

New England Newspaper Press Association (NENPA) E-Bulletin  
Published March 13, 2014

Available online with more visuals at: [http://www.seapubs.com/eBulletin3-13-14/winterconvention\\_design.htm](http://www.seapubs.com/eBulletin3-13-14/winterconvention_design.htm)

# Design with readers' needs in your mind's eye

**By Aneri Pattani**  
*Bulletin Staff*

Design is not an opportunity to be creative, but an opportunity to give readers what they need, said Ed Henninger, director of a design consulting business, Henninger Consulting in Rock Hill, S.C.

Henninger explained the importance of design thinking for newspapers to an audience of about 40 people in a workshop titled "The Essential Elements of Better Newspaper Design." The presentation took place Friday, Feb. 7, at the New England Newspaper and Press Association's winter convention in the Boston Park Plaza Hotel.

Henninger did not hesitate to voice his opinions.

"Those of you who think journalism is writing are dead wrong," he announced to the audience of reporters, editors, publishers and designers.

Henninger said people think a story equals writing and that the photo or graphic is a second thought, but that should not be the case. The photo should not be secondary, as in, "Do you want fries with that?" he said.

One of Henninger's top design tips is to use a dominant photo. Doing so might require writers to cut down their text, but Henninger doesn't see that as a problem.

"Am I going to have trouble taking out 26 inches from a 40-inch story to make room for a photo? No. Have I done it before? Yeah. And I won't lose any sleep," he said.

Another important mantra for Henninger is modular design. He thinks that everything on a page should be in neat rectangles to create a smooth experience for readers.

"If you're not doing modular design, you're not doing design. You're just filling stuff onto the page," he said.

One of the greatest obstacles to good newspaper design is adherence to tradition for the sake of it, Henninger said. Although there is value to some rules, there are many that are arbitrary, and there's no reason you cannot break them, he said.

For instance, he argued that if newspapers use headline hierarchy – using larger font sizes for more important headlines – then the lead story doesn't need to be at the top of the page. It will appear prominently no matter where it is placed because of the size of its headline.

In a similar vein, Henninger said centered headlines “are not the end of the world.” In fact, they can be useful in adding some negative space and highlighting a particular story.

Breaking any of those traditions will not interfere with readers' experiences, Henninger said. In fact, most won't even recognize it. He gave a particular example in which he advocated the use of flush left text to avoid weird spacing when inserting photos.

“The first newspaper where I said to flush-left, they thought I was a design god,” he said. “Readers couldn't even tell the difference.”

Henninger made it clear that although breaking tradition is acceptable, breaking rules within a newspaper was not. Consistency is key for readers, he said. That's why every newspaper should give its design style guide or design style cheat sheet to new reporters as soon as they enter the newsroom.

“You expect your reporters to know AP style, don't you?” Henninger asked. “Then you should expect them to know your design style guide.”

After all, as Henninger put it: “If you don't have a design style guide, you don't have a design at all. You just have a bunch of stuff in your paper.”