

From The Newsroom: Shaking up the front page


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If you look closely at my mug shot that runs with this column, you may be able to guess from my double chin that I enjoy a good milkshake. And, apparently, so do our readers.

Although the week isn't over yet, a Tuesday story about a new [gourmet milkshake franchise planned for The Waterfront Vancouver](#) seems destined to become one of our most-read stories. At the rate it is going, it will probably end up being one of our most-read stories of the year. By Wednesday, it had already reached more than 170,000 people via our social media

accounts. That's more than a third of the county's population reached in a little more than a day.

But just as milkshakes should only be an occasional part of a healthy diet, milkshake stories should only be part of a healthy news diet. That prompted an interesting conversation among the editors when the story placement was discussed for print.

In other words, is this a front-page story?

On one hand, a shake shop is hardly a driver of economic development compared with, say, a new technology business. And although this is The Yard's first Northwest location, milkshakes are readily available around town. It's not even like the grand opening of our first Walmart. (I covered it on Oct. 14, 1998; people showed up before dawn and cried tears of joy. Really. Email me if you want a copy of the story.)

And, as Features Editor Erin Middlewood pointed out, we already pay a lot of attention to what's happening at the Waterfront. It's an interesting and transformative project, but it's a tiny slice of the community.

But oh, that public interest! Shouldn't stories that are the most interesting to readers go on the front page?

To me, it was a situational decision. It was a slow news day. So we ran the story on A1, along with a supplied photo of the elaborate milkshakes, which can set you back close to \$20. But they look delicious and shareable. I will probably buy one.

Boring but important

The great milkshake debate leads to another question: What about the story of significance that doesn't have much appeal to readers? With probably too much snark, we call these the "boring but important" stories. Coverage of government happenings often falls into this category.

Looking at the same Tuesday paper that had the milkshake story, I found an example of one of these "B.B.I." stories on Page A9: "Woodland pitches I-5 offramp project to Herrera Beutler."

I don't live in Woodland, but I have been there often enough to know there's terrible traffic congestion as you exit the freeway coming from the south. Woodland has grown a lot, and several busy roads converge near that offramp, including a road that leads to a bridge across the North Fork Lewis River. You can't move the freeway or the bridge, so a solution will be very difficult and expensive, and will need federal financial aid.

The social media reach on this story, which was produced by The Daily News in Longview and picked up by us, was 4,645 as of noon Wednesday. That's about 2.5 percent of the audience for the milkshakes. But I think you can plausibly argue that the story is much more important.

Although both are relatively simple stories, we also see this with investigative pieces. A reporter could probably spend six months investigating problems in the dairy products industry, write a blockbuster front-page story and get only a fraction of the readership of that milkshake story.

So what should we do? As a profit-seeking business, we want to present a news package that our customers will read and enjoy, so they'll keep subscribing. In our watchdog role as journalists, we need to see what government is doing and report on its excesses and successes.

In the case of Tuesday's paper, we had the space to offer both kinds of stories. But these questions come up every day. My view is that we need to stick to a traditional news diet, but I always try to save room for dessert.