

LA Weekly at Age 40 and a Crossroads: Will This Media Vehicle Transform and Keep Covering Los Angeles?



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By Calvin Naito

The future of LA Weekly—the only remaining general print media publication serving the metropolitan LA area, aside from the Los Angeles Times—is uncertain.

LA Weekly is a long-standing treasure to the people who live in the Los Angeles area, a cultural organ with a heritage of presenting alternative stories and views, a valuable contrast to the more conservative and conventional Los Angeles Times. Yet the alt weekly seems to be getting thinner with every passing month.

December 2018 marks 40 years since LA Weekly was founded in 1978. November marked one-year since the paper was officially sold to the Semanal Media Group.

As the paper passes these milestones, it is at a crossroads: There are massive changes in the marketplace, allegations of corruption and mismanagement against some of the co-owners, internal dissent and power struggles, and external competition.

Will this media vehicle be able to transform itself and keep covering LA?

Alt weeklies are having a difficult time surviving in an ever-changing media landscape. We saw a dramatic example of this in August when New York's Village Voice alt weekly announced that it was ceasing publication.

The paper is under stress internally and externally. One of its ten co-owners filed a lawsuit in August alleging a management breach of fiduciary duties, unaccountable finances (e.g., the diversion and misappropriation of funds), as well as breach of contract—and is seeking a dissolution of the corporate entity governing the paper. The lawsuit and multiple media articles have described high staff turnover and internal dissent. A former LA Weekly writer, who initiated a protest movement against the new owners, is planning to launch a competing publication.

What changes to its business model might LA Weekly consider in order to survive and prosper?

Following are some options to consider.

Expand the subject areas covered. Presently, the paper provides a good amount of coverage to local hard news, entertainment, food and dining, and arts and culture. How about broadening out the coverage to also include local sports, books and literature, and personal relationships (e.g., love, dating, sex, and family)? The paper can also ensure that the subject areas include more intercontinental angles, since many Angelenos have ties that cross U.S. borders.

Create new page forums. This can include an op-ed page (e.g., one essay or two opposing essays on the same subject), a regular gossip column, a sightings forum (i.e., of celebrities and other notable individuals seen at places in LA), a more robust and inclusive calendar page, and a fun photos of the week forum (composed of selected reader submissions).

Utilize a larger pool of content producers. In addition to the staff editors and reporters, add columnists, more free lancers, guest writers (e.g., solicit celebrities), wire service stories (e.g., City News Service, Associated Press, Bloomberg), syndicated writers, and students (e.g., high school and college). These content producers can be utilized for the expanded subject areas and new page forums mentioned above.

Enhance the special items. Continue the annual "People" issue and the cannabis "Roll-Up 420 Guide," but also have more "best of" award competitions. LA Weekly could also conduct periodic public opinion polls on issues facing the community and create fun online contests with prizes to engage a larger LA audience.

Go beyond the flagship print platform into multimedia. Create a more dynamic and user-friendly website, expand the social media activity to be more immediate and two-way communication, and make the content more accessible via mobile devices (e.g., smartphones). LA Weekly can also create a multimedia studio (e.g., video, audio) to record and distribute media interviews and event coverage to diverse audiences. As part of this, the paper can produce TV/video shows in which hosts travel across the city to visit, interview, and highlight community issues, people, restaurants, and events.

Host events at a new office location. The paper should relocate from its downtown 724 S. Spring Street location to a more ideal site with heavy foot traffic, a ground floor café with a public speaking area, and easy parking. Grand Central Market meets these criteria, but there are other candidate locations (e.g., buildings close to Grand Central Market, the downtown Arts District, Hollywood & Highland, Hollywood & Vine, Larchmont Village). LA Weekly could host regular receptions and Q&A interviews with notable individuals at the new office building's public speaking area in the ground floor café on any of the expanded subject areas mentioned earlier.

Expand revenue streams. The list of potential changes mentioned above would multiply LA Weekly's forums, platforms, events, content, and audience engagement, and thereby create corresponding expanded revenue opportunities from sponsorships, print and

multimedia advertising (including expanding the range of advertising beyond the mainstay cannabis and adult entertainment categories), and merchandising (e.g., selling LA Weekly T-shirts, coffee cups, bobble head dolls, and other fun stuff, which would also benefit the paper's marketing and branding efforts).

LA Weekly must dramatically change its business model in order to survive and prosper. I have offered some options here. Other LA Weekly readers should also offer their ideas to the paper's staff. Individuals with resources should consider offering them with their business plans on how they might make the paper more influential and sustainable.

As LA Weekly hits age 40, it is at a critical crossroads that affects all individuals in vast and diverse LA who value it as a valuable cultural organ.

We as a community must work collectively to ensure that LA Weekly will be able to continue to travel across our vast and diverse city along alternative paved and unpaved roads to enlighten and entertain all of us in 2019 and beyond.

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