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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Neighborhood Paper Routes: Bay-Rat Business Training

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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The Erie Times-News was an important local institution for more than a century

Competition, job training, and entrepreneurial skills were everyday realities in the old neighborhood. And for many of us, those lessons were demonstrated by the two newspapers struggling for local dominance at the time in Erie, Pennsylvania: The Erie Times and the Dispatch-Herald.

Most neighbors seemed to subscribe to at least one of the two. A few had both papers delivered each day.

The Dispatch-Herald was the older of the two news organizations. It first appeared after a merger between two earlier newspapers, the Dispatch, which began in Waterford in 1851 and moved to Erie after a few years, and the Erie Herald, which was created by two high-school teachers in 1878.

The Dispatch-Herald had a unique editorial approach. It was less “establishment,” more labor-oriented, and featured a special focus on the waterfront. The Dispatch regularly featured “shipping news,” keeping track of the comings and goings of commercial ships, reporting on Great Lakes events such as shipwrecks, and offering regular features on commercial fishing as well as downtown fish tugs.

The Erie Times, which began publishing in 1888, seemed more focused on business and politics. It was perceived as the city’s “establishment” paper, even while claiming to be nonpartisan.



An Erie Dispatch-Herald front page from the 1950s



An Erie Times News frontpage from the 1950s

Both newspapers recruited young boys (there were no girls that I was aware of) to deliver papers to neighborhood residents, essentially setting the delivery boys up as independent contractors. Paperboys picked up bundles of newspapers at pre-arranged locations, and were then responsible for sorting, assembling, folding, and delivering them to customers on designated routes. Each paperboy was also responsible for collecting weekly (or sometimes monthly) fees from customers and then paying the newspaper.

Us paperboys were “official independent businessmen!” We were also encouraged to find new customers by reaching out to people who moved into the neighborhood, and by competing with the other newspaper. In my case the “competitor” was the Dispatch. To support sales, as well as new-customer prospecting efforts, both the Times and the Dispatch had regular “specials” in which discounts could be offered to new customers. In addition to rewarding episodic new customer deals, paperboys were incentivized with “premiums” offered to kids who successfully found new customers. Incentives included baseball gloves, jack-knives, flashlights, and even bicycles. There were also opportunities to earn “premium points” by avoiding customer complaints, paying weekly bills on time, and making “emergency” deliveries when asked. If a customer on another route did not receive a paper, a district manager or other newspaper official might reach out via telephone and request that a paperboy make a special delivery to that person. Finding the additional newspaper to deliver was made possible by a paperboy either having an “extra” paper or by having him purchase a paper at the store and deliver it.

The experience of having a designated paper route set each paperboy up as a small-business competitor. In my case, the route that I took over, during seventh grade stretched along West Second Street from Cascade to Poplar streets and included north-south cross streets that intersected Plum, Liberty, and Poplar. The route extended north on the cross streets to Front, and South to West Third. There were approximately 60 customers when I took the route over. During the time that I had the route, a friend was delivering the Dispatch along the same street.

There were many lessons to be learned on a paper route. The first was physical logistics. What was the very best way to move the bulk bale of newspapers to the location of the route, and what was the optimum place to begin delivering?

In my case, with a route that was several city blocks long, and had a large number of customers, it made the most sense to lug the main bundle to the geographic center of the route, secure it on the porch of a cooperative customer, and then carry half of the papers (rather than the entire bundle) away to the west, dropping individual papers off at customer homes. Running and walking west to the end of the route, I learned to stay on just one side of the street until I reached the route end, and then return on the opposite side. After delivering half of the papers, I would return to the rest of the bundle, pick it up and depart on an easterly loop, moving up and down the side streets as I encountered them. I eventually developed this delivery technique after asking most of the other delivery boys how they proceeded, and my Dispatch competitor was the most helpful. He was more than generous with his advice.

Another interesting physical decision surrounded the question of folding individual newspapers. Several of my colleagues paused at the bundle delivery site, where they meticulously folded each paper into one of several popular shapes, including rectangles, squares, and triangles. Some boys would spend as long as 30 minutes, folding papers before they departed the delivery site and began delivering them.

Early on, I decided that stopping to fold all of the papers made no sense, especially since some customers did not want their newspapers to be folded. My approach was to grab the secured (by bailing wire) bundle and immediately head for my route. I would not open the bundle until I got to my route. I was going to fold an individual paper I would do so, while walking between houses.

Another important strategy was to avoid being drawn into conversations. I was polite but focused as I dropped individual papers off. I continued to try to understand where each customer preferred to have the paper placed and always put it there. I saved extended dialogues for Friday evenings when I went about the task of “collecting.”

Meeting with customers proved to be the most important aspect of route improvement. I always asked if there was anything that I could do to improve my service, and, sometimes, I made delivery system adjustments to increase customer satisfaction. For example, I learned that some customers were anxious to have papers delivered as early as possible. To facilitate their interests, I altered my delivery design, shifting from one side of the street to the other. I also asked customers if they knew of anyone who needed a paper and offered self-funded discounts if existing customers helped me find a new one. I also asked if there was any other service that I could provide and organized an adjunct lawn-cutting service to accompany the paper deliveries. One of my most lucrative side gigs was mailbox painting – a side service that I promoted in the spring. I only offered black as a color option!

Probably the best thing that happened during my tenure was that the Dispatch, the neighborhood competitor, began to fail. I gained from the Dispatch problems by finding new customers and slowly building my route to 100 customers. New customer prospecting allowed me to earn several “premiums” for finding new Times News customers. I still have the high-quality baseball glove that I earned, using Times-News premium points.

Lessons learned as a Times-News paperboy followed me into and through my professional life, and I am grateful for them:

1. Listen carefully to customers and clients
2. Provide for their needs
3. Tell customers what you will do and be sure to deliver
4. Delight customers by being early and exceeding expectations
5. Invite feedback and fix problems

Sadly, the Erie-Times, like thousands of other local news organizations in America, seems to have fallen victim to a cascade of socio-economic trends that have disrupted revenue streams. The first was the growth of Craigslist, a privately-held company that operating classified-advertisements, which robbed newspapers of much of their revenue. As this and other internet trends accelerated, like social media, local news sources rapidly shrunk and or disappeared. The Erie Times-News, which celebrated 125 years of growth and prosperity in 2013, has been shrinking since then. The organization, which boasted almost 300 employees in 2005, has fallen to a staff fewer than 250. In 2015, it was sold to GateHouse Media after a series of layoffs and moved its printing out of town. Today, the newspaper is owned by Gannett Co., Inc., and is part of the USA TODAY network.

The local, Erie Times-News experience is not unique. A close neighbor, The Buffalo News for example, shrunk significantly during the same period. Its once powerful newsroom has been reduced from 200 to only 60 staff, as the overall

organization fell from almost 2,000 employees to its current total of approximately 500.

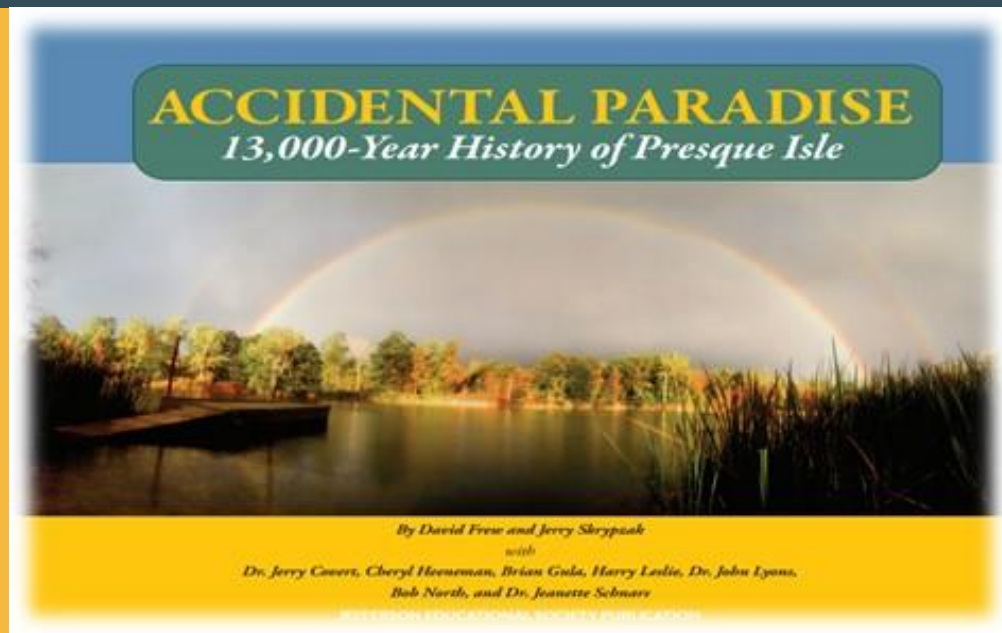
As news organizations shrink there is a concern that there will be no more local news and communities will suffer. But from my perspective, the loss is even more acute. Where will the thousands of local kids who once learned critical life lessons about jobs and work get those critical experiences?

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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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