-copy coupons in the paper that individuals can take to local stores to buy products and services at less expense.

Why not create systems where subscribers can go online at LATimes.com and download such coupons? It beats mangling the print newspaper each day with scissors! More businesses will see the financial upside of advertising in print and online, as they can attract more customers with discount deals on things like groceries, clothes for the kids, tickets to entertainment events, and family dining. All your sales and marketing representatives need to do is remind Angelenos that the weekly value of their coupons exceed by far the \$5.80 weekly subscription fee of your paper.

You can also use technology to make the news accessible to your diverse audience, approximately 10 million residents in Los Angeles County alone, over 10 times the number of your current 774,000 daily circulation. The reality is that for a high proportion of families in the region, their preferred language is something other than English, the only language offered by the Times. Where is the customer service? Make the product accessible to them. If you could figure out a way to deliver TV signals using innovative digital technologies and satellites, surely you can find a way to develop a multiple-language translation system where the newspaper could be available, for instance, online in Spanish, Chinese, Hindi and Russian. Just imagine the size of that untapped market.

Different world

There is little you can do about the splintering audience. The world has changed, and it will never go back. People have a multitude of news platforms and outlets. However, these other mediums rarely have the level of talent of the Times' editorial staff, among the best in the nation, and certainly the best at covering Southern California issues. Leverage that intellectual capital by forming more strategic partnerships with outlets like Google, wire services, newspaper chains, TV networks and Yahoo.

The paper needs to let go of the lone-soldier mentality and accept that it is *a* resource, not *the* resource. I need business news, for example, and would starve if I relied solely on your

paper's business section, which, although still solid, is showing serious signs of anorexia. As do many others, I survive by complementing my diet with regular portions from other resources like LA Biz Observed and the Los Angeles Business Journal. Like good reporters, we consult multiple sources.

To become a more attractive resource, make the paper more fun. In a busy, multitasking world, many of us often prefer generalities versus specificity, summaries versus in-depth. Or at least we want to be able to choose one or the other on a case-by-case basis. Despite the growth of online sources, if you want the full scope of the world's news, nothing can equal setting aside one hour each morning to lay the Los Angeles Times on your desk and turn every page of the print edition. There is no way to get such a quick overview of all the news by going to your Web site, no matter how maniacally one repeatedly clicks their mouse.

The paper must accept human nature. I have little doubt that more people read your stories about former presidential candidate John Edwards' extramarital affair than your stories about the Russia-Georgia warfare. Readers like sex, sports and assorted gossip – or at minimum, they want a paper that offers good-sized doses of both world affairs and entertainment.

These are just some humble ideas and thoughts that came to mind. I am copying Mr. Zell on this e-mail to keep him in the loop. Your team can find more incentives to draw more revenue generators. Mr. Hartenstein, I am confident that you can. You have shown that you are an "out-of-the-box" thinker, literally thinking outside the traditional electronic box that most people see next to their TV at home. Now you and your team need to think "outside of the dish."

As you start your second week of work, rest assured that a large multitude of Angelenos is with you pulling in the same direction. We all want the Los Angeles Times to remain our primary educator, watchdog, source of truth and common link.

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Note: This essay was honored at the Los Angeles Press Club's 51st Annual Southern California Journalism Awards ceremony in June 2009 with the second place award in the commentary category for daily/weekly newspapers under 100,000 circulation.