

Miami Herald asks online readers for donations

December 16 2009, By SARAH LARIMER , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The Miami Herald began Tuesday asking readers of its Web site to voluntarily pay for the privilege, a new wrinkle in newspapers' ongoing battle to increase revenue from their online operations.

A link at the bottom of online stories directed readers to a separate page that accepts credit card information. A short message thanks them for making the site "South Florida's most-read news destination on the web," and asks them to support the content.

The McClatchy Co. newspaper has cut hundreds of employees in recent years as the weekday circulation of its print edition has fallen by almost 25 percent in the last year to about 163,000 and 14 percent on Sundays to about 238,000, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations. By comparison, the paper says 5 million different readers visit its Web site each month.

"MiamiHerald.com features all the coverage of The Miami Herald's award-winning print edition, plus breaking news and multimedia extras including video, audio, slideshows and searchable databases," the message reads. "If you value The Miami Herald's local news reporting and investigations, but prefer the convenience of the Internet, please consider a voluntary payment for the [web news](#) that matters to you."

Elissa Vanaver, a Herald vice president, said some readers had already donated, though she didn't have specific numbers. A short story about the decision ran Tuesday in the Herald's print editions, which cost 50

cents on weekdays and \$1.50 on Sundays. The newspaper has no timeline for the plan.

"It's Day One," Vanaver said. "So we don't have a phase 2 or 3 or 4 yet. We want to see what trying this tells us about the market."

Most newspapers, with the notable exception of The Wall Street Journal, gave up long ago requiring payment to read stories on their Web sites, relying almost strictly on advertising. But ad rates online average about a 10th of what's charged in print editions, which have lost advertisers as readership declined.

"We've been watching what other papers in the country and around the globe have been doing," Vanaver said. "There are a number of papers that are experimenting with some sort of pay formula. We had a team that explored the possibilities and this is what they came up with."

Geneva Overholser, director of the USC Annenberg School of Journalism, said she has heard other major metro dailies discuss the voluntary pay option, but the Herald is the first paper she has heard of that actually implemented the concept.

"I can't imagine this is going to be a gold mine," Overholser said. "But I certainly don't blame them for trying."

Media business analyst Rick Edmonds said the voluntary pay approach was novel for newspapers but that some free magazines have asked readers to donate and support their publications.

"We're kind of at a period where I think there's going to be a lot of experimentation" by newspapers, said Edmonds, who works for the Poynter Institute, a journalism nonprofit think tank in St. Petersburg.

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