

## Government advertising must deliver substance

Each week more than 1,000 English and French community newspapers just like the <insert local paper name> go about the business of telling stories that matter to the communities they serve. We are at your rinks and schools. We are at your school board and council meeting. We are at the scene when tragedy strikes. We celebrate your milestones. Our job is to cover <geographic area served>, warts and all.

And we are good at it.

We are in towns big and small. Some community newspapers circulate well in excess of 100,000 copies. Some are in the hundreds. It may surprise you that each week, more than 20 million copies of community newspapers are distributed across the country. Independent research shows that more than 70 per cent of Canadians read their community paper.

Despite our collective strength, ours is a medium easy to ignore. Because we focus on Canada one community at a time, we lack the sex appeal of other media. We've seen our share of federal government advertising gradually erode over the years. Our regional and national associations have met with government MPs, opposition MPs, cabinet ministers and senior bureaucrats to promote our case. We are always met with courtesy and a promise that things will get better.

Well things are not getting better. So despite it being contradictory to everything we believe in journalistically, the time has come to tell you. In short, the federal government is all but ignoring your community newspapers like <insert local paper title>. We believe this means the federal government is ignoring you and your community's right to be informed about programs and services offered by the Government of Canada.

In the last fiscal year, the federal government spent \$75 million on advertising. More than \$26 million of that went to TV ads, while another \$15.5 million went to Internet advertising – an industry dominated by American-based companies like Google and Facebook. Creating ads and paying ad agencies ate away another \$10 million. Radio advertising cost just under \$7 million.

By comparison, community newspapers saw a paltry \$867,000 in total advertising from Ottawa – or an average of about \$25 per week per newspaper.

The way in which your government uses your money to communicate with you is very telling. TV and Internet ads work to build brand, not to inform. Your community newspaper generates debate and serves as a forum for discussion – and is also one of the few places where local MPs actually receive editorial coverage outside election season.

That's why those MPs submit letters to the editor, columns or buy their own local advertising to share their work with the community. They know the power of your local community paper.

The federal government knows it, too. The Harper government budgeted \$1.25 million to be spent with a company called News Canada to create its own stories – stories it offers for free to print and broadcast outlets. But you and I paid for them. It is disconcerting that the federal government proposed spending 50 per cent more to create its own news than the total advertising buy in Canadian community newspapers.

The federal government strategy appears to be that it's more important to make pretty ads than to put relevant information about programs and services in front of readers of community newspapers. They're telling you they'd rather give your tax dollars to Facebook and Google than Canadian-based companies that invest in local journalism.

If the federal government continues to ignore our community newspapers, some communities may lose them. When that happens a vital voice is silenced.

If you believe, as we do, that government should invest in meaningful communication with citizens through community newspapers, we ask you to help us. Contact your local candidate: <insert contact info>. We'd love to hear from you, too. Give us a call at <insert phone number> or write a letter to the editor.

We'll continue to make sure your voice is heard.