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Audio Transcript

Episode 255 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with *Mike Blinder*

Publication date: Wednesday Oct. 9, 2024



E&P REPORTS VODCAST EditorandPublisher.com/Vodcasts



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[Unpacking the NNA/ HHS rural public health ad campaign](#)

Martha Diaz Aszkenazy, the newly elected chair of the The National Newspaper Association (NNA), and Brett Wesner, the past chairman, discuss the association’s recent collaboration with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on the “Risk Less. Do More” campaign. This initiative, aimed at promoting public health messages is not only a public health victory but also a significant financial win for rural newspapers.



0:00:00.0 Announcer: This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor and Publisher magazine. The authoritative voice of news media since 1884. Serving newspapers, broadcast, digital, and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:19.6 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again. Mike Blinder, publisher of E&P Magazine. As always, we kick off with housekeeping. If you're listening on a podcast platform, we urge you to follow this program. Those watching on our YouTube channel, there is a pull down menu. Subscribe please, and you'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of this weekly vodcast series we affectionately call E&P Reports. I have an old friend and a new friend on the program from an association we love to support. I'm gonna try to say this correctly. Martha Diaz Aszkenazy. Martha, do I have that correct?

0:00:55.5 Martha Diaz Aszkenazy: Absolutely correct. Thank you.

0:00:57.4 MB: You are the new and president of the National Newspaper Association. Are you also still on the board of the California News Publishers Association?

0:01:07.9 MA: I am. I am the chair for the next two years for NNA, and I am the marketing committee chair for California Newspaper Association and on the board.

0:01:16.7 MB: And on the paying job you have, you are the publisher of San Fernando Valley Sun, El Sol, is that correct?

0:01:24.2 MA: Yes. It's a bilingual newspaper that circulates in the San Fernando Valley. Has been doing so since 1904. So it's been around for a very, very long time. I've owned it for the last 20 years.

0:01:36.6 MB: Congratulations on your 20th anniversary, man. And that's wonderful.

0:01:40.8 MA: Well, it's a little more than that, but that's okay. [laughter]

0:01:43.1 MB: Brett, this is not your first appearance on the show. This is your second. I don't know if you remember being on it before, but Brett Wesner, president of Wesner Publications, you published a number of newspapers in Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico, and you currently serve on the board of the National Newspaper Association. We're gonna be talking about something very exciting, the National Newspaper Association. From this moment, I will simply use the the acronym NNA. It has just done something amazing by tying in with the department of Health and Human Services to actually, I guess, champion a campaign for rural public health. That's pretty much it, right? Martha, you helped bring this thing to light. This is not just for members of the NNA, but this is for any publication that can help the cause, correct?

0:02:33.1 MA: Through our very diligent efforts over the last three years or so, we were able to get HHS through with the help of Congress in a bipartisan move to direct their dollars to rural and small communities, because they have a lot of issues that come up for health and there's a lot of folks there that need this message to get to them, and there's no better way to get it to them than



through community papers who are there on the ground, who are trusted sources of news information, so that they can get this information out and prevent perhaps future pandemics or stem them a little bit. The one campaign that they have now is called The Risk Less Do More, and it addresses COVID RSV and what's the other one, Brett?

0:03:20.0 Brett Wesner: Flu.

0:03:20.8 MA: Flu. Sorry.

0:03:22.1 MB: Well, we're gonna unpack all of that and talk about not just this, but how important the NNA is and serving rural communities and all the communities you serve. We'll do that right after this.

0:03:36.9 Announcer: This episode of E&P Reports is exclusively sponsored by Blocks Digital, formerly Town News. Even though the name has changed, their commitment to the media industry is as strong as ever. Blocks Digital is now even better positioned to deliver integrated solutions like content management, audience development, advertising revenue, video management, and more. Join the over 2000 news publishers worldwide that power their ongoing digital transformation with Blocks Digital, serving over 141 million monthly users who view over 6.5 billion pages of content each year. You can trust Blocks Digital to empower you, to connect you at scale with the community you need to reach. Blocks Digital, formerly Town News, now reimagined to help meet the news publishing challenges of tomorrow and beyond. Learn more at blocksdigital.com.

0:04:40.6 MB: All right, so Brett or Martha, which one of you wants to walk us through how this all happened? How did you get the germ of an idea that they approached the NNA? Did you approach them and how did you make this come to... Happen? What is the history of this?

0:04:58.8 MA: We have a very strong board and membership that supports the efforts of the board. And at the time that we started this, it was Brett who is at the helm of the organization. So I'd like to have him kind of explain how it came about since he was our leader at that point.

0:05:14.2 BW: Yeah, this was a great idea for Martha and what happened, Mike, is we were in the middle of the first COVID stages of illness. And we noticed that HHS was spending a lot of money on advertising throughout the country. And we also noticed the community newspapers received precisely this much money at federal advertising. And a lot of our communities certainly don't have television stations. Most don't have radio stations, and most have limited broadband. So we're really kind of the only game in town for a lot of these communities. So we thought, why are our communities not being served? Of course, all federal agencies have been very smart about sending a lot of press releases and free media, and we're happy to serve in that way, but we also thought, why are we doing all the free media and somebody's getting all the paid advertising?

0:06:11.5 BW: And we really it was a process of education with HHS and others about who we are, and who we serve, and how they can best approach our audiences through our kinds of publications. So it took... As Martha said, it took three years for this little education process and with the help of Congress, as Martha said, Congress nudged HHS to take a look at this through some report language in the appropriations bills. But yeah, HHS said, great, let's talk. And so we figured out a



way to work together. One of the things they liked most of all is that they're not gonna have to deal with 7,000 community newspapers. They deal with one NNA. And while we don't pick winners and losers on advertising, we are the source of the data that they use for who we are. And we're also a one stop shopping place, so they get one bill instead of 7,000. So their media buyers of course were very happy with this idea. And so really, we just kind of made it easy for them to use us, and then we showed them how important we are. And this is our... The first ad buy just happened two weeks ago, and this will be a several stage process we understand for this one campaign, but we're looking forward to every campaign that HHS does.

0:07:31.9 MB: I want you to help me understand the NNA, okay? And let our audience understand. 'Cause I think you're one of the associations doesn't get enough attention. And I'll tee it off this way, maybe Martha's the new chair can help us, but this is what ChatGPT Martha, says about the NNA. That was my last guest on this program, by the way. I interviewed ChatGPT, but you're a nonprofit organization established in 1885, representing community newspapers across the United States primary mission to promote, protect, and enhance local journalism, particularly in rural areas in small towns. Is that pretty much how you define the NNA and what you are to this industry?

0:08:11.2 MA: Certainly part of what we do, but we're a really diverse organization with over 1700 members in every state in the United States. We have great access to our representatives, and we're not afraid to call on them. It's a very active group, very loyal to the First Amendment. You have consummate professionals everywhere. We represent both Republicans and Democrats in red states and blue states. And when we come together, we get things done. We communicate, we talk. I'm so proud of all of the members, and I'm so impressed with all of the members that we have and I must say we're very humble. We don't really talk about what we do, but we get things done. We're the kind of organization that walks the walk. We're delivering things for our members and we wanna continue to do that, because as you know, we're threatened by a lot of things but the message continues. Everybody's true to the mission. They absolutely help their communities. And it doesn't matter large and small.

0:09:16.2 MA: I'm in an area that you would consider urban, but I'm in an area that is primarily a minority Latino immigrant community. Without my newspaper here telling their particular stories, nobody else would have the bandwidth to do it. So I'm here to do that. And so I feel sometimes that if I'm gone, it's a news desert that will be created. And you wouldn't think that, because I'm in a bigger market than maybe most, but I definitely absolutely relate to folks that are doing this work in rural areas. I feel I have many things in common, and I am very honored and privileged to be heading up this organization. And let me tell you, we're gonna continue to do more, because we're fighters at NNA, and we're gonna get the job done. And we're looking for more people that wanna just get the job done, just come in, work with us, and we're gonna deliver.

0:10:11.9 MB: Right. When I met you with my wife, business partner and Editor-in-Chief Robin, one of the things we were most impressed about was how well you guys get advocacy through. I want you to add to this, but I always call it putting up the bat signal. You know what I mean? When you need your membership to get motivated to make those calls or send those emails, you have an amazing organization for that. Do you not, sir?

0:10:40.0 BW: This is our strength as an association, is that our members, we have members in



almost every congressional district in the country. So when something is really important that we need help with, we as you say, send out the bat signal, and they call, and oftentimes maybe almost always, they know they're a member of Congress personally. And so this is a personal outreach and nothing's stronger than a grassroots outreach.

0:11:08.5 MB: You're here.

0:11:10.7 BW: Yeah. So this is our strength because our members are willing to do this. And this is the difference I think that you see with a lot of associations is that maybe they don't have the, as many districts involved in their organizations or their chief officers just don't make these kind of calls. I don't know. But I do know that this is our strength and this is how we get things done and people on the hill know NNA very well. Not only do we have our, of course, our grassroots outreach, but we also have professional representation on the hill and that sort of guides us and make sure that we're going in the right direction and planning things well on a timeline basis. And yeah, so you see things like this and postal reform that we got through three years ago, and you see multiple things that we've gotten, been able to get to achieve, this is a pretty big one though, I have to admit. Yeah.

0:12:04.6 MB: One of the things that I find fascinating about this is so many people are saying that the news media industries are at an all time low with public trust, but then there's data out there that shows that people do, especially during COVID trust the local voices in their communities. That may be, that data is like the national brands, the Fox News versus MSNBC and all that kind of stuff. Do you see this working? You have to battle, correct me if I'm wrong, and I don't wanna get political, there's a lot of disinformation out there about vaccines, right? And this is what HHS is battling. Did they pick the right media? And do you see these local publishers, whether they're an NNA member or not, having that impact and that ability to make the paradigm shift in the mind of the the local community?

0:12:52.7 MA: Absolutely. We've been on the ground here for many years, even before I bought the paper and people love the newspaper. I don't care what anybody says, if you're on the cover of our paper, or your child is in our paper somehow, or your relatives, people come to the office and they see it. I am on a mall, so people see us here all the time. We go to events and so forth. So during the pandemic, the Northeast San Fernando Valley was actually the epicenter of deaths where we led the nation in unfortunately, the number. People were clamoring to get the information from us. We did covered however we could our community. We never saw numbers higher than people coming to us. And they continued to come to us, because we provide them information that nobody else has.

0:13:40.1 MA: We don't always get into the political fray of things. We don't always do the national news, because quite frankly, our folks don't care about that. They can get that information somewhere else. So, because they can write to us, they can even come in the front door if they want and challenge what we've done. They do trust us, and they do look for us for that information. So if we write something about it, you might have people in the community that argue with something or other. But in general, we are trusted. We've earned it. We work really hard. We have professional editors, professional reporters. These are people that know what they do, and they're mission-driven, and so they wanna get it right and we do get it right. And for that, we've earned their trust.



And I know that other newspapers across the United States are doing the same thing. So when the going gets tough, people are gonna come to us.

0:14:35.3 MB: Martha, the final question, and this is your bully pulpit, at least to other news publishers far and wide, all across North America. Plans for the future, and how can someone find out more of how they can support the NNA and be part of your ecosystem?

0:14:52.6 MA: Well, thank you so much. There are a lot of plans to expand. I think there's a lot of other agencies within the federal government and state governments that we could also replicate our win in, because I think that it is a win-win situation, as I said before. It gets the message out and it helps our folks. We will continue to fight for postal because we have a lot of folks that are very dependent upon that. And I think that that is something that we've been doing for a long time, and we'll have to continue to do so because things are always tough there as well. And as far as our foundation, we have training that's available to everybody that they can avail themselves at.

0:15:38.3 MA: We can go back to advocating. We will also advocate for JCPA for other ways for us to get paid. I was disappointed that in California, we didn't get exactly what we wanted, but it was California trying to do something that I think the federal government needs to do. So I'm really hopeful that we can continue to do that, and I'm all in on that as well. And as far as how do they get involved, just look us up at nna.org. That is the best way to get involved. We also have other services, for example, like libel insurance. You know that many times when you join our organization, you get to buy a policy through Walter Berry, and it many times saves people almost their premium... Their premium savings is almost the membership cost of NNA.

0:16:25.5 MA: And nowadays, you can't be without it. I think one claim could put you out of a business if you don't have insurance. So I think you need to get involved with our organization because we are leading the charge. We're putting our money to work. We are also getting our members to put their capital also to work with the people that they know, and I think it can only get better if we can increase that reach even more. So there's power and strength in numbers, and I think that we need to just continue to add to our numbers, and the passion is here. So come on board and be part of something great, and let's make some changes. And let's just turn this around. Journalism is not dead, and cannot be dead if it is in our democracy, it is right behind it.

0:17:19.3 MA: So for me, it's a matter of just a mission to do this. I'm gonna be here and involved with NNA as long as I can. And like I said, I am extremely honored to be chairing this organization and helping lead in the steps that many before me have done. And like I said before, I hope I can fill the shoes of all those many people because NNA is a great organization and I think that more people need to know about it. But we're gonna continue to do the great work, so you're gonna hear more from us.

0:17:53.9 MB: Martha Diaz Aszkenazy, owner and publisher of the San Fernando Valley Sun, El Sol, and also the new chair of the NNA, Brett Wesner has held that post still a board member, president of Wesner Publications. I wanna thank both of you for your amazing work, this incredible win, and your valuable time. Keep up the good fight.

0:18:16.6 MA: Thank you.