

Quest of a Saleswoman

The following is an article from the newspaper trade magazine, *Editor & Publisher*, that appeared on July 28, 2003.

By Dave Astor

Margo Sugrue, national sales director of Creators Syndicate, is motoring downtown on Chicago's Kennedy Expressway. The license plate on her red Jeep reads "TI VUM" — a spelled-in-reverse phrase that could refer to Sugrue's efforts to move Creators' 100-plus features into the pages of newspapers. But on this beautiful mid-July morning, the message is actually aimed at slow drivers eyeing Sugrue's car in their rearview mirrors.

Rush-hour traffic limits Sugrue's speed, but she still pulls into a Loop parking garage 15 minutes before her 9:30 a.m. appointment at the Chicago Tribune.

When the gothic-style Tribune Tower opened on North Michigan Avenue in 1925, syndicate salespeople were already roaming the country to pitch comics, columns, and other features to newspapers. Today, developments such as e-mail, tight feature budgets, and the scarcity of competitive newspaper markets would seemingly make these road reps as rare as a World Series game at Wrigley Field. But in the last decade, the number of salespeople traveling for America's largest syndicates has held steady at roughly 30, with about 20% of them now women.

Sugrue — an 11-year Creators veteran whose territory includes the Midwest and several other locales — walks into the office of Tribune Associate Managing Editor of Features Geoff Brown. Lake Michigan can be seen through the window behind Brown's desk. Tacked to another wall are the many feature sections he oversees.

"Did you bring samples?" Brown asks Sugrue, knowing the answer will be "yes." Sugrue pulls media kits for several comics from her briefcase. One spotlights "Strange Brew" by John Deering.

"Have they seen 'Strange Brew'?" Sugrue asks Brown, referring to the 11-member committee that reviews comics the Tribune might buy.

"I'd say half of them have," he replies.

Sugrue also shows Brown some columns, including the political/celebrity gossip feature by Lloyd Grove — who entered syndication with Creators this spring and is now in the process of moving from The Washington Post to the New York Daily News. "He's really good," Sugrue says. "Every time I read him I learn something. He's a real reporter who breaks a lot of stories."

Brown responds that "the only conceivable place" for the column would be in "Tempo," but that Tribune section is preprinted two days before publication. "I don't know if we

want to be a day later than other papers," says the editor. "Anyone subscribing to it [Grove's feature] would want to run it ASAP."

He also says the Tribune has "so many columns — including staff-written ones — that it's not looking to buy many more.

Then Sugrue, who became a syndicate rep after working in public relations, gets creative. She mentions a newspaper that buys Grove's column in order to pull excerpts from it, rather than run it in full. Brown is intrigued, thinking Grove's column could be an occasional source for the "Quoteworthy" feature in the Tribune's "WomanNews" section. "But only if the price is right," he says. "We wouldn't get that much use out of it." Sugrue assures him price will not be a problem, and Brown promises to get back to her after talking to the "WomanNews" editor.

Now it's time for Sugrue to get back outside and take the short walk to the Chicago Sun-Times building on North Wabash Avenue. The saleswoman notes she would have also visited Tribune Editorial Page Editor Bruce Dold, but he was on vacation.

Sales "r" us

Like many companies, syndicates have tightened up on staffing and other costs. So why are they still sending out 30 people to visit newspapers — at \$800-\$1,000 per week per rep for transportation, meals, and hotels (not including wages)? Virtually everyone interviewed for this story cites the "r" word.

"This is a relationship business," says John Matthews, United Media national sales director, who's on the road 35 weeks a year. "It's the best way to get across who we represent, and why they should be in the newspaper."

That's especially true when it comes to selling new features, adds John Vivona, who also visits newspapers two-thirds of the time as Universal Press Syndicate's vice president of sales. "Existing comics are tangible," he observes. "They do well on a survey. They have this many papers. New strips are more intangible — artwork, a concept. You're trying to sell an idea. That's something you need to do face to face."

Doug Page, on the road 25% of the year, says: "You learn about new opportunities more in person than by phone or e-mail. You're pitching an editor about a new comic or column — the things the syndicate wants to talk about — and you find out the paper is developing a health section or changing its Op-Ed section."

Other on-the-road benefits? "You learn more about the different qualities newspapers have from one community to the next," says Universal President Robert Duffy, a high-ranking sales executive at that syndicate for many years.

Also, in-person conversations with editors can give syndicates ideas for content they might distribute in the future — whether it be a popular feature in that particular paper, or

a topic for a yet-to-be-created feature desired by editors and readers. And any problems (such as a delivery glitch) between a syndicate and newspaper can be discussed.

Then there's the fact that reps enjoy talking with newspaper editors, who they describe as smart and interesting people. "The economy makes the job difficult, but the people you deal with make it a pleasure," says Matthews, who's moving from United to Universal on Aug. 26.

Indeed, getting to interact with newspaper editors was one of the reasons Sugrue decided to become a syndicate rep. "The features are also great — entertaining and informative," she says. "We're not selling widgets."

Comics relief

Sugrue enters the Sun-Times, whose utilitarian building differs greatly from the ornate Tribune Tower. She'll be here for a while, having scheduled back-to-back-to-back sessions with three editors. First up is John Cruickshank, vice president of editorial.

"I don't know if you're doing any shopping," Sugrue begins. "I know things are tight."

Cruickshank, like many of America's editors, can only agree. But he does observe that syndicated content "can be economical" during a recessionary time.

Talk turns to "The Other Coast" comic by Adrian Raeside of Creators.

"I love his stuff," says Cruickshank.

"He's a very funny man," agrees Sugrue.

"When I get the opportunity I'm going to bring him into the main paper," continues Cruickshank. The comic currently appears in Red Streak, the Sun-Times publication aimed at younger readers.

Sugrue mentions other features, among them recently launched opinion columnist Neil Cavuto and — as she did at the Tribune — Lloyd Grove. Cruickshank responds, "I have so much gossip in the paper already."

Then the Creators rep gets creative again, suggesting that Charlos Gary's recently launched "Working It Out" comic — which Sugrue describes as "'Dilbert' with art" — could replace "The Other Coast" in Red Streak if "Coast" breaks into the Sun-Times.

"That's not a bad idea at all," says Cruickshank.

He and Sugrue chat a little about the naming of Amy Dickinson to replace Ann Landers at the Tribune, and then Cruickshank ends the meeting with some general comments about syndicated features: "We'd rather be local, but there are some good national

columns." And: "I love the comics. I always read all of them. They're an interesting, important part of the culture."

Sugrue walks to Sun-Times Editorial Page Editor Steve Huntley's office for a short meeting. Among the six talents she mentions is Steve Kelley, The Times-Picayune of New Orleans editorial cartoonist signed by Creators this year.

"I know you have Jack Higgins on staff," Sugrue says, but she suggests Kelley as a syndicated backup.

"Let me take a look," replies Huntley, taking a media kit to peruse later.

When Sugrue says goodbye to Huntley, it's nearly 11:30. There's a 20-minute wait before Features Editor John Barron is able to leave a meeting and invite Sugrue to sit at a conference table in his office.

"We're trying to figure out a way to get more comics in the paper," Barron announces — words sure to bring a smile to any syndicate rep's face. He says one way of doing this would be to reduce white space between comics and move their titles from the top to the side of each strip. Sugrue mentions Cruickshank's interest in "The Other Coast."

Barron then asks about African-American-themed strips, which he feels are "under-represented" in syndication. Sugrue cites three Creators comics by African Americans: "Working It Out," Stephen Bentley's "Herb and Jamaal," and Morrie Turner's "Wee Pals."

The talk turns to Creators columnists, leading Barron to recall writing a story about the recent party marking Robert Novak's 40th anniversary as an op-ed writer. (Novak is with the Sun-Times and Creators.) Barron also says the paper is happy with Bill O'Reilly's Creators column. "We don't know what took us so long to pick it up," he says, adding that a tight feature budget was a factor. Then Sugrue mentions the "Around the World with Jennifer Merin" feature.

"Our travel editor was just complaining that she needs more stuff," Barron replies. He'll talk to that editor about Merin.

Comics come up again as Sugrue shows Clayton Strohmeier's "Mr. Housewife," which was launched last fall. Barron chuckles at several samples — despite his statement of a few minutes before that he likes to keep a "poker face" when reading comics in front of syndicate reps.

"Not bad," Barron says. "Not quite as insipid as some other comics with married couples. It has a little bit of reality — I've been in a couple of these positions."

Numbers in a numbers game

Syndicate sales executives and reps travel anywhere from 13 to 40 weeks a year. Newspaper visits are usually scheduled no earlier than two weeks in advance. When on the road, reps tend to visit two or three newspapers a day, depending on how many editors are being seen at a particular paper, how far apart the papers are, and plane schedules — especially since airlines pared flights after 9/11. Sometimes reps show an editor just a couple of features, other times as many as 10. (Reps can't pitch every feature on a syndicate's roster at every meeting, but try to show them all to various clients over a period of time.) At least one new feature is almost always in a rep's briefcase.

While the number of reps has remained roughly constant during the last 10 years, several other factors have changed in syndication sales.

Layoff-buffed papers have busier editors, sometimes making it difficult for them to meet with reps for a half hour or at all. Because of time and budget constraints, there are fewer editor-rep lunches at local restaurants. Tight newspaper feature budgets and limited space — caused by today's stumbling economy and other factors including newsprint costs — have made a road rep's job harder. "The main downside [of being a syndicate rep] is the limited space for comics," Sugrue says. "An editor has to lose one to gain one, and that's a risk. On the other hand, if they don't take those risks, they may end up with a pretty stale page."

But perhaps the biggest change in the past decade has been the continued decrease in multi-newspaper towns. "Fewer competitive markets always makes it more difficult for the syndicate," says Creators President Richard Newcombe, a former syndicate sales executive. There are fewer potential clients for features, and the surviving papers don't have to make immediate decisions when there's no competitor for a syndicate rep to visit that day.

The digital age has also changed syndication sales. For instance, it's easy to e-mail feature samples. But most syndicates use e-mail to supplement rather than replace in-person visits. "If I was to send an e-mail to someone who didn't know me, more often than not it would be treated like spam," says Page.

How is e-mail used supplementally? At the Washington Post Writers Group, for instance, newspapers that have expressed interest in a column might be electronically informed when the writer makes a television appearance. And these are not mass mailings. "I type out each one personally," says Karisue Wyson, who travels one or two weeks a month as WPWG's sales manager/North America.

Syndicates continue to do plenty of feature selling by phone. They call some papers between regular visits and dial other papers — especially smaller ones — that are rarely or never visited.

"You can do so much with a person over the telephone," explains Glenda Winders, editorial director of Copley News Service. "If editors are interested in a feature, they and our salespeople can go to our Web site together to see samples" — even though they may

be hundreds of miles apart. Not too many years ago, syndicate telemarketers had to postal-mail samples to interested editors and call back a few days later.

Out of the Loop, into the 'burbs

It's time to head north towards The News Sun of Waukegan, Ill. Sugrue drives back to the Kennedy, then to the Edens Expressway. There's time for a pitstop at Wilmette, Ill.'s Corner Bakery, where Sugrue stands in line to order a salad and sits down to quickly eat lunch. She also purchased a large coffee in a plastic container to drink when she hits the road again for Waukegan.

A little while later, Sugrue pulls into The News Sun parking lot. No problem finding a space here. The afternoon summer sun beats down as Sugrue enters the modern, suburban-style building. She sits down with Managing Editor Chris Cashman and News Editor Charles Selle in the middle of the newsroom rather than in an office or conference room.

Cashman is looking for features of interest to young people and Hispanics. He says older-skewing newspapers are in danger of "losing a generation of readers," and adds that his paper serves an area that's now about 50% Hispanic. Sugrue suggests columnist Linda Chavez.

"She's not really speaking to Hispanics," Cashman replies.

Sugrue gets a more positive response when she mentions Peter Guren's youth-oriented "Ask Shagg" cartoon.

"Can we see it on the Internet?" Cashman asks.

"Sure — Creators.com," she says.

Cashman punches up the site on the nearest computer and looks at Guren's feature. "This is a possibility," he says. "Send me a price on this."

"You can name it — as long as it's reasonable," replies Sugrue. Newspapers usually pay anywhere from \$5 to more than \$100 a week for a feature, depending on their circulation. The average rate is under \$20 per week.

Cashman notes that there are News Sun writers Creators might consider syndicating. And there's some good-natured bantering about the possibility of the paper doing a story about Sugrue, who lives just a few miles away.

Life on the road: A mixed bag

Syndicate sales reps — most of whom receive a combination of salary and commission — have plenty of stories to tell. WPWG's Wyson, for instance, recalled visiting a West

Coast newspaper while suffering a severe case of food poisoning. But she still managed to make a sale — the aptly named "That's Life," by Michael Twohy.

Making a sale is exciting, as the travel itself can be at times. But there are drawbacks to being on the road, especially for reps with families. "I used to run to the airplane, now I walk," quips United's Matthews, father of two sons — ages 10 and 9 — who were born well into his 28-year sales career. He adds, "I have to buy a T-shirt for them in every town!"

Even the most-traveled reps do put down their briefcases by Friday night. "We try to get our people home every weekend," says Universal's Duffy.

What do sales rep do during their weekday spare time on the road? Some might drop exhausted into a hotel bed. Or prepare for their visit to the next newspaper. Watch a ballgame on TV. Exercise. Have a drink. Matthews and Page are partial to reading biographies and history books.

Home is where the office is

Last stop: Sugrue's office on the second floor of her Green Oaks, Ill., house. On her desk is a phone and an iMac. On the walls are Sugrue's diplomas (a B.A. in communications from DePaul University in Chicago, and a master's in the same subject from Northwestern University) as well as original cartoons from some of the artists she sells to newspapers. They include Tony Cochran ("Agnes"), Dave Coverly ("Speed Bump"), Rick Detorie ("One Big Happy"), Leigh Rubin ("Rubes"), Jerry Van Amerongen ("Ballard Street"), editorial cartoonists Chip Bok and Gary Varvel, and others.

Later that week, Sugrue will head to newspapers in southern Wisconsin (where she'll sell Steve Kelley's editorial cartoons to the Kenosha News). The next week, it's on to newspapers in Indiana. Sugrue's main territory is the Midwest, but she also covers part of the East. And, as Creators' national sales director, Sugrue visits such major markets as New York, Washington, D.C., Denver, Los Angeles, and Toronto.

During today's swing through Chicago and its northern suburbs, no newspaper signed on the dotted line. But Sugrue laid the groundwork for future sales. Indeed, The News Sun purchased "Ask Shagg" one week later. "I don't try to twist anyone's arm on the spot," Sugrue says. "It's very much a relationship-building effort."

There's that "r" word again. And syndicates believe in three other "r's": road reps = revenues.

Dave Astor