

# Generating revenue with integrity

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## **Upholding and Updating Ethical Standards, a seminar underwritten by the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation**

One of journalism's clearest and most unanimous ethical needs has been to protect the integrity of our content from being tainted by our need to generate revenue. Reporters and editors have had to explain again and again to advertisers (and sometimes to publishers, advertising managers and sales representatives) that buying ad space does not give a business (or any other buyer) any influence or control over news or editorial content. To protect journalistic integrity, news organizations developed organizational silos dividing newsrooms from advertising staffs, with little or no contact between colleagues in those departments.

While integrity remains as important as ever, we also have to acknowledge that journalism also has been harmed by the failure of the newspaper industry (and other media involved with traditional journalism) to innovate. With revenues declining significantly, newsrooms have been cutting staff throughout the industry. The quality of journalism has been harmed by individual organizations' failure to develop new revenue streams. With space and staff for business coverage being reduced as news staffs cut back, efforts to generate revenue relate directly to our ability to provide the journalism whose integrity we're trying to protect.

## **Cooperate in innovation**

Collaboration with colleagues from other departments in developing new products is not an inherent conflict of interests. If you develop a print or online product focused on an issue such as health or business-to-business interests, you want to ensure the success of the product. Journalists, advertising managers and IT staff should work together to develop a product that will build a niche audience in your community and generate the revenue streams necessary to finance the journalism. You can and should be involved in the *how* of generating revenue, suggesting ways to reach target audiences and ways to serve business needs beyond the traditional advertising model. Where you need to draw the line is to avoid involvement in the *who* of generating revenue. You shouldn't care which businesses support a publication or digital product, even if you are closely involved in planning the business model of the product.

As you work in plans for new products, keep in mind the time-honored ethical principles of the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics:

- **Seek truth and report it.** Would any of your innovation plans interfere with efforts to seek truth and report it? Some efforts to rely on user-generated content would give a forum to people seeking to distort the truth or to report false information. If so, you should lead discussion of efforts to enable other users to respond and report abuse. Also, seek ways to use the interactivity to help you find and report the truth. For instance, crowdsourcing gives people in the community who know the truth easy ways to contact

you and provide the documentation and proof that will help you report the truth more reliably.

- **Minimize harm.** Consider whether the innovation efforts hinder your ability to minimize the harm publicity can sometimes cause to innocent people.
- **Act independently.** This is the traditional area of concern where revenue sources have raised issues of journalism ethics. Even in the print-only days, the traditional divisions between news and advertising were never a guarantee that reporters or editors would not feel pressure from an advertiser seeking favorable publicity or seeking to avoid negative publicity. As you develop new products and new ways of reaching your community, discuss whether and how these innovation efforts might affect your independence.
- **Be accountable.** Make sure that accountability and transparency are part of your innovation efforts. Products using anonymous comments or user-submitted content are an inviting target for public-relations agents to get free publicity. If you require registration and identification in such products, you increase accountability.