

SYNDICATES

'SAVVY' SUCCESSFUL IN SELF-SYNDICATION

Jim Miller discusses why he's in 400 papers — and on TV

BY DAVE ASTOR

ABOUT 6,500 MAILINGS AND THOUSANDS OF PHONE calls brought "Savvy Senior" columnist Jim Miller 400-plus newspapers and three appearances on this week's *Today* show.

The writer is scheduled to demonstrate "senior gadgets" during his Aug. 12, 13, and 14 spots on the NBC morning program. Among the products is a talking pillbox that reminds people when to take their medication.

Miller, who also appeared on the show last month, has become nationally known in an extremely short time. His weekly information

feature entered self-syndication just last year, yet he already has more papers than all but 10 or so columnists distributed by major syndicates. How did he do this? Low prices, and hard work.

The average syndicated-feature rate of under \$20 a week is already modest, but Miller's prices are between \$3 and \$5. "I'm not in this to make a lot of money," he said. "I want to reach and help a lot of people." Indeed, Miller is only earning about \$20,000 a year from the column after expenses and taxes, despite his numerous clients (many of them weeklies and small dailies; his biggest subscriber is the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*). And he spends at least 40 hours a week on the column and related tasks.

The hard work first involved mailing packets to 6,500 potential clients. "Then I got on the phone and called and called and called," said Miller, not stopping until he got a yes or no. "If I hadn't done the follow-up calls, I would be in maybe 30 papers."

Miller — who made 3,500 phone calls a month (on an \$80-a-month unlimited-long-distance plan) — added: "People who are writers don't always have the salesman mentality. You have to be able to shake off

the 'no's.'"

It also didn't hurt that "Savvy Senior" has an easy-to-understand and not-too-serious approach. "A lot of senior news is depressing and complicated," Miller said.

The Norman, Okla., resident answers one question per 600-



"SAVVY SENIOR"

YOU ASK THE SENIOR QUESTION — WE FIND THE SAVVY ANSWER

A 40-year-old columnist who appeals to older readers.

word column, while also answering several dozen other reader questions he receives during a typical week. Among his many topics are volunteerism, employment, taxes, grandparenting, health, insurance, travel, Medicare, and Social Security. Miller

researches answers by calling experts, reading manuals, looking on the Web, etc.

Miller (<http://www.savvysenior.org>) has become a senior expert despite being only 40 years of age. "You don't have to be old to write about senior programs and issues, just like you don't have to be sick to be a doctor," he commented.

How did he get interested in the topic? Miller said his mother and father died within three weeks of each other in 2000. "I was pretty shaken up," he recalled. "I took a temporary job in a retirement community — doing marketing and other things — to be with people my parents' age." While there, Miller started a senior column for *The Norman Transcript* that was eventually picked up by a half-dozen other newspapers before he formally started self-syndicating.

"A lot of seniors read newspapers," he said. "Savvy Senior" fits a demographic need of newspapers."

Miller is also trying his hand at another medium, having almost finished a "Savvy Senior" book scheduled to be published next spring by Hyperion. The information/resource volume is original, not a collection of columns.

Meanwhile, Miller also works as the stadium announcer for University of Oklahoma football and basketball games. He formerly spent eight years in operations and events for that university's athletic department in Norman. Miller — who holds bachelor's and master's degrees in education from Kansas State University and Wichita State University, respectively — served as gymnastics announcer at the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta.

Future plans? Miller will do more public speaking (a number of offers have already come in) and may start another major marketing push next year that he hopes will increase his client list to 500 or 600 newspapers.

The Kansas native doesn't expect to sign with a major syndicate, noting that his prices might not appeal to a big distributor. Miller recalled that one syndicate wanted to raise his \$3-to-\$5 rates if it signed him, but he said many of his community-newspaper clients could not afford that.

Miller wants to continue "Savvy Senior" for "a long time" — meaning he may write it as a senior himself one day. ■

See "Syndicate World" (<http://www.editorandpublisher.com>) for stories that didn't make it into print.