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**American Hometown
PUBLISHING***Honoring Community Journalism*

Company aims to preserve community newspapers

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NEWS EDITOR

Across America, non-daily and small daily newspapers struggle to survive financially while their staffs perform a great labor of love to inform and serve their communities.

All too often, those newspapers are swallowed up by large media companies that make them profitable by laying off staff, slashing other costs and filling the pages with stories that don't reflect the communities' local needs and interests, according to American Hometown Publishing chairman L. Daniel Hammond.

American Hometown Publishing's mission is to do the opposite, Hammond explained Thursday during an interview and in comments to employees of The Coalfield Progress, The Post and The Dickenson Star.

This company will grow its publications not by slashing costs and content, but by finding innovative ways to increase revenue and strengthen their service to their communities, said Hammond, the company's chief executive officer.

The three local papers formerly owned by The Norton Press Inc. are American Hometown Publishing's first acquisitions, according to Hammond. As the sale was being announced Thursday, Hammond confirmed that the company also is wrapping up details of acquiring two Oklahoma newspapers.

The company intends to focus on non-daily and some smaller daily papers with circulation of 25,000 or less, he said.

► Hometown

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A NEW FAMILY

The sale of The Norton Press is the story of a family business changing hands, but it also marks the creation of a new model for how media companies run community newspapers, Hammond told employees.

Often, large media firms concentrate only on cutting costs, with little or no regard for helping their publications grow, he said. Also, such firms often put their own managers and editors in leadership positions, where they make editorial decisions with little or no knowledge of the communities they serve.

American Hometown Publishing's philosophy is very different, according to Hammond.

The company is led by a team with a commitment to the integrity of community newspapers that already do a great job for their readers, he said. Company executives bring many years of experience in publishing, marketing and finance, along with hundreds of fresh ideas for financial strength and growth.

American Hometown Publishing's newspapers will become a "band of brothers," continuing to be managed and edited day-to-day by local people who know their readers and share one philosophy — and a wealth of good ideas — for serving their communities, Hammond emphasized.

The company's management team in Nashville, Tenn., will not — indeed, cannot — dictate how the publications report the news, or influence the positions they stake out on their opinion pages, he said. Those decisions must be made by people already familiar with their readers' needs, he said.

When a newspaper's editorial decisions are made by long dis-

tance, "it allows them to be insensitive" to the community, he said.

Further, the company will not force its publications to substitute canned national stories for locally reported news, he said. The strength of these papers is in the unique product they deliver to readers. "You can't go anywhere else to find out who the homecoming queen in Norton is," he said.

The proof is in readers' reactions, Hammond noted. It has become clear to him that readers of The Coalfield Progress, The Post and The Dickenson Star have a strong sense of "ownership" toward their community newspapers, and are quick to express strong opinions about their content, he said.

COMMUNITY COMMITMENT

Hammond's philosophy about the strength of community newspapers took shape as he grew up in Noblesville, Ind., a small suburb of Indianapolis.

He admits local kids called it "Nowheresville," but says that in fact Noblesville was and is "a great place" whose population grew from about 6,000 when he lived there to more than 20,000.

Hammond said he grew up reading the Noblesville Daily Ledger, which was eventually bought by a well-known national newspaper chain. The company promptly converted it to a weekly, slashed costs and forced readers to buy two-for-one subscriptions that included a large Indianapolis daily it also owned.



◀ **After talking with employees, American Hometown Publishing Chairman L. Daniel Hammond talked with reporters for today's story.**

DONNIE SORAH
PHOTO

"Readers weren't happy," Hammond said, and pairing the two papers shifted some advertising revenue away from the smaller publication to the larger one.

In response, competitors launched a new local paper to fill the void. It now has circulation of 7,000 and is doing well, he said.

After successful careers in advertising and corporate marketing, Hammond found a new mis-

sion when a friend asked him an intriguing question: Why do major media outlets and advertisers ignore small communities?

In 1991, he began years of intensive research and planning that culminated in 2000 with the inaugural edition of American Profile, the four-color newspaper magazine that appears in The Coalfield Progress and in The Dickinson Star each week.

At first glance, American Profile looks similar to Parade and USA Weekend, which are inserted in the Sunday edition of many daily papers nationwide. But the comparison ends there.

American Profile is dedicated to presenting features that appeal to readers in the small cities and towns that advertisers call "C" and "D" markets, regions with fewer than 80,000 residents.

Hammond noted that 33 percent of the United States population lives in 7,000 small communities such as Wise County, which he called the "economic shock

absorbers for the country." The magazine's most popular features, he said, are reader-submitted recipes and "Hometown Hero," which spotlights ordinary people who quietly do a lot to make a big difference in their communities.

American Profile's creators decided early on to fill its pages only with good news. It was designed to celebrate what's great about hometown life, while relying on the locally owned newspapers that carry it to tackle the sometimes difficult stories that directly affect their communities, Hammond explained.

The formula worked beyond Hammond's dreams. American Profile is considered the second-largest publishing launch in U.S. history, with an initial circulation of more than 1.2 million in 2000. It is now the fourth largest publication in North America.

In 2003, Hammond stepped down from leadership of American Profile's owner, Publishing Group of America, to pursue the answer

to another life-changing question asked by another friend.

A former president of the National Newspaper Association said Hammond probably knew more community publishers than anyone else he could think of.

Hammond's friend lamented the fact that locally owned, community-committed newspapers were becoming a thing of the past, gobbled up by companies that gutted them to cut costs and make a fast profit at the expense of quality.

The friend asked Hammond: Is it possible to build a media company that is the antithesis of the slash-and-burn conglomerate, a company that strengthens community papers while preserving all the things they do well?

"I didn't have the answer," Hammond said. "But I did get the same feeling I got in 1991," when American Profile became his dream, he added. Now, he believes, he has found the answer. And it is beginning in Norton, Big Stone Gap and Clintwood. ▲