

# What's in a headline? 15 million reasons to get it right

One of the underappreciated jobs for those of us in the news business is writing headlines. Sometimes it's fun, as when we get to write clever little puns, such as "Love and Loyola go hand in hand," over a story about Loyola University alums renewing their marriage vows; it accompanied a photo of couples holding hands. Sometimes it's straightforward: "Archdiocese announces first STEM schools" for the unveiling of curriculum aimed at science, technology, engineering and math.

Sometimes, we think it's straightforward, but people get confused because – well, because it's hard to sum up 600 words in five or six words. You can only emphasize one element of the story in the headline.

Such is the case with a recent story about the annual archdiocesan finance report. Our story carefully analyzed the news about the archdiocese's most recent fiscal year numbers, noting in the headline: "Archdiocese posts \$15.4 million surplus." A subheadline in the print edition (but not the Web version) noted, "Two years of cutbacks help turn the tide." That's good news and that was the upshot of the report. Hard work and sacrifice by a lot of people over the last year, plus an improved stock market, led to the gains.

The story noted that the archdiocese utilized furloughs, made staff cuts and cut costs in other ways. Stock market gains also helped contribute to the bottom line, but those aren't available in liquid form. It's not like the archdiocese is flush with cash. Senior staff writer George Matysek did a good job of analyzing the information, bolstered by an interview with Mark Fetting, chairman of the Archdiocesan Board of Financial Administration and CEO of Legg Mason in Baltimore, who provided important context.

A surplus of \$15.4 million in one year is great news, especially in a recovering economy. What needs to be kept in mind – and what the story noted – is that this gain comes on the heels of two very rough years for the archdiocese. The deficit for fiscal 2009 was \$34.3 million; in 2008 it was \$22.4 million. Faced with those figures,

this year's surplus covers less than 30 percent of the previous two years' negative balances. So, the archdiocese is not flush with cash.

But some people saw the initial headline and think: "If there's a surplus, why can't the archdiocese go back to funding this ministry or that project?" It's not that simple.

Fiscal 2010 ended well; that's what the headline said. It took a lot to get there and Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien and those who work at the Catholic Center will continue to be vigilant stewards of the resources entrusted to the church. That's the rest of the story, and it was all right there, in George Matysek's report.

The church continues to need our support, in the parishes and in the Archbishop's Annual Appeal. One good year doesn't change that.

Could we have done a better job with the headline? Possibly, but I think the headline and the subhead provided the key information. Also remember that the complete archdiocesan finance report, with charts and graphs and the story, took up nearly two pages of the newspaper. The details were there for all who chose to see them.

February 23, 2011