

California publisher outsourcing with AffinityX

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It's been a year since Sonoma Media Investments fully outsourced its ad design and pagination operations to the AffinityX platform. California-based Sonoma Media was formed in late 2011 to buy the Sonoma Index-Tribune and Sonoma Magazine from Halifax Media Holdings, which acquired the publications through its

\$143 million acquisition of The New York Times Regional Media Group papers that same year.

When Sonoma Media purchased the Press Democrat Media Group in November 2012, it added the Press Democrat in Santa Rosa, the Petaluma Argus-Courier and the North Bay Business Journal to its stable of publications. Now the group publishes all five titles.

Having been through the outsourcing of pagination during the Index-Tribune's tenure as a NYT property, Mark Flaviani, advertising operations director, was tapped to head up Sonoma Media's transition to Affinity.

"I have been through it before and knew what it was about," he told News & Tech. "We went through all of the nuts and bolts of what it would take to do this and working with Affinity has been great."

With 2,200 employees worldwide, AffinityX has its U.S. headquarters in Elgin, Illinois. Its parent company is Ayala Corporation, a conglomerate in the Philippines.

Phased transition



The publisher's move to outsourcing happened in two phases, he said, and included all publications except Sonoma Magazine, which is handled by an independent designer. Phase one included transferring the design of all print and digital ads over to Affinity's Pune, India, operation in February 2017. The publisher builds a lot of special sections, which also needed to be paginated.

"Our designers were the ones building special sections, so once we moved to outsourcing we needed to paginate those, so we moved them to Affinity's Manila (Philippines) group," Flaviani said.

Phase two involved transferring the pagination and layout of classified ads. The publisher retained copydesk pagination and editorial pagination/copy flow, which are still overseen by the in-house editorial copydesk staff using the Newscycle Content Publisher platform.

"We don't use Newscycle for anything that doesn't have traditional editorial content, so that's why Sonoma Magazine is handled through an outside designer — it's dummied differently," Flaviani said.

The publisher is also using AffinityX for obituaries and public notices, which are produced essentially the same way as display ads. Manifests are sent to the company and the pages are produced.

Same front-end process

From the front-end perspective, not much has changed for the newspaper's in-house staff other than where the ads are sent once they're ready for production. Classified ads are still placed through newspaper staff, but now page layout for the four publications happens via the Amazon Web Services cloud platform rather than by in-house designers.

Flaviani said that while the transition to AffinityX involved a learning curve, the ad building part of it quickly became pretty seamless.

"There weren't a lot of communication issues as I'd seen previously when the Index-Tribune first outsourced ad pagination," he said. "This time around it was really a matter of just sending ads somewhere else — the front-end process was the same, but where we sent the ads wasn't much different."

Outsourcing evolution

Sonoma Media's smooth transition is a testament to the evolution of outsourcing in the newspaper industry. A shifting mindset wherein publishers have become more comfortable handing off processes they used to hold close to the vest combined with the advancements in cloud and hosted environments have made outsourcing far more seamless than it was 10 years ago.

"I'm impressed with the way AffinityX handles things and their response is always prompt," Flaviani said. "There was a learning curve but they are very dependable."

That dependability and responsiveness have given time back to the publisher's ad sales department as well, and has reduced production time on special sections.

"We could feed them 100 ads by 7 p.m. and they're done by 7 a.m.," Flaviani said. "We used to have to cut sales off in order to account for ad-building time and selling, but now we can extend those deadlines and let people sell for up to a week longer, which adds to revenue."

In addition to Sonoma Media, AffinityX has recently partnered with a number of other publishers, including Trinity Mirror, Fairfax Australia, Fairfax New Zealand. The company also has long-standing relationships with Hearst Corp. and Digital First Media. ▲

