

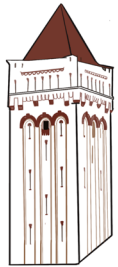
Cicero Independiente

CASE STUDY | FEBRUARY 2025



CICERO INDEPENDIENTE

Northwestern | **MEDILL**
Local News Accelerator



CICERO INDEPENDIENTE

How Cicero Independiente developed a revenue generating partnership program on its mission to increase community engagement and trust.

The Cicero Independiente team deepened its understanding of small businesses in its community and the resources the media outlet could potentially provide these businesses, fine tuned the program's deliverables, and established a media kit to present to partners.

As a result, Cicero Independiente:

- Facilitated a mentorship program for local businesses in Cicero and Berwyn, helping with digital marketing, social media and community engagement
- Developed the publication's first-ever media kit

A brief history of Cicero Independiente in relation to the community it serves.

Cicero Independiente is a community-driven newsroom dedicated to serving Cicero and Berwyn's diverse and vibrant Latinx community. The Town of Cicero is a majority Latine community in which over 60% of the population speaks a language other than English at home.

Founded in 2019 as a volunteer-run organization of Cicero residents, Cicero Independiente aims to fill the gap in independent, inclusive and accessible bilingual news for communities of color in Chicago's southwest suburbs. Now equipped with full-time staff and a steering committee, Cicero Independiente remains focused on transparency and community empowerment. The newsroom highlights injustice, fosters civic engagement and amplifies local voices through community narratives.

What problem was Cicero Independiente trying to solve, and why was solving the problem strategically important for the organization?

The Town of Cicero is home to a growing entrepreneur community, of which local businesses rely heavily on social media and word-of-mouth for outreach. Upon entering the Accelerator, Cicero Independiente aimed to strategically align the outlet's efforts in order to simultaneously drive sustainable growth for the outlet and its corresponding community. So, Cicero Independiente generated a program– the Madrino/ Padrino 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.

By establishing this business-focused program, Cicero Independiente hopes to increase community engagement with local commerce and entrepreneurship sectors, with the intention of later establishing an editorial business beat as a testament to the organization's investment in local businesses and community.



Cicero Independiente’s Initial Goals

Cicero Independiente established largely qualitative goals to tackle as it spearheaded this new sponsorship program. Because this undertaking would be the publication’s first sponsorship/ advertising launch, many of these goals revolved around developing processes and procedures for conducting business deals and partnerships with local businesses and potential corporate clients.

By utilizing the MOST (Mission, Objective, Strategy, Tactics) framework, Cicero Independiente was able to establish both a mission statement and tangible indicators of progress.

MOST framework — Cicero Independiente

Mission/objective statement	Supporting strategies	Tactics/measurements that support the each strategy
<p>Cicero Independiente will promote local innovation and showcase the journey of local business owners all while fostering community support with its business partners.</p> <p>By transforming and expanding our revenue portfolio, CI will not only reinforce its stability and presence in the community but also further residents’ informational requirements, elevate their standard of living, and foster a sense of belonging, inclusivity, and unity within the community.</p>	<p>Strategy 1: By October 4, Cicero Independiente (CI) will establish a locally owned business engagement program, named the Madrino & Padrino program, by developing partnerships with three businesses in Cicero or Berwyn to generate a combined revenue of \$5,000. (*RESEARCH IS ONLY ON LOCAL BUSINESSES)</p>	<p>Tactic 1: As a proof of concept, CI will seek to establish 1 partnership with a locally owned business during August - September or generate \$1,000 from a corporate business.</p> <p>Tactic 2: Develop a 1- pager that resembles a media kit but that is specifically and only for locally owned and independently operated businesses located in Cicero and Berwyn.</p>
	<p>Strategy 2: By October 4, CI will develop protocols and procedures to establish itself as a strong brand partner in order to be a strong client for corporate businesses that want to target the Cicero and Berwyn communities.</p>	<p>Tactic 1: CI will create a comprehensive media kit for corporate-owned businesses that includes CI’s brand identity and guidelines in order to maintain CI’s identity and values. Within the next three months, CI will collaborate with the marketing team, social media team, and steering committee to create design standards and guidelines with checkpoints and review to make proper adjustments.</p> <p>Tactic 2: Create intentional product offerings (advertising, sponsorship articles, newsletter features) to partnering businesses to reinforce CI’s stability and community presence. Product offerings are subject to change or be redeveloped based on research insights.</p>
	<p>Strategy 3: CI will develop a business beat by highlighting local business stories through a community engagement strategy by end of August. CI will use the beat as a tool to encourage locally business owners to connect with CI’s highly engaged community audience with the goal of encouraging readers to participate in Cicero’s local economy.</p>	<p>Tactic 1: CI already has business features profiling local business owners. CI will continue this coverage, yet grow it into an overall new editorial coverage area.</p> <p>Tactic 2: CI will aim to find a sponsor for certain business features/profiles. A sponsor like a bank or larger business with DEI funds that will sponsor the content without having any say in the editorial.</p>

How did Cicero Independiente go about solving its project?

In order to kickstart Cicero Independiente's vision for the Madrino/Padrino program, the team outlined a vision for the publication, which they aimed to achieve by the end of LNA programming, by utilizing a From/To Framework:

Cicero Independiente will go:

FROM being a nonprofit media organization solely funded by philanthropy with an audience of 6,000.

TO a nonprofit critical to the wellbeing of Cicero residents whose operations have been strengthened by multiple revenue generating programs that not only bring in significant funding but increase audience engagement and empower Cicero's community members and local business owners.

In its first step toward reaching the above goal, CI began determining which businesses were best to trial the developing Madrino/Padrino program through identifying the area's service gaps.

Initially, CI leaned into partnering with NGOs and nonprofits. But research into the barriers of the local Cicero Chamber of Commerce initiated a pivot toward small businesses and entrepreneurs. Most notably, research revealed that the Chamber of Commerce is not accessible to small businesses, as many of those named as members are large or established businesses. Thus, CI's program could fill this gap by developing services attractive to businesses in the start-up phase. Additionally, CI's status as a trusted community media organization, rather than an exclusive, politically-rooted organization like the Chamber of Commerce, placed the Cicero Independiente in a unique position to focus solely on a businesses' needs, with advertising promotions spanning to all of CI's readership (instead of solely a members-only newsletter).

With these findings in mind, 54 target businesses were identified under the following eligibility criteria: based in Cicero/Berwyn, less than 5k social media followers, early in business, willingness to grow alongside CI and no brick-and-mortar location. The CI team then developed a survey/intake form as a means of outreach to these businesses and a way to hear first-hand how the publication could potentially provide support. In the spirit of meeting small business owners where they are at, the team harnessed CI's existing social media platforms to distribute the survey link and emailed the link to existing business contacts.



Outreach Strategy

Identified candidate ⇒ interviewed ⇒ partnership



CICERO INDEPENDIENTE Northwestern
MEDILL

ARE YOU A SMALL BUSINESS OWNER OR ENTREPRENEUR?

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

REWARD: \$25 GIFT CARD

Cicero Independiente is partnering with Northwestern University to listen to the needs, concerns and hopes of the Cicero & Berwyn business community!



CI Small Business Owner Sign-Up / Registro de propietarios de empresas

B I U ↻ ↺

Cicero Independiente is partnering with Northwestern University to listen to the needs, concerns and hopes of the Cicero business community!

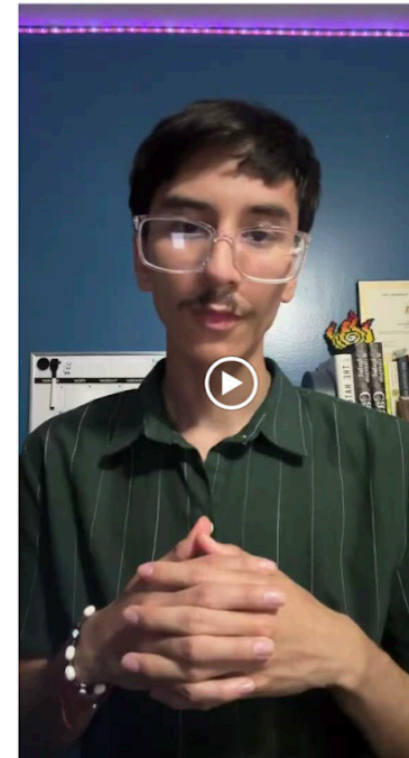
Please fill out this form and a team member will reach out to you to schedule a conversation!

Requirements:
- Must have your business located and/or serving the communities of Cicero and Berwyn

Cicero Independiente se está juntando con Northwestern University para escuchar las necesidades, inquietudes y esperanzas de la comunidad empresarial de Cicero.

(Complete este formulario y un miembro del equipo se comunicará con usted para programar una conversación!)

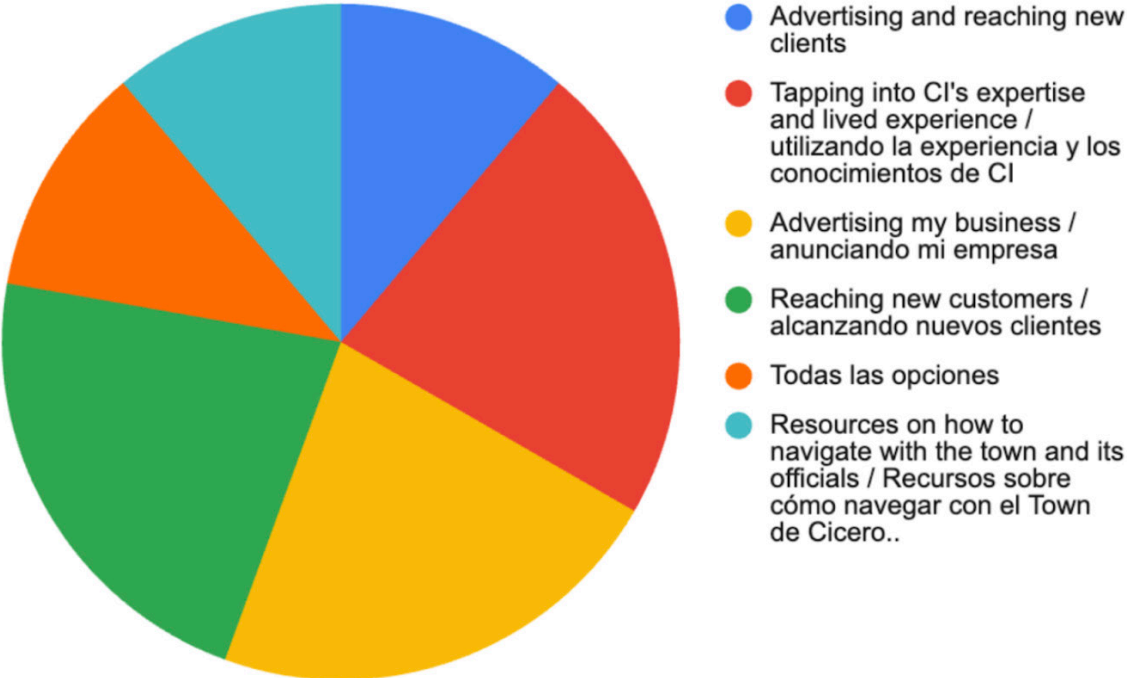
Requisitos:
- Debe tener su negocio ubicado y/o sirviendo a las comunidades de Cicero y Berwyn.



Although the form resulted in only nine responses, it served as an initial assessment of needs and scheduling availability and narrowed down businesses interested in the program versus those that remained uncertain.

Regardless, feedback generated from the survey proved vital as the CI team worked to further narrow the services it intended to provide for these small businesses. Most notably, 88.9% of respondents said they need help getting their message to customers. Additionally, when asked what support from Cicero Independiente looked like, small businesses responded with a variety of needs, as shown in the graph below.

How does support from Cicero Independiente look like?



These early research insights revealed that the target audience of businesses possessed a high interest in advertising, tapping into CI's readership to attract more customers.

Cicero Independiente then conducted interviews with the three most responsive businesses– Cristal's Treats, Magic Photography and Organic Cleaning Gold, INC– to gather more information on each business's background, problems and ways CI could potentially support growth.

These interviews revealed several key findings:

1. Many of these businesses are passion projects, the 9-5 prevents full-time pursuit
 - a. "I definitely, truly wish I had more [followers] since I've been doing it for a while now but work or school gets in the way, and it's been hectic." - Cristal Andrade, Cristal's Treats
2. Businesses want partners that can provide knowledge to assist with growth
 - a. "We are looking for ways to grow... one doesn't always have the information that help is available." - Adriana Gonzalez, Organic Cleaning Gold INC.
3. Small businesses in Cicero primarily utilize social media for engagement and outreach, with platforms like Facebook and Instagram allowing for targeted advertisements and direct communication, fostering customer loyalty and trust. Thus, social media is an essential tool for business growth and success.

The CI team ultimately decided to work with Cristal's Treats as the flagship Madrino/Padrino sponsor, with hopes that this partnership would provide CI with necessary research insights to assist with further development of the sponsorship program.

About Cristal's Treats:

A local entrepreneur and Cicero-native who founded her small business in 2020, Cristal Andrade makes sweets and treats for her clients. Before undergoing the program, Cristal's primary customer outreach was word of mouth. As a one-woman team, she often experienced difficulty connecting with new customers and maintaining consistency with her business's social media presence. Upon entering the Madrino/Padrino program, Cristal emphasized interest in paid advertising and assistance with social media content.



Through internal conversations, as well as discussions with Cristal, Cicero Independiente was able to strategically define and develop a list of services offered as part of the Madrino/Padrino program:

The Madrino/Padrino Program is a unique partnership opportunity where Cicero Independiente acts as a mentor (Madrino/Padrino) to small businesses in the community.

We share our expertise in digital marketing, social media management, and community engagement to help local businesses grow your online presence and reach more customers.

How it works:

1. *Personalized Social Media Consultation*

We work with your business to assess your current social media strategy and identify areas for improvement.

2. *Creative Content Support*

We collaborate with you to create compelling content that reflects your business's personality and values. Whether it's designing eye-catching graphics or crafting impactful posts, our team is here to help.

3. *Ongoing Mentorship*

As a Madrino or Padrino, Cicero Independiente is invested in your success. We'll check in regularly to provide continued guidance, share industry insights, and ensure that your business is maximizing its digital potential.

From here, CI developed and delivered a curated contract based on Cristal's specific business needs, outlining the services provided through the program:

1. One (1) professionally designed advertisement

Your business will reach new heights by advertising with us. Take advantage of CI's networks of over 30,000 engaged audience members to grow your customer base!

2. One (1) professional photo shoot (headshot and products)

a. You haven't posted on social media since November 2023, but with our help, we can take your social media platforms to the next level!

Let us help you build this new momentum and excitement for your business. We have a professional photographer on our staff who is dedicated to helping highlight your business.

3. One (1) social media promotional post designed and uploaded on official social platforms

a. A partnership with CI means tapping into our strong follower base. CI reaches customers of all demographics: immigrant, Latine, young, old, working-class and more. Your business currently remains relatively unknown. With CI's vast network that spans Cicero, Berwyn, Stickney and the surrounding areas, our readers will soon become your customers!

4. One-sheet page on social media best practices AND a one-on-one 30-minute conversation with a social media specialist.

a. Evaluate your social media presence and meet with an expert in social media to establish best practices for leveraging social media to establish your business and expand your customer base.

Given Critsal's Treats served as CI's first Madrino/Padrino Program client, all services were provided at a fee of \$1.



Upon completion of the above deliverables, Cicero Independiente placed a banner advertisement for Cristal's Treats at the top of the publication's website and provided the client with a gallery of images:



Results

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. This media kit will prove essential for CI as it provides a professional, cohesive way to present the organization's mission, values and impact. CI hopes the media kit will help attract potential partners, sponsors and advertisers who align with the publication's mission statement by showcasing CI's audience reach and achievements. The media kit will enable CI to explore alternative sources of funding with intentional partnerships and goals.



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 \$3,000 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.

The publication's initial client, Cristal's Treats, provided a feedback video, shedding light on her experience in the Madrino/Padrino program. This video provided valuable feedback for the team to apply when enduring the program with future clients.

Cristal expressed thanks to the Cicero Independiente team:

"Everything was very smooth... Everything was very well done."

"I have seen my business grow on various platforms, such as views (and) new followers..."

"I would definitely, 100% recommend this program (to other small businesses)."

What did the news organization learn 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. Thus, interviews with small businesses revealed key insights into this target audience. Emphasis on social media as a necessary tool for a majority of community outreach and business development was a commonality found between the three interviewed businesses. 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.



What worked?

From an infrastructure standpoint, Cicero Independiente leaned into the many ideas and strategies provided by LNA, which were largely lacking in the publication's newsroom prior to entering the program. LNA encouraged space for CI to collect data and implicate new ideas to strategically implement the Madrino/Padrino program.

What didn't work? What would the organization do differently now?

The Cicero Independiente team found the fast-paced environment of LNA most challenging. The publication struggled with having to quickly finalize a fully developed plan and test it without allowing enough time to flush out every detail in full.

When asked what Cicero Independiente would do differently upon reflection of the LNA process, Community Reporter Jesus J. Montero said the team would reevaluate its project with the business strategies it learned during the program.

"Knowing their effectiveness and knowing how beneficial they are, it's definitely going to make us think how to better prepare new initiatives at CI with this infrastructure." - Jesus J. Montero, Cicero Independiente Community Reporter

What was surprising or challenging?

Cicero Independiente faced challenges in connecting with small businesses in the community. Many of these businesses do not have formalized organization, including communication methods, instead relying solely on social media with no public-facing emails. Additionally, many of these businesses are run by just one individual, so scheduling conflicts due to work or family obligations made setting up meetings to discuss the details of the Madrino/Padrino program increasingly difficult. Furthermore, the town of Cicero largely lacks data surrounding small businesses, so accessibility to needed data and information proved challenging.



Key takeaways/ advice for other news organizations to learn from and/or apply to their own LNA experience?

“My advice would be, one, definitely participate, take advantage of the resources, take advantage of the infrastructure, the guidance. Try to get as many people from your staff to participate. That way, it'd be easier to share ideas and in the future, implement these ideas in your newsroom.” - Jesus J. Montero

Where is the news organization going from here? How will Cicero Independiente apply what it learned in LNA moving forward?

As Cicero Independiente looks toward the future, the publication aims to generate additional partnerships with local businesses offering further resources and opportunities to the community. CI 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, you know, 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



CI also hopes to eventually build upon its success in the Accelerator by forming community liaisons in other ways, including the following:



Cicero Independiente

Dedicated Newsroom: A central space for journalists, editors, and contributors to collaborate on stories, conduct interviews, and produce content.

Community Workshops/Public Newsrooms: Host workshops on media literacy, journalism, and civic engagement to educate and empower residents.

Public Forums: Provide a venue for town hall meetings, discussions on local issues, and open forums where the community can voice concerns and ideas.

Community Resource Hub: Offer access to important resources such as public computers, Wi-Fi, printing services, and local news archives. Etc. internships, journalism boot camps, or mentorship programs for young people interested in media and storytelling.

Collaborative Partnerships: Build relationships with local organizations, offering them meeting spaces and opportunities to co-host events with Cicero Independiente and the M&P program.

