



# A Commitment To Service

Embracing ownership changes, the Idaho Statesman reaches out to its community

by Heidi Ernst | Photo by Joe Jaszewski

**I**n 1864, business leaders in Boise literally stopped the press to bring a newspaper to their booming town of 1,000 residents. They persuaded a printer who was passing through to set up the press in his wagon.

In what would become the daily Idaho Statesman, the first editorial argued for “the hugest war that can be waged” against slavery and the Confederate rebellion.

The stance started what Publisher Mi-Ai Parrish calls the newspaper’s “strong public voice and commitment to the community to be a watchdog,” traditions that have endured through 144 years and several recent ownership changes. When The McClatchy Co. in Sacramento purchased

the Statesman in June 2006 as part of the company’s acquisition of Knight Ridder, McClatchy became the paper’s third owner within a year. Knight Ridder had acquired the paper in August 2005 from Gannett Co. in McLean, Va., which had operated the Statesman since 1971.

Top management reflects the recent proprietors.

Parrish arrived in 2006 from the Star Tribune in Minneapolis, then McClatchy’s largest newspaper property, where she was deputy managing editor for features and visuals; Editor Vicki S. Gowler, a Knight Ridder alumna and former editor of the Pioneer Press in St. Paul, arrived after the Statesman’s 2005 acquisition; and Travis Quast, vice president of sales and marketing, was classified advertising manager under Gannett’s ownership of the paper. But much of the staff has stayed constant.

“There was a lot of uncertainty,” Quast says. “For most people, Gannett was

all they knew. We were welcomed into Knight Ridder and quickly embraced their culture. Then the transition to McClatchy was much easier since we had recently been through it. We realized we all still had jobs to do.”

Guided by four main goals—grow IdahoStatesman.com, strengthen the Sunday edition, ensure a smooth transition to the McClatchy culture and reinforce the paper’s commitment to the community—the staff has implemented several changes since the most recent ownership switch. A gradual redesign drew on the work of a consultant who helped to set visual priorities, Parrish says, and make the paper “visually reflective of the [Treasure] Valley,” an area of about 550,000 people served by the Statesman.

A previously bright color palette, for instance, was changed to sages and sands to indicate Boise’s location in the high plains desert. A staff member created a

From left: Mi-Ai Parrish, Frank Peak, Vicki S. Gowler and Travis Quast.

capitol dome logo to show Boise's status as Idaho's capital, and a new "elegant and clean" font reflects that the town is a "very western, straightforward, no-nonsense kind of place," Parrish says.

In September 2006, the Sunday paper was redesigned, a new masthead was approved and additional national and world content was added to the front page of the first of two news sections for all editions. A 176-page quarterly magazine, "Idaho Health," was launched the next month. Other updates, such as ending a weekly tabloid insert, Our Towns, which covered two local communities, and switching to zoned hyperlocal coverage in the main news section, were implemented in January and February 2007. A web-width reduction from 50 inches to 48 inches helped to complete the redesign last July.

Because of the gradual changes, readers' complaints about the redesign were minimal. "I honestly don't recall more than 10 calls," says Circulation Director Frank Peak. "Nobody could wake up one morning and [ask], 'Where's the paper I used to like?'"

Under Gannett's leadership, the Statesman had created a free publication for young readers that Knight Ridder molded into Thrive, a lifestyle and entertainment guide for active urban adults. But the 24,000-distribution Thrive was actually created by people in the Statesman's newsroom.

Thrive's editor was also editor of Scene, the paper's weekend section. In an effort to decrease competition, combine resources and create a stronger brand, the Statesman absorbed Thrive's staff of two full-time and four part-time employees last summer. Delivered with the Statesman on Friday, Scene also is available for free at the 570-plus locations where Thrive had been distributed.

As the only daily paper in Boise, the Statesman has little local competition, especially compared with places like the Twin Cities, where Parrish, Gowler and Peak had worked. "I did sense a bit of a lack of urgency" when I arrived, says Gowler, who leads an upgraded Web pres-



## VITAL STATS

**OWNERSHIP** | The McClatchy Co.

**AVERAGE DAILY CIRCULATION**  
63,661

**SUNDAY CIRCULATION** | 83,787

**ONLINE MONTHLY PAGE VIEWS**  
More than 6.5 million

**EMPLOYEES** | 288 full time;  
74 part time

**CONNECTIONS** | 1200 N. Curtis  
Road, Boise, Idaho 83706,  
(800) 635-8934,  
www.idahostatesman.com

ence that competes primarily with other real-time media such as TV and radio.

IdahoStatesman.com was redesigned in February 2007 with more value-added content, such as blog-like daily posts and weekly video from outdoors reporters, plus breaking news throughout the day. In September, more sophisticated blogs and opportunities for story comments were created. All photographers and four reporters (of about 30) shoot video. In October, Quast's department launched Top Jobs, video-based online employment classifieds.

The site received a big prelaunch test in January last year when the Boise State University Broncos football team upset the University of Oklahoma Sooners in overtime to win the Fiesta Bowl. Page views tripled to almost 750,000, and the event set a single-copy sales record for 2007. Nearly 32,000 single copies were sold, Peak says, almost four times the volume for a typical Tuesday. "We were

overwhelmed," Gowler says.

Then in August, Roll Call, a Capitol Hill newspaper, broke news of the arrest of U.S. Sen. Larry Craig (R-Idaho) in the Minneapolis airport. The Statesman Web site logged more than 840,000 page views the day after Roll Call's story appeared. The Statesman ran a 3,800-word article in print and online that day by political columnist Dan Popkey acknowledging Roll Call's scoop and explaining similar leads Popkey had been tracking during a five-month investigation.

"We committed the time and resources [to the investigation] because we felt it was important, not only for the senator, because rumors had swirled around him for more than two decades, but [also] for our state and community," Parrish says. A story hadn't yet met the paper's standards for publication because of "unsubstantiated rumor and unnamed sources," Parrish adds, plus a denial from the senator in May. "[But Roll Call's article] was so relevant that it was appropriate to publish what we felt was publishable, including context, history, interviews."

Reporting from the newspaper's Boise newsroom and by its new Washington McClatchy correspondent, helped bolster the Statesman's story and make the paper the authoritative voice. Locally, advertisers and readers "saw us as a credible news source," Quast says, "and people respected us for doing the right things for the right reasons."

Two months after the paper's first story about the senator's arrest, monthly unique visitors to IdahoStatesman.com remained around 740,000.

Quast says advertisers have welcomed the paper's recent changes. While many products are too new to offer evidence in terms of revenue, he says, advertisers' attitudes demonstrate that they "see the McClatchy approach of making a better product for our readers with a local market perspective."

Readers aren't too concerned about who owns the paper, Parrish says, just that the product is first-rate. Overall, she notes, the publishing company, the newsroom, advertisers and readers all seek what the paper is striving to deliver: "a commitment to quality journalism." ■