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ON THE MEDIA; How to tap the tween readers

JAMES RAINEY. *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Dec 16, 2009. pg. D.1

Abstract (Summary)

The grand debate over how to save journalism has pondered many big solutions, such as making consumers pay for online news, strong-arming aggregators like Google into sharing ad revenue with newspapers and funding public-interest reporting with charitable donations, big and small. [...] Zoe Jacobson, 14, writes book reviews, while sister Sophie, 11, likes to straighten her dad out about language -- this week e-mailing Jacobson to protest that a story about a disabled person did not adequately define "quadriplegic."

Full Text (1039 words)

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The grand debate over how to save journalism has pondered many big solutions, such as making consumers pay for online news, strong-arming aggregators like Google into sharing ad revenue with newspapers and funding public-interest reporting with charitable donations, big and small.

Legions of commentators and bloggers have raged. Innumerable conferences have been convened. And a select few have taken action -- creating vehicles that promise to reach new audiences while making some money along the way.

One such upstart is Alan Jacobson, a veteran newspaper-design consultant who has created TweenTribune.com to bring news to pre-adolescents, provide teachers with a new classroom tool and help advertisers reach a market worth billions of dollars.

In the couple of months since he has been pitching the website in earnest, Jacobson has gained a foothold and seen his traffic grow several-fold. He's using educators as his marketing and editing force and even has gotten a few publishers in the innovation-phobic newspaper industry to play along.

Jacobson and his Norfolk, Va.-based website will not save journalism. He won't recapture the billions in ad revenue lost by newspapers over the last several years. But his ebullient innovation opens a door for an underserved audience and provides the kind of incremental revenue that, strand by strand, eventually just might rope journalism back to a financial mooring.

Jacobson, 54, has been helping newspapers redesign and plot ad strategies for more than three decades. He has watched with increasing alarm as the rush of readers and advertisers to the Internet threatened the underpinnings of the print industry.

After reaching a high of \$49.4 billion in 2005, newspaper ad revenue will shrink this year to around \$28 billion, San Francisco-based analyst Alan Mutter has projected.

When Jacobson convened a meeting last March in Washington, D.C., with representatives of most of the top newspaper companies, a certain urgency gripped those brainstorming new advertising forms. Ideas from the group, called RevenueTwoPointZero, led to several online prototypes. But the innovations that had the news people so excited nine months ago died of inattention or inertia. "Technology is not the barrier at newspapers," Jacobson told me this week. "It's just the culture that is not receptive. I have been beating the drum for years, and nobody has been listening."

So Jacobson, advisor to news outlets, set out to build an outlet of his own. He knew as the parent of two girls that

newspapers as a whole did not hold a lot of appeal for young people. But they did contain content that even pre-adolescents enjoyed.

Jacobson envisioned TweenTribune as that bridge -- gathering the kind of content from Associated Press that would inspire lunch table or computer lab chatter. Young people would be encouraged not only to read the news but also to talk back.

Among the top stories on the site Tuesday: the lawsuit by a Brazilian university student expelled for wearing a short skirt and a feature on "making your holiday eating ho-ho-healthy."

Stories drawing the most comments include a piece on a Salt Lake City woman who has been happier since losing her record-length fingernails and a story about President Obama's hope to increase school hours for students. (One outraged TweenTribune reader, nicknamed Chicken Nugget, responded: "I would have not told everyone to vote for him if I knew he was going to do this.")

Said Jacobson: "You are not going to hook a 9-year-old on reading a newspaper every day, but you could hook them on this."

Now Zoe Jacobson, 14, writes book reviews, while sister Sophie, 11, likes to straighten her dad out about language -- this week e-mailing Jacobson to protest that a story about a disabled person did not adequately define "quadriplegic."

Jacobson may have found the magic promotional bullet by bringing in teachers, whom he contacts via e-mails culled from the Internet.

Teachers said they like the fact that violent and racy content has been edited out. And TweenTribune encourages kids to comment -- responses that teachers must OK before they go on the site.

Jeff Greene, who runs the computer lab at Petoskey Middle School in a Michigan town of the same name, said his sixth- and seventh-graders have really taken to the website. "Even for the kids with a short attention span, it really fires them up to use the technology and learn about something happening now, not years ago," Greene said. "They get really engaged in it."

Karen Ivy, a fourth-grade teacher at the private Curtis School in Bel-Air, said that she sees "a lot of potential" in TweenTribune and that her students "like the idea somebody is interested in them."

From a trickle of users at the start, Jacobson said his site has now logged a total of 500,000 page views. That's still a fraction of what big news sites draw, but he believes that he has just begun to nick the surface of a mass market and called the growth "pretty extraordinary."

A handful of newspapers have signed on as partners, posting TweenTribune content on their websites and adding local stories to the national and international mix. They can also sell advertising to businesses with a niche in the youth market.

As the site grows and builds its audience, Jacobson believes more newspapers will pay to subscribe and easily recoup their investment in increased ad revenue. Schools in other countries, particularly Britain, have expressed an interest in the site, and Jacobson believes they might pay to give teachers access to the editing and oversight function (a service that's currently free).

Sandy Sanders, publisher of Valdosta Daily Times, brought TweenTribune to his Georgia newspaper's website and found local businesses willing to sponsor the child-friendly content.

The \$18,000 in new revenue this year won't change the fate of the 17,000-circulation paper, but it's a small shot in the arm in a challenged industry.

With the news business swooning from an overdose of seminars, conferences and essays about the future, a series of those small booster shots could go a long way to revive the patient.

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[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: READ ALL ABOUT IT: In a matter of months, Alan Jacobson's website has gone from a trickle of users to more than 500,000 page views, growth he calls "pretty extraordinary."; PHOTOGRAPHER: TweenTribune.com

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