

Chicago Southsider

CASE STUDY | JANUARY TO MAY 2025



Background

Chicago Southsider, founded and solely operated by Charlene Rhinehart, began as a Facebook Live bulletin, quickly building a dedicated community. Since its inception in 2021, it has evolved into a robust local news startup focused on Chicago’s South Side. The publication aims to amplify South Side community stories, perspectives and experiences through solutions journalism and community-driven storytelling. Chicago Southsider strives to challenge the narrow stereotypes about the community by offering deeper, authentic narratives about Chicago’s South Side.

Through weekly newsletters, which reach over 30,000 subscribers, the publication shares news about local events, highlights businesses and tells stories about the South Side’s history.

The Southsider’s primary goal is to tell the rich and diverse story of Chicago’s South Side and to attract steady and sustainable revenue for the business.

Highlights

The outlet’s project with the Medill School of Journalism’s Local News Accelerator (LNA) started with the idea for an AI podcast to generate a new revenue stream and let AI do a lot of the work. But an analysis using a tool called the Business Model Canvas showed that approach to revenue generation wasn’t going to work. Once Chicago Southsider landed on using an existing product to create a revenue model, the following “From/To/To” statement guided the outlet’s work:



From	To	To (future)
A newsletter that told the rich stories of Chicago’s South Side but without revenue.	Set a revenue goal and making its first \$7,500 in May.	Newsletter now is a revenue-driver, powered by its first \$7,500 sponsorship sale.

“The Local News Accelerator came at the perfect time for the Chicago Southsider,” said coach Jean Hodges. “Using the tools in the program, solopreneur Charlene Rhinehart made remarkable progress toward her goal of turning a vibrant newsletter into a money-maker. Plus, she knows how to grow her business and serve the South Side with an engaging and authentic product that showcases the very best of an often overlooked part of Chicago.”

The process

At the beginning of the Local News Accelerator, Chicago Southsider was interested in creating an AI podcast. The thought was that AI would be a timesaver, and the podcast would reach a new audience and become a new revenue source. The podcast used two AI voices that discussed a story about an event in the history of the South Side.

The Southsider hired a contractor who helped to produce the podcast, but the process was a much heavier lift than originally anticipated, requiring quite a bit of human interaction.

Business strategies and tools

Fortunately, one of the first tools introduced to the newsrooms during the LNA was the Business Model Canvas, which helps to organize the value proposition, key partnerships, activities and resources, customer relationships, segments and channels, as well as the cost structure and revenue streams.










The Business Model Canvas

Designed for:
Chicago Southsider

Designed by:
Charlene Rhinehart, Hopes Moses, and Jean Hodges

Date:
Updated 2/2/25

Version:
2

<p>Key Partnerships </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> AI technology providers and software vendors Major podcast platforms (Spotify, Apple podcasts) Local sponsors Community organizations Arts groups Chicago Artists Coalition Media partners Academic institutions (Northwestern, University of Chicago, Chicago State University, Illinois Institute of Technology, Olive-Harvey College) LION Publishers Real Estate organizations (NAREB, Dearborn Realist, CAR) 	<p>Key Activities </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing and refining AI algorithms for high-quality podcast production Producing, curating, and editing engaging episodes Marketing and distributing the podcast across multiple channels Conducting A/B tests to compare AI versus human-generated content Organizing and managing community contests to drive engagement and additional revenue 	<p>Value Propositions </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unique content: AI-generated podcasts that blend advanced technology with authentic Chicago storytelling Hyperlocal focus: Untold narratives and history of the South Side Engagement: Community-driven contests to spotlight local talent and make the project collaborative, community-focused initiative 	<p>Customer Relationships </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tailored content recommendations via newsletter Feedback via Surveys, reviews, and A/B testing to refine content Contest participation opportunities 	<p>Customer Segments </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people aged 18–25 South Siders 25-35 years old Local Chicago residents interested in community stories Tech savvy podcast listeners and AI enthusiasts Advertisers and sponsors targeting engaged local audiences Media researchers and academics Community art and culture enthusiasts College students High School Students Teachers Real estate professionals
<p>Cost Structure </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fees for AI Technology and software subscriptions Production, hosting, and distribution expenses Quality assurance costs (fact-checking, research, and editing) Marketing and promotional costs Compensation for creative, technical, and marketing contractors Overhead costs (infrastructure, administration costs such as payroll system, and research) Contest management expenses (prizes, platform fees, event organization). 		<p>Revenue Streams </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sponsorships and advertising Community support via platforms like Patreon Donations from individuals and institutions Revenue from contests (e.g., Chicago's Favorite Artist Competition) through paid votes Licensing & syndication: Licensing content to Universities; Allow institutions to license specific series or projects as standalone educational resources 		



Within the first month of the Local News Accelerator, and after the analysis of the Business Model Canvas, the viability of the podcast came into question. AI-generated voices turned out to be time-intensive to edit and expensive to create because of the need to hire someone with expertise to guide the process.

The Southsider decided to pivot to turn an existing asset, the Chicago Southsider newsletter, with over 30,000 subscribers, into a revenue generator. With that built-in audience, the Southsider shifted its goal from an AI podcast to creating a revenue stream on its existing newsletter.

THE QUICK PIVOT

The Business Model Canvas helped us see immediately that the AI-generated podcast was not feasible.

~~AI PODCAST~~

- EXPENSIVE
- TIME-CONSUMING

SOLUTION

NEWSLETTER

- ALREADY GOING
- LET'S MAKE \$\$

Here are a few of the tools that were most helpful during the process:

- **The Business Model Canvas:** The visualization showed clearly the lack of viability of the original idea for a project: the AI-generated podcast. The podcast was high-effort and low impact. Rhinehart was open to pivoting early in the program, and she never looked back.

Business Model Canvas

<p>Customer segments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary Audience: South Side Chicago residents, particularly Black communities, seniors, and marginalized groups • Secondary Audience: Advertisers targeting South Side residents (e.g., local businesses, healthcare providers, schools) • Tourists & Visitors looking for authentic, cultural experiences on the South Side (e.g., events, food, history, and art) • Supporters: Mission-aligned readers willing to pay for premium content
<p>Value propositions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hyperlocal, community-focused news not found in mainstream outlets • Platform that amplifies underrepresented voices • Cultural and community event coverage with storytelling that connects people • Targeted and affordable ad space for local businesses • Guides and recommendations tailored to residents and visitors
<p>Channels</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substack newsletter • Website (ChicagoSouthsider.com) • Facebook Live and social media • Local events and community forums
<p>Customer Relationships</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community trust and transparency • Interactive engagement via surveys, social media and events • Premium subscriber perks • Relationships with sponsors and advertisers through measurable ROI
<p>Revenue streams</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletter Sponsorships (\$500/issue) • Ad Placements (\$250/slot) • Subscriptions (\$5/month or \$50/year) • Press Release Packages (\$150-\$300) • Grants and journalism support funds



<p>Key resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Editorial and writing team • Substack platform & analytics or other newsletter platform • 30,000+ newsletter subscribers • Community credibility and access • Photography/video contributors for events • CRM and content management tools
<p>Key activities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating and publishing newsletter content • Outreach to advertisers and sponsors • Community engagement and listening • Event and campaign coverage
<p>Key partners</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local businesses and advertisers • Community organizations and nonprofits • Tourism boards, Airbnb hosts, local hosts • Foundations and grant makers • Cultural institutions and event organizers • Associations and affiliations (Northwestern, Lion Publishing, Dearborn Realtor Board, NAREB, Miss Chicago Org)
<p>Cost structure</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content creation (writers, editors, photographers) • Substack and web hosting fees • Paid ad spend for growth • Admin, legal and compliance costs • Event and partnership activations • Freelancer and operational costs

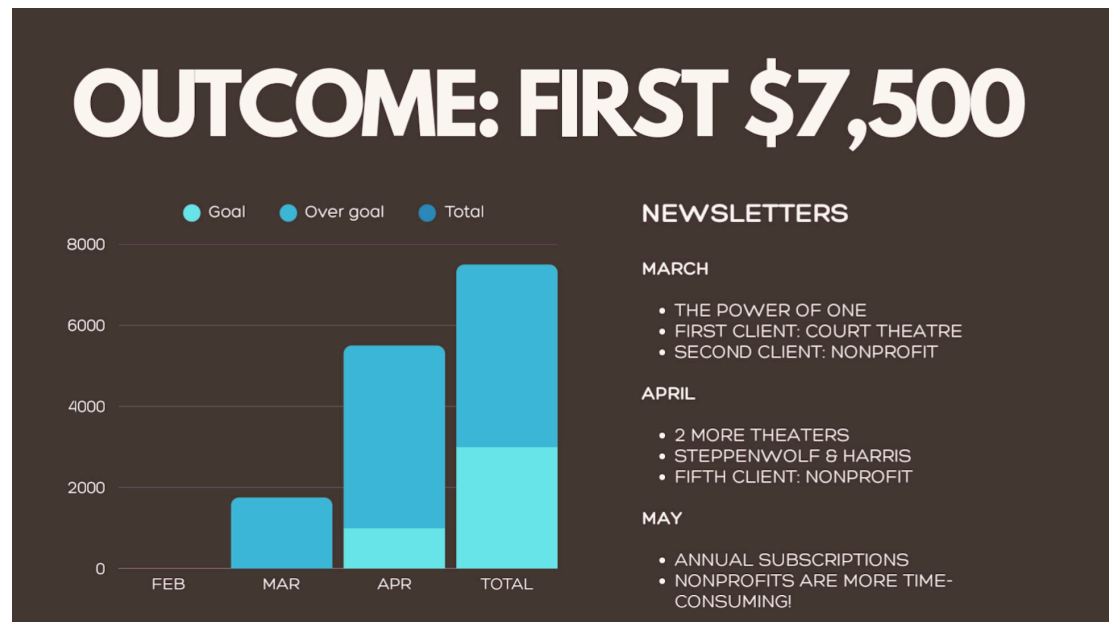


- **Activities vs. Outcomes:** If the first month of the program was a reckoning with the initial AI podcast idea, the second month was a flurry of activities, and at the end, there was great content, but no revenue to show for it. The Southsider decided to focus going forward on how to achieve the outcomes.
- **Design/Do loop:** The Chicago Southsider would design a process for revenue generation, try it, evaluate at, adjust it and try it again. The first process was running information in the newsletter for ads or sponsorships and responding to interest with an email and rate card. Most time was spent on content generation. The next iteration was to follow up by phone to learn what the potential advertiser/sponsor needed and tailor responses to their needs.

The framework of storytelling works well for Rhinehart because she’s such a dynamic speaker. In fact, Rhinehart began to do video event coverage via Facebook Live, and she generated some newsletter subscribers.

The results

The strongest results from the program have been the ultimate goal for the Southsider: They created a plan for revenue generation using their email newsletter to attract sponsors and advertisers, and they exceeded their goals during the program.



The Chicago Southsider went from not making any money in February from their newsletter to making money in March. The very first paying client was proof of the “Power of One” concept. The hardest part was the journey from zero clients to a single client. The first one was the Court Theatre for “A Raisin in the Sun.” The theater wanted to sell tickets, and Rhinehart was able to leverage her knowledge of the South Side to provide additional context and storytelling for her newsletter subscribers.

During the Local News Accelerator’s March meeting, the challenge was to set a revenue goal for April. The goal needed to be achievable, but also ambitious. The revenue goal for May 30, the end of the program, was **\$3,000**.

“Our newsletter sponsorship and advertising goal is now \$3,000, which is more than we’ve ever made from these revenue streams. It’s a great milestone to work toward!”



Charlene Rhinehart,
Chicago Southsider owner

Ultimately, the Southsider more than doubled the goal by the end of the program, reaching a total of \$7,500.

The Chicago Southsider was thrilled with the results, moving from making no money from the newsletter to making money each month. At the end of the program, Rhinehart was shooting for a goal of \$25,000 by the end of the year. Ultimately, she

South Side Native Takes the Stage in Court Theatre's 'A Raisin in the Sun'

Charles Andrew Gardner takes on the role of George Murchison in Court Theatre's extended production of 'A Raisin in the Sun' running through March 23rd.

MAR 12



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envisions making enough money to begin adding staff. As part of her growth plan, she first wants to hire a commission-only salesperson. In the meantime, she will continue to leverage her passion for Chicago's South Side to create the content and the revenue to fill a news gap for people living there.

A snapshot of Chicago Southsider's wins:

Process	Insight	Capability	Outcome
Completing the Business Model Canvas was the earliest significant win.	The AI podcast idea would not be feasible; need to pivot!	Shifted from email transactions to phone calls to win business.	Started making money in March, and continued to add, ending the program with \$7,500.



A Q&A



Jean Hodges, coach:

What was most helpful for you in helping you achieve the goals you set at the start of the program?



Charlene Rhinehart:

One of the most helpful aspects of the program was the coaching support, which pushed me to aim higher, set bite-sized goals and uncover blind spots in my revenue strategy. With your guidance, I refined how I showcased advertising opportunities and learned that using the phone instead of email is often more effective when discussing pricing tailored to a client’s needs.

I also conducted customer discovery interviews and had the opportunity to connect with people like Amber Nettles from the Chicago Reader, who had already done what I aspired to do. Going public with my April revenue goal during the midpoint gathering added another layer of accountability. It turned out to be my most successful revenue month so far this year. None of this would have been possible without the accountability structure and strategic insight provided by the accelerator. I also had the support of an intern who helped with research and testing alternative approaches, which made it easier to take action on the ideas we developed during the program.



Hodges:

Did your organization have to pivot? If so, what led to the change?



Rhinehart:

Yes, we pivoted from developing a high-cost AI-generated podcast idea to focusing on newsletter monetization through strategic advertisements. The Business Model Canvas played a key role in helping us evaluate the viability, desirability and feasibility of the podcast initiative. Once we mapped out the costs, resources and potential revenue streams, it became clear that the podcast was a high-effort, low-impact initiative (at least in the short term). This clarity allowed us to shift our focus to revenue-generating efforts that were more aligned with our capabilities and immediate goals.





Hodges:

What did you find the most surprising and/or challenging throughout the process?



Rhinehart:

The most surprising challenge was realizing how easy it is to stay busy without focusing on what actually drives revenue (output vs. outcomes). When you shift your focus, your revenue potential — and ultimately your sustainability — can shift, too. In February, I poured my energy into improving the editorial product by sending multiple newsletters per week, publishing on ChicagoSouthsider.com and running Substack surveys. But after analyzing my time, I noticed I was investing the bulk of my time into non-revenue-generating activities, and it wasn't moving the needle towards sustainability. I realized that even though I'm in the news business, I need to spend the lion's share of my time on marketing and sales-related activities in order to build a sustainable venture. Generating consistent revenue gives me the ability to hire support and improve the editorial product based on audience feedback instead of relying solely on my own time and capacity.



Hodges:

How would other news organizations like yours benefit from participating in the LNA?



Rhinehart:

There's something powerful about having multiple brains in the room. The LNA gave us the space to learn together, experiment and share ideas in real time. Participating in the LNA gives you access to a supportive network that can save you both time and money. Seeing what other news organizations in the cohort were doing and hearing their lessons learned helped me avoid costly missteps.

For example, I was considering launching a podcast, but insights from others helped me weigh the effort vs. impact more clearly and accelerate my decision-making. I also received valuable feedback from peers who listened to my ideas and offered recommendations that helped me refine my approach and stay focused. We often operate in silos, but the collaboration, accountability and knowledge-sharing in the LNA community are some of its greatest strengths.





Hodges:

Where is your organization headed from here? What are the biggest lessons you learned through the LNA that you will apply to future projects?



Rhinehart:

In the short term, we will stay focused on newsletter monetization as we work toward our next milestone: generating \$25K in newsletter revenue by the end of 2025. I'm currently seeking a commission-only salesperson to help accelerate sales, while also recognizing that I need to lead this effort in the meantime with a consistent and intentional strategy.

Long term, we're building toward building sustainable annual revenue and expanding our team to include a newsletter strategy manager, freelancers, salespeople, tech support and social media specialists.