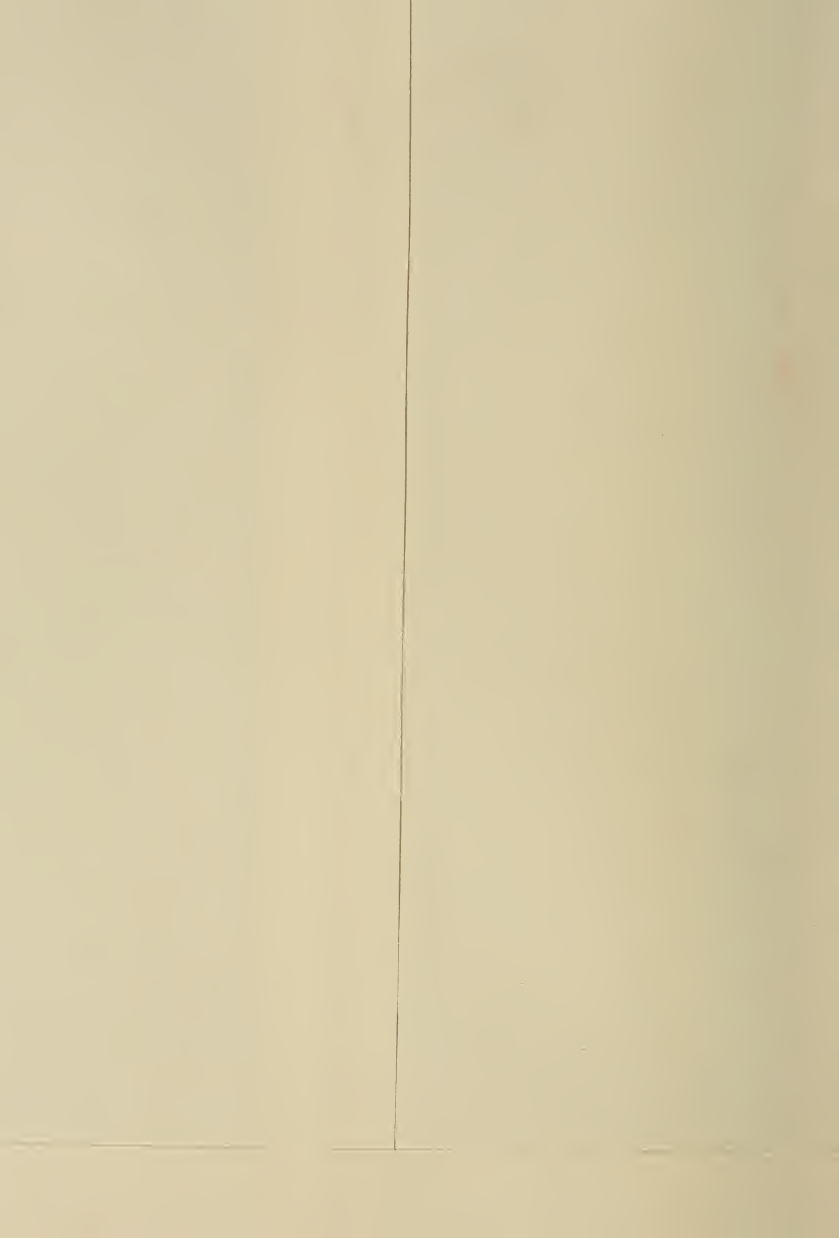


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# GETTING SUBSCRIBERS FOR THE COUNTRY NEWSPAPER





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BY J. B. POWELL



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## GETTING SUBSCRIBERS FOR THE COUNTRY NEWSPAPER



THESE is a common understanding among newspaper men that advertising depends on circulation, circulation depends on news, news depends on business facilities and these depend on advertising. In other words, the organization of a newspaper is an endless chain. Of course the employees of every department think theirs is the most important department of all. But they all know that one could not exist without the others.

If a newspaper man, starting in business, could have his choice of any of these constants, however, he probably would choose circulation. For it is known that the other things are sure to follow if you can produce the proper circulation reports. This does not make circulation the most important, but it does give it a place as a factor which should always be guarded and nursed.

There is no phase of the production of a country newspaper so grossly neglected as circulation. Who ever heard of a circulation manager of a country newspaper in a town of less than four thousand population? There are editors, business managers, secretaries and treasurers, bookkeepers and office girls, but there are no circulation managers. Yet any paper with more than a one-man office force can well afford to have a circulation manager whose business is to build, solicit and manage the circulation.

### THE NEWSPAPER'S FIELD

Country newspapers on an average have subscription lists of one thousand to two thousand names. The list which rises above the two-thousand mark and is yet a country newspaper is head and shoulders above others in this class. You can nearly count on your fingers those in a western state which exceed twenty-five hundred. County-seat papers in that state have circulations between fifteen hundred and two thousand. Those papers with less than one thousand circulations are considered very weak. If such papers pay, the profits must come from high advertising rates, legal printing or job printing.

The country newspaper might be considered—as in most cases it is—a county newspaper. That, in a way, limits its field. Across the borders in the other counties there are always county journals, so the country editor does not look for his subscribers in other counties. His is a local field, and success lies in pleasing, serving and soliciting this constituency.

Sometimes, in fact oftentimes, in the more thickly settled regions, the country-newspaper field is even more limited than by the county borders. It may not be the county-seat newspaper, a factor which always influences circulation. There may be other newspapers in the county which lay claim to a field around towns in which they are established. In these cases the paper's field is cut down to the town and vicinity, the latter being fixed



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## THE INFLUENCE OF SUBSCRIBERS ON SUBSCRIPTIONS

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generally by the rural routes. Of course it can always be expected that the home county, even tho dotted all over with newspapers, will always be richer in subscribers than outside territory. Always before the editor lies the possibility of making his *the* newspaper of the county.

In a county I have in mind there are twelve newspapers. The county's population is 25,253. The papers are located in eight towns. It can be easily seen how their territories overlap. The county business is divided between two towns, so no paper can assert itself as an official organ or lay claim to that title. The circulations of these papers are from five hundred to twenty-five hundred.

The next step in figuring a possible circulation list is to determine just what proportion of the total population in its geographical territory the paper can expect to put on its list. The biggest factor in splitting the constituency of a newspaper is politics. Most country newspapers stand out for some party. In fact, it is expected that they shall be partisan, and the strongest country papers, I might assert with confidence, are those which are partisan. Nevertheless, when a newspaper engages itself in the service of a party, it limits itself to the strength of that party. That is, supposing the county is evenly divided politically, a Republican paper cannot expect more than ten per cent of its circulation in the county to be Democrats, and *vice versa*. And the more partisan a paper is, the smaller becomes the percentage.

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## THE POSSIBLE CIRCULATION

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Now, taking a county with twenty thousand population, a partisan county-seat newspaper can expect to draw from ten thousand of its own party and a little more than one thousand of the other party. A newspaper's ideal should be to send one paper to each home. The family is composed on an average of four persons. To these eleven thousand people the paper should send 2,750 copies.

This is local circulation. Every paper has a foreign list, depending on its age and the emigration from the county. Perhaps an average would be fifteen per cent of the total circulation. In this theoretical case I am laying out it would be 627. This would make the total possible circulation 3,377, which should be the aim of that paper.

Of course every paper run in an energetic and wide-awake fashion has enemies. And there are always delinquents who must be cut off. But to offset these there are many instances where the bachelor or spinster will be getting a paper. All of the circulation so far considered is quality circulation, based on the idea that it is paid up to date. Any newspaper can stuff its list with complimentary copies, and just that much does it burden itself with expense and unappreciative readers. These should be limited to advertisers, advertising agencies, correspondents, exchanges and employees.

### BUILDING THE CIRCULATION

The case of the magazine which increased its circulation so rapidly that it outgrew its advertising rates and

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## THE QUALITY OF THE NEWSPAPER

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nearly went bankrupt is known to all of us. It can easily be seen how that happened. But there is no such possibility in the country-newspaper field, for the subscription rate is usually high enough to make the big list profitable. Therefore it should be and is the policy of every country newspaper to keep building its circulation.

Let us consider the methods of building circulation. The biggest factor, it is agreed by all country-newspaper men, is quality of the paper. The paper that is first-class in a news, editorial and mechanical way has the strongest pull on a big subscription list. Some editors go so far as to say this is the only method of building circulation, but I hardly agree with them. There are others.

From a news standpoint, it seems to be a general opinion that country correspondence is the biggest wire in pulling subscribers. Experience has taught the country editors that the personal feeling toward a letter of correspondence printed in the paper makes the readers appreciate the paper. It's an old maxim that every person likes to see his name in print, and there's no article like the country correspondence to get names in. In getting the town subscriber interested in your paper, the personal column will work the same way the country correspondence does. In writing further of the value of news in building circulation, it might be said that the paper which covers the news thoroly is the one which the people will look to for news.

There is some doubt as to just what influence editorials

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## SOLICITING BY MAIL

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have on circulation. The editorial enthusiast will argue for editorials as great circulation builders. Still, the proof remains that there are papers which have good circulations and yet do not run editorials. My opinion is that editorials are valuable because they bring the editor closer to his readers. The personality of the editor always influences the circulation of a country newspaper, and the greatest way an editor has in gaining a recognized personality is thru the editorials he writes.

But much of the effect of good news and good editorials may be lost by slovenly make-up and printing. The readers appreciate a neat newspaper. Correct and pretty mechanical work will always draw subscribers. Even the size of a newspaper's body type will decide some persons in selecting a newspaper. Many old persons complain of the type which is "too small to read even with specs on."

Thus are laid the foundations on which the country newspaper wishes to build circulation. But there is another phase of building circulation which is most generally neglected. This is solicitation. It is the impetus which enables the editor to cash in on his paper's superiority.

No paper can excuse itself for not soliciting by mail. It is possible to obtain lists to work on thru the voting registers of the county, thru the tax lists and thru other legitimate channels of information. This list should be kept up to date. Write appealing circular letters to the persons on this list and send them sample copies

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## THE EMPLOYMENT OF SOLICITORS

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of special editions and of papers in which there are marked articles about themselves. In mailing these letters and papers never forget that the wife largely selects the paper. A point in favor of mail solicitation is that it is a fact that most men welcome mail and most men avoid subscription solicitors. A letter that does not bring ten per cent returns is not effective.

One brainy little scheme of soliciting thru the mail is worked by a Hannibal, Mo., newspaper. Whenever a marriage takes place in its field, this newspaper is sent to the new home with the account of the marriage marked; accompanying the paper is a letter of congratulation, ending up with the suggestion that the right way to start married life is to have a newspaper in the home. It gets the subscribers in most cases.

A few county newspapers employ solicitors. It takes a live and energetic newspaper man to undertake such a campaign for subscribers. Most of those who have tried it are pleased with their results, they say, and are continuing. They say the cost is not prohibitive, in fact no more than the cost of getting subscribers by contests. One South Dakota editor states that new subscribers cost him fifty cents each, and he was able to double the circulation of two newspapers in two years with the aid of solicitors.

It is a fact, however, that some solicitors can do you more harm than good. There is a lot in picking your solicitors. One circulation manager of a big newspaper

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## CONTESTS AS CIRCULATION BUILDERS

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says that the requisites of a valuable solicitor are "honesty, sobriety, intelligence, canvassing ability, tact, patience, control." It is a big question whether he should be paid on commission or on a salary. On commission he will get subscribers at any sacrifice to the paper, even cutting rates. On salary he is likely to shirk. The country correspondent can always be made a good solicitor, and he should not be overlooked in laying out your campaign.

Perhaps the one point most disputed among country-newspaper men is whether contests and bargain days pay. There is a great deal of resentment against them, especially the discussions in trade papers being against them. Nevertheless the companies which arrange and conduct campaigns can show you that they are putting on contests for the best papers of the state right along. There is one newspaper in northeastern Missouri which puts on a contest every year. And this editor, who owns two good-paying, up-to-date newspapers in that section of the state, will tell you very quickly that contests do pay. Bargain days are more unusual than contests. There seems little argument to offer for any newspaper man to set aside a certain day when he will discount old bills and take new subscriptions at reduced rates.

Contests deserve more attention, however. There are many kinds of contests, the most popular being the piano contest, in which the winner receives a piano and the other contestants in second, third and fourth places receive other less expensive prizes. Then there is the con-

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## CONTESTS ARE EXPENSIVE

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test carried on by some retail merchant in which the paper co-operates by advertising the contest and allowing votes for subscription payments. Another kind is that in which the contest company persuades five leading business firms to allow discounts for purchases on which they give away tickets on a piano or automobile which the newspaper is giving away. The newspaper also gives tickets. They are all more or less similar to the old piano contest, with some minor deviations for the purpose of creating more interest.

In the first place, contests are expensive. They cost from five hundred to one thousand dollars. Just place that sum over to the debit of a mail and solicitor fund and imagine whether the credit to the fund would be more or less than the credit to the contest. You contract to pay a contest company fifty per cent for new subscribers and forty per cent for collections as a general rule. Unless your subscription list is full of dead-beats and your field has been thoroly worked for subscribers, you are likely to be paying a very dear price for your new subscribers and collections.

In the next place, a contest always makes enemies for the newspaper. And generally the losing contestants are disgruntled at the outcome. It is difficult to keep people from suspicioning graft. The biggest argument against them, however, is that the new subscribers are not obtained on the merits of the newspaper. And generally time tells that the subscribers who stick and pay are the

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## CLUBBING OFFERS AND PREMIUMS

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ones who do subscribe on the merits of the newspaper. Personally I believe there are some cases where a contest is a good thing in a business way. For example, a few years ago the publisher of a Missouri newspaper bought out an opposition Republican paper. The offices were consolidated, as were the subscription lists. The publisher found that the list he had purchased was in very bad shape. It was time to find out what this list was worth and what complaints any subscribers might have against the old management or the new. A contest, conducted after a series of statements had been mailed, cleaned up the combined list and put it on a good basis.

In closing the discussion of circulation building, it might be well to say something about clubbing offers and premiums. Some editors are under the impression that clubbing offers bring subscribers. This seems to me a false impression. Every other newspaper can offer the same figures on orders for city newspapers and magazines. So why would any one quit another paper for yours to get something any paper would give them? I do believe that mailing subscriptions to city newspapers and magazines pays, in that it produces friendship and good-will and encourages prompt payments on subscription. As far as premium offers are concerned—that is, giving away tin silverware or cheap pillow tops, etc.—I do not believe they can help in the least. Subscribers do not take a paper to obtain a premium, and if they did they would always be expecting another premium.



### SUBSCRIPTION RATES

Another vital point concerning circulation is the rate of yearly subscription. Rates now average about one dollar and twenty-five cents in the United States as a whole. In the West the rates run from one dollar and fifty cents to two dollars.

Some papers have two rates—the pay-in-advance rate and the rate for subscriptions paid after expiration. Other papers have a rate for foreign circulation and another rate for county circulation.

Generally the rate is all the editor thinks the “traffic will bear.” That’s the way he fixes his rate. In most cases the competition determines the price. There are some fifty-cent papers, but I do not believe the country papers will ever depend on the advertiser alone for profit, as do most city papers. There are some papers which hold up their rates in a highly competed field and yet retain the largest circulations. These are the papers with “quality” circulation. After all, the question of rates is one of business policy.

About one-third of the country papers pretend to have a pay-in-advance system. Not more than fifteen per cent have it in effect, is my opinion. That is, there is not more than fifteen per cent of the country papers which stop a man’s paper when his subscription expires. The editor should know his subscribers, and if he studies his list he can tell just about how much credit any subscriber

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## DO NOT MAKE ENEMIES

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can stand. For those who ask it I would stop their papers. That can be done by using a mailing-list book.

The country-newspaper man should rely on statements and abide by the government regulation that subscriptions shall not fall behind more than one year. A series of statements mailed out before expiration and during the year will tell whether a subscriber intends to pay. In mailing statements, the answer should cause as little inconvenience as possible to the subscriber. Make it easy for him to pay. Don't put him to the bother of filling out a lot of blanks. If the subscriber doesn't pay when the final time you have set is up, nor hasn't made a request that his paper be continued, cut him off.

Some editors have found it worth while in straightening up a bad subscription list to put some cases in court as test cases. Of course the newspaper wins, because the law says that as long as a man takes a paper from his mail-box or allows it to be taken out he assumes the responsibility of paying for it. If he does not want it he should not take it out. Therefore all the editor has to prove is that the defendant received the paper. The question of whether he ordered it sent does not enter into the case. These cases help the collectors a good deal. I don't believe in putting many bills in the hands of collection agencies. If a personal visit by a newspaper's representative won't bring the money, I don't believe a brow-beating by a collection agency will bring you as much as the enemies you make will cost you in the long run.

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## THE SUBSCRIPTION BOOK

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### METHODS OF RECORDING CIRCULATION

The methods of recording circulation in newspaper offices are nearly as numerous as the newspapers themselves. The systems fall into the general classes of card, book and loose-leaf. There are companies which supply record blanks of each of these classes. But nearly every office makes some deviations from the other systems. The general spirit among newspaper men is to better their office systems, and the day of the editor who dropped one-half of every dollar in his trousers' pocket and invited all the "boys" to have a treat on the other half without keeping a record of any of it is past.

The subscription book is the oldest system. The subscribers' names, generally on proofs of the mailing galleys, are put in the book at the left of the page under the heading of the town or the city where they get their mail. When the subscriber comes in to pay his subscription, the first question is, "Where do you get your mail?" Then his name is located and a credit made to the right showing the date to which he is paid. Some papers credit their subscribers for fifty-two issues of the paper instead of a year from date to date. In seven years the editor runs ahead one issue in this way. But it is always confusing and I do not think it worth while.

In most books no record is made of the date on which the subscription was paid. This is the main objection to the book system. You are never able to settle disputes as

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## PASTED MAILING PROOFS

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to when and how much was paid on subscription unless you go thru a myriad of entries on your cashbook. In this system the changes of address are made in the book. When a man changes, a note is made after his name at the old address, telling where he has been changed to. Then his name is placed under the new address with the date of the expiration.

A Missouri newspaper's old system was a book of pasted mailing proofs which was renewed about once every three or four months. Credits on subscription were made in the book, but no change of address; therefore if any person changed address and paid his subscription more than once before a new book was made, it was hard to locate his name to make a credit. Constantly it was necessary to refer to the mailing galleys. And any mistake made typographically in changing the dates and addresses caused lots of trouble. On the other hand, there was an advantage because there was always the incentive to keep the mailing galleys in correct shape—something many country papers neglect. In a nutshell, the main objection to this system is that it does not keep a permanent record in a concise form of all dealings with the subscribers.

The card and loose-leaf systems are much alike, except cards are not so flimsy as the paper used in loose-leaf books. Both are objected to because of the danger of losing the cards or sheets of paper. City papers as a rule use some form of the loose-leaf system. Their records are necessarily larger than those of a smaller paper and they

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## THE CARD SYSTEM

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need more room for their entries. A small five-by-three card is plenty large for the country paper. These cards are filed under the name of the subscriber and there is no time lost in locating him under a town or city address. The name is all that is needed to find a complete record of all transactions with the subscriber.

The first three cards shown on the pages immediately following are used in some newspaper offices.

The first is a Shaw-Walker card. It is a bit indefinite at the bottom. There would always be mistakes in making entries there. The top half is fine. The tips at the top are very convenient for the editor who has a cash-in-advance system or who wants to mail out statements. The checks near the top at the right make it easy to catch the exact date of expiration by years.

The second card form is one used by a Missouri newspaper. It lacks the tips, which makes it necessary to run thru all the cards and to look down near the bottom to find the date entries. It also lacks a place for change of address. Therefore every time a person changes his address a new card has to be made out.

The third is used in an Illinois office. It is very good for a country newspaper, but might be improved. The same objection raised against the second card because it lacked a tip at the top might be offered against this one.

The fourth card shown is one I have made up as a composite card, and which seems to be more nearly complete for a country newspaper.





SUB. RECORD

# The Abingdon Kodak

ABINGDON, ILL.

----- Town ----- State -----

Street No. ----- Ordered By -----

Began ----- 191 ----- ADDRESS CHANGED

Town ----- State ----- Town ----- State -----

DATE	AMOUNT	PAID TO	DATE	AMOUNT	PAID TO
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

A subscription card used in a country-newspaper office





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## A COMPOSITE FORM

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The "Remarks" space at the bottom is to be used in cases where more than one change of address have been made and you want to make a note that there has been a previous card. In the same way, if only six months' subscription was paid and the tip for the month of expiration had to be changed, a note might be made that there was another card. Or if there is a stop order, here is the place to put it. There is a perforation at the bottom for the rod to pass thru to hold the cards in the file. It can be used in this way or without the rod. If a rod is used the file is made as safe from losing names as is a book. But it would necessitate using a carbon receipt book from which subscription entries would be made to the cards only once a day or once a week. If the rod had to be removed every time a subscription was paid it would cause lots of work.

I would also use cards of two colors—white for county circulation and blue for foreign circulation. The advantage in this is in keeping a close watch on foreign circulation.

Another point worth mentioning about office systems is the value of receipts. Every newspaper office should have a blank form receipt, and one should be issued with every payment. It is easy to do. Besides giving the subscriber something to show him when his subscription expires, it shifts the burden of proof of mistakes onto the subscriber. Subscribers to a newspaper, especially to the newspaper which has no pay-in-advance system and lets

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## MECHANICAL DEVICES FOR MAILING

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subscriptions run, are prone to forget just how their bills stand. And generally the time slips by faster than they imagine. A simple receipt, merely telling the date issued, the amount received and the date to which it pays the subscriber, is all that is needed. Some offices use more complete receipts and keep carbon copies. These act as checks on all the other books.

### MAILING OUT THE PAPER

No discussion of circulation is complete without some word on the mechanical devices for keeping mailing lists and for mailing out papers. Country papers use either the Mustang mailer, which prints the name on the paper, or the galley-proof pasting mailers which attach a small printed slip to the paper. It does not matter which is used if care is taken in the work. All lists should be regularly read for errors, and should be arranged and kept in such a shape that a paper will be sent every week to each subscriber. And never is the time wasted which is used in stamping, wrapping and bundling neatly.

The mechanical devices should afford the best efficiency in mailing. No paper which is always late can expect to keep from hearing complaints, which are always hard on the circulation list. And those who have been around a newspaper office know that the last minute is always taken in getting the paper printed; therefore there is no time to be lost in mailing them out.

Postage is a small item in the cost of producing the

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## THE SUBSCRIPTION LIST

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paper. The average country paper pays only about twenty-five cents to seventy-five cents a week for all the papers it sends out. Extra charge is made for foreign circulation. But the newspaper man need not worry about postage, for it is easy to stay under the government rules for second-class mail matter.

### THE WORTH OF A SUBSCRIPTION LIST

When a newspaper is sold it is generally at double or more than double the actual value of the physical plant. The intangible thing which enhances the value of the newspaper is called its good-will. Good-will is that factor which is shown by the size of the newspaper's circulation list and the attitude of the subscribers toward the paper's management. Each newspaper has a good-will that is worth something. The only way that the amount of its worth is ever fixed is by the agreement of the buyer and the seller. The good-will of a newspaper with a strong circulation and high advertising rates is oftentimes double or even treble the value of the mechanical equipment. A strong circulation—especially the sworn circulation—brings advertising. And this circulation can be capitalized on the amount of profits above the profit realized on the actual physical value of the plant.

### THE SUBSCRIBER

The subscriber to a country newspaper should be among the editor's acquaintances. When he comes into the office,

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## THE SUBSCRIBERS

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the editor should be able to call him by name. He'll like it. If the editor doesn't know his subscribers, he had better get out and meet them. He is their servant; he has entered into a contract to furnish them with the local news. He'll never be able to satisfy his contract unless he is able to tell exactly what interests them and what their opinions are. It's his place to arouse a personal feeling between himself and his subscribers; for, after all, they are his customers just the same as there are customers of any country store. Often an editor calls on his subscribers to come in and pay up, as he wants to pay for a new machine. While not a good business policy, it always shows the feeling of friendship which the subscriber has for the newspaper. A subscriber will stick by you if you learn to serve him. That is the supreme test—service and loyalty to those who make up the subscription list.

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## BOOKS ABOUT PRINTING

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**THE ART AND PRACTICE OF TYPOGRAPHY.** By Edmund G. Gress. Fifty large inserts in color; 700 reproductions, mostly in color, of high-class commercial printing by some of America's best typographers; almost 100,000 words of practical instruction; 125 type arrangements.  $9\frac{1}{4} \times 12\frac{1}{4}$ , 250 pages, cloth, \$5.00; postage and packing 45 cents extra.

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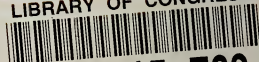
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