

Journal Scene

Your Local Newspaper – It's About Community

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In the next several weeks there's a chance you'll receive a phone call from an organization seeking your input for a survey on the very newspaper you're holding in your hands and reading right now.

I know – some telephone surveys can be inconvenient and even downright bothersome. Honestly, I feel that way about many telephone opinion polls, especially political ones, even though I'm an elected official.

This survey you might be contacted about, however, really is noteworthy. It's an annual effort by the National Newspaper Association to gauge readers' views on their local paper.

Your personal views are important.

In an era marked by the overload of 24-hour cable news and non-stop talking heads on television, the weekly and small daily newspapers in our communities continue their valuable tradition of helping to strengthen communities, promote local economies, and report on local governments.

Now is an especially appropriate time to consider the contributions that community newspapers make to our shared quality of life: Oct. 6-12 is National Newspaper Week. A majority of community newspaper readers understand and appreciate these contributions.

This fact was made clear from last year's survey by the National Newspaper Association, which released the results earlier this year.

"The numbers are self-evident," said Merle Baranczyk, president of the National Newspaper Association and publisher of a community newspaper in Colorado. "They [responses] indicate the level of connectedness people have with their community newspaper." "From year to year, the studies have shown that people believe in their local papers, for the news they need and the advertising they rely on."

Consider the responses in the latest survey, which sampled readers in small communities where the circulation of the local paper was 15,000 or less:

- 92 percent said they thought local newspapers were informative.
- 84 percent said they looked forward to reading their local paper.
- 83 percent agreed that they relied on their local paper for news and information.
- 69 percent thought their local paper provided valuable advertising and shopping information.

In some ways, despite the rise of the Internet and smartphones, community newspapers are becoming even more important, because they help foster something that the Internet and communications gadgets can't provide – a sense of being part of a community and knowing what's happening in it.

After all, it's in the pages of community newspapers where folks can read about civic club projects, church gatherings, honor roll listings, birthdays, anniversaries, family reunions, and other special events that add meaning to our day-to-day lives and create memories.

In this way, community newspaper readers enjoy a special connection through their local paper – a relationship to the community, if you will.

Other statistics from last year's newspaper survey bear out these facts, too.

On average, respondents said they normally spend about 40 minutes reading through their local paper. And nearly half said they hold onto it for more than 10 days.

And unlike some other modern-day media outlets, community newspapers are trusted by those they serve.

About 70 percent of the survey participants said the accuracy and coverage of their local paper is "good" or "excellent," with 59 percent saying the same about their paper's fairness.

Thomas Jefferson once said that if he were left to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers – or newspapers without a government – he wouldn't hesitate to choose newspapers.

I think readers of today's community newspapers realize the wisdom of Jefferson's words.

Richard Eckstrom, a CPA, is the comptroller general of South Carolina and commander of the S.C. State Guard.