

# Investor's Business Daily

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## Syndicator Rick Newcombe: Wooing Columnists, Cartoonists With Ownership Rights

By Thomas McArdle  
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The day after Christmas in 1987 is when Richard S. Newcombe says he hit rock bottom.

His 11-month-old upstart firm, Creators Syndicate, was already hemorrhaging tens of thousands of dollars a week and bankruptcy was just months away. When he arrived at work early that morning, he found that the company's entire computer system had been stolen on Christmas Day.

But part of Newcombe's business philosophy is that "problems are really disguised opportunities." Insurance covered the stolen equipment and, with new people, Creators took off from there.

In addition to the talented people around him, he credits his own energy and determination in making it through the inevitable valleys early on.

"I had an unshakable faith," Newcombe told *Investor's Business Daily*. "I mean I really had it in my head that if I had to, I'd crawl over broken glass. I'd live in a tent — it was gonna happen. And I think when you have that kind of steely determination — sort of like Margaret Thatcher or Winston Churchill — people get out of the way."

Los Angeles-based Creators has done what many experts on the syndicated column business were convinced was impossible. It has become the first successful independent syndicate in two decades, and only the second major independent founded since the 1930s.

Now a multimillion-dollar corporation, Creators has been operating in the black since 1989, in spite of the tough climate the newspaper business has faced.

The core of Newcombe's strategy has been to entice established, successful columnists and cartoonists into freeing themselves from what he liked to call the "indentured servitude" of conventional syndicates.

"Come Join Our Revolution," shouted the headline of an early Creators ad, offering "free-agent status" to major-league cartoonists.

"Our standard agreement for cartoonists includes the Hart Amendment," which was named after Johnny Hart, creator of the popular "B.C." comic strip, the ad noted. "We offer options for short-term contracts and for creators to retain ownership rights to their material."

It had become standard for syndicates to demand that writers and artists sign 10- or 20-year contracts or give over the ownership of their work. "Either way, the cartoonist is locked in," the ad told the artists.

Another ad simply announced "Freedom." Above the headline was a cartoon of a ball and chain being smashed.

Ann Landers, advice columnist for more than 1,200 newspapers who reaches 90 million readers, knew firsthand how bad conditions were. As powerful as she was, it was only in 1985 that she was able to gain ownership of her famous, long-established pen name.

Landers' decision to jump over to Creators soon after the syndicate began operations was a huge early boost, giving Creators 1,200 clients overnight.

But that was hardly just good fortune for Newcombe. He had done his groundwork years earlier, as president of News America Syndicate, from which Landers jumped ship to go to Creators.

It was under his leadership at NAS that the number of newspapers carrying Landers increased. Landers is said to have thought she had already reached her circulation zenith — then Newcombe proved otherwise. Other Creators' clients include columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, cartoonist Herblock and the Harris Poll.

Chuck Asay, Mencken Award- and Best of the West Award-winning cartoonist for the Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, is another of Newcombe's big fans.

"He's very nonpossessive," Asay told *Investor's Business Daily*. "Creators doesn't particularly seem interested in hording in on material I generated before I went with them."

Meanwhile, Asay says Creators works harder for him than his previous syndicate. "In a year, they doubled my clients."

Some of the most important seeds of Newcombe's success come from working under other successful people at a

young age. Armed with a Georgetown history degree, he entered the University of Chicago's MBA night program, but was too anxious to get into business to stay more than one quarter there.

He went to work for business consultant David Sandler, "a master salesman who taught selling skills and taught me a lot about selling."

Then came a stint in journalism, as a reporter and editor for United Press International. He eventually handled sales for UPI, for which he received recognition in industry magazine *Editor & Publisher*.

Newcombe came to the attention of Williard Colston, a sales manager at the L.A. Times Syndicate. Colston needed a sales manager with both editorial and sales experience. He called on Newcombe, who increased the syndicate's sales more in one year than in the previous seven years combined.

At 28, Newcombe was made vice president and general manager of the L.A. Times Syndicate. He credits Colston and Tom Johnson, then-publisher of the Times, now president of CNN; with giving him valuable business knowledge.

As president of NAS, the third-largest syndicate in the world, Newcombe worked for three years for someone he describes as a very different type of boss: media magnate Rupert Murdoch. The "very decisive" managerial style of Murdoch also helped Newcombe later lead Creators to success, he recalls.

The important thing in Newcombe's view is having quality writers and artists. Creators hopes eventually to own a book publishing company, which Newcombe considers a natural next step since many of the people Creators represents are bestselling authors.

He is undaunted by the experience of the publishers he would be competing against. "The key is having the bestselling authors. You can always hire people from other book companies who have decades of experience."

But don't expect Newcombe to let public stockholders in on the fun. Creators has no plans whatsoever of going public.

"The beauty of business is having total control," he says. "I was just telling my daughter, who's a sophomore in high school, it took me 20 years in business to get back as much freedom as I had when I was in college."



Rick Newcombe