

Come and get it

# HOW ABOUT FREE? DOES FREE WORK FOR YOU?

Syndicated business model takes cue from free Internet content

BY ROB TORNOE

**N**EWSPAPERS HAVE TAKEN A DRUBBING FROM THE VAST array of free content available on the Internet, but now a variety of syndicates offering free content has developed to help cost-minded publications embrace “free” and use it to their advantage.

One such company, Family Features, provides free editorial content that spans a variety of lifestyle themes, including food, seasonal and home & garden.

The syndicate’s team of writers, who work in AP style and many of whom possess newspaper experience, develop content in conjunction with nationally recognized corporate sponsors, commodity boards and associations.

“Many of us at Family Features come from journalism jobs, so we are familiar with what is seasonal and timely,” says Stephanie Carey, a Family Features account manager.

So how does the syndicate make money? By including names and products by such nationally recognized advertisers and sponsors as General Mills, Cold Stone Creamery and American Greetings,

among others. For example, one recent article involving landscaping your backyard using concrete walkways included a link to Quickrete.com for more project ideas.

The copyright-free content produced by Family Features is provided to editors in camera-ready and unformatted features, syndicated columns, special sections and Web solutions. Templates are also offered, to let editors localize the content.

“When we have information about a particular local aspect of any story, we offer that information on our Website,” says Carey. The content can also be used as a “story starter” for any publication that wishes to include local content, interviews and photos.

In business since 1974, Family Features has about 4,500 print and online media outlets currently using its content. Many editors, like Barbara Sauers, managing editor of *The Star Democrat* in Easton, Md., use the free content to help supplement their lifestyle sections. “They have a great service,” she says. “The layouts are nice, and we receive a lot of reader reaction when we run their pages. Readers enjoy them.”

Another company offering free content to newspapers is Just a Pinch media, started by industry veteran L.

Daniel Hammond. In 2000, Hammond launched *American Profile*, a *Parade*-like supplement aimed at small-town community papers. By the time he sold it and a home-cooking supplement called *Relish* to Shamrock and Bain Capital in 2007, *American Profile* boasted a 1.1-million circulation.

Hammond, wanted to create a way to tap into the kitchens of rural housewives and give them a way to share with one another. “The concept was that we could create one of the largest online recipe-swapping communities, targeting rural housewives,” he says.

Hammond’s plan has been a big success among readers. Ten thousand recipes were swapped in the first month alone, and after three months the site was up to 1.3 million page views a month and growing. More than 110,000 readers have created a profile on the site.

Users, he says, “love being able to pose cooking and ingredient questions directly to a recipe submitter or going to the Town Square where they can chat with other cooks about everything from Sunday dinners to fresh veggies.” Online coupons more than make up for the cost of a monthly membership, he adds.

Hammond uses content from the recipe club and offers it to newspapers for free in two weekly hometown food columns, “Just a Pinch” and “Janet’s Notebook.” The response has been strong from newspapers looking to trim costs while continuing to provide local, relevant editorial content.

“Just a Pinch” has no precise method of tracking how many publications are using its content, but according to Hammond about 1,000 newspapers have signed up to use the site. The content is e-mailed to publishers once a week, who are not required to use any of the columns they are provided.

“Just a Pinch” also awards blue ribbons to recipe club members for outstanding recipes and sends a press release to the creator’s hometown newspapers. Some have run just the release, but most make it into a staff-written feature.

“Unlike the celebrity food shows and Websites,” Hammond says, “Just A Pinch Recipe Club is fed and nurtured by people in towns across America.”

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