

PUBLISHER PROFILE

Ken Riddick

The Modesto Bee/Merced Sun-Star

Your 15-second sales pitch, please. What do I get when I drop my four quarters in the box?

Your community. But not only by putting four quarters in a box. The Bee and Sun-Star are proud of our seasoned journalists who report and post stories all day, every day. Our goal is to meet the needs of our varied audiences and we do this through the print product, modbee.com, and via twitter and Facebook. We offer text, photographs and video on our mobile platforms.

Tell us something about the communities that your operation covers.

With approximately 40 miles separating them, Modesto and Merced sit in California’s great Central Valley. The cities are home to Gallo Wineries, CSU Stanislaus and UC Merced. The area has long been among the United States’ most productive agriculture communities. Today it is the leading area for almond production. The Central Valley is exceedingly interesting and diverse. Merced County (population 268,000) is 56 percent Latino and more than half the population is under 35. Modesto (population 266,353) is 37 percent Latino and 36 percent are under age 34.

Contrast your demographic of locally employed residents and that segment that commutes to the Bay Area and points north and south. What strategies are in play to capture them both, digitally or in print?

The contrasts and market needs among all of our audience is diverse and broad. Relevance comes in many forms: interest, timing, convenience, demographics and value. We must meet all this diversity where it lives with what it wants.

Tell us a little about Vida en el Valle and how it helps you cover your region. What other products do you offer that target a niche or demographic segment?

As noted above, the Latino market is strong and growing. It is extremely important that we improve our connection with this community. To market to Latinos as if they all have simple single needs would be folly. It is a majority of our population and, as such, is just as diverse within the community as the rest of our population in terms of education, interests, language, among others. We aim to better connect with the community, learn more about what makes the various niches tick and provide that, both on the audience and marketing sides. We need to better reflect this community. We still have a lot of work to do. But it’s extraordinarily interesting and we’re learning all the time. Vida is a bilingual publication and serves a segment of this demographic well. But we’ll need to do more to ultimately meet this giant market opportunity.

What sparked your interest in journalism as a career?

Curiosity. And I bore easily. This career is not – and never has been – boring.

What was your path to becoming a publisher?

Since my first newspaper gig in Greeley, Colo., I spent the first half of my career in the newsroom. I moved over to the digital side in 1999 in Fresno. I took on the VP of Digital role at the Minneapolis Star-Tribune in 2003, then a corporate digital role with Hearst Newspapers, followed by returning to McClatchy with another VP of Digital role at the Charlotte (N.C.) Observer. I came back to California to become the publisher of The Modesto Bee in June 2014 and was asked to additionally take on the Merced Sun-Star in June of last year.

Who has inspired you?

I’ve had many folks that have encouraged me. A few have entrusted me with great opportunities that allowed me to do my bit for this business: Keith Moyer, currently the editor in chief at the Las Vegas Review-Journal, was my editor and publisher at three different newspapers and continues to be a close friend and mentor; Sacramento Bee publisher Cheryl Dell helped me learn the business side. Her tutoring continues today. My wife, Catherine, one of the most exacting journalists I’ve worked with, has challenged me to improve throughout my entire career arc. Most importantly, journalism continues to inspire me. The many journalists and advertising folks that continue to figure out the future of this important business inspire me profoundly.

Describe a typical day for you at the job.

Sorry. There is no typical day. The one thing I can count on is surprise. But that’s ultimately what keeps it fun and interesting. This business has changed dramatically over



Ken Riddick: “Our daily focus today is on bringing digital consumers the kind of information that is relevant, interesting and convenient while partnering with marketers to demonstrate to them the value, return on investment and the reach that our various digital platforms dominate.”

the years and the pace is only quickening. That’s just fun. Challenging but fun.

Describe a day where it’s running off the rails.

Any day that ends in “Y.” We strategize and plan not because we’re the smartest folks around but so a well-informed plan can help us navigate the chop when the seas get sloppy. It’s something new every day. Most days I’m eager for the next trial.

Tell us about a tough decision you had to make to ensure the vitality of your operation.

Many days offer difficult choices. There has been much contraction and this business has seen more than its share of hardworking professionals move on. Change can be hard on long-term readers and, frankly, sometimes it can be hard on us as well.

You’ve overseen digital operations for various companies across the country. How does that influence your day-to-day work as publisher of a media company that happens to also print newspapers?

This is a key reason why I love McClatchy. They value

two things above all else: journalism and our customers. My digital background, I hope, helps us satisfy both of those patrons. While we work tirelessly to assure our print readers are experiencing the best local journalism and marketing messages available, the data on audiences moving to digital and, more dramatically, to mobile is irrefutable. We’re already pretty darned good at this print thing. Our daily focus today is on bringing digital consumers the kind of information that is relevant, interesting and convenient while partnering with marketers to demonstrate to them the value, return on investment and the reach that our various digital platforms dominate. I hope my “digital pedigree” in some way helps hasten that effort.

“A good publisher hires the right people and lets them do their job:” True or false? And why?

Absolutely true. It’s the only way to scale any business. And it’s a lot of fun to watch good people do great things.

Tell us how your people oversee the various properties on your behalf.

It’s simple, really. Our leadership agrees that our focus should be on making this digital transition as smooth and rapid as possible. Each of us on the leadership team is empowered to chase that dream. Consequently, our newsrooms are more agile and pliable than ever before. We shoot video, post breaking stories from the scene and engage deeply in social media. And our advertising folks work every day to better understand our clients’ needs, goals and pain points so that we can partner with them to help them grow their businesses. It’s not rocket surgery. It’s about learning what your customers need and want, then providing it.

Tell us about how your newspapers are produced, printed and distributed out of Sacramento.

Our print products have been successfully produced off-site for a few years now. And only a couple of years ago we moved our copy desk operation into a consolidated team in Sacramento. As we continue to strategically manage down the expenses of the legacy side of our business, it is important to identify areas that might offer redundant expense savings. This allows us to focus on our customers, providing the news they need, how and when they want it. And it allows us to focus our advertising staff and resources on the new opportunities and invest in our future, while gracefully organizing away from past, archaic business practices.

Describe how your newspapers include charity in their missions.

We’re actively involved in the community on many levels in both markets. We feel we are a community member and have a leadership role. It is important to our brand and credibility. And, frankly, in a market the size of these, I’d argue that it’s important to the community, too.

PERSONAL STATS

Name: Ken Riddick
Born: Beaumont, Texas, 1957
First job: Delivering auto parts
Current job: President and publisher of The Modesto Bee and The Merced Sun-Star
Family: Wife: Catherine; Springer spaniel: Booker
Education: Bachelor of Journalism, The University of Texas
Community involvement and diversions: During my executive career I have served on several local boards. They include board member for the 2014 “Light the Night” Executive Leadership Council for The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society/ North Carolina Chapter; former board vice president for Marketing for Charlotte Concerts, a non-profit organization founded in 1930. It is the original performing arts organization in Charlotte. In Modesto, I am active as an Executive Committee member on the board of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Stanislaus County. I also serve as its Marketing chair. I also am a fellow of the American Leadership Forum, Great Valley Chapter.
As for diversions: I have been a SCUBA diver for more than 35 years. I enjoy photographing the marine environment.

OBITUARIES

Ben Bagdikian, 96

Ben Bagdikian, media critic, journalism dean, legendary reporter and news executive, died March 11, 2016, at home in Berkeley, the San Francisco Chronicle reported. He was 96.

“Ben was a major figure in 20th century U.S. journalism, and we’re all his beneficiaries,” said Edward Wasserman, dean of the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. Bagdikian was dean there in the 1980s.

From the Pentagon Papers to “The Media Monopoly,” and including a Pulitzer, a Peabody and a Guggenheim Fellowship, Bagdikian’s 70-year career was diverse and honored.

Bob Cane, 81

Robert Melvin Cane, editor of the Delano Record in Kern County, died Feb. 17, 2016. He was 81. Cane had been the editor and sole reporter for The Record since 1992. Previously, he was a reporter for the Gonzales Tribune in Monterey County and for the Inyo Register in Bishop.

Nick Ferentinos, 73

Nicholas Denis Ferentinos, a nationally honored journalism educator and mentor to educators, died Jan. 25, 2016. He was 73 and had lung cancer. Ferentinos taught at Homestead High School in Cupertino from 1965 to 2000 and was adviser to The Epitaph newspaper from 1976 to 1994.

When Ferentinos’ students wrote about an HIV-positive student, the school’s principal tried to censor the newspaper, citing the national 1988 Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier decision, which allowed school principals to censor student publications.

The students fought to publish the story and ultimately went to print when they discovered that Hazelwood did not apply in California, which was covered by the California Student Free Expression Law passed in 1977.

Ferentinos later mentored teachers – of journalism and other subjects – across the country.

Wally Griffin, 91

Wally Griffin, former editor and publish-

er of the old Crescent City American, died Feb. 21, 2016. He was 91.

Griffin as a boy learned to set type for his father, Howard, who founded The American in 1926. The younger Griffin later studied photography and learned lithography and offset printing using photographic film.

Wally Griffin took over the business when his father died. He was editor and publisher until he sold the paper in 1969 to the Del Norte TriPLICATE.

Steve Griffiths, 49

Steve Griffiths, a former editor in Fresno and Tulare, died Feb. 4, 2016, of complications from a leg infection. He was 49.

Griffiths was an editor of the Tulare Advance-Register and later ran The Bee’s South Valley Bureau. He later was a travel executive, did public relations and was campaign manager for state Assemblywoman Connie Conway, who was his former co-worker at the Visalia Times-Delta, that newspaper reported.

“Steve Griffiths was an outstanding journalist, a creative entrepreneur and a loyal friend,” said Jim Boren, The Bee’s executive editor. “He made our region a much better place.”

Bill Pfaff, 97

William “Bill” Pfaff, a former publisher of the Auburn Journal and Placer Herald, died

Oct. 22, 2015. He was 97.

Pfaff was publisher in Auburn from 1968 to 1989. Earlier, he had been publisher of the old Huntington Park Bulletin and South Gate Press and was an advertising executive at the Glendale News-Press. Pfaff served on the CNPA Board of Directors in the 1970s.

Catherine Shen, 68

Catherine Shen, a former editor at the San Francisco Chronicle and associate publisher at the Marin Independent Journal, died March 31, 2016. She was 68 and had pancreatic cancer. Shen later was publisher of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, general manager of the Horvitz Newspapers in the Pacific Northwest, and senior vice president at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Judith Unzner, 66

Judith Unzner, editor for 16 years of Herburger Publications’ River Valley Times, died unexpectedly March 27, 2016, in Henderson, Nev. She was 66 and had an autoimmune condition. Unzner had owned the former Murieta Times for a couple of years and changed its name to the River Valley Times. Herburger acquired it in 2000, and Unzner continued as editor. The River Valley Times covers Rancho Murieta, Sloughhouse, Sheldon and Wilton, communities northeast of Elk Grove.

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RIDDICK

From page 3

What is your biggest concern about newspapers and their future?

It’s funny. I don’t worry too much. We’ve got a bunch of really smart and innovative folks working hard to make sure we’re meeting our customers where they live. It’s Marketing 101. The rules and expectations haven’t changed, just the tools.

Any ideas as to how a community newspaper should mix Very Important Coverage and “refrigerator magnet” journalism?

Pay attention to your readers. Ask them. Test them. Learn from the data and provide what they want. What they want is more important than what we want. Plus, it’s a better business model.

How has your membership in CNPA helped your business?

I learn a lot. It’s helping me connect with peers in the region. It exploits the power of the crowd to get things done at legislative and other levels. And, frankly, makes me feel less alone in the fight.



Ken Riddick does his time behind the desk (Page 3), but when he gets out of the office, he likes to go deep. Riddick is a longtime SCUBA diver.

If you weren’t a publisher, what job would you do?

The subject has come up more than once with friends about opening a bourbon and cigar shack on some beach on the island of Grand Turk. But I’m just afraid I’d have “inventory control” challenges.

Where is all this change in the business going to end up?

I don’t know, but I sure can’t wait to find out!

To learn more about Ken Riddick’s area, visit modbee.com and mercedsunstar.com.

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