

PROPOSALS FOR IMPROVING THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE
AND ATTRACTING YOUNGER READERS

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I

INTRODUCTION

Big. Bulky. Impersonal. Stodgy. More concerned with things than people. As much fun as drinking cod liver oil (good for you but not so easy to swallow). Nearly devoid of any flair, flamboyance, or personality. This is the way the Chicago Tribune is perceived by many, and it is not the kind of image that will insure the future of this newspaper. Without a youthful base on which to build circulation, the Tribune is lacking the vital factor needed to survive.

The situation is more a problem of perception and image rather than content. Much of the image problem perceived on the outside is mirrored by attitudes prevailing on the inside.

Simply stated, the Chicago Tribune takes itself too seriously. This is not to diminish its role as one of the nation's best newspapers. Rather, it is a suggestion that the time has come for the Chicago Tribune to slaughter, once and for all, many of its sacred cows.

It is a certain subtle and gentle irreverence for institutions and old ideas that has made our competition more attractive to younger readers. It is a willingness on the part of our competition to ~~xxx~~ step into controversy in its news pages and among its local columnists that lends it a personality lacking in the Tribune.

What we are recommending, in a general way, is a relaxation of the restraint that prohibits surprise and thought-provoking material from appearing in the Tribune. It is not a recommendation to relax or reduce in any way the standards of journalism: Strict reverence for the facts, a sense of fairness, and an attention to thoro reporting.

II

SECTION-by-SECTION ANALYSIS

GENERAL STATEMENT: America's first "television generation" has come of age. This has had a profound impact on the news business-- newspapers, TV, radio, magazines. The new reader-- younger, smarter, richer, more interested in the world-- seeks variety, completeness, background, and personality.

News-summary publications like Time, Newsweek, and the New York Times Week in Review are successful with younger readers. So are irreverent, witty newspapers of opinion and trend like Rolling Stone. Even "Establishment publications" like Car & Driver and Field & Stream snare a healthy share of young readers. All these publications present ideas-- new, fresh ideas-- to their readers. Along with new ideas, they provide the information and background necessary to help the reader enjoy life.

Young readers, in their quest for new ideas, have largely passed the Tribune by without feeling they're missing much. In its desire to continue traditional forms of journalism, the Tribune has failed to attract young-adult readers who feed on a steady dose of TV headlines and magazine features. Until the Tribune confronts the manner in which it presents the news, it will continue having severe problems in attracting new readers.

Too often the Tribune responds to the news only when it is a crisis situation. This knee-jerk reaction continues to leave readers without the important background information and incisive reporting that should be an ongoing part of the newspaper. Editors must reevaluate news areas that have been covered routinely and must make new decisions ^{regarding} exactly WHAT is of continuing interest to the Chicago Tribune reader.

One of the helpful things that the Tribune has too rarely done is its use of the "background box," which runs with breaking stories. This feature should be continued as long as a story is news. It should not be assumed that every reader reads the paper every day and is therefore aware of all developments. The national and local desks have failed in providing this necessary information for readers.

The backbone of the Tribune's news coverage is, of course, its local effort. However, more attention should be paid to the kind of local news feature that gives the readers not only hard facts, but also the color and background of a story. This should take the place of SOME traditional Tribune news coverage.

Corrective attention must be paid to national news. Too often our national coverage is long, dull, and routine. The Tribune must provide coverage of national trends and personalities not only from Washington, but from the West Coast and other areas not traditionally covered by our national staff.

Today's young adult is better informed, better traveled, and more interested in world affairs. Our international coverage must reflect this increased sophistication. There must be increased space and play devoted to foreign news and features.

Specific problem areas-- and specific recommendations-- follow.

MAIN NEWS SECTION

The Tribune's large page size, formerly an asset in an era ^{where} ~~where~~ tabloids were viewed as sensationalist, has become a liability in a new age geared to lively tabloids and magazines that present good overviews and analyses of the news in a comfortable, easy-to-handle package.

RECOMMENDATION: An index should be presented on Page 1 everyday to help the reader locate regular features. And efforts should be made to place columns and stories of high interest on the outside of pages, where they will be more visible. Also, longer stories should be "jumped" to a regularly designated "jump page" on the last page of Section 1, where they'll be easier to find. The new Column 1 feature is a fine example of the lively, insightful attitude that should be continued and encouraged thruout the Tribune's pages. Staff writers should be occasionally freed of duties in order to work specifically on projects like Column 1.

Tribune news pages contain very few offbeat features. Editors complain that they're not fed enough such ideas while reporters lament the lack of receptive ears at the desks.

RECOMMENDATION: A sensitive news-feature editor should be installed, one who would be responsible for Column 1 and other offbeat material. This news-feature editor should evaluate reporters' ideas and negotiate with other editors for space.

Display of the American flag and the slogan "World's Greatest Newspaper" in the Tribune masthead project a questionable image to potential younger readers. Altho display of the flag perhaps has only negligible adverse effect-- in that it's a neutral political statement-- the slogan, on the other hand, clearly jeopardizes the paper's credibility. It is a bold claim ~~statement~~ that can't be supported by any objective standard.

RECOMMENDATION: Removal of the flag would not necessarily attract new readership by itself. However, the slogan "World's Greatest Newspaper" should be dumped. Its hyperbolic nature is unsuitable for the Tribune's newly acclaimed progressive attitude of fairness and credibility.

Younger readers express a strong desire for colorful, provocative, irreverent commentary by competent, personable columnists in the hard-news pages. The Tribune has made only token efforts in this area and has discouraged or restricted columnists from taking positions on current issues.

RECOMMENDATION: All columnists should be encouraged to express opinions within the limits of professionalism and good taste, but unrestricted by Tribune editorial policy or Tribune traditions.

Altho Action Express has done admirable work and become a very popular feature, it could do more as an adviser to readers.

RECOMMENDATION: Action Express should add brief "how-to-avoid-this-problem" statements after offering the usual reports on consumers who have been aided by Action Express.

EDITORIAL PAGE

Of all the Tribune's offerings, none has proven to be more offensive to young readers than the editorial page. Tribune editorials have been generally viewed as expressing ~~unrealistic~~ "prairie populism" and "jumping jingoism." They are unrealistically reactionary and ^{generally} lack any evidence of broad vision.

Editorial cartoons are unsophisticated at best in their artistic quality and ability to convey a point of view. Also, Dr. T.R. Van Dellen, M.D., doesn't belong on the editorial page.

The "Voice of the People" belies its name. The letters offer little sense of dialog. They are colorless and wordy and consistently come across as self-serving for the Tribune rather than serving as a vehicle for all viewpoints. The "Voice of the People" has improved in ~~recent~~ recent years only in that it prints more letters from readers who hold no official titles.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Altho the committee feels the most effective way the Tribune can attract younger readers is to moderate its harsh-conservative editorial stance, we realize this may be impractical in the broader sense. Nevertheless, younger readers would clearly appreciate a less "knee-jerk" brand of conservatism. Editorial writers are advised that it is not always necessary to stand athwart progress hollering "Halt!"

Dr. Van Dellen should be moved to Tempo, a very appropriate location.

Letters presented in the "Voice of the People" should be concise and reflect greater diversity of viewpoints, not just those that bolster the Tribune's harsh-conservative editorial stance.

The space vacated by Van Dellen should be filled by a provocative, articulate columnist perhaps specializing in humorous, unorthodox views. Or perhaps a rotating "guest columnist." Or perhaps a journalistic ombudsman who would occasionally monitor the news media, giving the "news behind the news." Such a column, already successful at other newspapers, would cater to readers' curiosity about the news business, would answer questions, and would give reporter-at-large analysis.

PERSPECTIVE

The regular Perspective columnists, generally speaking, have no punch. Altho bright, hard-hitting, liberally-oriented commentary occasionally shines thru, the page too often puts forth conservative viewpoints with much more ~~than~~ vigor. This diminishes the effect of "balance and fairness" that Perspective was designed to correct.

RECOMMENDATION: "Soft-feature" material containing little or no opinion (such as the recent college-course-by-newspaper) should be avoided. Also, the Perspective page should be moved to face the editorial page, thereby becoming a true op-ed page. Columnists should be encouraged to drop the editorial "we," especially when it can be interpreted as reflecting an "official position" ^{of} the Tribune or its staff. Above all, Perspective should be a home for opinion writers WHO HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY. And, for true balance, Perspective needs at least one local columnist with a hardline liberal viewpoint.

SUNDAY PERSPECTIVE

The Sunday Perspective section often gets hung up on the "theme-section" idea which causes it to miss good chances to analyze other current news events not covered by the theme. Also, younger readers appreciate tightly written, sensitively edited summary-analyses of current news events. Perspective often falls short of presenting such diverse material.

RECOMMENDATION: Sunday Perspective should present a "week-in-review" that would cover "heavy" and "light" issues and events in a manner that would update readers on the previous week's developments and prepare them for the week to follow.

TEMPO (and features)

The problem with Tempo is painfully obvious. It is an old-fashioned women's section-- with the accent on mothers and babies (especially problem children)-- and it clearly limits its audience and its image. It is dull, ~~fast~~ plodding, unimaginative, and frighteningly predictable from day to day.

RECOMMENDATION: We propose a drastic change in Tempo-- that is, transform the section ^{into} a daily "magazine-of-life," with emphasis on subjects of interest to men and women of all ages. No longer should there be the obligatory Page 1 mother-and-child feature. Also, along with the change in content, most of us feel there should be a change in format, switching Tempo in an easy-to-handle tabloid pullout. One of the specific disadvantages of the Tribune is its size and bulk. Such a pullout section would be a convenient package for a bus or train commuter and would create a unique Tempo identity. (Weekend, which already has young-reader appeal, should continue to run on Friday, but in a tabloid format.)

MORE SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS: 1. The new Tempo should stress feature stories-- from education and religion to science and consumerism to women's news and men's fashion. Aside from hard news, nothing of a lively and informative nature should be excluded. All editorial staffers should be encouraged to contribute features or ideas.

2. Entertainment and the arts, an extremely important sector of interest for young adults, should be prominently displayed rather than buried, as is now the case. The Tribune's Entertainment staff is a good one and should be ~~EN~~ used to better advantage thruout the week. Even more crucial is our belief that a strong entertainment/arts package can actually attract new readers to the Tribune.

3. A pop-culture column should be created, possibly to run on a three-times-a-week basis, such as Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The column would deal with the music, trends, and lifestyle of young people. This column should be pointed toward a wide young-adult readership rather than just a high school-college group. It should NOT assume a gossip or fan-magazine format but rather be a discerning commentary on young tastes.

4. The daily TV/radio section should be moved into Tempo. Television and radio are an integral part of the Entertainment spectrum, and therefore they clearly belong in the new Tempo.

5. A question-and-answer advice column should be developed. Like Ann Landers and Dear Abby, this column could become a successful "drawing card" for the new Tempo.

6. The restaurant column, now carried in the Thursday Food Guide, should be moved into Tempo where it will be visible to more readers. The column, currently a noncritical guide, should be revamped into a style that criticizes as well as recommends.

7. Dr. Van Dellen's daily column should be moved into the new Tempo, its logical home.

8. Consideration should be given to carrying Action Clinic in Tempo as well as in Lifestyle.

SPORTS

it is The sports section is a major attraction to younger readers, but ^{it is} not free from many of the problems that beset the rest of the paper:

Circulation, especially home delivery, is vital to the sports fan. No other section consistently has as much late-breaking news. However, the Circulation Department has advised us that home delivery of the 4-star sports final is practically impossible; the three-star final is the home-delivery paper. Therefore, on many occasions, a sports fan can listen to a sports event on radio, watch it on TV, or hear the score on the 10 o'clock news. But when he picks up his morning Tribune the next day, he finds out it's halftime or that the score is tied after 8 innings. This is ridiculous.

RECOMMENDATION: If it truly is impossible to deliver the 4-star sports final, we should encourage sports fans to ~~xxx~~ buy the 4-star at their newsstands and the Tribune should abandon any attempt to "fool" the reader with half-finished events in the 3-star edition.

Surveys indicate the Tribune sports pages do not have as much space as some comparable dailies. This sometimes limits complete coverage, especially with the constant expansion of all sports. Much available space is wasted because of long stories. Length bores all readers, particularly the young who are attracted

RECOMMENDATION: Writers ^(stories) should be tightened up, whacked if necessary by the desk, to avoid cumbersome stories. Since Sound Off and Sports Patter (both featuring brevity) are highly read by the young, the current Complete the Report column of notes, condensed 4-heads, and one-line sports items of the day should be expanded, dressed up with pictures, and run in 2-column set as a regular feature.

None of the sports columnists specialize in irreverence or humor, two styles with strong appeal to young readers. Humor and irreverence are especially applicable to sports writing. The only columnist mentioned by name in one Tribune young-reader survey was Jim Murray, whose syndicated L.A. Times column runs only on Sundays and not in all editions at that.

RECOMMENDATION: Irreverence and humor should be strongly encouraged in all aspects of Tribune sports writing.

The Tribune image of being concerned with things instead of people is sometimes evident in sports. The dull routine of the sports beat is often reflected in the writing. There is undue emphasis on coverage of meetings and transactions. Beat men are sometimes reluctant to dig for the human-interest stories, or the hard-news story behind the score.

RECOMMENDATION: Feature stories should be given greater emphasis and bigger play. The L.A. Times practice of running Sports Illustrated-type features with pictures (starting on Page 1 and "jumping" to great lengths) is appealing. John Husar should be given more assignments and direction in this area and better play when he deserves it. Other sports staffers should also be assigned to feature ~~XXX~~ stories, regardless of whether the subject might fall under another ~~XXXXXX~~ writer's beat. Altho the weekly "minor sports" specialty columns are a definite asset, putting the Tribune far ahead of its competitors, there should be more flexibility attached to them. If there is a particularly interesting softball story, for instance, it might warrant pictures and Page 1 play. More emphasis should be placed in high school features rather than scores. And a study might be made of the feasibility of regular rotation of sports beat reporters in order to foster refreshing ideas.

BUSINESS

The business section now appeals ~~XX~~ primarily to older businessmen well-versed in financial matters. The section should be broadened and made more appealing to younger readers and others in need of basic money information.

RECOMMENDATION: Business should be a separate section rather than behind sports and should have a Page 1 free of ads. Photos should be larger and more attractively displayed. More stories or columns dealing with consumer matters and money-handling advice (such as those in Money Magazine on saving, investing, insurance, credit problems, etc.) should be featured on Page 1. Also, Martha Patton's column should ~~XX~~ have a standing title that identifies her as a family financial consultant. And light, bright, short business features should be carried regularly.

PICTURE PAGE

The Tribune's picture page is one clear asset it holds over the rest of the Chicago papers and over hundreds of newspapers across the country. The paper should retain the unique nature of the picture page and avoid using the space as a dumping ground for long stories or poor-quality pictures. More "picture stories" should be developed and the page should reflect a constant style in makeup and design day after day. This ~~may~~ doesn't mean, however, that the formula makeup of several years ago should be reinstated. Instead the Tribune should encourage exciting forms of design but with a constant, refined style.

COMICS

The strength and drawing power of the Tribune comics page remains in its variety and willingness to explore new forms of humor. The current comics page reflects that desired goal.

METRO

We recognize the changing nature of the Metro section. The section has improved in recent weeks but further work with the pictures, copy editing, and reporting needs to be done. Metro should develop a set of goals and let the staff-- and perhaps the public-- know what the section is trying to accomplish. Chicago readers can best be ~~best~~ served by news of their community and of their neighbors, both near and far.

THE SUNDAY TRIBUNE

Tho this report concentrates on the daily Tribune, many of the same problems exist with the Sunday operation. Many of our suggestions on news coverage and attitudes can be applied to the Sunday Trib. Some areas that deserve consideration:

TRIBUNE MAGAZINE: The current magazine is a bland, *lacks its impact and has* ineffectual publication. During recent years it has failed to keep pace with the other Chicago-area magazines. The Tribune magazine must provide a greater variety of stories. The articles must be well written and geared to the more sophisticated reader, and staff photographers must be encouraged to develop photo essays for the magazine. Freelance photography should be strictly a last resort.

TV WEEK: Gene Siskel should write a weekly guide to TV movies, and the movies themselves, ^{which} ~~with~~ have big drawing power among young readers, should be listed separately in the book as they ~~are~~ are on weekdays. Also, there must be more serious TV commentary, with space devoted to important issues in the industry.

TRAVEL: There should be offbeat travel stories that avoid the traditional puff-piece designed to pull advertisers. Humor has a place in the travel section and it should be encouraged from the. And ~~local news staff~~ all editorial staffers should be encouraged to contribute to the travel section.

LIFESTYLE: The new Cosmopolitan/glamor image would be a welcome change of pace, balanced by a redesigned Tempo section. However, an attempt should be made to add depth to the stories now appearing ~~XXXX~~ in the section. And graphics should be more clearly related to story content.

COPY EDITING

One of the Tribune's major problems ~~XX~~ is insensitive copy editing. A far greater effort should be made, when possible, to bring the copy desk and the reporter together when a story must be trimmed. Often, a copy reader will not be familiar enough with a story-- or its background-- to make a sensible trim. This type of increased dialog would also result in stories that "read" better. It would also negate the complaint that much of the Tribune ~~XXXXX~~ copy reads as if it came off an assembly line.

PROMOTION

The Promotion Department should expand its focus to attract young readers with more comprehensive use of alternative media such as Chicago Reader, Chicago Express, the midwest edition of Rolling Stone. Designed cleverly and ~~extremely~~ attractively, the print ads could pull new young readers into the Tribune. Nonpandering humor and irreverence should be an important element of any ad campaign in this area.

Satirical, tongue-in-cheek ads, using Second City or Stan Freberg comedy, should be developed for the electronic media. For instance, an ad illustrating a commuting newspaper reader could be effective and funny by admitting the Tribune's cumbersome size and then showing how to do the "commuter fold" and telling what makes all that trouble so worthwhile. A diagram of the "commuter fold" could run in the paper concurrent with the TV/radio campaign.

WOMEN

The Tribune was not alone in its overreaction to the superficial, sensational aspects of the women's movement. Redundant stories about women who had "made it" in a man's world and cutesy trivialization of substantive issues have almost run their course, but not before minimizing a significant topic by boring readers to death or insulting them.

Five Tempo sections a week, one Feminique, and one Lifestyle have overkilled the same subjects repeatedly, competing with one another for stories but rarely, if ever, intelligently confronting the basic human issues involved.

Despite the Tribune's increased openness to women and women's issues, women reporters have found some editors letting their personal biases on these emotional issues interfere with honest reporting of the news.

Many Tribune women resent being "represented" by any one "libber" spokesperson, but would rather prefer many female voices heard ^{at} in all editorial levels. The more diversity of opinion, both in print and among personnel, the greater our appeal to all kinds of people.

RACIAL AND ETHNIC RELATIONS

Blacks and Latins, with only a few exceptions, have NEVER considered the Tribune to be designed with their needs in mind. Most of the newspaper's progressive accomplishments have gone virtually unnoticed by the masses of black and brown people who feel shut out by the Tribune's ~~hard-conservative~~ editorial policy.

Most of the Tribune's coverage of the black and brown community still consists of crime news, special series, and Operation PUSH. Besides Accion Rapida and the special Latin series two years ago, there has been almost no followup to incorporate the everyday issues and changes in the Latin community into our regular news pages. Of all Chicago's diverse minority groups, these two will undoubtedly be among the most significant in future years.

RECOMMENDATION: The Tribune's shortcomings in black and Latin coverage should be thoroly investigated. The Tribune is missing people and issues of great importance. The critical under-35 audience in these communities would definitely respond favorably to regular coverage of leaders, heroes, events, and groups now known to the general public. Many general news stories call for sidebars on how such news will affect blacks or Latins. A black or Latin columnist,

PUBLIC SERVICE OFFICE

Serious consideration should be given to expanding the facilities of the Public Service Office. The variety of information once provided to readers on a phone-in basis created much goodwill. On such an expanded basis, the Public Service Office could serve as a catalyst for drawing younger readers into the Tribune.

III

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

SACRED-COW SYNDROME and LACK OF CONTROVERSY: Despite its professed liberalization, the Tribune still considers many subjects taboo or sacred. For example, Lynn Van Matre and Les Bridges both wrote important features about homosexuality during the past year that were spiked because the Tribune readers "are not ready for homosexuality." The Tribune seems less afraid of controversy than it used to, but it doesn't seem to realize that many sensitive issues can be treated with a lighter touch without offending the intelligence of any readers.

BLANDNESS, STODGINESS, and LACK OF HUMOR: Thruout the paper is a general lack of irreverence or wit. Granted, the world is a serious place. But we hardly have to weigh it down any further. Why not suit the style to the subject without going to the extreme of TV's "happy-talk" newscasts? And why not develop a locally written humor column?

POOR USE OF STAFF: Writers are not encouraged to let their individualism be reflected in print. The Tribune has many different kinds of talent but they're not being given freedom and/or direction. For example, Clarence Petersen and the Tribune worked for four years developing a loyal following for ^{his} Petersen's TV column. Then, when Petersen moved into the City Room, that important, recognized name was absorbed into the Grey Elob. He was not promoted or encouraged to continue the development of his personal style.

Editors are not looking for the strengths of individuals on their staffs. Writers are forced to write formula stories; they do not feel that the Tribune has a place for their special talents and/or ideas. Those writers who do feel they have some freedom unfortunately lack help in developing direction. Overall, there is very little discussion between writers and editors about the quality of work. To paraphrase the Trib's current ad-promo line, "We need a friend in the Tribune."

IMAGE: We recognize that the Tribune's conservative political stance-- and that stance's implied support of the status quo-- is out of step with today's society, especially with the many persons facing the city's daily problems. However, we also recognize that it's neither possible nor desirable for the Tribune to become a "liberal" newspaper. But there must be a way for the Tribune to express its conservative voice in an intelligent, reasoned manner. One yahoo editorial, or a cheap shot at Joan Baez or Jane Fonda, is one too many when a paper is trying to break down a long-held reputation as a screaming reactionary.