

Marginal Costs and Editorial Spinoff: A Case History

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ROBERT WACKER, the bigtime freelance writer who spoke at the Northeast AAACE meeting in New York, made a point that bears repeating. He spoke of the slowness of research and writing and the need to keep selling. One of his solutions to this input-output problem is editorial spinoff, the sale of several pieces on the same general topic.

Without unduly upsetting any of the descendants of Adam Smith, this is third cousin to the marginal cost theory — a little extra revenue for a little extra effort.

A fresh angle often means an extra sale. Wacker mentioned a fellow freelancer who had become such an authority on private detectives that the vein was temporarily played out for everyone else. The writer had simply done everything from lady detectives to the horoscope of the private eye.

Is there a lesson there for us? Couldn't we emulate the housewife of yore who served chicken on Sunday and followed it with chicken and gravy, chicken sandwiches, and chicken soup, all of them genuinely finger-lickin' good?

Not to keep anyone in suspense, the answer here is yes. Obviously we should get maximum mileage out of our articles, if only to keep our conscience clear when we exhort the farmer and homemaker to as yet undreamed of heights of efficiency.

Despite our realization that communications involve the total actions of the total person, something of the fragmented approach

has crept into our profession. Most of us have a narrow specialty — we're radio editors, or TV editors, or news editors, etc. We work on the clients' eyeballs or ears.

This has obvious advantages in terms of communication skills and yet is terribly wasteful in preparation time. While the news editor is reading up on high-moisture corn to be able to interview intelligently, the TV editor may be doing the same thing.

In this day of specialization, there aren't many men who can do it all, with professional skill, right across the board. Maximum mileage, then, becomes a question of mental attitude rather than roaming across the media range. We need the determination to get as much use out of our preparation and interviews as the freelancers do.

As a wise old Sioux chief might have said, it's even fun.

Case History Provides Example

Let me offer a case history from my files. In fact, I'll come right out with it — it happened to me.

Like so many others, I recently returned to the academic shop for a repaint job. Not without some reluctance, I'll admit. Once there, of course, the right teachers began to work their usual magic and I not only enjoyed my courses but wanted to share them. (And hasn't everyone got a few term papers he wishes someone else would read?)

Courses in agricultural economics seemed particularly suitable for general consumption since there's a need both for the public to understand modern agriculture and for farmers themselves to understand modern financial issues and policies.

Armed with a clutch of term papers, all in proper polysyllabics, I removed my academic hat, hoisted the editorial skull and crossbones, and applied the hatchet techniques of editorial rewrite. I mean like it was somebody else's gibberish instead of my own pearls. I cried a lot but I got my beautiful term papers into about 12 pages of red-pencilled copy. Enough for a tight series of six articles.

Next I began to negotiate with not one, not two, but three live economists since I had — er, ah — put my series in the form of interviews. This wasn't quite as prolonged as the Viet Nam peace talks, but not done on the stairs either. It seems that economists don't always agree with each other, to say nothing of editors.

I ended up with 16 pages and a series of eight articles. This is not as neat a package as six, enough for one week, but compromise is part of the editorial art. (I tried to remember that I was quoting them and they tried to remember that I was signing the articles.)

Next we took pictures, using a book shelf for a backdrop of our serious economists and a conference table for an interview shot. Finally, we gave the series special treatment. This included a mailing with a personal note to each editor in the state, suggesting that the series be run on the editorial page with other columns of opinion. Acceptance was about 50 per cent. One weekly ran everything at once on one beautifully spectacular page.

At this point, the economists began to think of a bulletin for use at meetings and in the classroom. Preliminary study indicated that audience size wouldn't justify cost. As a substitute, we mimeographed a special cover, ran off extra copies of the news articles, and had an instant, low-cost handout for discussion groups.

Radio Offered Further Potential

Jack Spaven, our editor, then suggested that the material might have possibilities for radio.

In a few hours, I was able to pencil down my series into radio scripts and voice them. My ever faithful economists then assembled for the audition. Being rather conditioned by this time, they accepted all but one, which we reworked.

At this point I had academic credit for my term papers, a newspaper series, a full page in a weekly, a handout, and radio tapes.

So why not a magazine?

Dairy Herd Management was an obvious market because it specializes in management issues and aims at the top producers. The editors accepted a boiled-down version of the news articles almost without a change, although they did reject my homemade graphs. (If I were doing it again I'd ask our artist, overworked though she is, to add the professional touch.)

Cooperative as always, one of my stable of economists then passed along news that the Federal Extension Service was looking for policy articles. We sent tear sheets of the DHM article, clicked, and an offset reprint resulted. This now permits us to have a bulletin in limited quantity at a price we can afford.

While all of this was going on, the editor of our own three-times-a-year quarterly needed an editorial on agricultural policy. By now I was having coffee with the economists and mentally playing the stock market while they were at my desk reading the comics and taking care of my other duties. So I wrote the editorial which was, if you're scoring, a boiled-down version of the magazine article, as condensed from the newspaper series that broadstroked several term papers.

And there the matter rests, although there is vague talk of an hour-long show on educational television or a few spots on our daily program.

The moral?

Copy the freelancers and go all the way with your material. You'll increase both your professional output and your personal satisfaction.

You might even get an article for *ACE* from the experience.

Who knows what lecture tours may follow?