

FALLACIES OF STOP SURVEYS

What causes subscribers to stop home delivery and what can a newspaper do to stem the tide? Is there any more common question asked of newspaper researchers?

J. Ann Selzer, Ph.D.

The expense of churning subscribers causes many publishers to seek any relief researchers can hand them. But, the assumptions behind traditional stop surveys sometimes keep newspaper executives from understanding the whole picture and truly getting a handle on where resources need to be spent in order to reclaim lost subscribers.

The most common assumption behind a stop study is that a canceled subscription is the moral equivalent of a divorce with a no-contact order. They believe former subscribers no longer read the paper – that they are truly lost business. So, a typical stop survey doesn't include any questions that help define the on-going relationship former subscribers retain with the newspaper. In a recent study my firm conducted for a major metropolitan newspaper, we documented that not only did the majority of former subscribers continue to read the paper several days a week, the majority of those who continue to read pay for the paper through single copy sales. They are, in fact, still valuable customers of the newspaper.

Obviously, it's important to understand why these customers stopped, but most stop studies begin and end with that single goal. Of greater value would be understanding whether the new pattern of buying newspapers fulfills readers' needs and, more importantly, finding out how the newspaper can support single copy buying behavior, if that is what the reader prefers.

Surely, the newspaper would wish to convert the single copy buyer to home delivery, but this is the second most common assumption behind a stop study – that readers value the idea of home delivery as much as the newspaper does. A sizeable proportion simply do not and will not ever share that value. We've conducted a number of focus groups with former subscribers who are happy customers of the newspaper – often buying it every day. They would not trade their early morning walk to the convenience store, for example, for anything. That has become a treasured part of their routine. Newspapers often hound such customers, trying to move them into home delivery, when in fact, they are probably more profitable to the newspaper as consistent single copy buyers.

In addition to asking what can be done to convert single copy buyers into home delivery customers (and granted, the market for that conversion is still substantial for many newspapers), newspapers need to ask what can be done to support single copy buyers. One newspaper we've worked with considered creating a single copy discount card. The idea was for customers to prepay for 20 or 30 issues, with an expiration date. They get a good deal (on the order of a home delivery discount); they get the convenience of not having to fumble for change for a vending machine or store sale; the newspaper gets the benefit of an incentive to buy within a specified time period. To my knowledge, this program isn't in place.

But, this is the kind of thing that might work especially well with customers who recently stopped home delivery. Many newspapers routinely call customers who cancel subscriptions to find out if problems might be fixed and the customer retained. But that call could also be an opportunity to offer the former subscriber a single-copy discount card if in fact, that has become the preferred way the customer gets the newspaper. In the study I cited earlier, we learned that the greatest incentive to former subscribers is a discount. Given that predilection, the newspaper may well be better off serving these customers through single-copy channels (with a discount) than churning them as home delivery customers. This is just one strategy that could be researched to determine how better to retain customers.

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

The point is this: When we think that dropping home delivery means a lost customer, we ignore the fact that the newspaper still probably has a business relationship with the former subscriber. And, when we fail to research all the ways the newspaper could support its customer base – subscribers and single copy buyers – we fail to truly address how the newspaper can retain customers and decrease churn.

Published in NAA Research Federation Newsletter, April 2000.