

The Boston Courant: Proud not to have a website until the owner sees a profitable end game

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The Boston Courant: Proud not to have a website until the owner sees “a profitable end game” Publisher David Jacobs says he has no interest in the web — at least not until someone else figures out a business model for it.

By Callum BorchersEmail

Eight years ago, David Jacobs, publisher of the weekly Boston Courant, paid a web designer in Ukraine to create a website for his newspaper. On that initial investment, and on subsequent research and development, the Courant spent a total of \$50,000. The result is a slick, user-friendly layout.

But no one — save the Courant’s small staff, a few consultants, and me — has ever seen it.

“I won’t launch until I find a viable business model,” Jacobs told me. “We’ve never come close [to launching].”

BostonCourant.com — or whatever the heck Jacobs might call the site, if he ever buys a domain name for it — exists only on Jacobs’ desktop. The paper has no Twitter feed, no YouTube channel, no mobile app. It sort of has a Facebook page, but only because one was autogenerated from the Courant’s Wikipedia page. The Courant doesn’t control it.

But if the oldfangled Courant is doing journalism all wrong, someone forgot to tell its accountant. Circulation is at 40,000 and rising, the newsroom just moved into a swanky downtown office building, and the paper — which already covers four of Boston’s most affluent neighborhoods — is about to add two new full-time reporters to reach more of the city.

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“We have some major, major expansion plans,” Jacobs said. “One of the primary reasons for it is the fact that we don’t have a website.”

The crux of Jacobs’ argument is this: If the Courant had a website, some segment of its readership would ditch print. The paper wouldn’t lose subscription revenue, since it’s free anyway, but Jacobs strongly believes the digital migration would cripple ad sales. “If I had a website, I don’t know what type of value I could offer my advertisers,” he said.

I summarized Jacobs’ position for Reed Anfinson, the president of the National Newspaper Association. Anfinson said that there are plenty of community newspaper publishers on Jacobs’ side. “The question is what percentage of his income is going to be made off Internet, and what

is he going to lose by going to the Internet?” Anfinson said. “And the odds are that he will make very little revenue off the web and lose a lot of print revenue.”

Anfinson, who publishes the Swift County (Minn.) Monitor-News — which has a website; current lead story: “Unusual animal caught in a raccoon trap in Swift County” — said plenty of community newspapers choose not to ride the digital bandwagon. In Anfinson’s Congressional district, for instance, there are a whopping 120 local papers, but only half, he estimates, have websites. Some are too small; others serve rural areas where Internet penetration remains shallow.

But these explanations hardly apply to the Boston Courant.

“How many millionaires do you think are in my primary coverage area?” Jacobs asked me. I hemmed and hawed, then ventured a guess: a couple thousand maybe. “Ten thousand plus!” Jacobs exclaimed. “I have the sort of readership that advertisers kill for.”

Jacobs believes the Courant, whose strength is in real estate and development news, produces unique content readers struggle to find elsewhere. If people can only read his paper in print, that’s what they’ll do, he says — and they’ll pay more attention to ads they see on newsprint than they would to ads on a screen.

Surveying the newspaper landscape, Jacobs can’t believe more of his colleagues haven’t reached the same conclusion. “This is not rocket science! It’s really not!” he said. “I see all of the other newspapers hemorrhaging. I am amazed that some publisher of a daily newspaper online — maybe not a regional one, like The Boston Globe and Boston.com — but some non-regional daily newspaper has not said, ‘Hey, we’re hemorrhaging money because of the web. Our print advertising is going down. We’re going to stop our website. We have the sort of news that no one can get anywhere else. If they want to get it, they’re going to have to read our newspaper, and our print advertisers are going to love us.’ ... What do you have to lose?”

In a more subdued moment, Jacobs conceded there is something to lose by digital abstinence. Without a website, he said, the Courant misses opportunities to break news between printings. “I was discussing this with one of my reporters yesterday,” Jacobs said. “She really wants to have a website, and I said, ‘Why?’ She said, ‘Because we break so many stories before even the dailies know about them, and if we’re the first to post, we get the recognition.’ I understand that, and no one is more competitive than me.

“But look,” he continued, “it’s a question of tradeoffs. My ego and my staff’s ego — which is very important because we’re all in this to be competitive — versus losing money.”

Jacobs chooses money over ego. For a long time, he chose money over journalism. Jacobs held leadership positions at school newspapers from junior high to college, but when he went to Columbia for graduate school, it was for an MBA, not a journalism degree.

“I got sidetracked for most of my life doing international merchant banking,” Jacobs said. “Believe me, I made a lot more money than I’m making now...And then I guess I reached the point in my life where I said, ‘What do I really want to do when I grow up?’ And it was, ‘You know, I’ve always wanted to be a small-town newspaper publisher.’”

Jacobs started publishing the *Courant* in September 1995 and appears to have found his calling in his second career. But it’s the bottom-line focus developed in his first career that won’t abide a website.

“I love journalism, but I’m also a business man,” Jacobs said, “and I have to stay in business and hopefully not just stay where I am but grow...In business, one of my philosophies has been the first pioneer into enemy territory gets all the arrows. Let someone else pay. I’m not going to experiment unless I see a profitable end game. And the bottom line there is I see no possible way to benefit my print advertisers, who pay my reporters’ salaries and my overhead, by having a website.”

The *Courant*’s profit margin over the last two years has been “excellent,” Jacobs said, though he declined to quantify his paper’s success. “It’s enough that I’m expanding,” he offered, with a smile. “It’s all being done through retained earnings.”

In Jacobs’ mind, the print-only model ain’t broke, so he ain’t going to fix it. But for all his disparaging comments about digital media — “Right now they’re just toys, and no one knows how to play with them,” he told me — Jacobs is genuinely hopeful that some paper somewhere will develop a digital business strategy that can replicate the financial rewards of print.

“I’m praying that after all the investment, and all of the education at places like Columbia’s j-school, and all of the experiments that are going on at dailies and weeklies, that something’s gonna come of it,” he said. “But God knows what. As soon as we are able to develop a successful business model in-house, or a comparable newspaper comes up with a definite business model, I’ll launch a website within weeks.”