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Obituary

Michael Lemke, Times ad executive and innovator, dies at 53

By Eric Pryne

Seattle Times staff reporter



Michael Lemke, Times senior vice president

Michael Lemke spent three decades selling newspaper ads. "He was a hard-headed business guy all the way," says Seattle Times President Carolyn Kelly, who worked with him for 21 of those years.

But he also understood newspapers were about more than making money.

"Mike is a model for what our business needs more of today -- an advertising and marketing expert with the soul of a public-service journalist," Times Publisher Frank Blethen said.

Mr. Lemke, The Times' senior vice president for sales and marketing, died Saturday, eight months after he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He was 53.

Mr. Lemke's responsibilities at The Times were broad. Advertising and the online New Media division reported to him. Until recently, so did circulation and corporate marketing.

He was responsible for selling not only The Times but also the rival Seattle Post-Intelligencer. The Times has handled most business functions for both papers since 1983 under a joint-operating agreement.

Mr. Lemke's death came just months after he received a career-achievement award from the Newspaper Association of America. The board of the association's display-advertising federation called him an innovator who had "helped us move the business forward."

He was a pioneer in embracing the Internet and developing strategies for newspapers to tap its potential, the board said. It also praised his work in drafting "truth in advertising" guidelines.

Colleagues in The Times' advertising department said Mr. Lemke was a constant source of new ideas. Mei-Mei Chan, vice president for advertising, recalled brainstorming with him over sushi or curry.

He also maintained strong personal relationships with key advertisers.

Sometimes, Kelly said, one would complain about a news story, but Mr. Lemke would set them straight: "Mike would say, 'We're a newspaper first. We create content that attracts the audience you want to reach.' "

Mr. Lemke was born and raised in Honolulu. He was part native Hawaiian and was proud of that heritage, friends say.

He attended the University of Hawaii and Santa Clara University, receiving his degree in 1975. He worked briefly as a merchant mariner before beginning his newspaper career.

Mr. Lemke was hired by the now-closed Los Angeles Herald-Examiner in 1977. Stephen Hearst, a member of the family that owned the paper, sat at the desk next to him in the classified-advertising department, and the two became lifelong friends -- hunting, fishing, playing tennis.

Hearst called Mr. Lemke "a kind and gentle soul. He was a member of my family for 30 years, and I was a member of his."

Mr. Lemke also met his wife, Barbara, while at the Herald-Examiner. They married in 1983.

He left the classified-advertising manager's job at the Los Angeles paper in 1986 for the same post at The Times. In the mid-1990s, he headed company task forces that led to the creation of seattletimes.com, the newspaper's Web site.

He was promoted to vice president of advertising in 1996 and became a senior vice president in 2000.

Mr. Lemke held leadership positions in numerous trade organizations. He also served on the board of the Better Business Bureau that covers Western Washington, Oregon and Alaska. He was a member of Seattle Rotary and helped mentor University of Washington business students.

He served on the boards of the Yakima Herald-Republic and Walla Walla Union-Bulletin, both owned by The Seattle Times Co.

Outside work, Mr. Lemke read, golfed and liked to do anything that got him outdoors. He enjoyed entertaining at home; barbecuing was a specialty. "I was never at Mike's house that he didn't have extended family and friends there," Kelly said.

Mr. Lemke's survivors include his wife, Barbara Lemke, and daughters Rachel and Sarah, all of Woodway; his mother, Florence Lemke; brothers David Lemke and Herman Lemke Jr.; and sisters Marlene Lemke and Adele Badone, all of Honolulu.

A memorial service will be Wednesday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Columbia Tower, 701 Fifth Ave., Seattle.

In lieu of flowers, the family suggests donations to the McCloud Healthcare Clinic, P.O. Box 1143, McCloud, CA 96057-1143; or the Pancreaticobiliary Research Fund, c/o Virginia Mason Seattle Main Clinic, 1100 Ninth Ave., Seattle, 98101, Attn: Dr. Vincent Picozzi.

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