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Reflections on Leadership

Management Tips for the Newsroom

Welcome to "Reflections on Leadership," a weekly essay on newsroom management produced by Newsroom Leadership Group partners Edward and Cynthia Miller.

How Satisfied Are Your Customers?

By Edward Miller

Old methods leave today's customers wanting more

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"Abundance has satisfied, and even over-satisfied, the material needs of millions, boosting the significance of beauty and emotion and accelerating individuals' search for meaning. As more of our basic needs are met, we increasingly expect sophisticated experiences that are emotionally satisfying and meaningful. These experiences will not be simple products. They will be complex combinations of products, services, spaces and information. They will be the ways we get educated, the ways we are entertained, the ways we stay healthy, the ways we share and communicate." (from *A Whole New Mind* by Daniel Pink)

In these unsteady economic times for journalism some of us may feel quite so abundant, but Daniel Pink's point is valid nonetheless: The threshold of satisfaction has changed.

Consider the delivery of news. As recently as the early 1990s, people got their news once a day. Doorstep delivery or scheduled evening broadcasts met all expectations. The Internet changed everything. News, information and social networking available on demand raised standards for delivery, and subsequently, the expectations of customers. What had been routinely accepted for decades became substandard almost overnight.

Consider, too, the competitive environment. The diversity and depth of options offered by cable TV and magazines set new standards for serving devoted partisans. After you've watched the 11 p.m. SportsCenter on ESPN--or its streaming updates all through the night--what added value can you find in your morning newspaper's sports section?

Pink observes that *"we increasingly expect sophisticated experiences that are emotionally satisfying and meaningful."* Newspapers searching for a future should consider:

- What are we still doing that no longer is emotionally satisfying to customers?
- How can we supply more meaning about news, not just a repetition of facts that many customers already know?

In short, how can we provide the experiences that our future customers have already come to expect?

Answering these questions will involve aggressive leadership in three areas:

- A radically new business model to replace the one that has been so successful for the last 75 years but is now dead.
- A switch from journalism-driven to customer-driven thinking. When the late Jim Batten of the late Knight Ridder Newspapers put up a sign declaring, "*We are Customer-Driven*" on the Miami Herald building, it was so unpopular with the staff he had to take it down. It's time to reconsider the primacy of the customer in tomorrow's journalism.
- A passion for innovation. The first two items will only be possible if our cultures shift from bureaucratic hierarchies to entrepreneurial laboratories.

We failed to make these transitions in the best of times. Now we have to make them in the worst of times. It won't be easy. Leaders at all levels will be tested as never before.