

Editors pressed on production

Believe it or not, newsroom types actually can help in choosing printing technologies

A LONGTIME NEWSPAPER observer once espoused a rather cynical view about editors and their knowledge of printing technologies: "Editors find it hard to change the ball cock in a toilet, let alone understand how a printing press works."

I remember that observation every time I read another story about newspapers purchasing new printing presses or expanding their printing plants. There has been a rash of these announcements lately. Many include sentences like this: "The newspaper formed a press-selection committee that consisted of numerous executives, including the publisher, production manager, and several pressmen."

Who was there from the editorial side? Or advertising, for that matter? Based on my own experience and an informal sample of colleagues, editorial involvement in press selection is often a random occurrence.

It is time for editors to start paying more attention to what is going on in the part of their business that deals with "crushed trees and smeared ink." What I advocate — and I hear the groans already — is that editors add one more area of involvement to their many leadership obligations.

It is time to get closer to their colleagues in the newspaper's physical production plant. Editors must start paying attention to the manufacturing side of their business. If they continue to hesitate to join in the planning for production and technology investments, there will be costly oversights.

I know of one remote printing plant that was built without enough space for

additional color-printing units. Both the editor and the advertising director knew that increased color would be part of the newspaper's future. It took many millions of dollars and several years to fix a problem that might have been avoided if someone had asked: What will our newspaper look like 10 years from now?

Talking over plans for the future is the key issue: What *will* the newspaper look like in 10 to 15 years? How big? How many

pages? How much color? How local? Changes in the way we manufacture and distribute copies are coming quickly, and editors need to pay attention to the future of printing.

But with today's newspaper executives working in more cross-departmental teams, some of these editorial-advertising-production planning discussions are under way and mistakes will be avoided.

Lara Edge, managing editor of *The Knoxville (Tenn.) News-Sentinel*, told me that her company's new presses will allow color on *every* page. She recognizes that the increased color production will have a significant impact upon everything from work flow to journalistic mission.

Looking further out, printing is becoming "more digital" and more flexible. A poster child for the future of newspaper printing is *The Dallas Morning News*, with its installation of Swiss-built Wifag presses. Using this equipment, the *Morning News* will have the ability to change printing plates without stopping a press.

Our readers have been telling us for years that they want more zoning. They also want that zoning to be done for smaller

and smaller localities. Readers want news that ranges from international down to their neighborhoods. They want to know what's going on in the White House — and in the white houses on the next block.

The Wifag presses will give the *Morning News* the ability to better serve its readers — and advertisers — by increasing zoning without sacrificing its productivity positions. Increased zoning, however, ripples across an organization. It affects everything from reporting to design to the mission of what to cover. Addressing these issues early is why an editor needs to be involved in selection of technology.

The most revolutionary example of editorial-friendly technology that I think editors should watch comes from the German press maker MAN Roland. Its DICOweb press is a digital offset press that allows for the imaging, de-imaging, and re-imaging of printing cylinders. In other words, there is no printing plate to change, only a digital signal to send to the press that changes the page, much as you might send a formatted document to a desktop printer.

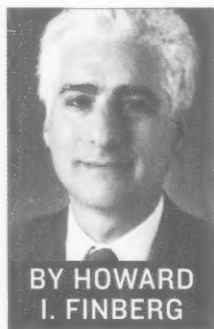
Today, the DICOweb is targeted at the commercial market, with press runs up to 30,000 copies. However, as papers develop microzoned products, the ability to instantly change what's being printed becomes an exciting opportunity. No printing plates to change means faster turnaround times for the next section — and reduced costs.

Can the era of the customized, one-off "The Daily Me" newspaper be far behind?

One answer to this question is being developed at the *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times*. The newsroom leadership has been heavily involved in long-term planning for all systems and manufacturing infrastructure. "We have cross-departmental meetings to talk about what we see down the road for additional regional editions, zoning, sectioning, color, targeted advertising needs, etc.," said Marty Petty, executive vice president. "This collaborative approach is mandatory if we want to make investments that ensure we can deliver on our journalistic and business objectives."

And that means editors need to know about everything from "on-the-fly" page changes to plateless printing — even if they still don't know how to change a ball cock. ■

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