

Water Tested, Flood Approved

by Heidi Ernst
Photo by Mark Tade



Partnerships and digital technology help The Gazette deliver disaster coverage in new ways

Even though the waters of the Cedar River were lapping at the doorstep of The Gazette in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, last June, trial by fire ruled the day and many weeks afterward.

Editor Steve Buttry hadn't had a chance to read The Gazette's business contingency plan yet—"I was just finding out where the restrooms were," he says—when, three days into his new

job, a historic flood devastated the city. "At my first staff meeting, on Tuesday [June 10], I was thinking I was laying the groundwork for years at The Gazette," says Buttry. "And I was, but it was also for Thursday morning."

Beginning at 3 a.m. that day, when the mobile journalist for the newspaper's Web site, www.gazetteonline.com, was first to arrive at work, the entire staff would face test after test. For weeks, portable toilets, generators and bottled water were the norm. The Gazette had a trial disaster run in July 2004, when an electrical fire wiped out power for one day, but it couldn't

Left to right: Jason Kristufek, Peg Schmitz, Chuck Peters, Dave Storey, Scott Swenson, Steve Buttry and Ron Bode.

compare with the need for tetanus shots, respirators and waders for reporters and photographers navigating contaminated waters.

The entire team at Gazette Communications—which includes the newspaper, ABC affiliate KCRG-TV and Color Web Printers, the company's printing division—rallied to create products that advanced the basics of news gathering and sharing and stunned visually. The company **30 >>**

<< 29 also broke technological ground, reinforcing a new mission for this already strong regional brand.

“We understand better why we need to be a multiplatform informational company,” says Publisher Dave Storey. The flood proved “you need to have all these channels available and robust so people can access information according to what they need.”

Changing technology is one reason The Gazette hired Buttry earlier this year. At the American Press Institute in Reston, Va., where Buttry was director of tailored programs, he developed the Complete Community Connection concept, which explores “the possibilities of digital technology, not just with news content but in the business model itself,” he says. It also integrates digital and print, and that’s just what happened on the fly in June.

“Internally, this was the wake-up call,” says Jason Kristufek, online operations editor. “Feature reporters used to spending days covering a story were going somewhere and giving tidbits of what they were seeing right then, then minutes later giving more. A forced change in behavior helped lead to a change in mindset.”

The most prominent picture of the disaster, which became the newspaper’s double-truck front-page cover (below) on Friday, June 13, was a product of investments the paper had already made in mobile journalism, says Chuck Peters, president and chief executive officer of Gazette Communications and The Gazette

Co. When the photo was chosen for page one and editors needed the image in a higher resolution, staff photographer Liz Martin was off-duty in Iowa City. But because of the laptop and cellular modem photographers carry, she was able to send the original file from there.

Emphasizing multimedia and live coverage throughout the worst of the flood, Kristufek’s online team of five led their first-ever live webcast and webcam coverage, sent 19 breaking-news text messages within 36 hours over a year-old service whose subscriptions rose 50 percent to 12,000, and created a flood news feed on its GazetteToGo mobile site. Kristufek redesigned the home page for quicker access to flood information, a 10-hour job, which he recommends papers do in advance of big stories.

Before the flood, normal online traffic was 110,000 page views per day, Buttry says; on June 12, traffic hit 1.5 million. In November, daily page views were still above normal, at 122,000.

Flood coverage continues, headed by a disaster team. Nearly every day, flood-related stories appear online and in print, often on page one. Online databases include business relocation information and Federal Emergency Management Agency buyout requests. At presstime, a 12-page special section, plus an online map with links from addresses of dislocated families to their photos and audio stories, was scheduled for the flood’s six-month anniversary in December.

Technologically, newsroom employees have continued to apply what they

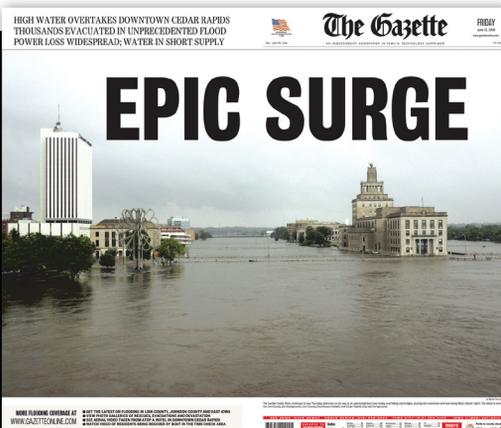
learned during the disaster. Buttry created a social-media guide position last fall and says the paper “Twittered like crazy” on Election Day in addition to producing live blogs and online chats.

The circulation department has likewise recovered. As waters crested, 1,350 subscribers were unreachable because of flooded roads. Still, customers in deliverable homes in all 19 counties of The Gazette’s circulation area received their papers within 30 minutes of their usual arrival, says Scott Swenson, vice president of circulation. In the days that followed, adjustments, such as going to press earlier, continued to result in on-time deliveries. All but 200 of the 1,350 lost subscribers have restarted delivery.

But because of the quality of flood coverage, the community connection and those dependable deliveries, plus election interest, says Swenson, subscription sales also have increased more than 30 percent in 2008 compared with 2007.

The advertising department wasn’t as fortunate at first, starting with an immediate six-figure revenue loss in June, says Advertising Director Ron Bode. By mid-November, Bode reports that the “negative impact is starting to shrink as more businesses open up, especially downtown.”

As evidence, businesses both downtown and farther away, extending to Iowa City, are advertising in an entertainment publication created by The Gazette’s newly formed niche-product-development group. Hoopla, a newsprint tabloid and accompanying Web site, www.HooplaNow.



VITAL STATS

OWNERSHIP | GAZETTE COMMUNICATIONS

AVERAGE DAILY CIRCULATION | 57,883

SUNDAY CIRCULATION | 71,732

EMPLOYEES | 470 full time; 117 part time

UNIQUE MONTHLY WEB VISITORS | 294,310

ONLINE MONTHLY PAGE VIEWS | 3,009,843

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com, targeting 20- to-35-year-olds, more than doubled its page-count goal for its first prototype issue in October. Weekly printing was scheduled to begin in early December. One reason for Hoopla's initial success, Bode says, is advertisers' overall appreciation of the amount of "good local content in The Gazette and outstanding color reproduction."

Key to The Gazette's flood coverage and recovery has been its press, located at Color Web Printers. Seven miles south of downtown and dry as a bone during the flood, the operation not only printed thousands of additional copies every day for more than a week but did so while also printing as many as 45,000 daily copies of The Courier in Waterloo, Iowa, because the paper's flooded basement prevented operating the press.

Color Web, which uses an 11-tower Goss Universal 70 press, had long ago proposed printing partnerships to regional newspapers, including The Courier. "What

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— DAVE STOREY,
THE GAZETTE

was proven out in the flood," says Peg Schmitz, vice president and general manager of Color Web, in addition to completing the job, "is that our invoice was accurate to what we proposed, and we worked well together." The Courier, which also shares a national ad sales contractor with The Gazette and the Telegraph Herald in Dubuque, Iowa, came on as a full-time printing client in October.

Across the board, partnerships are more prevalent since the flood, partly as a result

of how The Gazette operated in June and partly because of the slowing economy. In circulation, for instance, a few papers within 100 miles are beginning to discuss sharing transportation, carriers and other functions such as call centers.

Partnerships are what kept the 125-year-old Gazette afloat in June and do so now. "We were living up to what great newspapers do, and we certainly have examples [of impressive disaster coverage] not just from privately-owned papers like ours," Buttry says.

"Our community was in dire straits, but, by God, their newspaper was there on their porch in the morning," Buttry notes. "That deepened a connection we had, so we're going to be able to do some things they're maybe not going to like as we change the paper and shift more resources to the digital marketplace. But we have a brand with some value, and we can take some risks with it." ■

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