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Blue-ribbon tips for newspapers from ... Pabst?

Industry should emulate beer marketers' efforts to diversify, build WOM

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Desperate to help stop their industry's long slide, attendees at the Newspaper Association of America's marketing conference last week may have been expecting tips to help them emulate The Wall Street Journal or Washington Post.

Instead, they were advised to take take a lesson from Pabst Blue Ribbon.

"You need to be focusing on getting influencers to sell your papers for you," Darrell Jursa, president of word-of-mouth consultancy Liquid Intelligence, told assembled newspaper executives. "If [viral marketing] can sell PBR, it can sell newspapers."

Mr. Jursa-whose agency helped wake up long-dormant sales of PBR through a variety of stunts, on-premise tactics and word-of-mouth buzz-isn't the first to notice obvious parallels between newspapers and domestic beer. Both have slowly eroding but still-dominant positions in their respective markets, and both have ground-gaining challengers. Wine, spirits and import brews have been threatening domestic brewers for years; new media have caused a similar fragmentation of traditional newspaper audiences.

But while brewers such as Anheuser-Busch have confronted a world of additional consumer choice by offering dozens of new brands and eyeing moves into competing categories, newspapers have been slower to diversify beyond their core newspapers and websites. And, as speaker after speaker at the conference made clear, the pace needs to quicken.

"We need to stop deluding ourselves that one product will fit everyone's needs," Barbara Cohen, president of research firm Kannon Consulting, told newspaper executives. "The industry that led in segmentation is the beverage industry, because they realized what you drink has a lot to do with who you are."

There were, however, signs the message is sinking in.

Newspaper executives from titles as diverse as the Chicago Tribune and Bluffton (S.C.) Today heralded their brand portfolios. The Roanoke Times and The Bakersfield Californian touted social-networking initiatives.

Adrian Phillips, audience-development manager at Florida's St. Petersburg Times, drew oohs and aahs while explaining how the paper's youth-targeted tabloid, the Tampa Bay Times, used buzz on social sites such as MySpace, Fark and Facebook to draw thousands of entries to a "Be a Cover Model" swimsuit competition; 90,000 people voted to decide a winner.

The buzz boosted the fledgling publication's sales, profile and sex appeal. It also drew a new sponsor, Anheuser-Busch, which promoted a follow-up "Ultimate Bartender" competition with coasters and other in-bar gimmicks.

Mr. Phillips' advice to newspaper execs trying to find "friends" for their paper on MySpace: "Be polite, and don't try to sound young and hip, especially if you're not."

Ed Keller, CEO of word-of-mouth research and consulting firm *Keller Fay*, told attendees the viral efforts used by alcohol brands such as PBR and Makers Mark bourbon (which employs a successful "brand-ambassador" program that gives perks to drinkers who evangelize about the brand) ought to be tapped more by newspapers.

Mr. Keller noted research that showed so-called influencers were more likely to read newspapers in the first place. "Conversation catalysts are particularly heavy users of print," he said. "It's not you selling to them. It's you and them selling together."