

AN INFORMAL LOOK AT COLUMNIST READERSHIP

What is the right measure of success?

J. Ann Selzer, Ph.D.

Is there a touchier subject for editors than columnist readership? Columnists can be a wonderful asset to a newspaper. Through first-person writing, columnists can help add a third dimension to news and give a touchstone for readers who want to weigh their own opinions against others. Some columnists are loved, some love to be hated. But the question always arises whether they do, in fact, attract and hold readers.

To help get a feel for what a newspaper can expect from a stable of columnists, I solicited the help of a few of my NAA colleagues who sent me readership information for 85 local columnists appearing in their papers. Before summarizing the findings, I offer two caveats. First, there is no standardized way of asking about columnist readership. So, I used my best judgment to group responses. For example, one newspaper asks how often a columnist is read and I looked at the percent reading at least “three-quarters of the time,” which represents the top two boxes. For a different paper, I took the percent of those who “read regularly.” The measure I’m trying to approximate is the percentage who read a columnist more often than not when he or she appears in the paper, or “regular readership.” The judgments I’ve made involve some compromise. However, when I rank-ordered the columnists’ readership, I found that some who were measured by the more stringent measure (read three-quarters of the time or more) rise to the top of the list, with several in the top ten. Clearly, the strong performance of those columnists was not an artifact of the scale used to measure readership. This gives me confidence I’ve got at least a reasonably level playing field.

The second caveat is that this is obviously not a large sample; still the findings reveal some obvious and important rules of thumb.

- The 50% mark for what I’m loosely calling “regular readership” may be unattainable. Here is how the group breaks down:

Low 40% range (stars):	4%
30% to 39% (very strong performers):	16%
20% to 29% (above average performers):	28%
10% to 19% (average performers):	47%
Below 10% (questionable performers):	5%

I conclude that if you have one star, you are blessed. If you have a couple of “very strong performers,” you are doing very well.

- Local news columnists, as a group, do the best. Of the 17 with scores of 30% or higher, here is how they break by section:

Local news	8
Features	5
Sports	3
Main news	1

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

Within each of these sections, we see little in common by way of topic. These features columnists, for example, include society columnists, entertainment columnists, human interest writers, and more. Clearly, the skill of the writer and the connection he or she establishes with the audience is more important than the subject matter.

- Another finding from this ranking is the lack of business columnists. The highest ranking columnist in that section placed 32nd out of 85, in the low 20% range. Therefore, if a newspaper had a business columnist who drew 30% or more regular readers, this would be considered an unusual success.
- Tenure with the column doesn't necessarily predict readership. Among those with the strongest scores are columnists who've had the same column for many, many years, true enough, but also at least one who started his column in the last year or so.

The reason I pulled this together is that a market's reaction to a single columnist is often idiosyncratic. Newspapers often have good reasons to include less popular columnists in the mix of what they offer. What we need to look for is a constellation of columnists who show some appeal to different demographic and readership groups. But without any rules of thumb to gauge success, some papers wonder if 40% readership is high enough, while some wonder if they should be satisfied if none of their columnists cross the 20% mark. Interpreting research is all about having some sort of context in which to understand what is a big number and what is a small number. This simple analysis is an attempt to provide some albeit gross generalizations for columnists.