

News editors tread carefully with economy headlines

Up front/commentary

By Paul Emerson

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Paul Emerson

It's so long ago, I don't remember the year. Must have been in the 1980s.

It was at a meeting of one of our early Tribune community advisory councils and the late Jim Deranleau, a master appliance salesman, was talking about the Tribune and the effects of news stories on business.

"When the Tribune runs a big headline about economic problems at the Potlatch mill, our business just dies for a week or two," Deranleau said.

Deranleau, who owned an appliance store on 21st Street in Lewiston, didn't ask that we not run those headlines, but that we be sensitive to what happens when we do.

Jim's message has stayed with me. I've thought about it many times while running the Tribune's daily news meeting where we decide which stories are going to appear on the front page and front of the Northwest section.

I'm not saying that we've downplayed negative economic news in order to not upset advertisers. But I have always tried to steer our coverage toward fairness and away from sensationalism.

If Clearwater Paper (Potlatch's successor) cuts 500 jobs, that's going to be the lead story on the front page, under a big, inky headline. But if it adds 500 jobs, that too will be at the top of the page under big type. Both situations, if they arise, involve the largest private employer in our readership area and the news, good or bad, is crucial to many of our readers.

I've thought about this frequently over the past six or so months as we've been battered with daily doses of ugly economic news. Every day our news wires feed us stories about huge layoffs, failing banks and the plummeting stock market. Just one day last week the Tribune's own staff produced five stories about possible education cutbacks, job losses and other economic hits.

But, at least to this point, this region has avoided most of the horrendous economic shots that have hit other parts of the country.

Yes, our unemployment rates are up. But if you want a job and aren't involved in cutting down trees or processing lumber, then you probably still have work.

Everyone's 401(k) plan is in the toilet, but housing values aren't dipping much and I don't personally know anyone who has had his house repossessed.

Even so, everyone I know is hunkering down - trying not to spend any money. And I can understand that, given the daily diet of rotten economic news.

We in the news media have been accused of being part of the problem: Tell people often enough that the sky is falling and eventually they'll start running for cover. I don't totally disagree with that, but, other than trying to keep it in perspective for readers, I don't see an alternative.

We can't sugar-coat or ignore it. We have too much respect for the intelligence of our readers to do that. If you can't trust us to be honest with you, no matter how painful the message, then you will quit reading us.

The Tribune, like almost every other business, is trying to cope with the realities of a bad economy. Many of our advertisers are hurting and when they hurt, so do we. While we are in better shape than many, we are not immune to the battering that newspapers are taking all over the world.

So we are fully aware that when we run stories about the nation's Big Three automakers struggling to stay in business, that story could cause problems for our regional car dealers who have been faithful newspaper customers for decades. Their struggles quickly become our struggles.

It might be in our own best interest to do so, but we can't ignore those stories. It's reality and painful as it is, we have to print it.

It's all about being honest with your customers. I think Jim Deranleau would understand.

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