

COVER STORY >> ATLANTA BUSINESS CHRONICLE



Business weekly plays with the big boys

Commitment to community, fearless coverage make Atlanta Business Chronicle a force

By CHRIS ROUSH

IF HARD-HITTING BUSINESS journalism were baseball, then the Atlanta Business Chronicle would be the New York Yankees of weekly newspapers.

Six times in the past seven years, the weekly newspaper owned by Charlotte-based American City Business Journals has won SABEW's Best in Business Award in the weekly category. And in each of the past five years, the paper, which has a paid circulation of more than 30,000 and an estimated readership of 180,000, has won the weekly category in either spot news or enterprise.

No other weekly business newspaper in the country can match that record. Few daily sections have a similar performance.

"Too often, local business publications don't know where to draw the line between comprehensive, independent coverage of business issues and being suck-ups to the whatever corporate heavyweights are in the community," said John Sugg, senior editor of Atlanta alternative newspaper Creative Loafing and a former business journalist. "The Atlanta Business Chronicle demonstrates that a publication can be an invaluable tool for business while still being an aggressive and potent news product."

Current and former editors, as well as former staff writers, credit the publication's aggressive editorial coverage to factors that include a willingness to let reporters loose to cover a major story for weeks at a time; a publisher, Ed Baker, who backs the editorial staff when major advertisers complain; and a newsroom esprit de corps that helps young reporters learn the ropes.

"There was a belief from the very top of the organization down that we were going to prove that a weekly business journal could produce quality, award-winning investigative series," said former Editor David Rubinger. "It

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Women of the Year
Westbank's Sue Platen is the winner of this year's award from Women in Technology Industry Forum Tech 2B Section C

Sewer spending
Area governments are mounting billions of dollars in repairs for sewer systems. Engineering Special Section

A CHRONICLE RISKY BUSINESS SPECIAL REPORT

Danger in the aisles

Death, injury at Home Depot

Since the beginning of 2001, the number of stores operated by The Home Depot has increased from 781 to about 1,300 today, making the company the second largest retailer in the nation.

At the same time, critics have cited the safety of customers and employees in the stores. Since 1995, at least three customers and five workers have been killed in accidents in the stores.

In 2002, the number of Occupational Safety & Health Administration violations at Home Depot jumped 40 percent over 2001.

Steve Shook, the Los Angeles attorney who represented survivors of a woman killed in 2000 by a falling box at a California Home Depot, says the warehouse concept that has made Home Depot successful also makes its stores dangerous.

"They are creating a culture of death and injury and putting customers in walk-downs by profit over safety," Shook said. "Home Depot is responsible for these deaths and other warehouse-type store deaths."

Little information about accidents in the stores was available to the public. Home Depot requires confidential agreements in most legal settlements that prevent victims from discussing accidents.

In response to safety concerns, one state, California, recently enacted a law requiring Home Depot and other warehouse-type stores to open.

Atlanta Business Chronicle talked to the families of accident victims, attorneys and government officials around the country about safety at Home Depot stores, and obtained OSHA and court documents describing accidents and safety concerns at the company's stores.

Customer deaths
Jennifer Hines, 66, and Mary Pustoff died in Home Depot. Both were killed by falling products while shopping with family members. 24A

Astronaut grounded
NASA astronaut Jean-Loup Christon was forced to retire after being injured in an accident at a Home Depot. Christon was helping some screws when he was hit by a 50-pound drill press that fell from a shelf in a tools store. 25A

Keeping secrets
Home Depot demands confidentiality agreements to prevent public disclosure and discussion of accidents. 26A

Company responds
Home Depot has safety official Steve Hill, says the company takes safety very seriously. 27A

Workers at risk
OSHA safety violations mount 40 percent at Home Depot in 2002. 28A

California reforms
Lawmakers passed safety standards for warehouse stores after fatalities. 31A

A call for change
Consumer calls on Home Depot to make changes. 38A

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What they're saying

Selected SABEW judges' comments about the Atlanta Business Chronicle:

2000: "Great storytelling, good anecdotal leads and a good use of graphics. A comprehensive, meaty report each week."

2001: "The newspaper is remarkable for its enterprise reporting. The sheer volume of local stories each week is impressive. The paper breaks news on a regular basis."

2002: "In a year when Georgia's revenues from corporate income tax were down, the Atlanta Business Chronicle's Meredith Jordan, working with resistance from state officials, uncovered a secret tax break for a select number of corporations."

2003: "Georgia taxpayers should stand up and cheer for the Atlanta Business Chronicle."

2004: "Enterprising, authoritative, comprehensive, well-presented. So smartly done that the Chronicle should conduct how-to clinics for other journals. ... A news monster that throws its weight around with enterprise reports."



also went above Ed to (ACBJ CEO) Ray Shaw."

Its performance has made its newsroom a prime recruiting spot for other business news organizations. In the past decade, a half-dozen reporters and editors have left the ABC, as it is known in Atlanta, for The Wall Street Journal. Two others have gone on to Bloomberg News. Another former reporter, Dean Anason, is now the Washington bureau chief of American Banker, while yet another, Kent Hoover, is Washington bureau chief for the paper's parent company.

"Even though we covered business, we immersed ourselves deeply into the community," said Rubinger, who was managing editor from 1993 to 1995 and then was editor when Anita Sharpe left for the Journal. "It allowed us to dig deep into our beats. That was partly because we came out once a week, and we had time to get to know these people on a much deeper level."

Rubinger left the paper in late 1998 and is now vice president of communications at Atlanta-based Equifax Inc.

One deep-digging project in 2003 won in the enterprise category in SABEW's contest. In a series of five stories about workers and shoppers being injured and killed in Home Depot stores, writer Jim Lovel exposed the Atlanta-based chain's soaring OSHA violations and the steps it took to keep store accidents secret.

"I routinely troll the Web looking for data sources and found my way to the OSHA site," said current Editor David Allison. "In the fall of 2002, I finally figured out how to use it. I discovered it was possible to look at the safety records of any company in the country. We started punching names in."

Lovel first looked at safety among all large Atlanta-based companies and then focused on the companies with the worst records.

"We knew it was going to be highly sensitive and handled it just so. He spent several months researching before we ever published our first story," said Allison.

Home Depot's reaction? According to Allison, it no longer talks to the paper. Home Depot did not respond to a request for comment on the Atlanta Business Chronicle.

The paper has 25 editorial staffers, including two full-time photographers and eight reporters. Although its staff size is roughly half that of the daily Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the paper prides itself on beating the competition.

"We always felt like it was a David-and-Goliath situation, and we fed off of that," Rubinger said. "We knew they were larger and had the resources. But that just motivated us to try to work harder."

"I cringed picking up the Thursday morning AJC."

The Chronicle, like many weekly ACBJ publications, went to press on Wednesday night and was available Friday morning. But like Rubinger on Thursdays, the business staff of the AJC often cringed picking up the weekly paper when it arrived on Friday morning. If one of them had been beat on a story, they likely would have to follow for the next day.

For instance, the weekly regularly scooped its larger competitor on the Northern Arc, a proposed highway around part of Atlanta.

By digging through county real estate records, reporter Sarah Rubenstein discovered that board members of the Atlanta Regional Commission and the state Department of Transportation and their relatives had bought land near the proposed highway's intersections.

The tedious assignment was given to Rubenstein, a new reporter fresh out of Dartmouth, to help her break into the government beat.

The story ran on the front page of the paper for more than two months until Gov. Roy Barnes, who had publicly supported the highway, held a news conference pulling its plug. (Allison said the Chronicle was not invited to the news conference.)

"Over those nine weeks, all of those stories ran on page 1," said Managing Editor Jim Molis. "It had been discussed to move it inside, but we decided it was a pressing issue and it was important."

Sugg's only criticism of the paper is its commentary.

"It's editorial pages are almost totally dominated by shills for the Republican Party, and it's a big error to assume that Democrats are somehow anti-business," said Sugg, a former business reporter for The Tampa Tribune and one of the original reporters at the South Florida Business Journal, another ACBJ publication. "Some of the skepticism of ABC reporters could add to the quality of its editorial pages."

Still, Allison is working on making sure the paper continues its winning streak next year.

"We can never relax around here," he said. "Week in and week out, we strive for consistent quality. The editors try to actively praise our staff for their successes. We let them know what we want them to do and support them for their efforts and praise them profusely when they accomplish something."

Chris Roush, an assistant journalism professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, competed against the ABC from 1994 to 1997 as a reporter for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.