

NNA's top two web sites in 2009

From Ed Henninger NNA column 01.10

Non-daily Division: Sonoma Index-Tribune: Sonoma, CA. www.sonomanews.com

Judge's comments: Cleanest and simplest. Focus on news but also on what people might want—shop, share, do, etc.

Daily Division: The Statesboro Herald: Statesboro, GA. www.statesboroherald.com

Judge's comments: Cleanest of the three and focus on your major objectives can be seen. Try cleaning up more and ID your reader's top tasks to make better.

The look of these two sites varies considerably:

- Both pages keep a white background, good for readability. As the judge pointed out, they're both pretty clean.
- Statesboro's color scheme is mostly blue but Sonoma uses some color coding for various sections. It's too bad that coding is not picked up on the inside pages. For example, I'd consider using a blue-gray on the "share" page and tan on the "do" page.
- On both fronts, ads are placed in varying positions. I assume this is part of the plan, so that readers will be sure to see the ads as they scan the page. An advantage to this approach is that the ads aren't cluttered in one mish-mosh in only one area. But scattered as they are, they may pull attention from the content of the page. For this veteran of print, scattering ads just doesn't feel right, but on these pages it actually seems to work better than gathering them together. No, I would not suggest carrying this practice over into the print product.
- Typography on both of these pages is good. Both make good use of Verdana, a type face I find particularly appealing for web use because it's very readable. Sonoma pulls another sans serif into the mix, but Statesboro looks to be Verdana-only. Statesboro also uses much of its type in blue, which works OK.
- Photo use is similar. Both fronts feature slide shows. Sonoma has about twice the number of photos in the slideshow than Statesboro but I'm assuming that's adjusted with each update. The Statesboro site also features links to selected videos.
- The Statesboro Herald's front carries more material but the tradeoff is that you have to scan down to get to it. While this isn't much of a bother, I like the fact that the Sonoma front can be viewed in its entirety on my screen.
- Sonoma's ads benefit from much better design. There's a sophistication to the advertising here that helps the overall feel of the site. The Statesboro Herald has some catching-up to do on ad design.

There are positives to both of these sites. Check them out—then see if it's worth your effort to bring some of those positives to your newspaper's site.