

Special treatment heralds trouble in the industry

Here's a pretty good rule of thumb that an industry is in trouble: It rushes off to the government, pleading — on whatever grounds seem most expedient and politically attractive — for special treatment.

The best example is the railroad industry, in the 19th century the titan of the American economy. But as years passed, the industry lost sight of the fact that it was in the service business. Its practice of arrogantly administering rates to a market it presumed to be captive led inevitably to the rise of more efficient, cheaper competitors: trucks, airplanes, automobiles.

And so the railroad industry leaned on Congress time and again to pass special protective pieces of legislation, ultimately winding up in a wholesale bailout through which the government took over the assets and liabilities (mostly the latter) of the industry. The taxpayers are still paying the tab for all this and the railroad industry is no healthier.

A recent example has to do with the airline industry, whose big players for years made up for their very high cost structures by gouging their best customers — business people who have to make last-minute reservations and get in and out of their out-of-town meetings in one day.

When air traffic dropped to a trickle after 9/11, that strange noise you heard in the background was the corps of airline industry lobbyists rushing to ask Congress for a multi-billion dollar bailout. With air traffic remaining stagnant and low-cost competitors making money, the big airlines are now threatening to declare bankruptcy (a governmental protection against creditors) in order to jawbone the labor unions into making concessions.

Now comes the television industry, faced with increasing competition from cable TV and the Internet, wheeling and dealing with the Federal Communications Commission to relax the rules against concentration of ownership. The FCC is expected to vote June 2 to lift its ban on one company owning both a newspaper and a TV station in large markets such as Detroit.

There are several problems with all this. The first is secrecy. The FCC proposes to make this change — the biggest since the 1970s — having held only one open hearing on a very complex proposal that has not been available in final form to the public. Even so, something like 18,000 people have commented already. Keeping the FCC proceedings in the dark is simply inexcusable.

The second is more obvious. The more concentrated media ownership is, the less competition there will be and the likelihood is that quality (whatever that is in the TV business) will go down. As the rule change now being considered by the FCC certainly will not increase media ownership competition.

What's likely to happen? Some evidence comes from the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which purported to deregulate the radio business "in order to increase competition." It hasn't worked out quite that way. In Detroit, for example, two national radio companies own half of the major radio stations. In smaller cities, Clear Channel or Infinity Broadcasting are basically the only game in town.

Newspaper readers may sense an uncanny similarity between this proposal and the passage of the oddly named Newspaper Preservation Act in 1970. The product of special interest lobbying by an industry beginning to experience competition from television and the rise of community newspapers like this one, the NPA's purpose was to relax the anti-trust laws to allow two big-city daily newspapers to combine their business, maintain their editorial functions to remain separate. The idea was that a daily newspaper, facing the possibility of failing in the competitive marketplace, could combine with another to form a "joint operating agreement" so as to "preserve editorial diversity."

A leading example of the JOA was the creation in 1906 of the Detroit Newspaper Agency, which owns both *The Detroit News* and *Detroit Free Press*. Skeptical readers in Michigan may wonder whether relaxing the competition between *The News* and the *Free Press* has increased the quality of either.

In other states, JOAs are now beginning to unwind, with the richer partner putting the weaker one out of business but paying it a continuing share of monopoly profits. Most people think the ultimate effect of the Newspaper Preservation Act will be to both reduce competition between newspapers and then to reduce the number of papers left.

All of which makes me wonder whether the forces of the free market are not a lot more effective and fair than the heavy-handed efforts of failing industries to extort special protection from the government.

Phil Power is the chairman of the board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2047 or at ppower@hometelecom.net.

One more good reason to Race for the Cure

On June 21, some 30,000 men, women and children will converge on the grounds of Comerica Park for the 12th annual Susan G. Komen Detroit Race for the Cure. I'll be among the throng, immersed in the excitement and mission of this dynamic event, just as I have been for each of these past 12 years.

Sadly though, this year will be different for me, for one reason. This year, one of our friends will not be among us.



Wendy Rose Bice

Twelve years ago, when my daughter was an infant, a dozen of us volunteered to help organize the 5K breast cancer awareness race and walk. We hoped that a few hundred people who cared about this disease would join us at the Detroit Zoo on a springtime Saturday morning. Imagine our surprise when 3,000 registered.

In those days, we Race committee members were many hats — from planners to beggars to laborers, establishing many traditions and routines. We'd meet six to eight months in advance, always on Mondays, to begin our planning.

We debated logo colors, how many bags to order and questioned whether we were even going to outgrow the Zoo. We remained steadfast in our mission to put forth positive breast health messages and always kept the needs of breast cancer survivors at the forefront, ensuring there would be a place for the weary to rest and opportunities to honor those women wearing pink visors.

On Race day, we gathered on the stage, a perfect vantage point to watch the early morning, sleepy-eyed crowds come to life.

Now, a dozen years and thousands of walkers and runners later, we can look back at the significant advancements of this race and more importantly, in the treatment and diagnosis of breast cancer.

We know that some breast cancers can be prevented, thanks to studies concerning the drug Tamoxifen. Researchers have identified two breast cancer risk genes (BRCA1 and BRCA2), allowing physicians to identify persons of high risk. And, there has been a continued improvement in breast cancer chemotherapy, new drugs and drug combinations including the administration of chemotherapy prior to surgery, often allowing the cancer to be more easily removed.

There are no age limits, no gender restrictions among the thousands of people who return annually, coming to share the mixture of camaraderie, joy and solemnity this Race for the Cure brings.

It's an addiction, I think. We return because we feel so connected to those who stand beside us, silently or publicly honoring a friend, mother, sister or aunt — the women who've survived breast cancer. We return because we want this disease to go away so badly. And we return because we want to be touched by the breast cancer survivors — those brave wonderful women wearing pink visors.

In this sea of emotion though, we — or at least I — failed to notice one thing. I never noticed the women who were there one year, but not the next. I forgot that in between the cheering and singing and walking and running, women were home or in the hospital dying from breast cancer.

It took my friend, Geri Lester, to remind me of that. Last week, Geri passed away from the disease she fought so hard to beat, from the disease she devoted the last 20 years of her life to making less deadly. Geri was one of our original dozen — she leveled at the size of this event as much as any of us, all the while finding ways to make it a little better.

Geri's handwork can be seen throughout the Race. If you arrived early enough, you might have gotten a fruit smoothie, something Geri insisted on providing to volunteers and survivors even as the numbers of race participants exceeded 20,000.

No matter what the weather, Geri doggedly stood by her shake machine offering a tasty dose of healthy goodness. Thanks to the limitless energy and brightness of volunteers like Geri, the Race for the Cure has managed to constantly evolve, adding new features like this year's Survivor Trolley, courtesy of Ford Motor Company. The vehicle will lead off the Race, pink ribbons adorning the outside and breast cancer survivors who are not feeling quite up to a 5K or one mile walk sitting on the inside. Geri was the first to reserve a seat.

But it is Geri's spirit that reminds us of the real reason why we continue to come. Geri strove to touch each and every survivor, a sisterhood she knew all too well, and provide them with inspiration and promise — or at least a fruit smoothie and a smile. She wanted the music of hope to ring in the ears of all who could hear, she wanted this disease to get up and fly away, never to break a human heart again.

But, it has.

The Race for the Cure is Saturday, June 21 at Comerica Park. To register, call (800) KAR-MANOS (527-6266) or www.karmanos.org/racefortheuredetroit.

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