

Big Daily's 'Hyperlocal' Flop

LoudounExtra.com Fails to Give Lift To Washington Post

BY RUSSELL ADAMS

FOR BELIEVERS in the power of rigorous local coverage to help save newspapers, the Washington Post's launch of LoudounExtra.com last July was a potentially industry-defining event. It paired a journalistic powerhouse with a dream team of Internet geeks to build a virtual town square for one of Virginia's and the nation's most-affluent and fastest-growing counties.

Almost a year later, however, the Web site is still searching for an audience. Its chief architect just announced he is leaving for another venture in Las Vegas and taking his team with him. And while Post executives say they remain committed to providing so-called hyperlocal news coverage, they are re-evaluating their approach.

"It's too early for us to put any kind of stamp on it as a success or failure," said Jim Brady, executive editor of Washingtonpost.com, a unit of Washington Post Co. "We're just going to keep experimenting," he added.

Like hundreds of other hyperlocal sites launched in the past few years, LoudounExtra.com reflects a basic premise: Metro newspapers probably can't compete with the Internet or cable TV in covering breaking national and international news, but they can dominate what happens in their backyards.

LoudounExtra.com offers detailed databases including every



The Washington Post saw LoudounExtra.com as a chance to re-engage local readers.

church, restaurant and school in Loudoun County, about 25 miles west of Washington, D.C. It embraces the idea that a high-school prom is as newsworthy as a debate over where to build a hospital, and that Little League deserves major-league attention. And it promises to let visitors to the site shape the news through blogs and photo and video submissions.

But LoudounExtra.com remains little more than a skeleton of the site its architects pledged to build. One reason: the team of outsiders didn't do enough to familiarize itself with Loudoun County or engage its 270,000 residents.

The Washington Post, perhaps best known for exposing the Watergate scandal, is among the few American newspapers that boost a local, national and international audience. About 85% of the more than nine mil-

lion monthly visitors to Washingtonpost.com live outside the Washington area. Many of them come to the site trolling for political and overseas news.

But the Post's local readership has been its great strength: Though its weekday print circulation has plummeted by about 19% since 2000 to an average of about 635,087 it continues to reach a higher percentage of local readers than many other big dailies. That encouraged the newspaper, which has won 47 Pulitzer Prizes, to look to coverage of local American Legion meetings and T-ball games as a potential source of growth.

This is a turbulent time for Washington Post Co., which until recently was one of the newspaper industry's symbols of stability. The company's hugely profitable Kaplan higher-education business had helped to offset the advertising and circulation declines that have led to massive staff cuts at newspapers around the country. But steep declines in circulation and

ad revenue at the Post and at sister publication Newsweek forced the company to shed more than 200 jobs through voluntary buyouts earlier this year.

Against that backdrop, Post executives decided a couple of years ago that

it had an opportunity to re-engage its local subscribers. "We have learned a great deal from the Web operations of small papers," Don Graham, the chief executive and chairman of the board of Washington Post Co., said in a published report.

In 2006, Mr. Graham hired Rob Curley, who had built Web sites for smaller papers in Kansas, Mo., and Florida and by that time had emerged as the hyperlocal movement's biggest star. Perhaps his biggest success was the Lawrence (Kan.) Journal-World's KUSports.com, a site dedicated to University of Kansas sports that grew during Mr. Curley's three-year reign from 500,000 monthly page views to a one-time peak of about 13 million monthly page views.

Mr. Graham gave the 37-year-old Mr. Curley, a self-described "Internet nerd," a big job: vice president of product development at Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive, the subsidiary that oversees the compa-

Please turn to the next page



Don Graham

'Hyperlocal' Site Is Flop For the Washington Post

Continued from the prior page
ny's Internet operations. In the year before LoudounExtra.com's launch, Mr. Curley and his team worked on a number of projects, including a Facebook application on Washingtonpost.com.

Though LoudounExtra.com seemed to promise an ideal combination of innovation and marketing muscle, it has failed to benefit from the reach of Washingtonpost.com. Mr. Curley says whenever a big story breaks involving Loudoun County, the Post typically publishes it on Washingtonpost.com without a link to LoudounExtra. That deprives LoudounExtra of potential traffic. Nor does the Washingtonpost.com's own dedicated Loudoun County page link with its online sibling. In September, when Time Warner Inc.'s AOL unit announced it was moving its headquarters from Dulles, Va., to New York, the Post linked to the story on LoudounExtra for a couple hours before moving the story back to its own site. That window of promotion fueled Loudoun's best traffic day to date, Mr. Curley says.

Mr. Brady now says he is considering replacing the current Loudoun County page on Washingtonpost.com with LoudounExtra.com, although he adds that he wants to be careful not to clutter Washingtonpost.com with promotions for this and future hyperlocal sites.

Another problem: Mr. Curley's crew was trying to reach a much different audience than they were used to. Unlike Lawrence, Kan., which had a small populace linked by an easily identifiable set of interests, Loudoun County is a 520 square-mile area with seven towns whose residents share little else besides a county government.

To penetrate those communities requires a more dedicated effort than the LoudounExtra.com team was putting forth. Mr. Curley himself acknowledged he spent too much time talking to other newspaper publishers about the hyperlocal strategy and too little time introducing his team and the site to Loudoun County.

All in all, the site has yet to catch fire. "We certainly didn't get the numbers that our team was accustomed to getting," Mr. Curley says. "Even in Lawrence, Kan., we were attracting more traffic than we were accustomed to getting [on LoudounExtra.com], and Lawrence is a town of 80,000 people."

The Post's Mr. Brady said he still plans to unveil a hyperlocal site for Fairfax County, Va., which has more than a million



road. But he said the site needs better integration with Washingtonpost.com and more such user-generated content.

Several media analysts agreed LoudounExtra.com doesn't do enough to engage the community. Hyperlocal sites range from the fully service-oriented—filled with databases, calendars and news—to repositories for blogs, commentary, photos and video from visitors to the site.

But there were hazards involved in putting an autonomous team of outsiders in charge of new digital initiatives at a major media company. Mr. Curley says his team had been developing online tools to funnel Loudoun County-related video and photos to the site from other sites like YouTube, Facebook and Flickr, but couldn't get approval from the Post's legal team to launch the application. According to Mr. Brady, the legal team voiced concerns about who had legal claim to the content of those sites.

As he decamps with five colleagues to take on an Internet venture for the Las Vegas Sun, Mr. Curley acknowledges he didn't get out into the community enough. "I was the one who was supposed to know we should be talking to Rotary Club meetings every day," Mr. Curley said. "I dropped the ball. I won't drop it in Vegas, dude."