

How to Create a Distinctive Community News Website

I. Plan for the Web

Your website should be the comprehensive source of online news and information – big and small – about your community. It is a standalone product not encumbered by deadlines. It complements your newspaper with breaking news, updates and web-exclusive stories, photos, video and graphics. It doesn't mirror the day's print edition.

Each newsroom needs a plan for what it publishes to the site, who produces that information, when items are published, and how often the site is refreshed. Plans will vary according to a newsroom's resources. But every newsroom needs to embrace the fundamental qualities of the web:

- Your website can publish news 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. So the site must post breaking news as it happens with updates as developments unfold.
- Web viewers are more pressed for time than newspaper readers. Your site must deliver information quickly, in simple, declarative sentences.
- Your site needs regular attention. Readers expect fresh information.

II. What Content Goes Online?

Unlike print products, your website has unlimited capacity to deliver real-time information your readers value. It's up to each newsroom to create a site that serves community needs and interests, appeals to advertisers, and makes sense for your staff.

Structure Your Site: Don't overcomplicate your site with sections that are rarely updated or mimic newspaper conventions. Focus on local breaking news, multimedia features, sports, opinion (blogs), and reader contributions. Build from there.

Promote Breaking News: When big stories break, post staccato-style updates. Give a simple presentation of details. Leave the complete narrative to the newspaper. Solicit eyewitness photos and videos. "Breaking news" also may be smaller stories that are immediately relevant to readers -- accidents, fires, weather warnings and sports scores.

Use Your Newspaper Sparingly: Stories written for the newspaper should be rewritten into shorter (three or four paragraphs) web versions. Don't just post the first three grafs of a newspaper story; write for your web audience and its expectation of fast news.

Schedule Updates: Plan non-breaking updates. A morning report briefs readers on overnight developments, events planned for that day and local meetings. Add mid-day and afternoon (before 5 p.m.) updates.

Web Features: Plan regular features. A pothole patrol invites readers to nominate road hazards; a reporter calls officials to check on repairs. A most-wanted segment profiles fugitives. A blotter update reports the most interesting item in each day's police log.

Information, Not Just Stories: Web content isn't just news. It's information about your community that readers cannot easily find elsewhere. Aggregate high-impact information and update it regularly – home sales, building permits, business licenses, interest rates, school lunch menus, honor rolls, crime data, gas prices and health inspections.

Ask Readers for Help: Create features with reader photos – prom formals, pet contests, vacation snapshots. Make sure readers know how to submit photos and video. Find other community contributors: Survey pastors for a Saturday roundup of sermon topics. Ask a librarian for a weekly book review to post with a list of new books. Recruit readers to submit neighborhood news, photos and video.

Not Just Black and White: The web is a multimedia platform. If you can't create daily slideshows, video or interactive presentations, set a goal of one or two per week. It could be a video interview with coaches before the big game or a man-on-the-street poll.

Your Site Is a Resource: Anyone looking for information about your community should start with your site. Compile links to community groups. Create an online almanac with census statistics, crime data, employment figures and test scores. Create citizen guides: How do I register to vote? How do I get a gun license? Where do I pay my taxes?

III. Measure Success

The website is your most interactive news product. It thrives on reader input and invites an ongoing conversation with readers about what works. Check your numbers:

Monitor readership with Google Analytics. Watch common gauges of web traffic: unique visitors, monthly page views, time spent on site. Identify the most popular sections and stories each day, week and month.

Share reader data with your newsroom. Talk about what works and what falls flat. If you're not sure what the numbers tell you, ask readers for their input.

Adjust accordingly. Give the pothole patrol a good shot. Don't be afraid to shut it down if it draws only limited interest and has little results.