

Chicago News Weekly

CASE STUDY | JANUARY TO MAY 2025



Background

Chicago News Weekly (CNW) is a print and digital media company covering news, events and conversations relevant to Chicago's community of Black professionals. The publication produces original journalism and commentary across multiple platforms, including print, digital, audio, social media and live events, with coverage focused on entertainment, politics, health, culture and local affairs.

CNW's flagship product is its free, citywide print edition. The organization also operates a rentable podcast studio and a multifunctional office space that doubles as an event venue, creating additional revenue streams and positioning CNW as a hub for local media producers, creatives and organizations.

The organization's core goal during the Medill School of Journalism's Local News Accelerator (LNA) was to develop and test a newsletter product that could deepen engagement with Black professionals in Chicago aged 35-55 earning \$75K or more (and a secondary audience target of younger, aspiring Black professionals earning \$50k+), which the team considers its core audience today and a high-potential audience for future growth. The team wanted to:

- Assess whether there was enough audience interest to justify further investment
- Build internal workflows needed for consistent newsletter production and promotion
- Explore the newsletter's potential as a long-term revenue channel through sponsorships



The “From/To/To” statement guiding the team’s work was:

From	To	To (future)
A primarily print operation with an emerging digital footprint but no dedicated newsletter product.	Launched a weekly newsletter product with a 60% open rate, featured as a high-value on-the-go source for busy Black professionals, intended to reflect and serve Chicago’s upwardly Black community.	A multi-platform media company that produces original journalism and serves as a production, publishing and event platform for other Black media creators, subject-matter experts and community-serving organizations in Chicago. The newsletter gives CNW a replicable format for spotlighting expert voices, testing content themes and deepening connections with partners who may later collaborate across platforms.

Highlights

Based on early performance and insights (particularly the realization that the contacts that seeded their email outreach skewed toward professional and institutional contacts rather than general-interest readers), they shifted this subscriber growth target to year-end, allowing time to focus on broader outreach and audience acquisition.

Through the LNA, CNW:

- Launched **six editions** of the Stay Ready newsletter, building internal workflows for serialized content delivery
- Reached **60%+ open rates** on initial sends — an early benchmark that will inform engagement targets as the team continues building their outreach and audience acquisition approach
- Landed a **pre-launch email sponsorship** (with Chicago-based Ford Desired Real Estate) based on the concept and audience fit

The LNA gave CNW the structure and support to stay focused on testing the newsletter while managing the demands of their ongoing publishing and events operation. The program also helped the team:

- Clarify how the newsletter fit into CNW's broader publishing and sponsorship strategy
- Define performance benchmarks that aligned with the broader goals the newsletter was intended to advance across the organization
- Maintain clear, focused priorities to drive weekly progress

Their coach provided both strategic guidance and implementation support, including helping refine conceptual and design choices, build Mailchimp automations and establish a sustainable production workflow.

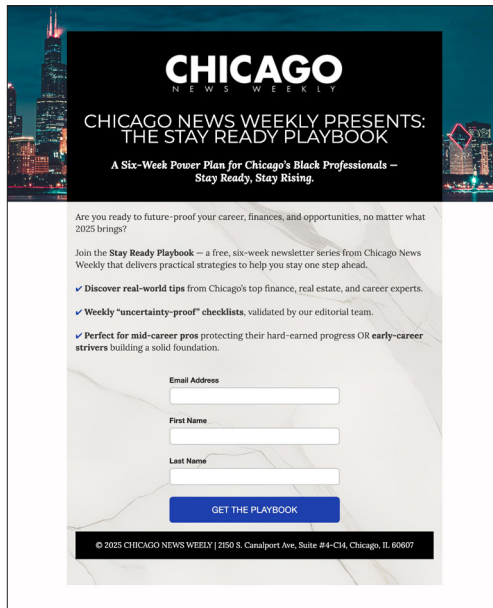
Crucially, the LNA's research gave CNW actionable insight into what their target audience values and how they consume news. It confirmed strong interest in topics like health, local events and Black-owned businesses and highlighted social media and YouTube as key platforms for local news discovery. These findings are helping CNW chart its path both as a publisher in its own right and as a facilitator of a broader ecosystem of Black media and community organizations in the city. The newsletter has become a testing ground for identifying subject matter that resonates, and the research continues to shape CNW's editorial priorities and channel strategy.

“Ongoing education about changes in the media landscape is vital for every newsroom. This program helps newsrooms clearly understand where the industry is headed and offers tools that are actually useful.”

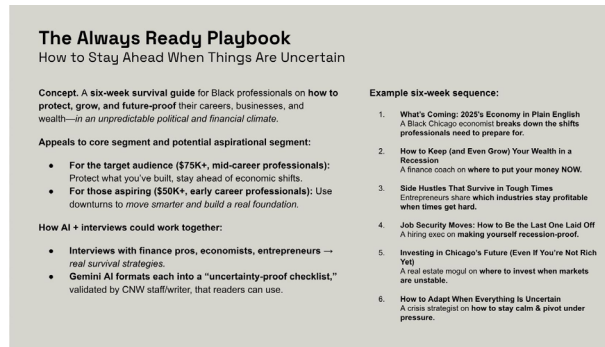


Laura Miller
Managing editor

Added CNW's coach, Andaiye Taylor: "The CNW team used the LNA to pressure-test a new editorial product and publishing model with real audience data, a working content strategy and a clear path to monetization. It was a smart and focused use of the LNA's support that gave them the clarity and momentum to keep growing."



The Stay Ready Playbook sign-up page



CNW's initial concept of the Stay Ready Playbook



An example of CNW's Stay Ready Playbook newsletter

The process

At the start, CNW wanted to explore whether an email newsletter could become a sustainable audience product and revenue line. The team aimed to test product/market fit, define the newsletter's voice, document and hone their production process (and specifically test the Google Gemini newsletter builder they got early access to through another fellowship), build newsletter automation and subscription workflows in Mailchimp and generate early audience engagement.

CNW ultimately launched the email as a six-part popup series, *The Stay Ready Playbook*, as a way to test into newsletter production, audience and sponsor interest while giving themselves the ability to stop, assess and retool the content strategy and production process at the end of the newsletter's run.

The team realized, due to lower-than-expected signups for the email, that the initial contact list they promoted the newsletter to skewed toward professional contacts, media peers and community leaders. This prompted the CNW team to broaden their promotion to reach subscribers who are better aligned with the newsletter's general-interest focus.

CNW also explored how the newsletter could integrate into its broader content and audience engagement strategy, especially by supporting live events and setting the stage for subscriber-exclusive perks.

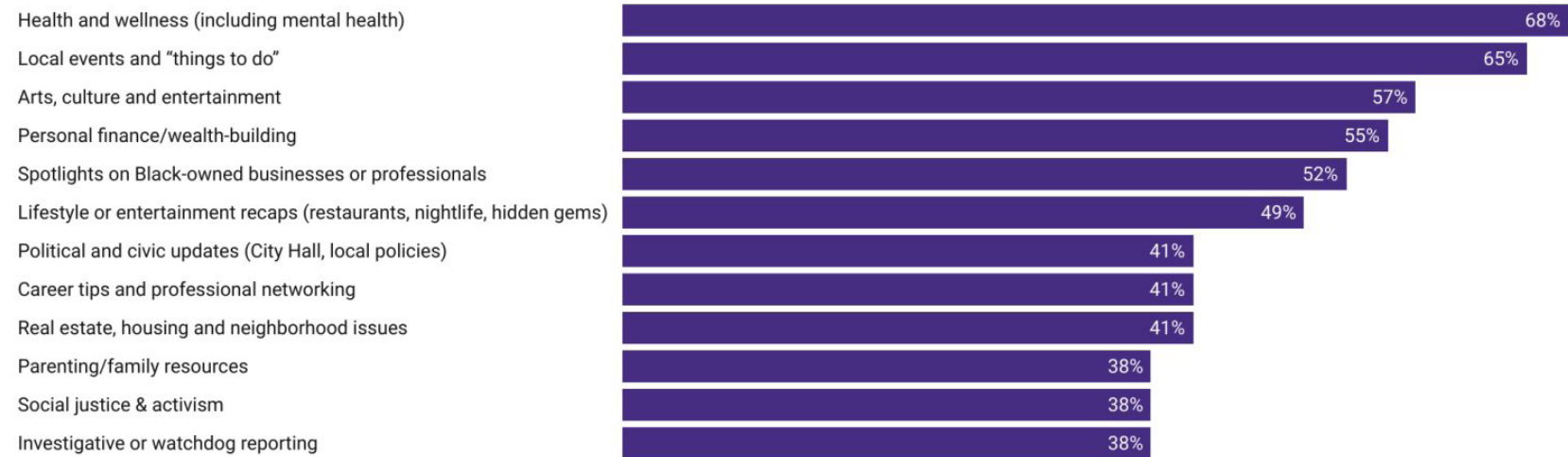
Research insights

The survey conducted through the LNA confirmed strong alignment between CNW's concept and its target audience:

- 87% wanted weekly or more frequent newsletters
- Most-valued content areas: health and wellness (68%), local events (65%), arts and entertainment (57%) and Black-owned business spotlights (52%). The newsletter launched before survey data was ready, but with a frame ("Stay Ready") that was flexible enough to incorporate survey data in topic selection for the latter editions.
- 75% had heard of CNW; 56% read it occasionally or often
- 90% showed interest in exclusive content or member perks

Respondents identify topics of interest

What issues are most important to you?

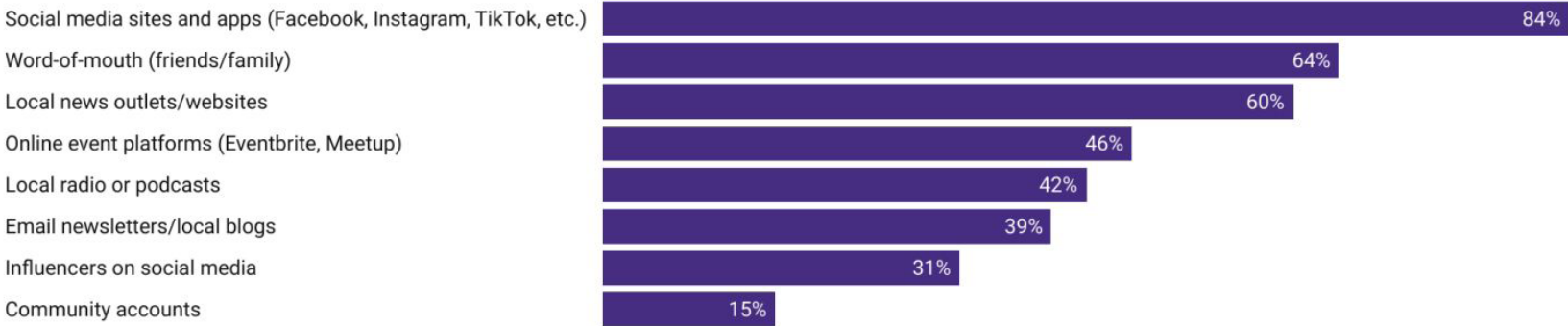


Created with Datawrapper

A snapshot of CNW's research findings in the LNA.

Respondents turn to a variety of sources, including local news, to learn about local events

Where do you typically learn about local events, activities or leisure options in Chicago?



Created with Datawrapper

A snapshot of CNW’s research findings in the LNA.

Informed by the research, CNW took the following approach:

1. Opted to launch the newsletter as a six-edition “pop-up” to reduce operational complexity, manage internal capacity and allow for a focused test of format, workflow and engagement
2. Selected “Stay Ready” as a flexible editorial concept (a nod to “staying ready” in the wake of political and economic uncertainty) that allowed the team to get moving before survey results were available. Adapted the latter installments of the six-part calendar to reflect the audience insights surfaced in the research.
3. Mapped and implemented a Mailchimp workflow to invite contacts from their internal list to opt into the newsletter. Created branching follow-up email invites based on recipient behavior (e.g., didn’t open, opened but didn’t click, clicked but didn’t subscribe)
4. Documented a repeatable content creation process (each issue was built around an expert interview, followed by AI-assisted tip generation tailored to Chicago, with human validation to ensure accuracy and relevance)
5. Developed social media kits for featured experts to enable easy sharing—a way to leverage subject matter experts as both content sources and distribution partners

6. Implemented email capture tools including a persistent site menu link, homepage banner and targeted social media promotion to grow the list beyond internal contacts
7. Explored converting the six-part sequence into an on-demand series (using Mailchimp's automated drip campaign features)

Business strategies and tools

CNW came into the LNA with a clear mission and strong instincts about their audience and editorial direction. The **strategies and tactics framework** helped them channel that clarity into focused, measurable action, especially when it came to planning how the foundational work completed during the LNA would carry forward to support their year-end goals for newsletter growth and engagement. For example:

- For subscriber growth efforts, the team mapped specific audience acquisition pathways, including invite emails, QR codes in print, social media kits for featured experts and signage to capture contacts from event attendees in their space.
- CNW planned to systematically increase newsletter engagement by testing subject lines and headlines, segmenting audiences and experimenting with whether initial emails should preview the full newsletter or focus on describing its value. During the LNA, the team tested all three approaches and generated early performance insights to build on.
- Tested feedback loops to help shape the product, including polls in each newsletter to rate content and gather input. These didn't yield much during the LNA, but CNW can build on the setup to start collecting useful feedback as their subscriber base grows.
- Planned a survey for non-subscribers on their contact list to understand where interest dropped off (for example, if the email invitation didn't resonate or the landing page didn't persuade). The results will help inform future series and outreach design, including whether an insider-focused newsletter might better suit their original contacts.

Because of their work in the LNA, the CNW team now has:

- A documented workflow for producing and publishing newsletters
- Reusable infrastructure for pop-up campaigns, including Mailchimp templates and automations
- A clear framework for ongoing testing and data-informed decision-making
- Deeper insight into what their target audience wants and how they consume content

The results

By the end of the LNA, the CNW team accomplished several milestones:

- Six-issue Stay Ready newsletter series launched
- Social media kit framework developed and deployed to featured experts
- Active email capture efforts designed for future subscriber acquisition via print, web and events
- Achieved 60%+ open rate on initial sends
- First newsletter sponsorship secured

The Stay Ready Playbook became a live prototype for what CNW's digital expansion can look like editorially, operationally and financially. The team created a strong proof of concept for audiences, funders, sponsors and internal stakeholders. Thanks to high initial engagement (among subscribers) with the content themes and a documented plan to build on what they launched during the LNA, CNW now has an asset it can replicate and/or expand.

While the team was hoping for higher subscriber numbers, the program gave them the space and resources to build the operational framework for this new channel. In addition to the newsletter itself, they have automations, promotional assets, test plans and creative directions that help their team take this work forward at will.

A snapshot of Chicago News Weekly's wins

Process	Insight	Capability	Outcome
<p>Created and used a documented workflow for producing the newsletter, including a weekly topic selection process, an interview guide, and standard prompts and guidelines for expanding interview insights using Google Gemini's news AI tool (which team CNW was granted early access to).</p>	<p>Uncovered the need to broaden promotion beyond their initial list of insider contacts to attract a more general-interest audience to their newsletter.</p>	<p>Built newsletter publishing and marketing infrastructure, including automation workflows that could support an on-demand version of the newsletter if they choose to pursue it.</p>	<p>Secured a newsletter sponsorship before the first issue in the series was published.</p>

A Q&A



Andaiye Taylor, coach:
What was most helpful in achieving your original goals?



Laura Miller, managing editor:
The research and coaching aspects of the program were the most helpful. Knowing what our chosen demographic wanted to read in relation to the newsletter definitely helped us create content with them in mind. Furthermore, your knowledge made it easy for us to integrate this new channel into our newsroom without the usual growing pains of implementing a new capability.



Taylor:
Did you pivot during the project, and why?



Miller:
During the LNA, we stayed on track with our initial project throughout its tenure. However, we experienced a slowdown after the accelerator due to delays with the experts we used for the Stay Ready Playbook. But we still continued to publish a weekly newsletter.



Taylor:
What surprised or challenged you most?



Miller:
The most surprising thing about the process was the time allocation. We expected an increase in workload, and with a small newsroom like ours, that kind of change could have strained our capacity. But it didn't because we had help from our coach.



Taylor:
How might other news organizations benefit from the LNA?



Miller:
Ongoing education about changes in the media landscape is vital for every newsroom. Sales training and insights into market innovations aren't always accessible, and most teams don't have the time to make major changes day to day. This program helps newsrooms clearly understand where the industry is headed and offers tools that are actually useful.



Taylor:
Where is CNW headed next, and what key lessons will you carry forward?



Miller:
The biggest thing we learned was how to rely on research and see how this newsletter concept can apply across different channels. How one product can extend into many. For example, the Stay Ready Playbook works as a limited series, an extended newsletter and a live event series. We're excited to explore all of those. We realized that a newsroom's brand doesn't have to live in just one format. It can take many forms.