



Leveraging Radio to Build Standalone Local News Sites

A step-by-step training guide for local radio stations to launch successful digital news outlets

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Introduction

The local news ecosystem's decline has left many small- and mid-sized cities across America without a reliable source of timely information for their residents. Once, a community could rely on a healthy and diverse mix of outlets, including a regional daily newspaper, a state daily with regional bureaus, multiple community weeklies, several local television news options and a local non-profit radio station covering city and town events. In recent years, many regions have become "news deserts," with media outlets scaling back coverage or shuttering altogether.

Commercial broadcast radio station markets, each home to multiple music format stations, are uniquely suited to fill the vacuum in the local news space. Heritage radio stations have long-established credibility and relationship with the communities in which they operate. For many local residents, there's a personal connection with the music-format radio station in their area -- a memory of a local festival put on by the market or an unforgettable concert they scored tickets to from a morning radio show contest. The deep connection local radio has built with community members over decades creates an opportunity to successfully build a hyperlocal news site supported by a radio market.

As a community-focused digital media, marketing, and radio company focused outside the Top 50 markets in the U.S., Townsquare Media knows this deep connection with community members well. In [partnership](#) with the [Google News Initiative](#), Townsquare explored how AM/FM radio stations can create sustainable standalone local news sites in underserved regions. The findings of this work show that radio's marketing influence remains vast. Even with the myriad media options available to consumers, radio reaches over 92% of the population, according to Nielsen studies. When a local radio market supports the launch of a local standalone news site, the marketing effort reaches a broad segment of the regional population, with different radio stations touching different demographics within the community. Radio station marketing helps a local news site to gain rapid and broad-scale brand awareness in the region it covers. This local marketing saturation allows the news site to grow traffic and creates the potential for it to become financially self-sufficient.

Based on this 13-month partnership with the Google News Initiative, Townsquare Media has built this guide to help local radio company leaders navigate the step-by-step process of building a local standalone news site. The output of this guide can produce a more robust regional presence for the radio market while providing the community with real-time local news critical to its health and economic well-being. The guide outlines best practices for building a digital news brand using the marketing resources, local reach and community influence unique to local radio.

This guide's instructions and best practices will allow any radio market with local on-air staff to launch and grow a local news site. The guide outlines how to execute the following:

- Ideate and build a standalone news site's brand identity.
- Create an editorial plan that can be executed efficiently by a managing news editor.
- Market the news site through radio station inventory and a geo-targeted social media campaign.
- Develop multiple avenues for monetization, including through the site itself and combined site and on-air products.

Building the Brand

Determining the Coverage Area

Ensuring a digital news site can financially sustain itself in the long term starts with establishing your coverage area. Too small a population and the site will never earn enough programmatic revenue to support a full-time editor's salary and freelance support. Too broad and the news site won't have an authentic local identity.

The region your digital news site covers should have a population large enough for the site to be supported by programmatic and local digital display ad revenue after the first year.

Radio markets with a population of at least 350,000 can support and sustain a local digital news outlet. Content created for the local digital news outlet should reach at least 50% of the population.

This audience engagement level can come in many forms, including social media, email newsletter subscriptions, app downloads and site traffic. The most consistent barometer for your digital news site's reach is local unique visitors. Use geographical filters to define local boundaries by state or Designated Market Area (DMA).

Engaging with half the audience in unique visitors in a given month will ensure the site will have the ability to support itself on programmatic ad revenue. This unique visitor traffic benchmark includes visitors generated on the digital news outlet and visitors generated on partner radio station websites also publishing the content.

Hiring Process

The most critical decision made when creating hyperlocal digital news sites is in hiring an editor.

The ideal managing editor has to be multifaceted and highly adaptable. Your editorial hire needs to have a passion for community journalism and strong writing as a foundation -- but the skill stack an editor needs for this role goes beyond solid reporting chops.

The editor has to be inspired by the idea of operating in a fast-paced, evolving start-up-style environment. The ideal candidate likes building things from the ground up. In their past work experience, they've spied a vacuum -- a beat that hasn't been pursued or a neglected social media strategy -- and moved to fill that vacuum. The editor also has to work quickly and be adaptable.

The interviews and editorial test should reveal whether the candidate is industrious and a self-starter.

A potential 100-point scoring rubric based on the interview and editorial test could weight topics as follows:

- Understanding of Libel and defamation - *Test* (Pass/Fail)
- News judgment - *Test* (15 possible points)
- Writing Skill - *Test* (15 possible points)
- Entrepreneurial/Self-Starter - *Interview* (15 possible points)
- Problem Solving - *Test* (10 possible points)

- Resourcefulness - *Test & Interview* (8 possible points)
- Journalistic Ethics - *Test* (5 possible points)
- Headline Writing - *Test* (5 possible points)
- Social Media Acumen - *Test* (5 possible points)
- SEO - *Test* (4 possible points)
- AP Style - *Test* (3 possible points)

Sample Editorial Test

PART I - Story Selection

Section 1: Story Ideas

These story ideas arrive at you either through press releases or as tips from coworkers or sources. Order these 10 story ideas by which is most deserving of your immediate focus to those that are least deserving or aren't newsworthy.

- An accident on a major highway in town has closed two northbound lanes during rush hour.
- A DJ at the radio station says a popular restaurant in your coverage area has closed down. He texts you a picture of the front door that has a sign that reads, "We've closed for good. Thanks for the support over the years."
- A fire in a local apartment building displaced 10 residents and killed two pets.
- A 19-year-old is pulled over at a traffic stop and charged with possession of under 50 grams of marijuana.
- A popular reality TV show star stopped into a local pizza place and took photos with fans.
- The county health department releases its annual list of top restaurant health code violations. (The list may or may not contain radio station clients.)
- An area teacher was charged with possession of child pornography.
- The Market President texts you the message "possible story?" along with a photo she took of two cars crashed at an intersection of a quiet residential neighborhood. There are no reports of injuries or traffic issues in the area.
- A person was shot and killed in a nearby city outside of your coverage area. This city has seen a rash of recent gun violence.
- A woman won \$100,000 on a scratch-off ticket at a local deli.

What factors played a role in your decision-making?

Section 1: Candidate's Answer

Section 2: Headlines & Social Media

Pick one of the story ideas from among the top 5 stories in the list you created above.

- Generate 3 possible headlines for that story that takes into account search engine optimization.
- Generate 2 possible headlines for the story tailored specifically for Facebook's link share preview.
- Write 2 possible Facebook teases that would accompany the link share.

- Think about what the most compelling image for this story would be.
 1. If you'd be relying on your internal local stock library, describe what the most compelling image for this story would be.
- or-
- 2. If a stock image would be most appropriate, search Getty Creative and include the link to the photo you would use (<https://www.gettyimages.com/>).

Section 2: Candidate's Answer

PART I - Story Selection - Scoring Tips

In scoring this section, consider the goals and objectives of your standalone news site. Do you want a brand with a more rounded community and lifestyle focus? You may want to see a candidate weigh the story about a restaurant closure or the lotto win higher in their list of 10. Some test elements should appear near the bottom, specifically the market president reaching out about a minor traffic accident and the shooting in a city outside the coverage area. Story selectivity and news judgment are essential characteristics of a potential news editor.

Look for a demonstrated understanding of search engine optimization and engaging social media copy in the headline and social tease examples. In evaluating the image choice, look for whether the image makes contextual sense with the article. For example, a Getty editorial image of a fire burning down a building is a poor choice for an easily identifiable local apartment complex. In contrast, a stock image of a fire truck without identifiable location markings or a Google Streetview image of the complex may be more appropriate if a photo of the specific fire isn't readily available.

PART II - Writing

- Write a story based on this press release: [INCLUDE A LINK TO A LOCAL POLICE PRESS RELEASE THAT BURIES THE LEAD]
- Also, include the following:
 1. Headline
 2. Social media tease for presenting the story on Facebook
 3. Tweet presenting the link to the story on Twitter

Candidate's Answer

PART II - Writing - Scoring Tips

Does the candidate know to highlight the compelling detail in the police press release within the headline? Does the candidate know how to navigate libel issues when working on a story based on a police press release? News judgment and knowledge of libel defamation should factor into how you assess this section and weigh scores on applicable elements in the rubric. The Facebook and Twitter elements factor into the candidate's score on social media acumen.

PART III - Scenarios

Scenario 1

A competing news organization has published a major story about an area hospital settling a wrongful death lawsuit involving a surgeon who subsequently lost his medical license. You don't have any documentation about the lawsuit. What are your next steps for pursuing the story?

Scenario 1: Candidate's Answer

Scenario 2

A local woman posts a photo on Facebook that appears to show a cockroach in her burger at a local restaurant. In her post with the picture, she names the owners and calls them "shady people," saying she's heard they steal the waitstaff's tips. The post has 2,500 shares and 595 comments on it in a publicly-facing local Facebook group. Is this a story worth pursuing? If you did decide to pursue it, what would your next steps be?

Scenario 2: Candidate's Answer

Scenario 3

The State Attorney General's Office sends out a press release announcing a \$250,000 fine has been levied against an area car dealer who is one of the market's biggest clients. You receive a frantic call from the salesperson representing the car dealer asking you not to run the story. What are your next steps?

Scenario 3: Candidate's Answer

Scenario 4

You're driving down a major road in your area and notice construction fencing has gone up and crews are beginning to break ground on what appears to be a significant project. How do you find out what is planned for the property? Who do you call first? What public records and filings do you seek out?

Scenario 4: Candidate's Answer

PART III - Scenarios - Scoring Tips

This section should give you insight into a candidate's resourcefulness, problem-solving and journalistic ethics. Do they know how and where to go to find information not readily available to them? Do they know when a local viral social media post merits further investigation? Do they know how to pursue such a story responsibly? Do they have the confidence and knowledge to pursue a storyline that may be

problematic to a client? Weigh these elements in allocating a score to the relevant topics in the test rubric.

PART IV - Breaking News Response

Breaking News Update #1

It's a Thursday afternoon and a DJ at one of the radio stations hears a rumor that shots have been fired at [LOCAL MALL NAME] in [TOWN]. Multiple tweets and messages on a community Facebook group are discussing the rumor.

One of those Facebook posts is from Sharon Jones; she claims she was at the mall when shots went off and that one [LOCAL DEPARTMENT STORE] employee shot another employee in the leg. An Instagram story by @cassiesmith tagged with the mall's location appears to show customers being escorted out of the mall by security.

- a. What agencies, media contacts and people do you reach out to next?
- b. Do you have enough information to proceed with writing a brief article? If so, write a brief update. If not, explain why you are choosing not to post a story yet.

Breaking News Update #1: Candidate's Answer

Breaking News Update #2

The [LOCAL] Police Department hasn't responded to a call and email you have out to them for a request for comment. However, the [LOCAL] State Police have issued the following statement on their official Facebook and Twitter accounts:

"State Police and other law enforcement agencies are assisting the [LOCAL] Police Department with an active investigation at [LOCAL MALL NAME]. Avoid the immediate area surrounding [LOCAL MALL NAME] at this time."

Your email and call to the media relations contact for [LOCAL MALL NAME] have not yet received a response.

Your messages to Sharon Jones, Cassie Smith and a call to the [LOCAL DEPARTMENT STORE] press relations hotline have not been returned.

Write up the story using the information you have available to you.

Breaking News Update #2: Candidate's Answer

Breaking News Update #3

You messaged Cassie Smith on Instagram earlier, identifying yourself as a journalist. You asked her if she took the video shared on Instagram and was at the mall at the time of the shooting. You also asked her

permission to use the video on the station's digital platforms. You ended by asking if she had any comments about the experience to be included in the article.

Cassie Smith sent you back the following response:

"Sure. You can use the video. It was all really terrifying but it was over quickly. I was in Sears at around 2pm and the shots were down at the other end by the [LOCAL DEPARTMENT STORE]. A bunch of people came running and screaming, 'Shots fired.' I was there buying a birthday present for my mom and thought this was how I was going to die, so I texted her 'I love you.'

"It was chaotic until the mall security came into the store and told us to walk single-file with our hands up toward the parking lot. That's what we were doing when I took the video.

"The police were outside waiting in the parking lot. Some of them were running inside as we exited and some of them stayed out in the parking lot to take our statements."

Sharon Jones has also responded. She asks you not to use her name but tells you she heard the shooter was a college student named John Dover.

She sends you a link to a Facebook profile for a 21-year-old [LOCAL COLLEGE] student named John Dover with the message, "That's supposed to be him."

Update the story with the new information available to you. (If you decide to include Cassie Smith's video, indicate where in the story you would put it with **Video Embed Goes Here**)

Breaking News Update #3: Candidate's Answer

Breaking News Update #4

The [LOCAL] Police Department's public information officer, Sgt. David Evans, returns your call. He says that one shot was fired into the ceiling of [LOCAL DEPARTMENT STORE] shortly after 2PM by a man involved in a domestic dispute with his estranged wife, who is an employee at the store.

No one was injured and the man has been taken into custody. Sgt. Evans identifies the man as 39-year-old John Dover.

[LOCAL MALL NAME] issues the following statement to the press:

"The safety of our guests and tenants is our highest priority. We are working with law enforcement to investigate an incident that took place this afternoon at [LOCAL MALL NAME]. A suspect is in custody, but out of an abundance of caution, the property remains on lockdown until further notice as we work closely with law enforcement officials in the investigation of this incident. Guests are advised to stay away from the property at this time."

Update the story with the new information available to you.

Breaking News Update #4: Candidate's Answer

PART IV - Breaking News Response - Scoring Tips

This section is meant to assess a candidate's understanding of libel, news judgment and writing ability in a deadline-intensive environment. Can the candidate produce clean writing under pressure? Can they move fast during a breaking news event without risking the publication's credibility or putting it in legal peril?

Defining the Site Editor Role

Are you looking to build a news site brand to command attention in the market on its own? Or do you want to develop a news site to supplement your existing radio station websites with hyperlocal content?

How you envision the brand will determine the role of the news editor you want to hire.

Hybrid Model: News Director Role

When our Townsquare Hudson Valley market launched Hudson Valley Post, we approached the brand as supplemental to our radio station websites. We created a hybrid news director role split roughly 40% on on-air newscast responsibilities and 60% on written news reporting.

The news director for Townsquare Hudson Valley participates in the morning show on 101.5 WPDH, the market's heritage classic rock station. In this role, he writes and delivers four hourly newscasts. Between newscasts and after the show, the news director writes five to seven pieces of content. Because this role requires a heavy amount of content creation, the news director works entirely from the office.

The heavy output requires the news director to be highly selective about the stories he devotes time to. The news director has to have a finely honed sense of news judgment. Stories should be compelling to a broad Hudson Valley audience to make the hourly newscast. If a newscast needs to include a particular storyline, the news director is relentless in pursuing sources for the written article. The time and resource limitations and the deadline-intensive environment reinforce the need to be selective and follow the stories of the greatest regional interest.

The news director role requires someone with either radio or television broadcast journalism experience. Print or digital journalists may not be suited to an on-air role or to producing recorded newscasts.

PROS of Hybrid Model: A news director's on-air presence allows a built-in opportunity to brand and market the news site beyond recorded promotional mentions and liners or commercials. Having a staff member with both radio and editorial responsibilities allows the news director to be familiar with various processes and procedures in the building. The news director can thus step in to assist in a pinch.

With the cost of a full-time salary split between the news site and the station, this leaner cost model means lower overhead for the site, allowing it to become financially viable quickly.

The built-in time constraints force story selectivity and focus on reporting stories of the greatest interest to the broadest audience. The attention to audience engagement leads to higher website traffic, which also allows the site to become financially self-sustaining quickly.

CONS of Hybrid Model: To find someone with broadcast experience, you may need to sacrifice extensive written journalism experience. Leaning into the broad strokes of regional coverage means sacrificing in-depth coverage, investigative journalism and more deeply reported topics.

If your news director hasn't worked primarily in a print or digital journalism environment, a staff member with such experience should be monitoring coverage to ensure quality control and journalistic standards are upheld.

Because your news director has on-air responsibilities, there will be constraints on his or her time that may limit the ability to respond to breaking news events during off-hours.

More time constraints mean less time to recruit and manage freelancers, making the site operation largely dependent on one person.

Managing News Editor Model

The [Tuscaloosa Thread](#) and the [Seacoast Current](#) launched with a managing news editor model in which one full-time editor wrote articles and assigned stories to freelance staff.

The editors are responsible for ensuring six to eight articles are on the site daily during weekdays. The individual site editor determines the mix of articles written by the editor or assigned out.

For The Tuscaloosa Thread, it proved more cost-effective and better for story coverage to bring on two reliable freelancers in an hourly, part-time capacity rather than on a per-story basis. The editor's role here is more supervisory, with the editor producing two to three articles per day and closely monitoring story assignments.

In Portsmouth, the Seacoast Current's managing news editor writes four to five articles per day with freelance staff or DJs writing content for their station websites in the market, producing the two to three additional articles that appear on the news site daily.

PROS of Managing News Editor Model: Having an editor with print or written digital journalism experience will lead to higher content quality and a shorter ramp-up period.

Experienced editors will have keener news judgment. If they are from the coverage area, they will have contacts in the area and potential freelancers among the professional network. Their entire professional energy will be on digital content creation for the hyperlocal news site.

This dedicated focus allows the editor to be more responsive to off-hour breaking news events. A managing news editor will not have to pause on writing an article or calling sources to attend to any on-air responsibilities.

A managing editor model allows for a deeper freelance bench since the editor has a more flexible schedule and the time to manage and cultivate stringers. This makes the digital news site less dependent on one person's content production and pulls in a diverse set of voices and strengths.

CONS of Managing News Editor Model: Editors with a more traditional journalism background may dig in on specific beats they feel obligated to provide in-depth coverage on rather than

allowing audience engagement to inform coverage decisions. In Portsmouth, for example, the Seacoast Current was providing regular coverage of the University of New Hampshire's hockey team, which is one of the top-rated in the nation. The editor felt obligated to cover the beat because of the team's status, but the articles did not gain traction with the audience.

Branding & Logo

Selecting a brand name and logo design tells your audience the values and goals of your news organization.

Reflecting regional identity

The brand name should reflect local identity. Is there a specific name for the collection of towns that make up your coverage area? Is that name used colloquially, or would it commonly be used in search engines to find news and information in the area?

Include that local identifier in the name of your news site. Having the moniker in the brand name and the URL will help build search engine authority for local news-related phrases likely to refer to that area. Don't create a geographic designation just to force a collective identity. Suppose the designation doesn't already exist or isn't commonly recognized. In that case, the name will ring false to the local audience and may signal that your site and staff aren't members of the community.

SEO in Practice: Druid City vs. Tuscaloosa

In launching our local news site in Tuscaloosa, we explored brand names that included "Druid City," a nickname for Alabama's fifth-largest city. The nickname would have been a knowing wink to residents, signaling that the brand was rooted in local culture and identity.

Ultimately, though, we settled on including Tuscaloosa in the brand name, so we were as direct as possible about the focus of the news site. This decision also afforded us a better footing in capturing search traffic in the future.

What should the brand name convey?

Once you've identified the geographical name you'll use for your news site, consider the impact and scope of the brand you plan on launching. Do you plan on encouraging user-generated content? Brainstorm synonyms around community and conversation that may flow well with your regional name. Are you envisioning a rich arts, culture and events beat? Avoid a brand name that sounds too traditionally like a newspaper name. Also, consider unique geographic features around the community in determining your brand name.

When we discussed a brand identity for the news site we would launch out of our Portsmouth, N.H. office, we wanted a name that could have a dual meaning. The site would cover the Seacoast region of New Hampshire, along with towns along the coast of York, Maine and the northern coastal towns of Essex, Massachusetts. We settled on the name Seacoast Current. The word "current" spoke to the region's nautical connection. It also evoked a sense of timeliness, relevance and the present moment.

Our Tuscaloosa market settled on the name the Tuscaloosa Thread for their news site. The staff wanted a name that called to mind tying a community together. The team also wanted a name that sounded modern and carried a digital connotation: “thread” could as easily speak to the tapestry that makes up a community as it could to an email thread, a forum subthread or other means of communicating information in a digital space.

How will it sound on the radio?

The layered meaning and alliteration are particularly important for brands with a prominent radio presence. Local news sites in radio markets will be largely supported by on-air promotional mentions and in-house commercial spots.

Having a brand name that is easy to say and lends itself well to promotional copy will help in the early days of marketing the brand.

Logo design

Consider the impact you want your brand identity to have in the community. The logo you settle on should call to mind the characteristics you’ve decided are integral to your news site.

Traditional radio station logos are busier with brighter colors and more design elements, given they’re meant to convey the fun and excitement of entertainment. That may not be the case for a news site logo. Additionally, traditional news/talk radio logos may include a color palette and design that suggests a political point of view that may not make sense for a hyperlocal news site.

If your news site logo is created by an in-house designer who primarily focuses on radio logos, be clear on what you do and don’t want to be reflected in your design. Have examples of design elements and font styles available to your designer to steer them in the right direction.

For both the Tuscaloosa Thread and Seacoast Current, we wanted the font to play a significant role in the design. Staff for both sites wanted a modern and simple design that did not call to mind traditional newspaper logos. They also wanted a glyph incorporated into the logo that reflected an element of the brand name. For the Tuscaloosa Thread, the designer included three lines of varying size, mimicking threads. The Seacoast Current logo had three wavy lines stacked on top of each other to evoke an ocean wave or current.

Conversations about branding and logo design may feel like marketing elements outside a journalist’s wheelhouse. Still, these discussions are crucial to figuring out what you want your news site to be and how you want it to reflect your community.

Editorial

Planning the Launch

Building a Media Library

Compelling visuals are an essential part of digital storytelling. Photos communicate the subject matter of a story and the legitimacy and authority of the publication. A local digital news site needs to represent its connection to the community visually. A robust image library of local spots and prominent community members is necessary for any local media publication.

Before launch, assign a freelance photographer to shoot a bank of local images. Locations that should be part of the local news image library include:

- Police cars with visible emblems for every law enforcement agency in the coverage area
- Police headquarters
- Fire department vehicles with visible emblems
- Fire department buildings
- Town, city or municipal halls
- Iconic landmarks (think “the image about [TOWN NAME] that everybody in the area has on their phone”)
- Bridges and prominent roadways
- Signage for prominent roadways
- Colleges
- Schools (preferably photographed on weekends or when school is out)
- Popular parks or other recognizable recreation areas
- Downtown business areas
- Shopping malls and larger strip malls
- Restaurants and iconic local businesses

The digital news site’s editor should reach out to prominent community members to schedule headshots. This allows the editor to build a rapport with community members and ensure they have the best contact numbers and email addresses. Headshots should be on file for the following:

- Police chiefs
- Mayors and/or other heads of municipal or county boards
- Notable restaurant and small business owners
- Notable nonprofit executive directors

Have a centralized location for staff to access these photos easily. Photos should have a naming convention that makes their content easily identifiable, or the centralized location should include relevant tags, descriptions and photographer information for future use.

Getting Added to Press Release Distribution Lists

The news editor should reach out to area police departments, fire departments, municipal and county governing bodies, chambers of commerce and tourism boards, among others, to ask to be added to

their press release distribution lists. Provide a centralized mailbox address to receive press releases so the news editor and radio station staff can readily access information.

The editor should lean on the news site's association with the radio station market to lend credibility to the new publication.

Sample outreach email:

I'm the managing news editor for [RADIO STATION MARKET]. We're the home of a popular network of radio stations including [STATION 1], [STATION 2] and [STATION 3]. We'll be launching a digital news site associated with the stations in [MONTH OF LAUNCH].

Please add [CENTRALIZED MAILBOX ADDRESS] to your press release distribution list.

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me at [PHONE NUMBER] or at [EDITOR'S EMAIL ADDRESS].

The editor should follow up with a phone call the next day, either to thank the public information officer for quickly fulfilling the request or as a prompt to get added to the distribution list.

Freelancers & Internships

Building a Freelance Pool

Finding reliable freelancers will be an ongoing process when running a hyperlocal news site. Solicit recommendations from staff at the radio station. Local DJs have a broad reach into the community and may have existing relationships with former reporters or writers who may be potential freelancers.

The news site's editor will also have community and regional ties and should leverage their social network for potential freelance writers. Because freelancers are contractors and not employees, they often cycle in and out of being available to assist with coverage. Always keep an ear to the ground for an opportunity to build a freelancer Rolodex, but plan on dedicated recruiting at least once every six months.

Even though a freelancer isn't an employee, they represent your organization to the public. Interview each potential freelancer and get multiple writing samples before assigning their first story. Consider a story topic that is evergreen or that you could turn around easily and quickly if the freelancer proves unreliable.

A diversified freelancer pool will include contributors with the following strengths:

- 1) **Features:** Feature story writers tell deeply-researched stories about the community members and businesses that add to the character of your community.

Factors to consider for Features freelancers: Feature stories are unique to your publication. You rely on the legwork done by a features freelancer to ask intriguing questions that help paint the picture of a notable local resident or a new restaurant in town. Features require a significant time investment for the writer, which means a feature story will cost at least 2-3x more than what you would pay for a breaking news story, police or fire write-up or town government story. Consider seeking out content

sponsorships around tentpole feature categories you anticipate needing freelance coverage for, such as restaurant features and community leader profiles.

- 2) **Police & Fire:** Local police and fire freelancers cover time-sensitive crime and breaking news stories with keen news judgment.

Factors to consider for Police & Fire freelancers: Experienced police and fire freelancers know how to write an arrest story without libeling an individual or hedging so much on a story that it loses its teeth. Their copy may be mechanical and lean on police-speak, neglecting to tell a human story or showcase writing that draws the reader in.

- 3) **Breaking News:** A good breaking news freelancer loves being on-scene at a breaking news event. You may notice them commenting or posting images and videos on social media accounts or groups that monitor local scanner traffic.

Factors to consider for Breaking News freelancers: Breaking news freelancers can help your news site gain authority and relevance for quick response to an event that impacts your community. They may have difficulty discerning what events that come over scanner traffic merit breaking news coverage and which are more routine. You may have to manage their expectations regarding publication.

- 4) **Sports:** Local sports freelancers have deep relationships with coaches and sports programs in your community. They know which rivalry games matter most in the region and which young athletes are rising stars.

Factors to consider for Sports freelancers: Freelance sportswriters write with authority on a subject matter that touches on the lives of many in the community. Local high school sports coverage can be labor-intensive to do well. If you plan on including sports coverage as one of your content tent poles, consider seeking out content sponsorships with tiered primary and supporting levels to cover the cost.

- 5) **Government:** Freelancers who cover local government know how to parse opaque town resolutions to hone in on the impact of a decision on the community.

Factors to consider for Government freelancers: Freelancers who cover local government issues are adept at pulling multiple stories out of a single town meeting. They tend to be fast writers with an eye for finding the most crucial detail buried in dense paragraphs of legalese. A regional local news site will have dozens of municipal bodies with associated meetings, making it challenging to determine where a local government freelancer's resources are best spent.

- 6) **Jack-of-All-Trades:** Jack-of-all-trades content creators have a little bit of experience in everything and are as comfortable writing a quick arrest story as calling up a new restaurant owner for a brief interview for a short feature.

Factors to consider for Jack-of-All-Trades freelancers: Jack-of-all-trades freelancers are discerning and can see the forest through the trees as to what stories are worth their time investment for the audience interest. A jack-of-all-trades is a rare find and may not exist in your market at launch.

Exploring Internship Programs

If your coverage area includes an area college, develop a relationship with the school's journalism department and internship coordinator.

Journalism internships should be a learning vehicle for the students. If the college's journalism department doesn't have a structured program and learning modules your organization is asked to follow, you will need to develop your own.

Every assignment given to an intern should provide an opportunity for learning and hands-on education.

Establishing Breaking News Procedures

Radio markets will have their own internal procedures for when and how to respond to local and national breaking news. Consider that these internal procedures may need adjustments when adding a local news site to the market. For example, a news site in your market may mean your audience expects you to cover local breaking news topics in greater depth than you have in the past. Having an outline of responsibilities and procedures is all the more crucial.

Additionally, having a stand-alone news site will accelerate the breaking news coverage cycle in a radio market. In a radio market that doesn't have its own news site, on-air staff typically rely on a local newspaper or television website for breaking developments to provide broadcast updates and aggregated digital content. With an in-house news operation, information will be provided to on-air staff, the listening audience and the radio market's websites and social media accounts faster.

A market's operations manager or content director should delegate assignments and responsibilities for both on-air contributors and the news site staff. The determination of how responsibilities are divided up will largely depend on your staffing and employees' skillset at the time of the event.

Different contributors in the building may be tasked with different aspects of breaking news coverage, such as communicating updates to other staff members, updating a live blog about the news event or posting updates on social media. A breaking news procedure signed off on by the market's operations manager could also assign the news site editor as the market's point person on breaking news events.

Have an action plan as to who may be available to respond should the operations manager or news site editor be out of reach. You should also be aware of your weekend and evening staffing availability and who may be tapped for extra hours or to lend a hand should a breaking news event occur.

You should also have a clear understanding of what merits activation of breaking news procedures and what doesn't. Being overzealous with executing breaking news procedures during more marginal events, particularly during night and weekend hours, may increase staff burnout and morale issues. Be mindful of your resources to avoid exhausting them.

The bullet points for your market's breaking news procedures are entirely up to you. You know your staffing makeup, resources and weak points better than anyone. What matters is that a breaking news process exists and is known to all staff in the market. Your breaking news procedures will help avoid confusion about who is responsible for which task when you're in the throes of a breaking news event.

Developing Your Content Strategy

What Are Your Tent Poles?

Discuss the content categories you will focus resources on ahead of launch. What are the tent poles your publication will be known and relied upon for by your community? Will you be the first to respond to breaking police and fire news? Will you cover new restaurant openings? Will you report on issues affecting the local college?

Determine the five or six larger categories your content will fall into. Think about the time commitment and publication frequency of the articles that tend to fall in each category. Arrest stories may be easier to quickly report on and publish, while a feature on the new brewpub opening up may require more time and planning to arrange.

With the launch of the Tuscaloosa Thread, staff looked at the content topics that the market's existing contributors had success with consistently covering. They also assessed what content had performed well with the community in the past based on existing traffic data and could present an opportunity with additional resources.

The University of Alabama and collegial sports are an integral part of daily life in Tuscaloosa. Townsquare Media of Tuscaloosa operates Tide 100.9 FM, a radio station focused on Alabama sports coverage. The relationships and sources available to Tide 100.9 FM contributors made Alabama Sports a natural tent pole topic of the Tuscaloosa Thread.

Articles about restaurants and retail openings and closings had routinely performed well with the Tuscaloosa radio stations' digital audience. Staff formalized this subset of local business coverage by choosing Restaurants & Retail as a dedicated tent pole topic and allocating resources to it.

In the Seacoast, the University of New Hampshire (UNH) campus based in Dover impacts life in the region. Unlike Tuscaloosa, however, collegial sports teams do not broadly impact the community. The radio station market also didn't have an existing sports station, let alone one dedicated to college sports coverage. Rather than UNH Sports as a category, the staff identified a broader category of UNH Happenings as one of its tent poles.

These tent pole categories were presented in the navigation menus of both sites so readers could access up-to-date information on each topic. A long gap between stories on coverage within a particular tent pole became an occasion to assess how staffing resources were being allocated and to stay focused on the editorial mission each brand had established.

Your digital news site will need to publish six to eight original pieces of content per day to maintain a steady flow of content to engage your audience. The particular content mix you decide on should reflect the type of news site you're looking to build.

Suppose you want your publication to present a broad range of topics most of interest to your community. In that case, your tent pole categories are Police & Fire, Things to Do, Local College Happenings, Restaurants & Retail, Outdoors and Real Estate. If 80 percent of your articles on a given week fall into the Police & Fire category, those tent poles you've established will push you to recalibrate.

Don't Become a Press Release Repository

A news site model helmed by a single full-time staffer responsible for ensuring six to eight pieces of content appear daily can seem daunting. You may be tempted to create a section of the site allowing for business press releases, full police blotters or user-submitted event listings. Content is content, right?

In actuality, opening the floodgates to unedited or minimally curated content diminishes your publication's value to the audience. If your readers come to associate your news site with the unedited and untended content they find on community Facebook Groups and listservs, they won't view your publication as a credible source of local news. What sets a local news site apart is an editor's discerning eye. Lean into this advantage. Don't undermine it by becoming a news site/community forum/press release distribution center.

Focus on your primary objective: providing quality local content. Fulfill that objective by being selective about the content that appears on your site and storylines you pursue, and offer a balanced mix of content based on the categories you defined as tent poles.

Preparing the Launch Announcement

Prepare a development site a month before your launch. This will allow you to build out navigation menus and correct any broken links or errors well ahead of your debut.

Populate the development site with relevant evergreen content available from your radio station websites to better visualize the look and layout of your site ahead of launch. Including articles cross-posted from your station sites also pre-fills the content well, giving opportunities for your future audience to remain on the site longer once they arrive.

Splash Page

As you prepare the site's back end, create a splash page prompting visitors to sign up for your email newsletter. Include links to your social channels, as well. Consider including a countdown clock or an announcement tease video to make the splash page more dynamic and intriguing to visitors.

Radio Commercials

Begin teasing the launch with 15-, 30- and 60-second radio commercials several weeks ahead of the launch that direct people to the splash page. Your commercial script should highlight that a new source for local news and information is coming to the area, as well as any unique characteristics of your site such as the lack of a paywall or your coverage tent poles.

With the Tuscaloosa Thread, the staff cut several commercials highlighting the absence of a paywall on the site and the site's focus on rapid response to breaking police and fire news coverage.

Sample Commercial #1

Script:

TRYING TO GET THE LATEST NEWS BUT TRAPPED BEHIND ANOTHER PAYWALL? (SFX: DEMOLITION SOUNDS) WE'RE CUTTING THROUGH THE RED TAPE TO BRING YOU THE NEWS

THAT MATTERS TO YOU AND YOUR FAMILY AT TUSCALOOSA THREAD DOT COM. OUR WRITERS ARE PROUD TO CALL WEST ALABAMA HOME AND TO BRING YOU LOCAL NEWS WITHOUT THE HASSLE OF A PAYWALL. BOOKMARK THE SITE NOW! TUSCALOOSA THREAD DOT COM.

 [Listen to Audio](#)

Sample Commercial #2

Script:

(SFX: A BUNCH OF OVERLAPPING NOTIFICATION SOUNDS, THEN SILENCE, FOLLOWED BY THE MX BED TO UNDERSCORE THE PROMO) CUT THROUGH THE CLUTTER AND GET THE NEWS THAT MATTERS TO YOU NOW AT TUSCALOOSA THREAD DOT COM. THE TUSCALOOSA THREAD IS YOUR LOCAL NEWS LEADER, WITH WEST ALABAMA'S LARGEST TEAM OF MULTIMEDIA JOURNALISTS LED BY EDITOR IN CHIEF STEPHEN DETHRAGE (pronounced Death-ridge) AND BROADCAST NEWS DIRECTOR DON HARTLEY. BOOKMARK THE SITE NOW AND GET THE NEWS THAT MATTERS TO YOUR FAMILY. TUSCALOOSA THREAD DOT COM.

 [Listen to Audio](#)

Sample Commercial #3

Script:

WHEN NEWS BREAKS IN WEST ALABAMA, WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED AT TUSCALOOSA THREAD DOT COM. GET THE STORIES THAT MATTER TO YOU AND YOUR FAMILY WITHOUT THE HASSLE OF A PAYWALL NOW AT TUSCALOOSA THREAD DOT COM. IT'S FREE, IT'S LOCAL, AND IT'S LATE BREAKING, TWENTY-FOUR HOURS A DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. BOOKMARK THE SITE NOW AT TUSCALOOSA THREAD DOT COM.

 [Listen to Audio](#)

Dry Run

Your site's debut will be an exciting and chaotic time. Your editor will be pulled into a variety of meetings while simultaneously putting out small fires. Ramping up an aggressive publication schedule is difficult. An editor who hasn't been consistently writing at least four to five articles per day won't be able to do so on launch day. Add in assigning out and copy editing to the day's workload and the content production will be impossible to jump into feet first. The production cadence requires preparation.

A week before launch, start a dry run of your content publishing schedule. This will allow you to settle into the rhythm of the six to eight articles per day production schedule. This will also let you flesh out your tent pole categories, each of which should have at least two to three articles available at launch time.

Introduction Article

Write an article introducing your publication to your audience. Define your coverage area and what kind of content your audience can expect to find, with links to relevant articles you've pre-populated on your site. Introduce your managing editor and highlight his or her professional experience and ties to the community. Include links to where your audience can follow your publication on social media and provide contact information for your editorial staff.

You may also want to include an announcement video voiced by your editor and featuring photos or videos from well-known places throughout the community. This video can also be posted natively on social or edited down as part of a future paid social media marketing campaign.

Press Release

Draft a press release announcing your launch. Include details about what coverage area your publication will focus on and the content categories you'll be pursuing. Your editor or market president should have a quote in the press release describing the value the digital news site will provide to the community.

The press release is an opportunity to introduce your publication to community stakeholders and a valid business reason for your sales staff to reach out to clients.

Digital News Gathering Resources

Use a Social Media Insights Tool

Social media provides insights into what issues and trends are impacting your community. Parsing through the mountain of content in social media to find meaningful information and stories worth pursuing can be overwhelming. Social media insights tools can help you scan content more efficiently.

Townsquare Media editors frequently use Crowdtangle, which is a social media insights tool owned by Facebook. Crowdtangle allows journalists to monitor trends, fact-check potential misinformation and sort through publicly available social media data. It also enables users to build curated lists of specific Facebook pages and Instagram accounts and search terms. The lists can be used to set up daily email digests or viral email alerts weighted by the audience's reaction to posts.

Crowdtangle lists are helpful for local journalists to keep tabs on breaking news events, trends and potential story leads.

Your Crowdtangle lists should include local law enforcement, fire departments, municipal and county governments, popular businesses, nonprofits and community stakeholders.

Community Facebook Groups & Forums

Where are the digital spaces where your community gathers to ask questions, report happenings and discuss the issues that directly impact residents?

Many citizens have established unofficial town and regional community Facebook Groups or, in some instances, a popular local web forum or active listserv. These digital community spots are as much a social gathering space as a local pub or the public library. They play a vital role in finding out the topics your potential audience cares most about or tipping you off to a developing story.

- **Crowdsourcing:** Are you looking for locals impacted by a redevelopment project? Would you like to share comments from a resident affected by layoffs to humanize a story about spiking

unemployment? A digital community group may provide the quickest means of reaching out to your people in your coverage area.

- **Identify Yourself:** If you're crowdsourcing on a story or commenting to share a relevant link from your publication, identify yourself as a reporter and indicate the publication you work for.
- **Don't Link Spam:** A community group or forum shouldn't be treated as your publication's Facebook page or newsletter. Be highly selective with the content from your news site that you choose to share.
- **Be a Part of the Community:** Comment on photos or links that spark your interest. You'll develop relationships with community members by adding value to the group.
- **Spot Trends:** A post that leads to heavy community interaction may be a hint at a breaking community news event (e.g., "Route 9 is totally shut down near I-84. Police cars everywhere.") or a lifestyle trend worth pursuing (e.g., "Anyone know any Seacoast stores selling cocoa bombs?")

Building an Editorial Calendar

Content calendars allow you to track important local events, monitor freelance spending, develop a schedule to launch search engine optimized content and prepare story budgets for the week ahead.

Without shared weekly and monthly calendars, your digital news site will lack strategy and focus and struggle to keep your community engaged on slower news days.

Monthly Calendars for Long-Term Planning

Monthly calendars are best suited for long-term planning. The editorial staff will glance at this calendar a few times a month rather than operate within it daily as a real-time working document.

Your monthly calendar can exist in a shared document or a group calendar, but it should be a space any member of your editorial staff can readily access and monitor.

Important dates and content topics to outline within your monthly calendar include:

- **SEO Reminders:** Establish dates to begin assigning out content around holidays, seasons and regional lifestyle happenings (i.e., Back-to-School) and dates when that content should be published.
- **Event Announcements:** If a local concert venue typically announces its schedule the first week of May, add a reminder to prepare the story shell two weeks out and a reminder to monitor for the announcement the week of.
- **Historical Dates:** Include notable historic dates around your coverage area, such as the birthday of a famous native son or daughter, the day something was invented in your region or the anniversary of a local tragedy. Not only does this allow you to prepare articles around these topics, but it often presents an opportunity for engaging posts on social media.
- **Staff Vacations:** With a lightly-staffed newsroom, planning ahead for vacation coverage is essential. Note dates when an editor, reporter or frequent freelancer is unavailable so that all staff is informed.

Weekly Calendars for Daily Story Budgets

A weekly calendar will be the working document that guides your daily editorial operations. An effective weekly calendar should provide a rough outline for the week ahead so you can ensure your content includes a balanced mix of topics within your tentpole categories and across your coverage area. It

should also allow you to easily adjust publication dates for evergreen content, should an influx of breaking news force you to adjust the day's budget of stories.

A weekly editorial calendar should provide the following information about each day's articles at a glance:

- Headline or descriptive placeholder headline
- Reporter or freelancer covering and associated freelance cost
- Content category for the article
- Municipality or county the article is primarily focused on
- Content marketing plan for the article, including social media schedule, app alert schedule, newsletter inclusion and/or inclusion in an on-air mention

Example: [Weekly Editorial Planner](#)

Marketing

Radio Marketing

Radio's broad reach makes it the perfect marketing medium for launching a digital news site. Over 92% of adults listen to the radio each week, according to Nielsen studies. The consistency of radio messaging helps create familiarity with your news site, and its recency -- with listeners reminded to take immediate action -- will drive site visits and app downloads.

Using the market's radio stations to support the launch and growth of a digital news site is not only affordable but can also create sponsorship opportunities for both the station and the site.

Liners and recorded promotional mentions

Your radio station's on-air personalities have a built-in connection with the audience. Station liners or recorded promotional mentions voiced by station personalities will lend credibility to your news site and augment the on-air commercial spot schedule.

Rotate liners and recorded promotional mentions to occur at least once per air shift.

Creating a spot schedule

Produce 30- and 60-second commercial spots that include different creatives to run in the weeks before the launch and then immediately following the launch. The 60-second spots should consist of room to allow for a 15-second sponsor tag so that you can add a sponsorship to the site.

The creative imaging should vary by the station to reflect the format and identity of those brands, and the commercials should run once an hour through available spot inventory.

Integrating the Digital News Site Into Existing Programming

Your editor's educational background and prior job experience may inform how you're able to market your digital news site on air. An editor whose background is primarily in print or written digital journalism may not feel comfortable joining a radio show on air or recording newscasts.

If an editor has on-air experience and one of your radio shows would benefit from an on-air newscaster, consider integrating the editor into the broadcast. Live or recorded newscasts could add an extra dimension to a show while also providing an opportunity to highlight the news site the editor oversees. The on-air talent could throw to the editor by introducing them with their news site or title. The editor could also end any newscast by directing listeners to find more information on local happenings at the news site.

Digital Marketing

Sonic Branding

Standalone news sites with apps can use the resources of a radio market's production department to create a custom sound to brand the news site sonically. This sound should be integrated into recorded commercials or played into any newscasts featuring headlines branded as coming from the news site.

This sonic brand can also be integrated into the news site's digital presence through its mobile app. Both the Seacoast Current and the Tuscaloosa Thread incorporated an audio element used on-air as a sounder when an alert was sent from their app on a significant story.

 [Tuscaloosa Thread app alert sounder](#)

Search Engine Marketing

Your news site will take several months to gain authority in search for local news terms—research keywords around town and regional news terms to see which phrases your audience commonly searches. Consider your budget and determine whether you want to lean into a larger regional term or tackle multiple local ones.

Create ad campaigns optimized for users searching for the keyword phrase from mobile or desktop. The messaging around your mobile search campaign should prompt users to download your site's app and direct them to the App Store or Google Play Store, depending on the device they are accessing the ad from. On desktop, the messaging should direct users to sign up for the site's newsletter.

Directing users to the site's homepage may increase traffic and build brand awareness, but promoting app downloads and newsletter signups will create long-term traffic opportunities and develop a more engaged audience base.

Paid Social Media Marketing

Boosting individual articles on social media may lead to a temporary traffic gain but does little to build an engaged audience for yours to come.

Marketing social media budgets for local news sites are best spent on building your owned and operated distribution channels, such as newsletter subscriptions or app downloads. Click-to-action campaigns have greater continuing value for your news site while boosting an individual article provides a temporary traffic boost.

Growing the audience in channels you control allows you to develop a long-term relationship with readers and create opportunities to promote your content organically.

Highlight the unique elements of your publication in your ad creative, such as the lack of a paywall or a particular coverage focus that may be underserved in the market.

Organic Social Media Marketing

The radio stations in your market will often have an established following on social media. While the content from your digital news site should eventually help boost traffic on your radio station websites, the marketing reach of your radio stations will be critical in the initial stages of launching a news site. This marketing reach includes your radio stations' on-air audience, as well as their social media audience.

Select one or two stories per day from your digital news site to share on your stations' Facebook pages. Tag the digital news site's Facebook page in the status update teasing the article. Then comment underneath the article as the radio station brand and invite the audience to follow the news site's Facebook page, download the app or subscribe to the newsletter. Vary the messaging to allow the audience to engage with the brand on their preferred platform or multiple platforms.

Tweet out or retweet at least two or three articles from the news site on the stations' Twitter accounts per day. If tweeting out a link to the news site's article, include the site's handle and encourage the station followers to follow the standalone news. Monitor locally-focused hashtags and have relevant and popular ones when tweeting out story links.

When your news site's audience begins consistently outperforming its monthly traffic goals by 50% and you notice a dip of 20% or more on your stations' sites, sunset organic social media marketing of your news site in favor of the radio station sharing cross-posted versions of the news site's content housed on their websites.

Instagram can be a heavier lift without a direct traffic payoff; however, if you have the resources to post on the platform consistently, you can drive significant brand awareness organically. There are simple but effective ways to increase your Instagram visibility if you have limited time and staffing resources:

- Use your stock photography library as an opportunity to build brand awareness by highlighting scenic or iconic locations and including popular, relevant local hashtags to drive reach.
- Fill in the location field with every post to increase your news site's local visibility.
- Create text-based designs highlighting "This Day in Local History"-style fact posts.
- If sending a freelancer out to cover an event or story, ask them to take a photo of whoever they may request a quote from.
- Take mobile screenshots of articles on the site and use the first sentence or paragraph of text in the description, along with relevant local hashtags, to build visibility and interest.

Outdoor Marketing

Outdoor marketing can be costly but can make an impact in building brand awareness for your news site. Leverage existing trade agreements in the market, e.g., stations have provided commercial inventory in exchange for products or services to cut down on upfront costs.

Wrapped Vehicles

Many radio markets have trade agreements with car dealership clients to acquire station vehicles and signage clients to wrap cars with brand logos. A car wrapped with your standalone news site's logo

becomes a rolling billboard for the new brand. It also offers visibility for your brand in higher-profile reporting situations, such as a breaking news event.

Billboards

Billboards can make a splash in introducing your brand to a market. Digital billboards, in particular, can allow a hyperlocal news site to highlight its immediate relevance within a community. Many digital billboard providers enable clients to update the copy text on the sign regularly through a secure website. News outlets can use their billboard to highlight specific headlines and coverage.

The Tuscaloosa Thread, for example, had a billboard that initially announced the new news brand and prominently featured the Townsquare Media of Tuscaloosa logo. This allowed the community and potential clients to get familiar with the company behind the brand and informed them where they could reach out for more information. As the brand evolved, the focus became the news site's coverage on topics such as the University of Alabama's football season and the aftermath of severe weather events.

Whatever your marketing budget, you can find various solutions to build awareness and visibility for your news site. Quality local content will often present organic opportunities to showcase your news site on social media and on-air. Strategic use of paid social and search engine marketing can create a long-term relationship with your community members, particularly if you use tactics that build app downloads and your newsletter database. Whether your marketing strategy is paid, organic or a mix of both, planning out a strategy for reaching your audience is crucial to generating awareness of your brand and driving website traffic over time.

Monetization

Launch Packages

The launch process is an opportunity to build excitement and interest with existing clients. With a digital news site launch, you can offer a client a chance to partner with the radio market on a new brand.

Radio sales representatives are uniquely suited to pitching the exclusivity of a brand launch. Whereas most traditional media outlets such as local television and newspapers rarely launch new brands or rebrand the outlet entirely with a new name, new design and new vision, the radio industry is accustomed to changing station formats. As a result, radio staff is more comfortable positioning a launch package to clients.

Use existing spot inventory to regularly run a 60-second commercial promoting the digital news site across stations in the market. The 60-second spot can include a 15-second client commercial.

Include a percentage of the news site's display ad inventory as part of the launch package. Share of voice on any display inventory should only be a short-term offering on a new site. In the first three months, when the news site establishes its audience, the ad revenue for any third-party programmatic advertising will be small.

A sponsorship that includes a percentage of all site display ads will only generate more revenue than programmatic in the first few months after a site launch. Once the news site establishes itself in the community and generates significant traffic, a share of voice offering will bring in less revenue than the limitless potential of impression-based selling.

Radio/Digital Display Sponsorships

Sales packages combining on-air commercials and display ad impressions can continue after launch with updated creative and revised, impression-based pricing.

The commercial promoting the now-established news site can highlight its unique offerings. If the site's lack of a paywall is distinctive in the market, highlight it in your on-air messaging and append a sponsor tag to it.

At Townsquare Media of Northern New England in Portsmouth, for example, the market highlighted the news site's accessibility in its commercials. The promotional spots highlighted the availability of news without a paywall through the Seacoast Current website and app. The spots also referenced on-air newscasts drawn from Seacoast Current headlines in noting the availability of news through the station stream on audio platforms such as Alexa and Google Home.

Sample Commercial #1

Script:

THANKS TO YOU, SEACOAST CURRENT DOT COM IS THE FASTEST GROWING NEWS OUTLET ON THE SEACOAST. GET LOCAL CURRENT NEWS ON YOUR DESKTOP ON YOUR PHONE AND ON ALEXA. GREAT CHOICE. NO PAYWALL, JUST LOCAL, SEACOAST, CURRENT NEWS, SEACOAST CURRENT DOT COM. BE CURRENT, STAY CURRENT AT SEACOAST CURRENT DOT COM. DOWNLOAD THE FREE APP NOW.

 [Listen to Audio](#)

Sample Commercial #2 (with sponsor tag)

Script:

BE CURRENT, STAY CURRENT WITH THE SEACOAST CURRENT APP. GET THE LATEST VACCINE INFORMATION, BREAKING NEWS, STORM UPDATES. ALL WITH NO PAYWALL. THE SEACOAST CURRENT APP. DOWNLOAD IT FOR FREE IN YOUR APP STORE TODAY. POWERED BY NEWBURYPORT BANK. JOURNEY WELL.

 [Listen to Audio](#)

When the site has established itself in the market, pivot from generic marketing messaging to the day's top headlines. Establish a workflow for who is responsible for recording the time-sensitive news and communicating the availability of the new spot to the ad trafficking department. Ensure all stakeholders -- managing editor, production director, brand managers, traffic department -- have been involved in developing the process for daily production and have the bandwidth to commit to daily updates to the commercial. This involvement and alignment are crucial before moving forward with this change to the commercial.

A regularly updated spot will be engaging to the audience, solidify your news site as a source of real-time information for the community, and benefit the client.

Finally, the bank of digital display ad impressions included as part of the package should be sold at a rate well above your average programmatic CPM because of the premium value of those positions.

Newsletter Sponsorships

Local news sites traditionally have a stronger open rate than most media and entertainment brands. Campaign Monitor data [found an 18.1% open rate and 3% click-thru rate](#) for media and entertainment sites' newsletters in 2020.

Townsquare's Tuscaloosa news site, the Tuscaloosa Thread, has seen a 30.8% open rate and a 9.3% click-thru rate since launch. Our Portsmouth site, Seacoast Current, has seen a 36.6% open rate and a 13.4% click-thru rate.

Audiences hungry for local news and information are more apt to engage with a local news site's email newsletter, making it an opportunity for local advertisers.

Consider your impression pricing, the defined nature of the audience comprising the newsletter subscriber base and the time and labor in manually substituting newsletter ads when determining a price point. Establish a \$500 monthly minimum for a newsletter ad and increase rates when subscribers reach a benchmark for every 1,000 new emails.

App Sponsorships

A local news site's app users are its most engaged audience members. The surge in interest in local news aggregating apps such as News Break, which TechCrunch notes [became the third most downloaded app in the Apple iOS store](#) at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, shows hunger for hyperlocal news.

Townsquare's internal metrics show app users will visit a radio station app 4 to 5 times more frequently than its website. For our news/talk stations and our news sites, the frequency of user app visits compared to website visits is 6 to 7 times greater.

An app component to your news site presents a valuable sponsorship opportunity for clients. Consider offering a title sponsorship and supporting sponsorship packages to monetize this high-engagement tool.

Content Sponsorships

Content sponsorships can be sold around any particular topic you anticipate creating articles around regularly. Consider broader topics as potential content sponsorship opportunities instead of more niche or highly specific topics. This will ensure you will have content that will satisfy the client's expectations for the frequency they can expect on the particular sponsorship they purchased.

Topics for a potential content sponsorship should arise out of the editorial department rather than from sales to ensure the topic presented to a client is actually something reporters and editors will likely be writing about. Selling a content sponsorship on a topic editorial staff wouldn't typically write about compromises the editorial integrity of the news site. It also forces resources to be pulled away from content topics that can drive heavy traffic, limiting programmatic or locally sold display advertising revenue. A content sponsorship that doesn't fit with the current content topics available on the site is also unlikely to perform well for the client.

For example, a topic such as "Tax Tips" may appeal to an accountant around tax season, but most hyperlocal news sites won't have content that addresses federal or state tax filing concerns. If they do, it would fit into a local event announcement, such as a session at the library offering senior citizens tax advice or something broader in scope that is unlikely to generate traffic among a local audience. A better fit for a client looking for greater content specificity is an advertorial, which will allow them more control over the content.

Content sponsorships can be one of your existing tentpole content categories; a seasonal or holiday category, such as all Halloween-related content; or a content series, such as profiles on local small business owners.

When pricing out a content sponsorship on a broader content, establish a pricing floor and consider the historical traffic those content categories have seen in the past. Categories such as police and fire news will make up a large percentage of your traffic. Ensure that your pricing for a content sponsorship in those categories aligns with your local digital display ad rate, so you don't undercut the news site's revenue potential.

Content sponsorships can also support community service content categories. For example, publishing obituaries may not be the best use of your managing news editor's limited time and resources. However, a content sponsorship could support the cost of an editorial assistant's hourly rate to publish obituaries on the site. Providing a resource for the bereaved to have a loved one's obituary published at no cost would also prove a valuable community service and one certain advertisers may want to be associated with.

Advertorial Opportunities

Advertorials allow clients to control their message while benefiting from a content presentation that appears similar to an organic article.

News sites benefit from the trust and reputation built within a community. A client can reach a hyperlocal audience and leverage the authority of the news site to amplify their message.

Advertorials should be clearly identified as sponsored content, so the audience is clear about the distinction between paid articles and organic articles.

Have a means of directing traffic to the advertorial either through social media or display advertising to satisfy the pageviews and impressions promised the client. Set a price point that accounts for the heavy lift of creating content and the onerous cost of paid social media or display advertising that could have yielded programmatic revenue.

Programmatic Advertising

A robust programmatic display advertising stack allows you to realize revenue on every pageview. Consider the user experience when designing a site to optimize ad revenue without distracting from the content.

Create opportunities within the content and through the site design to keep readers on the site longer. This could be through internal links to relevant articles, which also helps optimize content for search, a list of the day or week's top-performing articles or creating photo galleries from user-generated content.

Conclusion

The local news landscape has become increasingly barren as media companies have shrunk dedicated coverage in parts of the country or shuttered altogether. The public's appetite for reliable news and information about their community has not waned, however, and there's an opportunity for local radio markets to create a financially viable standalone news site to fill the vacuum.

Radio's marketing reach can help a new brand rapidly create awareness in a community. While an independent local news site could take years to grow its presence organically, a site connected with a radio market has a built-in megaphone to build an audience immediately.

Locally-staffed radio markets have deep connections within a community and built-in credibility with area residents. This relationship allows a standalone news site to leverage the trust between its partner radio stations and the local population to gain traction and grow traffic.

Furthermore, the role of a standalone news site and its radio station partners in the market is a symbiotic one: content created by the standalone local news site can be used in on-air scripts or included on the station websites. The influx of up-to-date local news content to the radio stations will strengthen those brands by creating a larger digital footprint and associating them with articles of deep relevance to listeners' daily lives.

Radio stations trusted with the use of public airwaves have a unique opportunity to expand the bounds of their commitment to public service. Local news is critical for an engaged and informed populace. Radio can leverage its marketing strengths to support the public good while creating a financially viable pathway for community journalism.