

Step-by-step instructions on publishing your own niche market periodicals.

How to Publish Weekly Newspapers, Niche Market Tabloids, and Free Circulation Shoppers.

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How to Publish Your Own Weekly Newspapers, Niche-Market Tabloids & Free Circulation Shoppers

A Kitchen-Table Publisher Book

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How to Publish Weekly Newspapers, Niche Market Tabloids & Free Circulation Shoppers

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Thomas A. Williams

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Chapter One / Getting into Publishing: An Overview

Weekly newspapers, free circulation shoppers and niche market tabloids can be very profitable business enterprises. Such publications have a lot going for them. Start-up costs are very modest, usually well within the range of the average family bank account or the limit on your personal credit cards. My own start-ups required no capital at all. You can even avoid the cost of office space by utilizing a basement, garage or spare room in your own home. Most needed equipment, chiefly your desktop publishing computer and laser printer and an enlarging/reducing copy machine, can be leased by paying a couple of monthly installments up front. Production tables, files, and other paraphernalia are generally very simple to design and can be homemade.

Any other up-front costs—for office supplies and public relations materials—are more than balanced by the short weekly billing cycle you will be working on. By the time your next month's lease payments come due you will already have four or five (yes, some months will have five Wednesdays in them!) week's accounts receivable to pay them. If, in the beginning, you do not need to draw out great amounts of cash for your own living expenses, it really is quite possible to start a newspaper of your own and pay for it as you go, wholly out of current revenues.

This is precisely what I did with the *Mecklenburg Gazette*, a weekly newspaper that I owned in Davidson, North Carolina. When I began to edit the newspaper it was literally a week away from bankruptcy. I had no cash to speak of—just a few thousand dollars in savings to live on until advertising revenues started coming in.

I did decide to buy the building the newspaper was housed in, mainly because it was a good deal, and I had only to assume the mortgage. It was not a necessary part of the transaction. When the first monthly pay-

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The Value of a Customer

A satisfied customer will generate many more of the same kind. Many businesses fail or do far less well than they should through simple failure to recognize this basic fact. Your customer—whether an advertiser in your magazine, a sponsor of your county history, or a Chamber of Commerce executive—is your most precious asset. This is true not only for the income you currently derive from meeting his needs, but from all the future business you will derive from him and from everyone he recommends you to. A good customer recommends you to two friends, who also recommend you to two friends and so on into the future. It's a geometric progression. It takes a while to land the first client or two but after that, if you do your work well and deliver as promised, it becomes much smoother sailing. An ill-served, dissatisfied customer, on the other hand, represents a dead end and, at worse, a dead weight that you'll drag along behind you for years to come.

Always go the extra mile to make your clients happy, even the smallest among them. Put the same effort into thoughtful advertising design for the guy who takes the one-twelfth page ad in the back of the book as for the bank that takes the back cover. Write your clients. Thank them for their business. Deliver complimentary copies. Refer leads to them when they come your way. Do business with them yourself. Send Christmas cards. Maintain positive contact in every possible way. When you have a complaint, go overboard in trying to resolve it in a way that will meet your customer's needs. Big businesses indeed can be built on the solid, sound base of satisfied customers.

ments for the equipment and the building came due some six weeks later, I was easily able to meet them. Thereafter, month after month, I was solidly in the black. After three years I sold the paper to one of the larger chains and made a handsome profit.

I accomplished all this with very little cash outlay on my part. My only investment was the three months' sweat equity I put in before beginning to draw my own salary as editor.

I learned by trial and error. At that time there was no other way. I asked a lot of questions and came up with a lot of ideas. If an idea worked, I added it to my repertoire and repeated it as often as possible. If it didn't, I scrapped it and tried something else.

Anyone Can Do It

Who can succeed in niche market publishing? Anyone can. I am convinced that I could take my MacIntosh, a few business cards and a change of clothes and generate a sizable income for myself in any town in America. Among the successful independent publishers I know are some that have backgrounds in sales; others come from the ranks of graphic designers; some are free-lance writers who, tired of sending articles in to other people's magazines, decide to create a publication of their own. Some are simply management types with an idea they believe in and the willingness to give it a try.

Publishing Is Profitable!

The kind of publishing I discuss in this book is a business in which you can eventually earn *almost as much money as you desire to earn*—so long as you are willing to learn the business and work for it.

How much money one desires to earn varies greatly from person to person. Some of us love the laid-back life, want to live simply and modestly, and find the publishing life a delightful way to do it. Others are satisfied to clear sixty or seventy thousand dollars a year.

Some ambitious souls shoot for the biggest prizes of all. They want to develop strong publications, duplicate them in every imaginable market, franchise them, go public and become millionaires.

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Each of these scenarios is a possible one. The one you choose will depend on your temperament more than anything else—and your mastery of the success principles and trade secrets of the business, as outlined in this book. Can I guarantee your success? No, I cannot. I do not know your capacity for work, the amount of time you have available, or the quality of your attention to detail. I do not know your willingness and ability to learn from the experience of others. Nor can I judge your skill in managing the work of others, always a key element.

What I *can* guarantee, though, is that the ideas and techniques presented in this book have worked for me; that they have worked for others; and that they can work for you, too, to the degree that you study them carefully and put them into practice.

A Publishing Revolution

There is a revolution taking place in the publishing business today. Publishing businesses that, just a few years ago, would have required immense investment in graphic arts equipment of all kinds are now within the reach of any ambitious individual, thanks to the appearance on the scene of the astonishing new desktop publishing technology. When I started my publishing company in the early 1980's I had to lease a phototypesetter that cost \$30,000 and had a maintenance contract attached to it that cost another \$600 a month. I needed a graphic arts camera and darkroom that cost another \$5000. And this was just the beginning. I had waxers, bulky layout tables, typewriters.

Today a \$1000 desktop computer and a laser printer will do everything that my expensive equipment used to do. The need for space? Publishing companies can now be run from any location in the country or from the kitchen or spare bedroom in your own home if necessary. One of the most successful independent publishing companies I know of is run from a small apartment built in a former dry-cleaning shop in a town of 200.

My own office is in a 150-square-foot spare bedroom, a former child's nursery. There I preside over my world-wide electronic empire. I routinely receive and transmit manuscripts by modem. I fax contracts and requests for quotes on publications in progress. I write, lay out and design more than 20 publications each year with a single computer and

laser printer. I do business with printers in Ann Arbor, color separation houses in Colorado, and book wholesalers in California. In publishing, the much-heralded "electronic cottage" is very much a reality. *And it works!*

A One-Person Business

Since it does so much, so well, desktop technology creates the possibility of operating a business single-handedly. One person can do almost all the essential tasks, farming out the rest to free-lancers or part-time independent contractors. There are few, or no, full-time employees (especially in the beginning) whose work schedules, holidays, and down time you have to accommodate. Furthermore, the same computers that produce your books and maintain mailing lists can send bills and do all other necessary accounting operations, from accounts receivable to general ledger.

The SOB Factor

Another great benefit of the new technology is what I call the SOB factor. When you develop a new business there are three ways that you can finance yourself during the start-up phase. You can use OPM (Other People's Money), by going to the bank and getting a loan which you immediately have to start paying back. You can use YOM (Your Own Money) by raiding the reserves of your hard-earned savings. Or you can use SOB (Sweat of Your Brow) by doing all of the work yourself until the business is up and running. It used to be that before you could get a publication on the street you had to pay designers, typesetters, paste-up people, and printers. Now you do it all yourself. It takes longer, but it's much easier on the pocketbook. You are converting the Sweat of Your Brow into equity in your business.

Moonlighting: I Highly Recommend It

What about the time required? Is it manageable for someone working at another job? It is, indeed. In fact your first plunge into publishing will work out better when you start slowly, build wisely, and learn as you go. The fact is that you are unlikely to generate an income to live on from publishing alone until you learn—from firsthand experience—all

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the rules of the game. You will need an established income for a while yet. You just put in the extra hours until the payoff comes.

Many individuals will be quite content to continue in this way indefinitely, deriving their major income from a “regular job” and maintaining publishing activities as a lucrative sideline. This is a very workable arrangement, especially for those whose primary employment is so remunerative or so intrinsically interesting to them that they prefer not to give it up.

Others, for whom this is not the case, will eventually discover ways, as I did, to move into publishing as a full-time occupation.

The Three Secret Ingredients of Publishing Success

The term “publishing business” covers a lot of territory, a good deal of it out of reach for the beginner. It would be nonsense to say that you could start, from scratch, a company on the scale of, say, *USA Today*. But setting aside this high-dollar neck of the woods, there is still a lot of publishing going on out there that is viable for the start-up entrepreneur. How do you recognize the kind of opportunity that is likely to yield success and result in financial reward for the independent desktop publisher?

My experience tells me that there are three secret ingredients that you must look for. When one or another of these ingredients is missing, consider it a red flag of warning. You may feel that your publication idea contains other elements that more than compensate for the missing ingredient. And you may be right. There are always exceptions. My advice, however, is to stick with the tried and true, at least until you learn to navigate on your own. To do otherwise can cost you money in lost time and profits.

The secret ingredients of my publishing success formula are as follows:

Choose only those projects that allow for . . .

1. **A large number of potential customers**
2. **In a limited geographical area**
3. **Who are easily identifiable**

There are far more such opportunities than you ever dreamed of. Let's take them one by one.

A Large Customer Base

When a high proportion of the businesses in a given area constitutes prospects for advertising sales, or when a book will appeal to the majority of those who buy books in a given area (a book on Atlanta for Atlantans, for instance), then that magazine or book has the possibility of intensive sales. A high percentage of potential customers will be interested in buying an ad or in buying a book. When there is a large enough pool of potential customers that are also easy to reach (see the next section), sales to a reasonable number of them will bring success. A suburban shoppers guide, for instance, meets this test, as does a weekly newspaper in any small or medium-sized town that either doesn't have one or has one that isn't doing the job it should be doing.

Limited Geographical Area

A single entrepreneur can easily handle a project that covers a limited geographical area, whereas expanding the coverage area beyond the reach of one or two people can create real difficulties. A city magazine is relatively easy to publish; a regional magazine (the mountains of your state, for instance, or the coast) is more difficult; a statewide magazine requires an entire staff of sales and production people. A national magazine requires all of the above, plus a high-risk investor with several million dollars of idle money in very deep pockets.

When you focus on a tightly delineated geographical area, several good things happen. You or your ad salesperson can make calls and sell the product without traveling anywhere overnight. Circulation and distribution are easily and inexpensively managed. You can do this job yourself if necessary. In the case of book publishing, all the major booksellers can be called on personally. Your own advertising becomes more affordable and your name recognition more readily achieved.

A Well-Defined (or Targeted) Clientele

It is difficult for a small publisher to market a general interest novel because those who may want to buy it represent a diverse group of people,

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spread across such a wide area that it becomes prohibitively expensive to reach them all. A typical book of this kind, even when successful, will sell relatively few copies in each of a large number of bookstores nationwide. A company that does not have a national sales force simply cannot make the calls necessary to get the title on the bookstore shelves. When a few people in a great many communities constitute the potential pool of buyers, the small publisher has a problem.

The successful desktop publisher will bring out books and magazines that have a large number of potential readers in a very limited area. When I brought out my bicentennial history, 99% of all sales took place within a fifty mile radius of the town. No one in Detroit or Denver or San Diego was interested in a picture history of Greenville, NC. But a great many people in Greenville were. Enough, indeed, to sell out an entire first edition.

Analogous to the concept of the limited geographical area (and an acceptable substitute for it) is that of the targeted, specialized, and easily identifiable readership. This is the domain of the so-called “niche” publications, each of which has a highly specialized readership. If you bring out a magazine called *Gum Disease Today*, you know that it will appeal to every periodontist everywhere. Mailing lists of targeted readerships are readily available, so that even though this group of individuals may be spread across many geographical miles, they are still easily reached by direct mail or by telephone. They are targeted in such a way that even the small publisher has a chance of hitting the mark.

The following chapters will take you step-by-step through the process of starting and publishing a wide variety of periodicals that meet the success criteria described in this introduction to the business.

Chapter Three / Preliminary Money Matters: Getting and Managing Your Money

Rich in ideas but low in capital? Great! You may be better off than you think. You can get into the publishing business on a shoestring. After I had assembled my basic equipment, I often had nothing more to invest in a new project than my ego and my time. So I worked hard to make publishing time and brain intensive rather than money intensive. The only real equity I invested in most of my projects was sweat equity (SOB), and most often that was enough. You've certainly got every bit as much of it as I have.

Real Benefits of Limited Resources

Flat wallets can actually bring some very real benefits into your publishing ventures. Indeed, I advise you not to spend too much, even if you have sufficient money in the bank. It can be bad for business, just as a diet overly rich in sugar and fat can be bad for the heart and the circulation.

Anyone with deep pockets can spend enormous amounts of money starting any business, and I often see people do precisely that. Although it sometimes works, it is often a mistake. Even the biggest publishing companies on the scene today had modest beginnings. Dick Simon and Max Schuster got Simon & Schuster Publishing Co. underway when they brought out a series of inexpensive crossword puzzle books. They then built and expanded the business on the cash flow that this early project generated.

A limited bank account, far from causing concern, can be a positive advantage. When cash is scarce you work to get the most out of every dime and dollar. You plan carefully. You find ways to pay writers after

You can get into the publishing business on a shoestring. What's more, flat wallets are not necessarily bad.

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Recommended Resource!

I highly recommend *The Start-Up Entrepreneur*, written by James R. Cook. It is chock-full of insights and ideas on cash management and business building.

publication, to get printing ten or twenty percent cheaper, to use the family car for business rather than that fancy new van you have your eye on, to do the billing on the kitchen table rather than in an office suite you really can't afford.

Maybe you have just \$500 in the bank for your start-up and not \$50,000. Don't worry about it; revel in it. Run a tight ship. Stretch your resources to the very limit. Such financial discipline can produce a sound working base, a business built on what is good and necessary rather than on what is wasteful and strictly for show.

Many a new business has needlessly failed because the principal (or principals) couldn't resist driving that "image-building" Mercedes and filling closets with \$500 suits and fancy Italian shoes. They bought mahogany desks and conference tables when a homemade table would have done just as well.

On Resisting Temptation

Some years ago I was involved in a start-up of my own. Apple Computer had just reduced prices and come out with a new line of products (a development which is becoming disgustingly familiar to all of us who buy and use computers), all of which I loved. I could have paid out \$5000 and had the computer of my dreams. Instead, because I simply didn't have enough cash on hand to do that, I bought a lowly Mac Classic.

As it turned out, the Classic was quite powerful in itself, and I wrote, typeset and designed five books on it in two years' time. I turned out work for others, including top-of-the-line, four-color capabilities brochures and direct mail packages. After a week or two I was totally acclimated to the small Mac Classic screen and seldom even gave a thought to what I had *not* been able to buy. I was too busy making money with the computer I had. The Mac Classic, it turned out, was all I really needed at that time. It cost \$1000. The \$4000 difference between the computer I wanted but did not really need and the little workhorse I actually bought was put into building my business. In addition, I had no monthly payments hanging over my head to keep me awake at night.

The same things are true for your copying machine, your fax, your furniture, your car—even the pictures on the wall. Limited resources wisely spent will buy (or lease) what you need. And they will prevent

you from wasting valuable cash resources on things you don't need.

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Why Big is Not Always Better

It is also true that big is not necessarily better. I learned this while publishing real estate guides in a large southern state. I started out with three of them, and I was taking home about \$50,000 a year from this particular activity. I kept adding more guides and taking in more money. I was also meeting higher payroll and printing bills and coping with vastly more difficult management problems. . . .and I was still taking home just \$50,000 a year.

I would wake up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night praying that my ad revenues in a very distant city, from a publication I had necessarily put into the hands of someone else to manage, would equal or surpass the five-digit printing bill that was coming due. I had to let many other opportunities pass me by. I had successfully expanded to the point where I grew unhappy with my business, and when a willing buyer came along and offered me a substantial profit I was only too happy to sell out.

This kind of thing is just not necessary. Don't try to create an empire unless you're a natural-born emperor. Just create a profitable enterprise. There is a certain healthy joy in a lean, small, profitable business. You can play the niche markets and build one of your own. Remember, success is not measured by the amount of money that flows *through* your pockets or your bank account, but by how much actually *sticks there* for you to use as you see fit.

Where the Money Comes From

How do you generate revenues for your publishing business? These come from three sources:

- Product sales**
- Advertising sales**
- The sale of services**

Don't try to create an empire unless you're a natural-born emperor. Just create a profitable enterprise.

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A surprisingly large number of advertisers will pay in advance if you give them an incentive to do so.

If you are a book publisher, for instance, your income is primarily *product-based*. You publish a book that costs you \$3.00 to produce and sell it for \$18.95. If you publish a traditional weekly and charge .25 for it, then that income comes from product sales.

If you publish a free circulation newspaper, shopper, tabloid or any other such periodical your income is chiefly derived from *advertising sales*. You send out a sales rep to sell advertising to businesses who believe that they can earn a profit from the exposure they will get in the pages of your publication.

Considerable income can be generated by the *sale of services*—although such activities are not your primary business. Such sales constitute a lucrative secondary profit center. (See the later chapter on this subject). Sometimes a client with whom you do business will ask you to design a brochure, a direct mail flyer or even a product catalog. Your advertising salespeople will often encounter such needs and bring in requests for quotations from their customers. You can easily handle such an assignment with the equipment you have on hand. Such service-based revenues can constitute an important secondary profit center for your publishing company.

Cash Flow Strategies for the Small Publisher

When you're trying to start a business as I did, with no money down, cash flow becomes a major challenge. After all, you will have to spend some money before your first publication comes out. But where will it come from? How do you pay the suppliers, free-lancers and others who must do work for you when you still have not cranked up a flow of money coming in? Since I often faced such problems, I have developed various strategies for dealing with them.

You will, of course, do everything you can yourself. In addition you will keep a sharp eye on expenses. You do not order expensive stationery. Your laser printer will turn out great letterheads. All you have to do is to buy the blank paper, and if you shop around for that at paper wholesalers or at discount office supply houses you can get hold of it very cheaply. You can buy envelopes for a penny apiece at Sam's Club, Costco or Office Depot. Invoices are generated by your bargain basement accounting program. Envelopes, again, are addressed and generated by your

computer and laser printer. You will sign up with Carlson Craft or one of the other business card printers to the trade and get your business cards at half of retail or less. By working at home you eliminate business-related rent, telephone and utility charges.

Still, even after doing everything you possibly can to limit expenses, sooner or later you will have to pay out some funds to people who provide services for you.

Eight Ways to Generate Up-Front Cash

In my own publishing activities I have found that there are several effective ways to generate upfront cash:

- ❑ I send an invoice as soon as an advertising contract is signed. The amount shown on the invoice is not strictly due and payable until my publication actually appears, and my invoice makes this clear. But many of those who receive it, especially the larger businesses who routinely put such billings in the hopper for action, will pay on receipt.
- ❑ Further, I offer a two percent discount to advertisers who pay within 15 days of the invoice date. Many large businesses routinely take advantage of such discounts.
- ❑ I offer a five percent discount to small advertisers who will pay on the signing of the contract.
- ❑ On agreements for the sale of services, such as designing and producing a book, a brochure, a direct mail piece, a product catalogue or some other such project—I require one third of the agreed contract price on the signing of the contract, one third on a approval of preliminary proofs (galley proofs) and one third on approval of final proofs (page proofs).
- ❑ My agreement with those who sell advertising for me specifies that no payment of commissions will be made until the invoice is paid. This arrangement encourages salespeople to try to get a check on the signing of the contract. Often just asking for the check is enough. A surprisingly large number of advertisers will pay in advance if asked to do so.



Recommended Resource

You can't operate your business without careful record-keeping. In fact, the law requires that you do so. Bernard Kamaroff's book, *Small-Time Operator*, will give you the book-keeping basics—in clear and easy-to-understand language.

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All of these and similar ideas are discussed in detail in the pages that follow. For the moment I just want to assure you that it is, indeed, quite possible to generate the income you need and do real, substantial business on a pay-as-you-go basis.

Publisher's Perks

Publisher's perks are hardly a part of the central financial management of your home-based publishing company, but they are very pleasant benefits nevertheless. Small publishers do not benefit from any tax breaks not available to the business community in general, but due to the nature of the business, publishers are able to use these laws in very flexible and interesting ways. No single one of these benefits is substantial when taken alone, but taken together they constitute a welcome cluster of tax-sheltered earnings.

When you work at home you do not increase your mortgage payment or rent. You work out of the same space as you lived in before, but now a percentage of the cost of that mortgage has become a deductible business expense. You can write off a portion of the rent proportional to the floor space that you use exclusively for business purposes. And you shelter not only the mortgage payment itself, but the same percent of the insurance, property taxes, utilities and the many other expenses associated with home ownership. You may even take depreciation on this part of your home, although it may not be desirable to do so, since such a deduction will have tax consequences when and if you sell your home. You should check all these matters out with your accountant to see precisely how they will affect you.

In addition your business can own your automobile and buy your health insurance and even life insurance, insofar as the latter is purchased to protect your business from creditors and other risks in the event of your death. I find that leasing an automobile in the name of my business works best. I pay all auto-related expenses directly from my business account and simply keep careful records of personal use of the business vehicle, if any, to report on my personal tax return. There is very little travel that you will do that cannot be turned into a business expense. Your interests as a publisher are more general than those of the owners of most other businesses. No matter where you go or what you do, if you

meet with other publishers or look for ideas and ways to improve your publishing products, then a portion of the trip is deductible.

Other Perks

Other delightful perks come from freebies and barter. When I published a regional magazine for Eastern North Carolina, I wrote the restaurant reviews and the entertainment and travel columns myself.

When I vacationed on the Outer Banks, for instance, I would call ahead, inform various restaurateurs that I would be on the Banks sampling restaurants for review, and ask them what their policy was. I also shared with them my own policy. My magazine was not in the business of trashing restaurants, I pointed out. It was, instead, promotional. (The magazine was founded with the sponsorship of seven chambers of commerce). If I went to an eatery with clumsy waiters and appetizers apparently made from last month's oysters I simply did not write about it. On the other hand, when I liked a place I would praise it in the warmest terms and advise my readers to go there and try it for themselves.

The result: some very fine complimentary dinners for me and my wife and a vacation that cost me much less than it otherwise would have. I will add that I am always scrupulous in delivering the publicity that I promise.

Many tourist attractions have PR offices with standing orders to accommodate visiting journalists with passes. This is true of the "Six Flags" and Busch Gardens-type amusement park. It is true, for instance, of Disney World in Orlando, Florida.

The Barter System: The Joys of "Trading Out"

Much more important than the freebies, however, and perhaps even than the tax advantages, is the barter system that will be open to you as a publisher who sells advertising.

How does it work? Let's say that you are publishing a tabloid or a weekly shopper in a medium-sized town. Naturally you are going to approach every possible advertising prospect and try to convince them that advertising in your publication will give them profit-producing exposure. With many of these prospects you will be able to conclude normal

A very valuable barter system will be open to you as a publisher.

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sales agreements. In other cases, however, your prospects will tell you that they simply can't afford to advertise, no matter how much they would like to. They just don't have the cash.

In such cases you or your sales representative may suggest a "trade-out." You will give the client the advertising space they need. In return you will take a credit at their place of business. At a restaurant you will simply eat out until the credit is depleted. At a motel you will use the credit to provide accommodations for business or personal travel. I once had a large credit at a local motel that I was finding it hard to utilize until my daughter got married and I had to find beds for dozens of out-of-town guests. The trade-out in this case was quite a boon to me.

During one serious downturn in automobile sales, our local Ford dealer was growing desperate. He was paying out large sums in interest for the unsold cars he had on hand and very little cash was coming back in the front door. Yet he needed to run large, relatively expensive ads in my weekly newspaper.

I suggested a strategy that would help. My newspaper needed a station wagon, but we did not have the cash on hand for an adequate down payment. The Ford dealer, I explained, could trade out a \$4000 down payment against advertising lineage in my paper. He agreed to this arrangement. He got the advertising he needed while hanging on to his precious supply of cash. I got my station wagon while hanging on to my own precious supply of cash. Furthermore, I was publishing my newspaper anyway. The dealer would not have been able to advertise otherwise. It cost absolutely nothing to run his ad. My printing cost was the same with or without it.

If you publish a tourism guide, then resort trade-outs can be used for sales incentives (a free weekend at the beach if you reach your goal this month), for client relations and for executive vacations. I have also benefited from trade-outs with bookstores, dry cleaners, office supply houses and many other types of business. The key, of course, is to trade out only when you do not expect to sell advertising under a normal sales agreement, or when you expect only a small ad on a pay-for-space basis and can barter for a much larger one.

Chapter Four / Periodical Types: A Menu of Publishing Opportunities

Local circulation newspapers, tabloids and shoppers fall into five categories: the traditional community weekly; the modified community weekly; the niche market newspaper; the editorially-supported shopper; and the outright shopper, which has no editorial matter at all. Which is right for you? The answer depends in part on your own personality and career goals and in part on the niche markets that you find open to you.

The Full-Fledged Community (Weekly) Newspaper

Community newspapers flourish in small and medium-sized towns all across the county, and they constitute the bedrock of the newspaper trade. Many reporters get their start in weeklies. In fact, many newspapers that are currently dailies also got their start as weeklies and simply grew with their towns. As the towns became cities, the weeklies became dailies.

The community weekly is a real newspaper. As such, its job is to report all the news, to tell what happened last week in the town it serves. There are many good reasons for starting a full-fledged weekly newspaper, but they are almost all of a personal, and not a business, nature. The kind of person who edits and publishes a successful weekly is a person who really cares about his or her community, the things that happen there and the people who live there. One of the best books on publishing weekly newspapers is Bruce Kennedy's *Community Journalism: A Way of Life*.

The subtitle of Kennedy's book — "A Way of Life" — is revealing, for the publication of a true weekly newspaper is indeed a way of life for

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the person who undertakes it. A good weekly newspaper soon becomes an integral part of life of the community, a community asset. People in town soon begin to think of it as “our paper.” When, in conversation, they use the expression “I see by the paper...,” it is the paper you publish that they are referring to. Technically it may be your paper and you alone enjoy its profits and are responsible for its debts, but in reality it is “their paper.” When you hear people start referring to it in that way, you know you are on the right track.

The weekly does everything. It publishes all the hard news of the week, gleaned from police reports, fire reports, city council meetings. It publishes church news, scouting news, civic club news. It publishes social news, especially the weddings that the big dailies no longer cover, complete with full descriptions of the bridal gown, bridesmaids gowns, family attire, reception news, and every other fact of interest that can be gleaned from whatever source is available. Prior to that, news of the engagement will have been published.

There will be a sports page, with school athletic news and features and news of the children’s baseball, softball, soccer and basketball teams. There will be an arts and entertainment section. There will be an editorial page and an op-ed page. There will be a page of legal ads and, of course, a well-developed classified page. All of this takes a great deal of work—often sixty or seventy hours a week of it.

Who Should Publish a Full-Fledged Weekly?

The full-fledged weekly option works best for individuals who are as interested in the publication itself as in the financial rewards it can bring. Writers and editors who hire salespeople to help them with that part of the job will have a head start, and are the ones most likely to choose this option. Publishing entrepreneurs who are not primarily writers often find the niche market publications listed below a more attractive business option — just as profitable, far less time consuming and much easier to publish. Those who come to publishing from a background in sales, for instance, may or may not have a sense of what constitutes good writing and what does not, and of what readers want to read and what they do not want to read.

Fewer Slots Available

Niche market opportunities abound, but opportunities for publishing full-fledged weeklies are more limited. You should look for two things when testing the market for a full-fledged weekly:

- **A growing community with no weekly and no small-town daily.** Such communities most often result from the development of new areas which attract large numbers of new, reasonably affluent residents. I lived for a time in the town of Washington, NC, on the north bank of the Pamlico River. Across the river on the south bank, eight or ten miles away, was the hamlet of Chocowinity. In the last five years the south bank has been the scene of intense real estate development by the Weyerhaeuser Corporation, which for years had bought waterfront timber acreage in the area. Chocowinity now has 1800 residents. It has no newspaper. I believe that a weekly would survive and thrive there. And since it is clearly a growth area, the paper would grow with it.

The population of the town where I published my own community weekly was only 2800 and, as a matter of fact, there was only one discount drug store, and not a very big one at that. There was also a big city daily competing for market share (the *Charlotte Observer*, published just eighteen miles away) as well as a free circulation shopper. Yet my paper was successful, and my family of five derived a comfortable income from it.

- **An advertising base of businesses adequate to support your paper.** The population of Chocowinity and its environs now has the population and purchasing power to make a real weekly newspaper possible. There are local grocery stores that would certainly advertise on a weekly basis, and the larger ones across the river would probably advertise as well.

Pluses of the Full-fledged Weekly

Let's say you do find just such a community. What are the good things

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about running a weekly? This turns out to be a personal as well as a business question. Here is a quick survey of the way I would answer it:

- ❑ The personal satisfaction factor can be quite high. As editor of a weekly newspaper you will take your place among the leaders of your community. The town doctor, the bank president, the head of the local industry and the newspaper editor are all up there together in public esteem. There will be many opportunities for public service: boards and commissions to serve on, civic clubs to join and be active in, churches to go to regularly. If you are a good candidate for running a full-fledged weekly you will be, by temperament, very content to do these things.
- ❑ While running such a paper is clearly not a get-rich-quick scheme, you will be able to pay yourself a very livable, “executive-level” salary by the standards of the place where you live.
- ❑ The long-term value of your newspaper is likely to be very substantial. If your paper has been solidly established over a number of years, and if it has won community acceptance both as an editorial voice and as a vehicle for advertising, it will be a sought-after property. When the time comes to sell the business to someone else and retire, you should be able to realize a handsome profit and so repay yourself for all those long days and weeks you spent getting the paper out issue after issue, well-written, well-designed, and chock-full of advertising. The full-fledged weekly may command a higher price — often two to three times its annual gross — than any of its easier-to-manage periodical cousins.

Disadvantages of This Kind of Weekly

How about the downside. It, too, is both personal and financial in nature.

- ❑ **The ratio of time spent to profit earned** will not normally be as favorable to you as with the other publication types de-

Always
remember this:
money is not
sentimental. It
does not often
take sides. It
seeks only to
multiply itself.

scribed below. You can often make more money, with less effort, publishing niche market tabloids.

- ❑ **Although you will be taking home a good salary**, it is often difficult during the first few years to afford to hire a managing editor to take some of the load off your shoulders and reduce the number of hours you have to spend at the office. You can pay salespeople on commission and many writers by the word, if necessary, but a middle manager will require a livable salary.
- ❑ **If you are really not the kind of person who enjoys** the kind of life that the weekly editor lives, you will be miserable in the job.
- ❑ **You can easily duplicate many niche market publications.** If they work in one community, you can also publish them in another. A chain of them can be established and run by a single individual. A traditional weekly, on the other hand, is rooted so deeply in the character of a single town that it is not possible to duplicate it elsewhere.

One Risky Reason for Starting a Weekly

It sometimes happens that some members of a community may become disgruntled with the editorial stands their community paper takes or with its coverage of social events, sports, or any the category of news. When this happens one inevitably hears grumblings that the community “needs another newspaper.” Maybe the editor of the paper in place is a liberal Democrat and the critics are conservative Republicans — or vice-versa. And people keep telling you that they would “like to see” a competing newspaper and encourage you to start one. This happens more frequently than you might imagine.

Just remember, though, that it is advertisers who will make your publishing business successful. It is the advertisers who spend the money to buy your ads, and money —as I have said elsewhere — is definitely not sentimental. The question you must ask yourself is not “Does the community need another paper?” but “Will the businesses in this community advertise in this paper?” Money does not take sides. It seeks only to multiply itself and make a profit.

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You may consider these hard and even unpleasant truths, but there they are. Advertisers spend money to increase sales, not to “support” one side of an argument over another. When you make a presentation to a major food store chain, their questions will always center on circulation and the cost of space, not whether your editorial page is liberal or conservative in the stands it takes on the issues.

II

The Modified (or Modular) Community Weekly

If there is no market opportunity for a true weekly newspaper in your area, or if you just don’t think you would enjoy owning and editing one, consider the modified community weekly.

The modified weekly represents the best of both worlds. It does not attempt to “cover all the news” as the traditional weekly does, but it does print feature articles about local people and places. These articles can be quite popular and often build a faithful readership. Such a weekly is much easier to produce, and can easily be run, if necessary, by its owner and one other person during a start-up phase. The modified weekly is particularly appropriate where a small town daily already exists. (See my discussion on the unlikely and almost accidental success, *The Scoop*, a modified weekly, in the chapter on niche markets.)

Editorial Content of the Modified Weekly

The modified weekly gives the feeling of covering local happenings far more fully than it actually does, and it does develop a community identity. In this format you establish up front certain news categories. You will generate a fixed number of editorial modules or slots each week. This then becomes the editorial format of your paper. There is no need to rethink it from week to week. Just fill in the blanks. You leave fast-breaking news up to others (TV, dailies, etc.) to cover. You do feature stories only, people-centered whenever possible. You use as much photography as possible. You establish a few regular columns by well-known local personalities, editing or rewriting these as necessary.

There will be a great many local writers eager to get their work into

print and so contribute many of the articles you need. Local authors will enhance the reader interest of your paper, so you will use them whenever possible. There may be a great cook who wants to do a recipe column or a local historian — every town has at least one — who will do an ever-popular weekly article on local history. When you can't find a local author to handle a subject, you can write the articles yourself or buy them from syndicates.

One warning here: when a writer comes to you with a column idea, and you like it, ask to see ten sample columns. There are many short-winded writers who take on long-winded commitments. Such a mix is disastrous. These writers lack follow-through, and you can't afford to deal with them. Just when they are beginning to develop a following, they fail to send in next month's piece.

Readers like to see the same columns in the same place, issue after issue, right where they are supposed to be. They look forward to their favorites and are disappointed when they are not there. They like predictability and permanence. If you have doubts about the long-range commitment of the author of a column, don't begin publishing the item. If you are a good writer with wide-ranging interests you can always write several articles per issue, under various pseudonyms. I once wrote the entire contents of a magazine that I published just to see if I could do it. It worked.

Here are some of the subject matter areas and article types from which you can choose your editorial content:

- ❑ **A profile of some interesting person**, with generous use of pictures: an award-winning gardener, the volunteer of the week at the local hospital, a civic leader, a church leader, an artist—anyone at all who stands out from the ordinary in some special way.
- ❑ **A profile of a new business start-up**: the idea, the people involved, obstacles overcome, prospects, etc. Such stories not only give much needed and deserved recognition to individuals who are putting themselves on the line to make an idea into a reality but, in the long run, create a loyal base of adver-

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Always look for the opportunity to duplicate your publication in other towns or parts of your metropolitan area. The niche market tab is always a good candidate.

tisers for you. Your local daily probably has a policy against doing such stories and often even charges businesses for running the standard ribbon-cutting photo with its brief cutline. But your own weekly newspaper will never forget that behind every business start-up there is a strong human interest story that you can and should print.

- ❑ **A local history column** written by the established (there is always at least one) specialist in the history of your town. Old photos, maps, etc., will do much to heighten reader interest. Such a column is a real winner and will help to establish a loyal readership.
- ❑ **All You Ever Wanted to Know about. . . .** These background articles on items high on the local political agenda will attract readership. Are there environmental questions? Decisions concerning annexation and expansion? Complaints about utility rates? Without taking sides just gather and publish all available facts. This feature could be called the “Citizen’s Notebook,” or something similar.
- ❑ **If local sports is an important subject, publish a column by the high school football coach or basketball coach.** You can’t cover the weekend games; these would be old news by the time you got to them nearly a week later. But the coach’s reflections will draw strong reader interest. A column on golfing by the local pro could be a strong feature.
- ❑ **Community information**, such as school lunches, school schedules, etc. — anything furnished to you in news release format by community organizations.
- ❑ **The list.** Ten most powerful storms; Ten most beautiful women; Ten best cruise buys, etc.
- ❑ **Tests and Quizzes.** How do you rate as a lover? Can you take these deductions? Ten questions on good nutrition, etc.
- ❑ **How to Do It.** As a sidebar to an article on sex in marriage, a sidebar on “Ten Ways You Can Be a Better Lover.”
- ❑ **Information Sources.** Where you can get more detailed information on the subject at hand.

- ❑ **Maps, graphs, graphics.**
- ❑ **Flesh these regular features out with columns purchased from the syndicates** (more about these later) on how-to subjects of wide reader interest: How to Supply Your Own Vegetables from a Backyard Garden; Treasures in the Attic: A Guide to Antique Hunting; Saving Money with Coupons; Furniture Refinishing; How to Write a Family History; Cash in with Free Government Publications; How to Start Your Own Business; How to Supplement Your Income with Your Own Home Business. The possibilities are endless.

Modified weeklies have many of the satisfactions of the traditional weekly but have almost none of the drawbacks.

III

The Niche Market News Tabloid: Weekly or Monthly

The niche market news tabloid publishes news articles and features of interest to its target readership and derives its revenues from advertisers interested in reaching that target readership. Examples include arts and entertainment tabloids, business weeklies, professional specialties (*Hospital Management News*) and many others. Examples of niche market news tabloids are extensively discussed in Chapter 5. These tabloids also develop a fixed editorial format but target all their articles toward their special readership. News releases and new product information releases provide a rich source of publishable material.

Successful niche market news tabloids can easily be duplicated in nearby towns and cities, or in nearby neighborhoods and suburbs of major metropolitan areas.

IV

The Editorially Supported Shopper's Guide

An editorially supported shopper's guide also has some editorial matter to support the advertising it carries, but this editorial matter is not local in its appeal. It has none of the local personality of either the tradi-

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tional or modified weekly but relies on canned articles purchased for syndicates. My own shoppers — *Dollarsworth* and *Bucksworth* — were of this kind. I did not take time to write any of the articles and columns I printed. I bought them from news and feature syndicates, which sell professionally written articles and features prepared at very low prices. All of the reading matter in my shoppers was chosen to appeal to the natural readership of the shopper. None of it was locally written. All of it was purchased from syndicates. These shoppers are even easier to move from neighborhood to neighborhood or from town to town, since even the articles they contain, being generic in content, can be moved right along with it. What kinds of article are best? I recommend articles on such high reader interest subjects as the following:

- Furniture refinishing.
- How to spot real buys in used furniture stores and auctions.
- “Gold in the attic” type articles on book collecting, stamp collecting, and similar subjects.
- Many how-to pieces on doing it better and cheaper yourself.
- Herbal medicine and home remedies, etc.
- Saving money with your own home garden.
- Crossword puzzles and games.
- The editorial mix was sometimes spiced up by surefire crowd pleasers like articles on ghosts, UFO’s, strange phenomena and similar pieces.

Such articles all come ready-made each week in packets mailed directly to you from the syndicates, sometimes in hard copy and sometimes on disk. Your goal in using them is to build readership loyalty, to create talk and discussion, and to give the shopper a shelf-life of at least a few days—all, of course, with a view toward increasing results for your advertisers. Editorial material such as this can also serve to create a market position and a distinct identity for your shopper. It gives your sales rep an easily understood talking point and should sway some advertisers in your favor.

V

The Outright Shopper (No Editorial Copy at All)

Some successful weekly shoppers are published with no editorial copy at all. These will use design principles to hype the money-saving, bargain-hunting aspect of the advertising.

The outright shopper's guide contains ads and nothing but ads, and makes no bones about it. Its pages are crammed as full of advertisements as possible. Layout is secondary. Aesthetics of design are seldom a concern. The shopper promotes sales, bargain hunting, discounts. It is filled with as many clip-out, money-saving coupons as possible (the only place where I really recommend coupons).

The success of these publications is due to the universal desire to buy goods at bargain-basement prices. The ads in such publications proclaim end-of-the-week sales, discounted cars, factory outlets, clearance and close-out sales. All of this is beefed up by scores of classifieds, which always have high reader interest. Typically, classified ads of a certain size will be given free to readers (not to businesses) for the advertisement of personal items for sale, trade, garage sales, etc. This ensures a good flow of these reader-pulling miniatures. Businesses have to pay the going rate.

Success factors for an outright shoppers' guide include the following:

- ❑ **A sufficient advertising base** of businesses that feature frequent sales. Image-enhancement ads for institutions like banks will not appear in these publications. The appeal is strictly to the pocketbook.
- ❑ **An identifiable market position** for your paper that makes it a desirable advertising medium for your customers.
- ❑ **A readership large enough to justify reasonably high ad rates.**
- ❑ **Saturation circulation of your market area**— Shoppers are often mailed, but this is can be expensive and not every market area will require it. A split circulation pattern may be pos-

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“Super Sources” of Information

There are run-of-the-mill sources of information and then there are Super Sources. Both of these categories are valuable to you, but the latter ones are indispensable. This book is a Super Source. Another such source is the magazine *Free Paper Publisher* (pictured on the right), a fairly new publication that is taking its place as the trade magazine of the free paper and niche-market tabloid publishing industry.



Free Paper Publisher is a wonderful source of trade news, success stories, management tips and, above all, for its listing of suppliers to the trade that you will need. It is a sister publication to the venerable *Editor and Publisher*, for many years the trade magazine of the paid circulation daily newspaper industry.

Moreover, *Free Paper Publisher* lists trade associations that you must join: the National Association of Free Community Papers and regional organizations like the Texas Community Newspaper Association and the Southeastern Advertising Publishers Association — to name just two of them.

You will also find suppliers for newspaper racks, classified and specialty software, circulation supplies, advertising services, syndicated features and more.

The web address of *Free Paper Publisher* is <http://www.mediainfo.com>.

This is a magazine you can't afford to be without.

sible, with post office delivery to rural routes and carrier delivery to in-town addresses.

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VI

The All-Classified Version of the Outright Shopper

The outright shopper also exists in an all-classified version. These papers are often in a quarter-fold format, half as large as a tabloid, magazine-sized but still printed on newsprint. Inside you will find only classified line ads and classified display ads. One such shopper — the *Flyer* — comes to me in the mail twice monthly. It is printed on the lightest and cheapest newsprint available. I often throw it away unread, but whenever I am in the market for a kitchen appliance, car or some piece of used office equipment or furniture I always read through it.

The often-seen “car trader,” “boat trader” or “truck trader” publications are examples of all-classified shoppers.

Step-by-step instructions on publishing your own niche market periodicals.

How to Publish Weekly Newspapers, Niche Market Tabloids, and Free Circulation Shoppers.

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