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Be the organizer, not the storyteller

October 21, 2021 No Comments

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Find out what matters to your community; it might not be your news stories

This week's post focuses on examples of successful business strategies for local news publishers. The strategies have become ever more critical as local news organizations have suffered mightily in the covid-19 crisis.

Several years ago I was working in Belarus, a former Soviet republic, where independent newspapers have a hard time surviving. The government has denied them access to state-controlled newsstands, overcharged them for newsprint, and harassed them at every turn.

We looked at one publisher's website data to see if he might have an opportunity to generate revenue online. Turns out the website's most popular page contained the community's bus schedules. And what's more, his community spent more time on that page – 5 minutes, 30 seconds per visit – than any other. This publisher, a journalist, was humbled to see that a simple list was more important to his readers than the news articles.

But this was a business opportunity, I told them: find a local business to sponsor that web page.

The wisdom of the neighbors

Journalism professor Jeff Jarvis wrote of a similar opportunity for local publishers in his book *Geeks Bearing Gifts: Imagining New Futures for News*. A local news organization should “help a community better organize its knowledge so it can better organize itself,” he wrote.

In his book, Jarvis showed how news media failed their communities in 2012 when **Hurricane Sandy** hit metropolitan New York City and New Jersey. As a resident, he wanted to know where to buy ice and gasoline and groceries, which roads were impassable, and which places to avoid. Instead, the local media gave him news narratives.

Jarvis concluded that local news organizations should serve audiences not only as storytellers but as intermediaries who help their users inform each other.



Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay

A perspective from Germany

Fast forward to 2021, and business journalist Olaf Deininger [described a “systemic failure”](#) of local newspapers in his country. They assess the value of their own products from a publisher's perspective, not the reader's. They don't spend enough effort investigating what the readers need and value.

He gave an example similar to the Belarus bus schedules and the

hurricane reporting. His community has a major trade fair every year that attracts 1.3 million visitors. But none of the local media make it easy for out-of-town visitors to find out the cost and location of public parking. Why? Because it does not fit an editorial department's definition of news.

Even focus groups and reader surveys ask readers to evaluate the existing product, not the local issues affecting readers' daily lives, Deininger says. Too often the newspaper uses the wrong metrics to evaluate a piece of content's value, such as total clicks (which invites sensational headlines) rather than steady reader interest over time (the long tail).

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Deininger suggests newspapers could invite more local experts and bloggers to supplement staff reports. The publications could become “the local portal [that] presents everything that is relevant to the reader ... and systematically provides answers to all the questions of the citizens.”

Solutions from all over

Some other examples of strategies to increase user engagement and support:

- The European Journalism Centre held a bootcamp for digital natives [with advice from experts](#) in various areas of online journalism, such as **solutions journalism**, **interactive gaming**, **researching audience needs**, and **demonstrating impact** to various groups of stakeholders.
- An [Engagement Innovation Summit](#) hosted by [Hearken](#) suggested that journalists could learn a great deal from community organizers, through **relationship building**, **creating coalitions**, and **taking action**. Hearken is a consultant whose core belief is that “curiosity and listening” leads to creating more resilient businesses and communities.
- LION (Local Independent Online News) Publishers in the US described how more startups are launching with a “community first” approach of [identifying needs](#) of marginalized or underserved audiences before they even create their products. They list a host of case studies.
- Mark Glaser, writing for the Knight Foundation, described [several new ownership](#) structures that put journalists in control of news organizations. Among them are **local impact investors**, **cooperatives**, **public benefit corporations**, and limited liability companies (LLCs). The key, he writes, is for the structure to ensure local control and avoid a trend becoming common in the US in which a ruthless hedge fund gains control of the news outlet.

Collaboration, not conflict

The common theme of these local initiatives is creating a tie with real people's problems and issues. The emphasis is having people focus on working together to solve their most pressing community issues.

As I have written elsewhere, one of the [causes of political polarization](#) and paralysis is the nationalization of politics. When people on the local level identify common problems, they are much more able to find common solutions through debate and compromise. That does not occur often enough when political parties frame everything as black and white issues.

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