

Mean Street Sales

Joe Martin, a scrappy Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, once recalled that when he began his career at the New York *Daily News* in the 1930s, one of his duties was to clean the gun of circulation director Max Annenberg.

Annenberg, the son of Prussian immigrants, got his own start in the business hawking newspapers on street corners in a tough Irish section of Chicago. He learned that pushing local items was often more effective than bellowing out the editor's lead headline, and that quick fists were an important sales booster. When he was still a teenager, Annenberg was put on the payroll of the *Chicago Tribune* and soon rose to the number two position in the circulation department.

When William Randolph Hearst started the *Chicago American* in the summer of 1900, he hired Annenberg, then 25, away from the *Tribune* to direct his circulation efforts. The job meant making sure that the *American* got on the newsstands—and that rival papers didn't stay there. Annenberg recruited a staff of thugs proficient with brass knuckles to ensure that newsdealers steadily increased orders for the *American*. Those who didn't were roughed up. The rule was: What you don't sell, you eat.

The tactic proved so successful that when Bertie McCormick and his cousin Joe Patterson took over control of the *Chicago Tribune* in 1909, they launched a million-dollar circulation drive. One of the first things they did was hire back Annenberg at an extraordinary \$20,000 a year. Hearst sued Annenberg for breach of contract. He lost. The court determined that Annenberg's agreement with Hearst was a "contract to commit illegal acts" and therefore unenforceable.

The fun was just beginning.

Annenberg is credited with instigating an all-out circulation war, and it's generally agreed that the *Tribune* came out the victor. In October 1910, according to the *Chicago Socialist*, Annenberg "furnished revolvers to some of the sluggers and the slugging crew of that paper rode around in a big black automobile truck." They stopped near newsstands, waiting for a Hearst delivery truck to appear. When it did, bullets flew. The Hearst



boys responded in kind. Between 1910 and 1912, at least 27 newsdealers were killed in the war. Hearst's "circulation lieutenant," Dutch Gentleman, was blown away in a gin mill by the *Trib's* Mossy Enright, but the actual number of dead henchmen remains a mystery.

Chicago's politicians and police pretty much ignored the gun battles on their streets (as did the mainstream newspapers) for fear of getting caught in editorial crossfire. Although Annenberg was once indicted for shooting a rival in the chest, he was acquitted on grounds of self-defense. He operated with such impunity, in fact, that he was able to secure an appointment as a Cook County deputy sheriff. But the outbreak of World War I made strong-arm circulation tactics unnecessary: War news sold itself. Annenberg took up golf and horseback riding.

Though Annenberg was one of the key *Tribune* executives behind

the launch of Patterson's New York *Daily News* in 1919, his heart remained in Chicago. In fact, three weeks after the paper's inauspicious start, he walked into *Daily News* general manager William H. Field's office and said, "Boss, we're licked. We better pick up the marbles and go home." But an Annenberg lieutenant who had day-to-day responsibility for *News* circulation was more confident—and prescient—about the paper's chances. "Max climbed on the Century and went home," says the *Daily News's* 50th anniversary history. "He did not get on the *News* bandwagon until the end of the year, when everybody else was on it." He was, however, instrumental in setting up an independent delivery system in 1921 that gave the *News* a critical edge on its competitors.

Annenberg was formally installed as *Daily News* circulation director in 1932, when daily sales were 1.4 million and climbing. There's no evidence that Max ever fired his gun in the line of duty in New York City. ■



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