

Upbeat Enquirer Thrives on Sales In Supermarkets

By Stephen Klaidman

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LANTANA, Fla.—The recipe goes something like this—Take a generous helping of offbeat crime, a dollop of history and a sprinkling of bloopers, and mix with a human interest roux of rags to riches and good Samaritans. Stir in a tablespoon each of UFOs and the occult, fold in a couple of miracle cures, a pinch of parapsychology and half a cup of government waste, and top with Jackie Kennedy Onassis.

Boil down to something less than the essence and half bake. Package carefully and deliver to thousands of supermarkets for sale to Mr. and Mrs. Middle America.

It is absolutely guaranteed not to cause indigestion because all of the ingredients have been pre-digested and, in four out of five cases, it leaves the consumer with a sense of being at peace with himself and the world.

The product, which publisher Generoso Pope Jr. likens to "a can of peas," is the National Enquirer, which sells more than four million copies a week at supermarket checkout counters all over America.

Just a few years ago, it was a one-million-circulation journal of wife carvers and baby boilers with more shock appeal than an exposed high-tension wire. Today's version lacks the juice to get a rise out of the proverbial little old lady in tennis shoes.

Among those sophisticates who are aware of its existence, it evokes, at best, snickers. But like Liberace, Gene Pope laughs all the way to the bank. The weekly is extremely profitable (Pope won't put a precise figure on it) and has been growing so fast that, until this year, it operated without budgets.

From its 7½-acre campus-like headquarters in Lantana, the Enquirer reaches out to millions of Americans, soothing them and assuring them that things are not really quite so bleak as they are made to appear in the conventional press.

"We are trying to give people some hope," Pope says. "We want to give them some sense that there

See ENQUIRER, G2, Col. 1



NATIONAL 30
ENQUIRER Jealousy—How To Deal With It
Exclusive Photos & Story—Wedding Heals Breach
**JACKIE-CHRISTINA:
BITTER FEUD ENDS**

Kissinger's Trash:
Secret Service
Admits Breach
Of Security
page 46

EXCLUSIVE!
First Photos of
1976 Oldsmobiles
And Chevrolets
pages 18 & 48

Bizarre Incidents
Plague Stars
As They Film
Movie About Devil
page 41

How the Capital's
Top Women
Stay in Shape
page 28

Fantastic Amount
Networks Pry
For Prime-Time
TV Shows
page 8



Jackie Back in the Fold

ENQUIRER, From G1

are ways out of all the problems that they are constantly bombarded with."

"It doesn't leave me depressed the way other newspapers do," said Mrs. Jeanne Caspar, a reader in Arlington. "And it has things in it that you never can find in The Post or The Star. Do you know that there's a woman in Russia who can stop a frog's heart with her mind? That was in the Enquirer."

"Readers turn to us for something a little more upbeat," according to Stuart Lichtenstein, the paper's director of public relations. "There's a programmed balance sheet. Every story has a category."

"We depend a great deal on reader response (to determine what goes in the paper). Last year, we received about a million letters from readers."

The success of the National Enquirer is the product of inventive marketing. The formula for success, according to Pope, the paper's sole owner and guiding genius, is to "figure out how something's been done for many years and do the opposite."

"Publications have the most antiquated marketing systems in the country," he said. "We had to get into the supermarkets."

"I went out and hired guys who had worked selling to supermarkets to get into the supermarkets. Nobody had ever sold a publication to supermarkets."

The sales force totals 185 full-time employees and 674 part-timers, and they have put the Enquirer in every chain supermarket in America as well as drugstores and convenience chains such as 7-Eleven.

But success didn't come easily or overnight. The Enquirer was launched in 1926 by a former Hearst advertising executive as a full-size Sunday paper. By the time Pope bought it for \$75,000 in 1952, it was little more than a tout sheet.

"When I took over," Pope said, "I suppose it sold mainly because it had horse racing tips. The circulation was only 17,000. There was no staff. We had one full-time employee who was a billing clerk and telephone operator. A Journal-American (defunct New York daily) rewrite man slapped it together on Saturdays."

"The first year, I lost \$100,000 and, the second year, another \$100,000. I borrowed money from friends every

Friday to pay the employees, who would only take cash."

According to "Uncle Frank," a biography of the racketeer Frank Costello, "Each week, Costello would loan (sic) his young friend (Pope) \$10,000 to meet operating expenses. Pope would repay the loan promptly the following week in two \$5,000 installments as revenue from newsstand sales rolled in."

Pope, whose father made a fortune in the sand and gravel business in New York City and published the Italian-language newspaper *Il Progresso*, knew Costello well, but he denies that Costello was one of the friends who helped him keep the Enquirer alive.

"I did all kinds of experimenting until I finally hit the formula of gore," the large, rather avuncular-looking publisher said. "It really took off in 1958. The catalyst was a newspaper strike."

By 1967, Pope had moved the paper to Englewood Cliffs, N.J., and the circulation was up to a million. This was probably the critical moment.

"Circulation had stalled at about a million and conventional newsstands were going out of business at an alarming rate," Pope said. "The only place to go was into supermarkets, but we couldn't do it with our contents."

"We bent over backwards to overcome the image of the gore. Anything that has even the slightest inkling of sex or gore is just not used. Initially, we lost a quarter million in circulation but, six months later, we were back at a million—and then up."

In 1971, Pope moved the operation to Florida, taking his entire staff with him. He set up his printing plant in Pompano Beach and the editorial and business shop in Lantana, which is about 10 miles from Palm Beach.

The single-story headquarters is modern, airy and lavishly landscaped. Pope says the facility is worth more than \$2 million. The printing plant, according to Pope, is worth about \$10 million and three new Goss Headliner presses are on order. The Washington Post operates five Goss Headliners and two more-modern presses.

The Enquirer's news operation has about 180 full-time employees and a network of stringers in the U.S. and abroad.

The annual expenditure for news-gathering is \$10 million compared with \$14.6 million at The Post and \$26 million at The New York Times.

Revenues have been increasing at a startling rate. The figure for 1973 was \$17 million, for 1974 it was \$30 million and the projection for 1975 is between \$42 million and \$45 million.

Circulation has jumped from just under two million at the end of 1970 to just over four million at the end of the first half of 1975 and the trend is still up. Supermarket managers say the paper sells out the day it appears in the store.

Enquirer part-timers provide a racking and stacking service in areas where there is no central news delivery company. The supermarket provides nothing but space and earns 7 cents on each paper sold.

Gene Pope has surely been a super-salesman, and he has also been a successful editor in the eyes of millions of Americans who read the Enquirer regularly.

What he appears to have done is to identify a need and tailor the paper to fit it. Stewart Aledort, a Washington psychiatrist, studied the paper and articulated the need he believes it is designed to fill.

"Nothing is left hanging," Aledort said. "There is no anxiety, no emotions are aroused. The Enquirer helps the reader to identify with a powerful force—it could be Jackie Kennedy or something from outer space—without having to do any work. People are made to feel privy to things."

"It's also very authoritarian. There's almost a religious quality about it. It leaves no doubt. An Enquirer story tells you that's the way it is and that's that."

Aledort's analysis is consistent with Pope's exposition of what the paper is meant to do. He believes that digesting the news is a key part of the editorial function.

Pope believes that "the best writing is the simplest writing" and he has a cardinal rule that "everything we run must be of interest to more than 50 per cent of the readers."

Brian Wells, a senior editor who was running the newsroom in the absence of editorial director Iain Calder, described the process by which the lead



story is selected every week, a decision, like all others at the Enquirer, in which Pope has the final word.

"We don't say 'which is the most important story?'" Wells said. "We say to ourselves, 'which one will sell more?' It's our shop window."

"We give 'em things they want. Jackie O is the hottest thing at the moment. She pushed us up to 4.8 million. There's a difference of 800,000 on a Jackie O or a Christina (Onassis) headline. To see a figure of 4.8 million come up on the board, that's a satisfaction."

Wells, Calder and eight of the top 12 Enquirer news executives are British, Canadian or Australian. They are graduates of the popular British papers whose style of journalism is closer to that of the Enquirer than that of conventional U.S. dailies.

The British journalists, like the Americans who work there, are lured to the Enquirer by very high salaries. Salaries for the top eight newsroom

employees, Pope said, range from \$48,000 to more than \$100,000. Articles editors, of whom there are 14, begin at \$31,500, writers begin at \$26,500 and reporters begin at \$22,000.

But the high salaries do not come without risk. There is considerable tension and no job security at the Enquirer. By Pope's count, 26 persons have been fired in the last three years.

Roger Langley, a former Enquirer editor who now works in Washington for the competitive National Star, describes Pope's technique as follows:

"He'll double or even triple your salary and then he owns you. You can't do enough for Gene Pope, because he already pays you more than you're worth."

Enquirer editors produce about a thousand ideas a week, 65 to 70 of which end up as stories in the paper. In a shop where you can be fired on a whim, this creates tremendous tension. If a few weeks go by and an editor doesn't get anything into the paper, it stands to reason that the editor in question will begin to get a bit uptight.

"There's a fear syndrome that runs through that place," according to Bernie Gould, a former Associated Press reporter who recently was fired from his job as a writer at the Enquirer, and now works for a competing publication called Midnight.

The prototypical Enquirer reader, according to a demographic survey done for the paper, is a 25- to 49-year-old woman with more than one child and a family income of under \$10,000.

Pope is out to increase and broaden his circulation with a goal of 20 million sales weekly domestically and he also would like to expand into the English-language market abroad and ultimately to publish foreign-language editions. The current market, which is reached entirely by trucks—they used

to come into Florida loaded with manufactured goods and go back empty, now they go back loaded with Enquirers—is all over the U.S. and part of Canada, but the highest sales are on the East and West coasts of the United States.

The Enquirer is the opposite of conventional newspapers in that 80 per cent of its revenues are generated by the sale of the paper and only 20 per cent by advertising. Ninety per cent of sales are over the counter and 10 per cent subscription.

Pope's ambitions for the paper go beyond just increasing circulation. "Hopefully," at some time, we can become the champion of the public," he said.

The Enquirer crusades against excessive government spending, frequently with by-lined articles by members of Congress such as Les Aspin (D-Wis.), and the paper is negotiating with Secretary of the Treasury William Simon for a contribution.

When asked about those discussions, a spokesman in Simon's office indicated that the secretary would be happy to contribute something and that "we treat them (the Enquirer) the same way we would any other publication—with four million circulation."

Meanwhile, the Enquirer, which has published a fairly good string of medical exclusives, is preparing to expose wasteful spending at the National Cancer Institute.

It also has a series in the works that, Pope says, "goes into the entire, complex, massive, antitrust picture in this country."

When asked how the Enquirer would deal with such a sophisticated and technical subject in easily comprehensible terms, Pope said:

"We'll simplify it to the extent that we'll present it as we see it."