

# Medill Local News Accelerator 2024 Cohort Case Study



**As part of the 2024 Local News Accelerator program, Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications welcomed seven different Chicago-area news organizations: Windy City Times, Borderless Magazine, Chicago Public Media, WTTW News, Chicago Reader, Shaw Media and Cicero Independiente. Over the course of a six-month program, each organization identified concrete goals it could achieve to expand audience reach, improve audience engagement and further optimize its business model to build a more sustainable future for local news.**

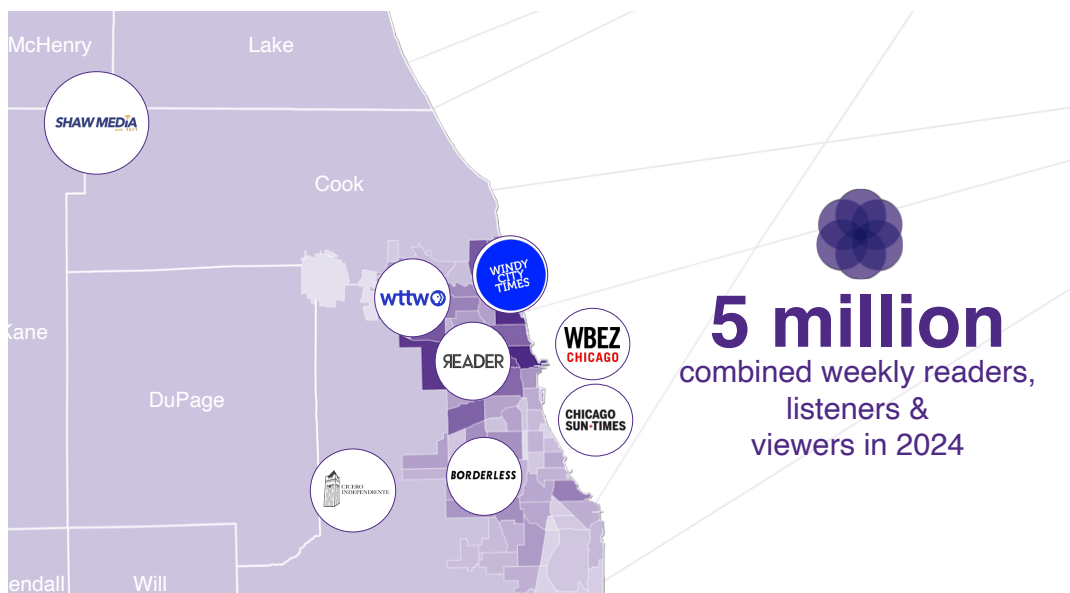
**The Accelerator centered around five key pillars: research and insights, content strategy, business strategy, product development and leadership development. Through Medill-sponsored research, organizational collaboration and Medill's proven processes, the Accelerator's participants were able to come away from the cohort armed with measurable results based on the outcomes of various projects. These included newsletter launches, content strategies targeting younger demographics and more efficient operations. Underpinning all the projects was bespoke research that better-informed the clients about high-potential audience segments, and what benefits those segments sought from local news providers. They were also able to learn from each other's different experiences and grow as leaders in the industry.**

## Results

The seven news outlets included in this cohort each chose different projects to enhance their reach and business models and worked on the same timeline using LNA processes. Among the key highlights:

- **Chicago Public Media** targeted readers between the ages of 18-24 and saw a 45% increase in loyal readership among that group and 22% increase in its social media audience, while also adding 2,000 subscribers through a text messaging pilot program;
- **Windy City Times** exceeded its goal of reaching 4,000 subscribers for its Chicago Social Butterflies newsletter, totaling 4,893 by the end of the Accelerator, while also building a newsletter Instagram account to 1,574 ultra-targeted followers from zero at the start of the program;
- **WTTW News** launched a new newsletter that drove a 29% increase in subscribers in the first two months and yielded a 28% increase in open rate as compared to its other branded newsletters;
- **Shaw Media** reached 95% of its goal to hit 24,000 paid digital subscribers by the end of 2024 and improved retention for high school sports subscribers. This was a more than 9 percent net increase in six months;
- **Chicago Reader** adapted to the geographic locations of its audience, using pinpoint Medill research about outsize density of high arts and culture spending among consumers concentrated in specific points around the city. The Reader repositioned 45 distribution points in neighborhoods on the South and West Sides of Chicago, while growing its circulation from 60,000 papers per week to 63,000 papers per week;
- **Borderless Magazine** built a more robust field canvassing program that helped expand their community outreach and led to 468 new digital subscribers;
- **Cicero Independiente** facilitated a mentorship program for local businesses in Cicero and Berwyn, helping with digital marketing, social media and community engagement.

The remainder of this case study will provide a breakdown of each outlet — who they are, what they do and what they set out to accomplish during their time in the 2024 Local News Accelerator program.





### **Overview**

Chicago Public Media began in its current iteration in 2022 when the parent company of public radio station WBEZ bought the Chicago Sun-Times, forming the largest non-profit news organization in the country. Prior to merging, WBEZ and the Sun-Times had a rich history in Chicago's media landscape, with WBEZ's in-depth, community-oriented reporting and the Sun-Times' investigative journalism and local coverage. The two entities can now leverage each other's strengths to provide an even richer news ecosystem across Chicago.

In their work in the Accelerator, Chicago Public Media focused its efforts on how to improve their engagement with younger audiences between the ages of 18 and 24. With this younger demographic vital to the long-term health of the organization, they sought to learn how to better connect and build relationships with this audience.

### **Wins**

Over the course of the Accelerator, CPM saw a 45% increase in loyal readers aged 18-24 in Illinois,

a 22% growth in its social media audience among those aged 18-24 and gained 2,000 subscribers through a text messaging pilot.

“The Medill Accelerator project for Chicago Public Media enabled the two newsrooms to focus on reaching new, younger audiences through techniques that can be expanded for different audience groups and platforms,” WBEZ’s Executive Editor Gilbert Bailon said. “CPM outreach on TikTok and texting during the Democratic National Convention and then fall election cycle were successful in attracting new audiences with different content across new platforms. The project built a CPM collaboration that will support future efforts to gain younger audiences and broader audiences using an expanded portfolio of platforms.”

### **Key takeaways**

Through the Accelerator, CPM came to recognize the profound value of prioritizing not just community listening sessions, but targeted interviews with specific demographics — in this case, young Chicagoans. These interviews provided insights into how young Chicagoans engage with media and allowed CPM to test different ways of outreach to potential young audience members that align with these insights. CPM was able to integrate these experiments into the core of their workflow by promoting discussion surrounding younger audiences into a broader newsroom discussion. This allowed for further conversations about how to carry this perspective past the six-month Accelerator.

Research conducted during the project also revealed that the Sun-Times and WBEZ benefit from strong name recognition — though they’re not usually the places young Chicagoans typically return to habitually for news — and helped direct them on where to focus their efforts (TikTok, texting pilot, etc.) in order to meet users where they are at. As texting became a key way of reaching younger audiences and produced positive early results, this led to another new funder looking to support an additional pilot program focused on Spanish speakers.



**The Medill Accelerator project for Chicago Public Media enabled the two newsrooms to focus on reaching new, younger audiences through techniques that can be expanded for different audience groups and platforms.**

WBEZ’s Executive Editor Gilbert Bailon



**Chicago Public Media’s operational improvements during the project included:**

FROM	TO
A newsroom that needs to improve engagement with younger audiences.	<b>A newsroom that understands the interests and motivations of 16-24-year-old Chicagoans.</b>
Two organizations that don’t meaningfully serve the under 25 audience.	<b>One organization with a clear strategy for reaching them.</b>
Publications young Chicagoans may or may not be familiar with.	<b>A publication young Chicagoans rely on and trust (and even talk to their friends about).</b>
Publications young Chicagoans might read for news.	<b>A go-to source for connecting, enjoying, and engaging with Chicago and a reader’s specific community.</b>
A place of passive consumption.	<b>A place young Chicagoans turn to intentionally to know more about their community.</b>
“Many young people in America / our community feel disconnected from each other and their community, and deal with the many ramifications of that disconnection.”	<b>“Young people feel more connected because of our work and that has a positive impact on our city.”</b>
An organization that reaches a diverse set of Chicago readers but doesn’t connect with the young adults (and soon-to-be adults) in our community.	<b>An organization that truly reaches and represents all of Chicago.</b>

**How Chicago Public Media will build on what they learned**

CPM plans to continue to grow its audience of young Chicagoans, armed with its accomplishments generated through the Accelerator. Finding people under 25 to become loyal supporters is critical to CPM’s long-term sustainability, and the addition of an outside funder to support the next pilot text messaging initiative, demonstrates short-term financial value in the efforts as well.

## Notes



## Overview

Windy City Times is the only news organization in Chicago devoted solely to covering the city's LGBTQ+ community. In publication since 1985, Windy City Times has published monumental stories — from an interview with then-Chicago Mayor Harold Washington about various gay rights issues, to a story revealing then state-senate candidate Barack Obama's views on marriage equality. The publication moved to online-only in 2020, placing a greater emphasis on newsletters.

The organization entered the Local News Accelerator aiming to increase subscriptions for the publication's recently-developed Chicago Social Butterflies newsletter, hoping to use those subscriptions to generate more advertising revenue. The newsletter serves as a one-stop shop, highlighting the hundreds of events in Chicago's LGBTQ+ communities.

## Wins

Over the course of the program, Windy City Times far surpassed its goal of reaching 4,000 newsletter subscribers (up from 200 at the start of the program), reaching 4,893. It also

maintained a newsletter open rate of 55%, exceeding the goal of 50%. And, the organization went from having no Instagram followers for the Chicago Social Butterflies Instagram account to having 1,574 by the program's end.

A few weeks after the end of the program, the newsletter's success continued, as it eclipsed 5,000 subscribers.

Following the success of the Chicago Social Butterflies newsletter, Windy City Times plans to continue expanding its newsletter offerings, reviving sister publications En La Vida and BlackLines as newsletters focused on Chicago's Latine and Black queer communities.

### Key takeaways

As part of the program, Medill surveyed Windy City Times readers to better understand how they interacted with the organization and what they wanted from the publication in the future. These surveys produced data that helped Windy City Times make informed decisions about what types of events to highlight in the Chicago Social Butterflies newsletter, where they could invest more resources and possible products to launch in the future.

Through participating in the Local News Accelerator, Windy City Times saw that it could continue to grow, even as the media landscape evolves.

"The Local News Accelerator program pushed the Windy City Times team to aim high in setting our goals. In doing so, we realized we can accomplish even our most lofty ambitions," then-newsletter editor Jake Wittich said. "Breaking down our long-term vision for Windy City Times into two-week 'sprints' with regular check-ins made our goals more manageable, ensured we were consistently making progress and brought a sense of accountability to make sure we were always



**Giving monthly presentations about our project, goals, successes and pressure points was really valuable in helping us learn how to tell our story and pitch it to potential readers, funders and other supporters.**

Jake Wittich, then-newsletter editor



moving forward.”

The program also helped Windy City Times gain a stronger understanding of how to market themselves to potential subscribers and funders.

“Giving monthly presentations about our project, goals, successes and pressure points was really valuable in helping us learn how to tell our story and pitch it to potential readers, funders and other supporters,” Wittich noted.

Based specifically on his performance in this project, Wittich was promoted to managing editor at the beginning of 2025.

### **Windy City Times’ operational improvements during the project included:**

<b>FROM</b>	<b>TO</b>
Bi-weekly newsletter	Weekly newsletter
No formal website to house our calendar	Soft-launch phase of the Chicago Social Butterfiles website
Manual and infrequent posting on social media (just Facebook and Instagram)	Using Loomly as a scheduling software to post at least once daily on FB and IG.
No social media ads for CSB	Running ads on FB and IG to recruit newsletter subscribers

### **How the Windy City Times will build on what they learned**

For the Chicago Social Butterflies newsletter, Windy City Times plans to continue finetuning its advertising practices on their website and social media. They aim to try pop-up forms to sign up for newsletters and use more notable banners promoting the newsletters within their stories.

Windy City Times is also planning on relaunching its sister publications, En La Vida and BlackLines, as newsletters focused on Latine and Black queer communities respectively. Both publications were previously community newspapers from 1996-2004, and Windy City Times has since digitized much of the archives.

These newsletters will both reexamine their archives and also include news stories and features. The goal is to launch both in early Spring 2025.

## Notes



## Overview

WTTW News is the journalism arm of Chicago's PBS member television station in Chicago. The organization includes a nightly news show, Chicago Tonight, and also provides additional online coverage of the arts, politics, crime, education, health, science and other topics of interest across Chicago's diverse neighborhoods and communities.

The publication's main goal during its work in the Accelerator was to create an email newsletter to help draw in a younger and more diverse audience, while applying what it learned through the process to the entire WTTW News brand.

## Wins

WTTW launched its new email newsletter, The Daily Chicagoan, in August and within the first two months saw subscribers to this newsletter increase by 29% and their open rate for the newsletter increase by 28%, as compared to pre-Accelerator newsletters.

In addition, The Daily Chicagoan has not seen an engagement dip after the initial spike of success, maintaining a steady rate of subscribers and newsletter engagement.

As part of their work in the Accelerator, WTTW also built a survey for new subscribers so they can better understand how their newsletter is resonating with readers, what type of information they're looking to gain from it and other information that will help guide the newsletter's future direction.

### **Key takeaways**

Through survey research conducted during the Accelerator, WTTW gained a more in-depth understanding of the expanded audience they hope to reach. Among the findings, the survey results revealed that younger news consumers were less interested in things like food reviews or how a concert hall was decorated and were more interested in how that restaurant or concert hall tied into and connected with their communities and to Chicago.

This process underscored the value of consumer feedback in helping shape decisions made in the newsroom.

"Our newsroom has changed," said Jay Smith, WTTW's news director. "The revelations of what the audience wants has had an impact on all our reporting. We are more focused on the audience than ever before, more dedicated to developing new ways of telling stories and delivering the stories and information our audience wants and needs."



**The revelations of what the audience wants has had an impact on all our reporting. We are more focused on the audience than ever before, more dedicated to developing new ways of telling stories and delivering the stories and information our audience wants and needs.**

Jay Smith, WTTW's news director



## Lessons learned

WTTW News emphasized that tactics, metrics and strategies will always be evolving, an important understanding to have as long as the long-term mission remains consistent. The publication also saw value in having the newsletter operate as a stand-alone entity, not something that necessarily requires engagement with a TV broadcast or a website link.

WTTW also hoped to launch five different email newsletters, each covering different topics, but they determined that it was not a realistic task in the short term.

## WTTW's operational improvements during the project included:

FROM	TO
A newsroom where decisions were driven by internal opinions or how people used their content (TV ratings, Google analytics)	A newsroom that asked consumers questions that drew insight into unmet needs and other questions that made it easier to build new or enhance existing products
Automated email newsletter designed to drive traffic back to the website	A newsletter written by a staff member that served a specific purpose and was designed to stand alone as a unique product that served a reader's needs
An audience that is mostly older than 60 and higher income, including many of the established civic leaders in the Chicagoland area	An audience that included its current readership and viewership, but expanded to include a 30s-to-50s cohort that was more racially and geographically diverse and included the next-generation of civic leadership
A newsroom with an emphasis on "hard" news about politics and other news of the day	A newsroom that also served as an outlet for greater arts, entertainment, science and nature coverage
A television-focused newsroom	A more digitally-focused newsroom

## How WTTW will build on what they learned

The organization aims to seek new ways to build its email subscriber base, with new subscribers having plateaued. WTTW is also looking at how to continue integrating the newsletter into the day-to-day of the newsroom, including how to create a continued flow of original content for it.

They also aim to continue gathering audience feedback and survey results to better inform their decisions on what types of stories to highlight in the newsletter.

## Notes



## Overview

Shaw Media is a newspaper publisher with properties across Northern Illinois and Iowa, serving 14 markets and reaching more than 2.5 million readers and listeners every month. The organization joined the Accelerator hoping to grow its digital subscriptions to 24,000 paid subscribers from an initial 21,941 at the beginning of the program — close to a 10 percent net increase.

Specifically, Shaw focused on building a more sustainable retention model with subscribers who prioritized high school sports coverage and often canceled their subscriptions after a sports season ended. The organization also created clearer directives on its web pages to improve internal web traffic and included some of its print-only content on its websites.

## Wins

By the end of the Accelerator, Shaw Media had reached 95% of its goal of hitting 24,000 net paid digital subscriptions. This translated to a more than 9 percent net increase in its digital-only subscription business.

Some tactical breakthroughs:

- Shaw found improving digital headlines, pushing marketing emails toward high school sports subscribers, adjusting web headers and adding print content to the website all helped achieve this milestone.
- The team added news links to promotional emails, displaying content that would appeal to a targeted audience segment— in this case, families. Promotional emails with these featured stories were sent to spring season high school sports subscribers at the end of the season. The result: retention of 94% of subscribers versus a previous 81% when promotional emails were sent without the linked news content.
- Adjusting web headers led to internal traffic increasing 300% to 400%. They also found that users spent more time on the website.
- And, adding print content to their websites converted almost 25 readers to subscribers without the need to produce any additional content.

### Key takeaways

Taking a comprehensive approach — utilizing Medill-funded research, making adjustments in various areas (marketing, web design, content coverage) and maintaining flexibility and eagerness to improve — all allowed Shaw Media to work toward its goal of 24,000 subscribers.

The team did note, though, that adding subscribers was far easier than maintaining them. This has informed how they continue to approach growing digital subscriptions to sustain the work they've done to grow.



**The tools and resources offered in the Local News Accelerator helped our team to complete tasks we wouldn't have done (or been able to do) on our own. It also provided our team time for focused conversation about our goal, which is so important to continue making progress.**

Rebecca Meyer, Former Shaw Media Consumer Sales and Marketing Director



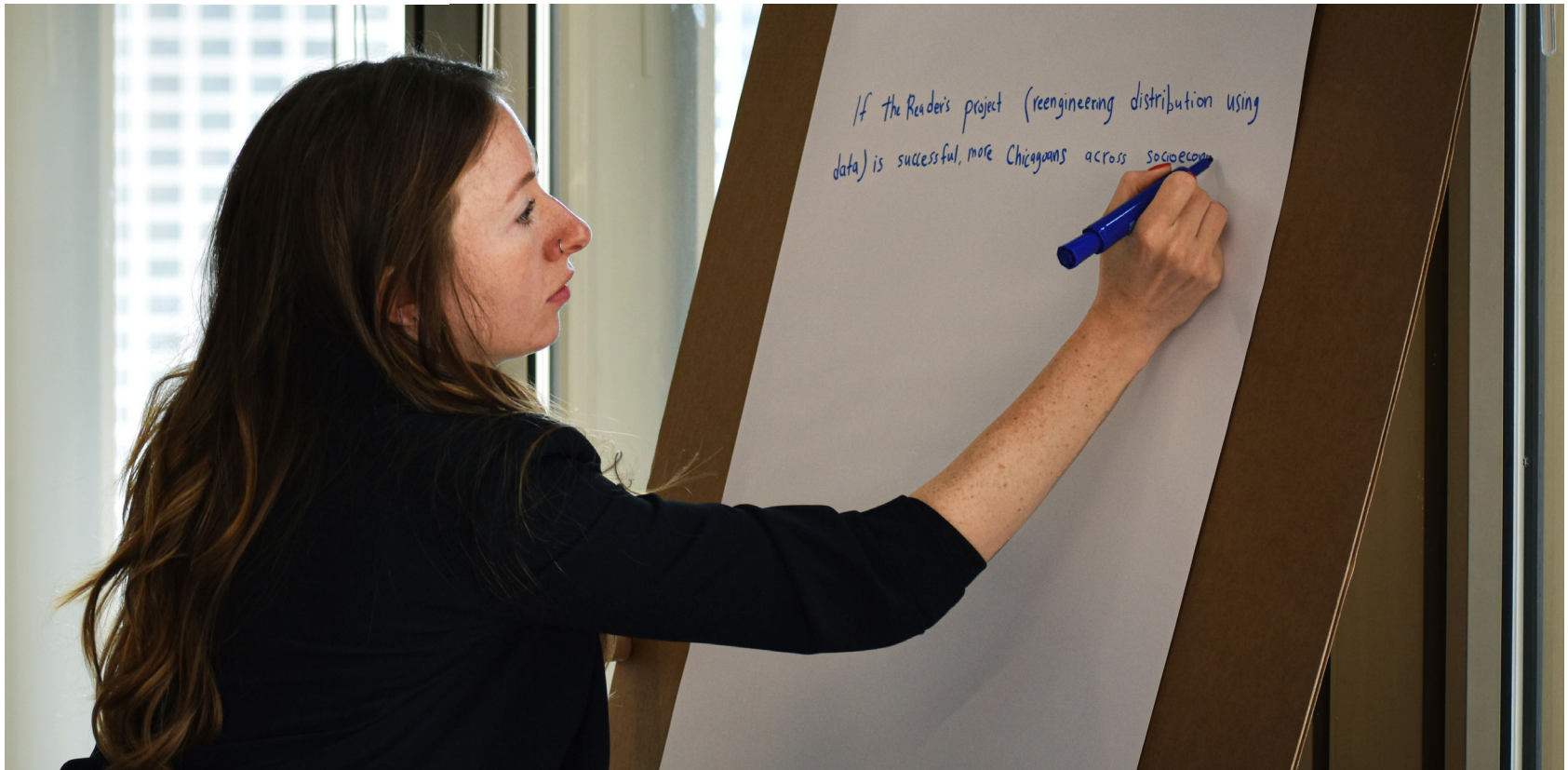
**Shaw Media’s operational improvements during the project included:**

FROM	TO
Writing for sources without an audience in mind.	Writing for a specific audience: young families
An audience that came just for high school sports.	An audience that sees value in other Shaw content, such as education and things to do.
An organization with contracting net subscriber growth	An organization that reduced churn using a combination of tech tools and improved content.
Covering events after the fact	Providing more info beforehand

**How Shaw Media will build on what they learned**

Shaw Media wants to continue working with its reporters to prioritize the reader in how they approach their stories. The team is also aiming to exceed 25,000 subscribers in 2025 (a further 9.6 percent net gain on top of what they achieved in 2024), as they continue to fine-tune the work done over the course of the Accelerator.

## Notes



## Overview

The Chicago Reader, founded in 1971, is an “alternative weekly” newspaper focused on Chicago’s arts and music sphere. Prior to joining the Accelerator, the publication’s distribution was done mostly through targeting young professionals who rode the CTA to work. As of 2024, there are more than 1,100 plastic boxes or newspaper racks that serve as distribution points for the Reader’s print edition.

The Chicago Reader has also expanded its operations over time, building a digital platform and expanding its print distribution into local businesses, museums and art and culture centers.

During its time in the Accelerator, the organization aimed to create a more data-grounded distribution map with a goal of changing 15% of its distribution locations, while not eliminating any locations. The Chicago Reader also increased its distribution from once every two weeks to once per week.

## Wins

By the end of the Accelerator, the Chicago Reader moved from publishing biweekly to weekly, added 45 new distribution points to the South and West Sides of Chicago and grew its circulation from 60,000 papers per week to 63,000 papers per week.

In addition, the Reader's new distribution map has the flexibility to be continuously monitored and adjusted to meet evolving audience data. The organization developed a crowdsourcing page to take suggestions for distribution points and keep that conversation ongoing.

## Key takeaways

Having a research-based approach allowed the Reader to develop a more nuanced and evidence-based outlook in terms of where to relocate its distribution locations. These surveys also armed the Reader with deeper insights into their audience — who they were serving and how they could be better served. Opening up the project to the Reader's audience helped the publication find ideal distribution locations while also including the audience as decision makers through the process.

"I think that was a really big key— having access to the research, having a partner that had the ability to pull some research that we would not have been able to, and [having Medill researchers] really analyze it. That was huge—expanding outside of our own organization." Chastity Cooper, Director of Marketing for Chicago Reader

The Reader also emphasized the value in demonstrating commitment to making continuous improvements in its product. For example, in their time in the Accelerator, the publication both increased its print frequency while also deciding where to optimally place its distribution locations.



**I think that was a really big key— having access to the research, having a partner that had the ability to pull some research that we would not have been able to, and [having Medill researchers] really analyze it. That was huge—expanding outside of our own organization.**

Chastity Cooper, Director of Marketing for Chicago Reader



**The Chicago Reader’s operational improvements during the project included:**

FROM	TO
Bi-weekly publication	Weekly publication
A distribution map based on word-of-mouth, designed using a commuter framework	A distribution map designed using data on current and prospective audiences, created using experience surveys, interviews and census data
Boxes and distribution points disproportionately-concentrated in Chicago’s Loop and Magnificent Mile, as well as North Side	Equitable distribution points and newspapers distributed across Chicago; increased circulation in South and West Sides
A distribution model lacking a mechanism to review and update map locations	An agile distribution plan that enables locations to be evaluated based on data and continuously updated

**How the Chicago Reader will build on what they learned**

The Reader will continue to utilize the agile distribution point assessment tool, developed during the Accelerator, to evaluate its distribution map as it evolves. The tool evaluates the quality of distribution points based on categories that include walkability, engagement with the arts and proximity to other distribution points on the map. During LNA, the Reader’s team used the tool to divert racks and boxes from areas that were oversaturated with distribution points to neighborhoods with lower concentrations of points.

Additionally, with the goal of increasing equitable circulation of the Reader’s print product, the Reader team will shift its focus from distribution points to circulation, expanding efforts toward the number of papers circulated in each area in Chicago.

## Notes



## Overview

Borderless Magazine is a non-profit online magazine focused on journalism for the numerous immigrant communities across Chicago. It launched in October 2019 and aims to provide representative, diverse coverage that centers around the perspective of immigrants. In addition, the publication works to train BIPOC journalists through its "Immigration Reporting Lab," looking to further diversify the media space and empower reporters to tell their stories.

During their time in the Local News Accelerator, Borderless Magazine's main goal was to expand their field canvasser program, creating more in-person contacts with people in the community and growing their subscriber base.

## Wins

Borderless Magazine developed a more robust field canvassing team, expanding their outreach to community members. Over the course of the Accelerator, they distributed 1,482 resource guides and added 468 digital subscribers.

Canvassers attended 45 events across Chicago, such as farmer's markets, public libraries and writing festivals, helping them gather information to expand their audience and learn what types of stories are most valuable to them.

"We were able to formalize the program and create a sustainable structure, and we've gained actionable strategies to help us keep track of data and progress," marketing and engagement manager Diane Bou Khalil said. "The program also connected us with like-minded organizations and journalism experts who understand the unique challenges of nonprofit news."

**Key takeaways**

The organization learned more about what types of events they should send canvassers to and how to create a more robust system for keeping track of and following up with the people they come into contact with at these events.

Borderless Magazine also gained insight into newsletter advertising strategy and aims to further invest in them as a complement to their canvassing work.



**We were able to formalize the program and create a sustainable structure, and we've gained actionable strategies to help us keep track of data and progress. The program also connected us with like-minded organizations and journalism experts who understand the unique challenges of nonprofit news.**

Diane Bou Khalil, Marketing and engagement manager



**Borderless' operational improvements during the project included:**

<b>FROM</b>	<b>TO</b>
A small field canvassing team	A more robust field canvassing team that expanded outreach to community members
Gaining 60 subscribers a month	Ended the program with gains of 144 newsletter subscribers a month and 460 subscribers overall
Minimal information on how to best serve various communities	Gathering detailed responses on what people want to learn about from the publication

**How Borderless will build on what they learned**

Borderless Magazine hopes to launch a year-long canvassing program and invest in newsletter ads to continue to grow their audience.

## Notes



## Overview

Cicero Independiente is a community-driven newsroom dedicated to serving Cicero and Berwyn's diverse and vibrant Latinx community. The organization was founded in 2019 as a volunteer-run organization. Their goal is to create an accessible bilingual news outlet that serves communities of color in the southwest suburbs of Chicago.

The team now consists of full-time staff members and a steering committee and focuses on highlighting voices of those in the community through narrative storytelling. Cicero Independiente aimed to generate a program to meet the outlet's revenue generation and diversification needs in addition to the community's economic needs, specifically those centered around entrepreneurship, through mutually-beneficial local business-sponsorships.

In doing so, Cicero Independiente took on its first small business client, refining its Madrino/Padrino program by establishing processes and deliverables along the way. The outlet also developed its first media kit to share with future clients and advertisers.

## Wins

Cicero Independiente ended the Local News Accelerator with a media kit that encapsulated Cicero's current coverage, community involvement/partnerships, and more about its audience.

They were able to establish the foundation of what a mentorship program between Cicero and Berwyn's local business owners could be. They went from having a dream of creating a new revenue stream for CI that also bolstered Cicero's local economy to having the blueprint of what a pilot mentorship program could look like, operate, and cost.

In addition, CI determined the cost of their mentorship services. In total, a business and social media consulting package from CI to a local business owner had a price tag of \$3000 that would be free to community members.

They ended the experience with two established partnerships with local businesses in Cicero that agreed to partner with them further.

“

**This is the first time CI is focusing on its internal operations within its five years, and I think this program is setting up the framework of how CI will further operate in the future. So it's not an understatement saying this is definitely going to help greatly because this is the first round of training that we've had as a staff regarding operations. So it's definitely needed and will be used in the future in great ways.**

Jesus J. Montero, Community Reporter

”

## **Key takeaways**

Cicero Independiente was able to learn more about its target audience. Under the scope of Cicero Independiente's LNA project, the publication's target audience was not traditional in that the news organization targeted small business owners, rather than readers. CI was able to identify gaps in community resources for this target audience and ways in which CI could provide support to fill these gaps. Interviews with small businesses revealed emphasis on social media as a necessary tool for a majority of community outreach. This informed CI's project, as they knew their social media presence and readership within the Cicero and Berwyn communities could be leveraged to support these businesses in connecting with new customers.

## **How Cicero Independiente will build on what they learned**

Cicero Independiente ended the experience knowing their next steps: building a list of corporate businesses that would want to sponsor their business mentorship program. Now, they had more defined pricing for services that they could share with sponsors, as well as a beautifully designed media kit to use as a selling tool.

"This is the first time CI is focusing on its internal operations within its five years, and I think this program is setting up the framework of how CI will further operate in the future. So it's not an understatement saying this is definitely going to help greatly because this is the first round of training that we've had as a staff regarding operations. So it's definitely needed and will be used in the future in great ways." - Jesus J. Montero, Community Reporter

## Notes

