

Zyskowski says CPA can help Catholic media be 'even more vital'

WASHINGTON - At the top of Bob Zyskowski's to-do list as the new president of the Catholic Press Association of the United States and Canada is "making association membership more valuable to everyone who works for Catholic publications."

"I think we need to offer members more programs and services that make Catholic media so good that they are even more vital and valuable to readers and viewers," he told Catholic News Service in an interview in June.

"Our association should help its publications be so compelling that when the papers, magazines and newsletters come in the mail," he said, "our subscribers stop what they're doing, turn off 'Oprah,' put down People magazine, take out their iPod earplugs and sit down to be brought up to date on the news of their faith, challenged by the Gospel and inspired to be better Catholics."

The CPA can "help members' Web sites be so cool and valuable that people bookmark them and go to them every day," he added.

Mr. Zyskowski, 56, is associate publisher and general manager of The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis. He was elected to a three-year term as president by CPA members and took office May 25 during the closing awards banquet at the Catholic Media Convention in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Mr. Zyskowski and his wife of 34 years, Barb, live in Oakdale, Minn., and are actively involved in their parish, Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in nearby Maplewood. They have three sons, one daughter and four grandchildren, with another one on the way.

The CPA should offer "educational programs that improve everything we do, management training that makes our companies more efficient, information that makes good use of new technologies, cost savings through group buying power, and much, much more," he explained.

One immediate change in store for the CPA is a move of its headquarters from Ronkonkoma, N.Y., to Chicago. Executive director Tom Conway lives in the Chicago suburbs and has been telecommuting and traveling back and forth.

Mr. Zyskowski announced the move at the close of the Brooklyn convention. An e-mail message sent by the CPA to its members June 25 said a site selection is under way, and relocation is expected by the fall.

"The decision was difficult for many reasons," Mr. Zyskowski told CNS. "Change is always difficult and the association has been headquartered in New York for a long, long time. Setting up a new operation takes energy."

"Probably the most difficult part," he said, "was knowing that we may be displacing some longtime office staff who wouldn't be making the move."

But after examining the situation "very carefully," he said, the CPA board of directors "found no compelling reason to remain in New York and (saw) several huge upsides for moving to the Chicago area."

The move will give the CPA a fresh start and "force the association to update and upgrade operations, and many of those systems are long overdue for updating," Mr. Zyskowski said.

Members have come to expect "little else" from the CPA beyond the annual convention, the awards competition, Catholic Press Month and The Catholic Journalist monthly newspaper, he said.

He would like to see members have access to Web-based, searchable data that would offer "benchmark information" such as advertising guidelines, compensation for freelancers, policies about letters to the editor, vacation and sick-time policies, printing costs, salaries and the commission structure for ad sales people.

Mr. Zyskowski thinks the CPA also could offer members distant-learning opportunities with a Catholic university; a job line; online workshops; a place to exchange ideas for advertising, circulation and marketing; and access to all members' e-mail addresses on the Web site to make networking easy.

He said the CPA could better promote and market its members by creating print, radio, television and Web spots “that could be adapted for local use” and providing a Web-based list of “best promotion practices.”

Asked what challenges the Internet presents to Catholic publications, Mr. Zyskowski noted that “most Catholic organizations are several years behind with their Web product, and we need to catch up and quickly.”

“Catholic magazines, newspapers and other media can take advantage of what’s been learned about how people use the Web, what they are looking for when they go to the Web, and the best ways to give Web users what they need and want when it comes to their faith life,” he said.

A recent national survey showing that one-fourth of U.S. Catholics read their diocesan newspaper does not really alarm him “because there are several elements involved here,” he said. One factor is fewer people are going to church, where many would likely pick up their diocesan paper.

But Catholic media also need to market themselves better, he said, reiterating his earlier point, and they must be “eye-catching” and cover what people care about. “We all need to keep improving,” he added.

Working to attracting younger readers is key, too, he said.

“Just as young people don’t drive their father’s Oldsmobile, they may not read their mother’s Catholic magazine or newspaper,” he said.

“Niche publications continue to be developed for all kinds of target audiences, and Catholic media folks need to create products aimed at the niche of younger Catholics,” he said. “The Internet is one answer, but don’t discount print. Ink on paper didn’t go out of style when radio was invented, and it didn’t disappear when television came along.”