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BUSINESS ARCHIVE

Tribune using online focus groups before paper appears in print

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BY [ERIC HERMAN](#) Business Reporter

Long committed to market research, the Chicago Tribune is now soliciting opinions from an online focus group that allows its members to see and comment on parts of the paper before publication.

The Tribune has been working with Communispace Corp., a Watertown, Mass.-based company that runs the online panels, since April 2004, according to Communispace executive Brian Harrold. While most of what the focus group sees has already run in the paper, the Tribune has tested photographs, layouts and headlines before publication, sources said. The group does not see the text of stories before publication.

"You sort of do it to take the temperature out there. But I don't know of any editor who's been told, 'Whatever they say, that's what we do,'" said Denise Joyce, editor of the paper's Q section.

The Tribune used Communispace to get pre-publication comments on proposed photos and layout of two new entertainment sections -- 'At Play' and 'On the Town' -- that debuted last week, sources said. For example, the paper asked focus group members to weigh in on photos of the musical 'Wicked,' reviewed on the cover of 'On the Town' last Friday.

Jim Warren, the paper's deputy managing editor for features, is a strong proponent of Communispace, sources said.

Warren declined to comment on specific uses of research, but said, "We occasionally do research, and when methodologically sound, I have found it of great help."

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The quick-response research shows the Tribune's need to understand readers at a time of declining sales and competition from the Internet. Newspaper circulation, or sales, fell across the board in the six months ended in March, according to the Newspaper Association of America, with average circulation down 1.9 percent in that period. But the problem is acute at the Chicago Tribune, where average daily circulation plunged 6.6 percent -- the biggest drop among the nation's 20 largest papers, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations.

(The recent figures did not include the Chicago Sun-Times, which was suspended by ABC for overstating its circulation.)

Communispace creates online communities of about 300 members. Though Harrold declined to discuss the Tribune specifically, he said focus group members are often paid in Amazon gift certificates, receiving \$15 worth every six weeks. The members post comments as on an Internet message board.

"Think of it as a 24-7 focus group on steroids," Harrold said. "It really kind of blends together quantitative and really in-depth qualitative information."

Harrold said the typical Communispace client pays \$150,000 to \$300,000 per year in fees and must also cover the incentives for group members, which cost roughly \$30,000 per year.

Joyce, who has seen the Q section subjected to Communispace scrutiny, described the experience as "humbling and rewarding all at the same time."

The online community's response can be inconclusive. Last summer, Q ran a feature on a lab that analyzes sweat. The Tribune pre-tested two covers with photos for the story. The Communispace vote was "exactly split down the middle," Joyce said.

Mary Ann Weston, an associate professor of journalism at Northwestern University, noted newspapers have long used market research. But the Tribune's latest foray "seems to be taking market research to a whole different level."

Whether or not it was ethical "would depend on what they do with the information they get," and whether the focus group was limited to a certain sector of the population.

Harrold would not describe the Tribune's group, beyond saying it included only people in the Chicago area.

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