

# City Bureau

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CASE STUDY | OCTOBER 2023



**City Bureau focuses on research to expand audience, develop strategy**

Audiences across the board want to take action, make changes to improve their communities.

**In one sentence, what was the key insight City Bureau came to through the Accelerator?**

City Bureau learned that their target audiences care most about *taking action* on issues that matter most to them and learning new things to feel more informed on local issues.

**What communities does City Bureau serve?**

City Bureau is a hub for civically engaged Chicagoans, with an emphasis on connecting with people on Chicago's South and West Sides. These portions of the city are areas of historical disinvestment. City Bureau equips people with skills and opportunities to engage in civic life, spurs critical public conversations, and produces information that directly addresses people's needs.

**A brief history of City Bureau in relation to the community it serves:**

City Bureau was founded in 2015 to reimagine and reshape local media. It understands media as a network of engaged civic actors working to fill community information needs. Its founders wanted to address the need for more news coverage on the South and West Sides and the lack of diversity in newsrooms. The unique proposition is that it brings Chicagoans together to learn civic skills, hold local government accountable and create local information that reflects people's priorities. Its Documenters program trains and pays Chicagoans to cover public meetings, contribute to public information archives and expand civic knowledge. Through the national Documenters Network, City Bureau helps grow and sustain participatory local media on a national scale.

While City Bureau believes that its work can benefit anyone who reads its coverage or participates in its programs, its approach to impact is focused on reaching out in sustained and focused ways to those most affected by problems with the status quo. In Chicago, City Bureau concentrates on geographic communities where disinvestment is exceptionally concentrated, prioritizing the 15 ZIP codes on Chicago's South and West Sides that are 90% or more people of color. These ZIP codes comprise areas of the city where poverty and health disparities are most concentrated, and educational attainment and access to jobs are lowest. By working with residents

from these neighborhoods to build capacity and access to information and media skills, City Bureau better serves its mission of creating a more equitable information system.

### **What problem was City Bureau trying to solve through the Local News Accelerator? Why was solving the problem strategically important to the organization?**

People who engage with City Bureau love it. It has strong engagement among those who know it. However, its leaders know they need to broaden awareness in Chicago to reach more people who would benefit from its mission and editorial coverage, as well as grow and sustain their organization. Part of their strategy is to engage with more civically curious people in the city. But they didn't have a clear path to do that. They knew audience research was the starting point for developing communications, marketing and content strategies. Research would allow them to base change not on assumptions but on insights directly from the people they are trying to serve.

The research focused on civically engaged Chicagoans, particularly 15 ZIP codes on the South and West Sides. City Bureau collected data through this research that could inform plans to broaden awareness of the organization.

City Bureau is a small nonprofit, and it's hard to just stumble upon it. The organization's priorities are building brand awareness in Chicago, driving social media followers, web traffic and email newsletter signups.

Driving attendance to its events is another big goal. City Bureau holds a monthly Public Newsroom event series in Bronzeville, a South Side neighborhood where the organization is based, on timely issues, such as immigration or equitable housing. Attendance at the



monthly events is free and allows attendees to meet like-minded people and learn about opportunities to participate in local organizing and decision-making. The events currently draw a regular, consistent cohort.

**Which of the key pillars of the Local News Accelerator did this help City Bureau improve on? (Research and insights, content strategy, business strategy, product development, leadership).**

Research and insights were foundational.

**How did City Bureau frame the project?**

At the beginning of the five-month Local News Accelerator, City Bureau created this vision statement:

To unlock City Bureau’s full potential and relevance, more people from historically underserved communities in Chicago will discover City Bureau as a powerful partner and connective hub for personal and community transformation. City Bureau will enhance the city’s understanding of civically engaged Chicagoans and residents in the 15 ZIP codes that most directly benefit from our mission and apply those insights to more strategic communications and program plans. To achieve this, we will conduct a research study involving at least 300 participants from our target areas. This study will provide detailed insights into our potential audiences in Chicago, empowering our teams to understand their needs better, reach them where they are, deliver more relevant messaging, and attract more followers and attendees. The project lays a reliable foundation for catalyzing our growth through transformational capacity wins, empowering our teams to shape audience strategies, and driving the evolution of the programs, brand, and messaging of City Bureau for generations to come.

**Medill Enterprise Sustainability Assessment (MESA):  
City Bureau’s growth in five pillars of the Accelerator**

RESEARCH & INSIGHTS	+19%
CONTENT STRATEGY	+23%
BUSINESS STRATEGY	+25%
PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT	+30%
LEADERSHIP	+16%

The Accelerator measures its partners’ mastery of these five competencies through a partner self-assessment fielded at the beginning, middle and end of the program.

## How did City Bureau go about solving the problem?

They designed a custom research survey to help them reach those goals. They gained insights from Medill's faculty and staff to help them in the survey design.

Throughout the program, the longer vision statement evolved into something shorter and sharper:

**GOAL:** Conduct robust research to understand better the high-potential audiences in Chicago we are not currently reaching so that City Bureau can establish a marketing communications function and equip its staff to build brand awareness, increase our followers and ultimately increase participation in our programming and journalism.

**Tactic 1: Define specific research goals and methodology.** Design a custom research survey to help us reach those goals.

**Tactic 2: Learn about potential audiences.** Administer and analyze the survey with a research partner.

**Tactic 3: Equip our staff.** Use the research project to deepen the staff's understanding of target audiences.

**Tactic 4: Create and test new communications materials.** Lay the foundation for a forward-looking brand and create actionable projects and campaigns.

The outcome they sought:

Complete a substantial audience research study to equip their teams with transformative information about their target audiences in Chicago.

The result:

- Completed a three-month collaboration with a Medill research partner (Qualtrics) to conduct an in-depth audience study.
  - Reached 400+ of their target audiences in Chicago, 300+ representing those they weren't currently reaching.
  - 50% of participants from 15 ZIP codes represent their neighborhoods of focus.
  - Started analysis and reporting of the data to shape their communications strategy materials.
- Began an analysis to understand better audiences they aren't currently reaching.

- Using four provisional high-level takeaways from the data, they created two audience personas that will be a key component of their emergent communications strategy.

**What were the most important findings discovered through the audience research?**

**City Bureau found potential audiences for their work in Chicago. There’s an eagerness for more and better quality local media and opportunities to shape decision-making and participate in the city’s civic life.**

For people who are already civically engaged in Chicago but unaware of City Bureau, the survey helped identify the top reasons that people participate in local community and civic activities:

**“Take action on issues I care about.”**

**“Learn something new and feel more informed on local issues.”**

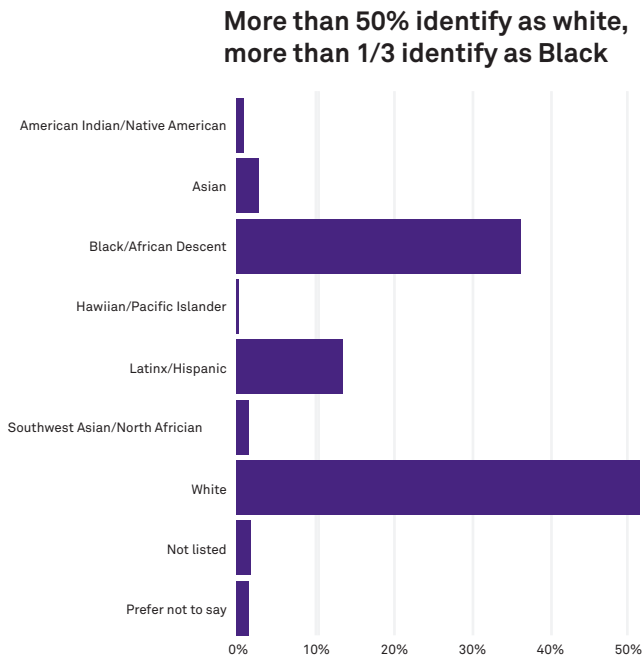
**“Support organizations or causes that I believe in.”**

City Bureau will use these exact phrases as calls to action in its marketing materials on social media.

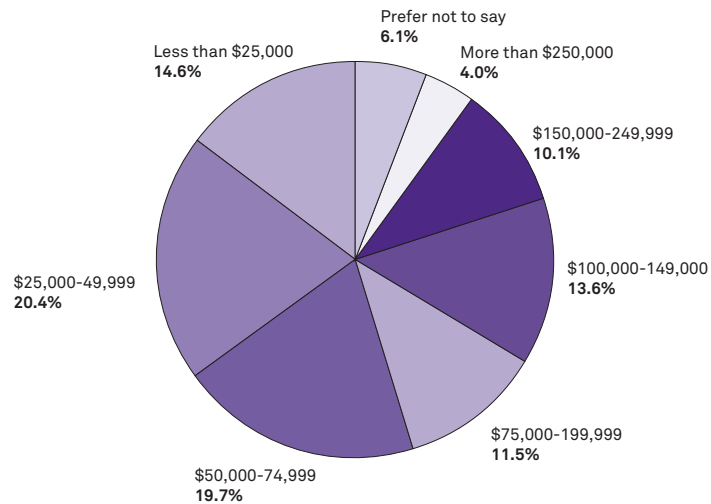
More than half of the survey’s respondents identified as white, and more than one-third identified as Black. More women than men responded, and over half had a bachelor’s degree or higher. Over half had a household income of less than \$75,000.

**REACHING NEW AUDIENCES:** The research suggested ways to reach new audiences via social media. For example, **66% of the respondents unfamiliar with City Bureau check local news on YouTube**, compared to 33% on City Bureau’s email list. **Facebook still played a part in respondents’ social media diet, too, with 61%** of potential audience in the 15 ZIP codes saying they used the platform for local news. For the youngest audiences surveyed, **73% of the 18-24-year-olds who described themselves as civically engaged use TikTok**, the highest percentage in any age group.

### Survey Quick Facts



**54.7% have an annual household income less than \$75,000**



**58.5%**  
Bachelor’s degree  
or higher

**1.74:1**  
Women:Men Ratio

### What worked?

Two elements of the program worked well:

- A clear project management framework for a complex project.
- Expert consultants City Bureau connected with through the Accelerator helped project leaders build a strategy to generate early buy-in from stakeholders at every level of the organization.

### What didn't work?

City Bureau would have liked a longer timeline for each phase of the program to be able to apply the program's insights and do the research analysis phase. Fortunately, they are still part of the Medill community and will continue to execute.



Director of Communications Kristen Fallica presents at the Local News Accelerator graduation.

### City Bureau did this work as part of a five-month program focusing on identifying a crucial challenge to the organization's future. How did having a limited amount of time encourage them to try new things?

The short time for the program could have been better in many ways. It compelled them to prioritize this project. It was challenging but also beneficial because it enabled City Bureau to complete the ambitious research project relatively quickly.

**What would you do differently now?**

City Bureau wasn't sure how to trim the time or scope of the research to fit more in the five-month program. However, any adjustment to limit the scope to get more done before the program ended would have made the result less valuable.

**What advice would City Bureau give to others who try to participate in the LNA?**



**First, get clarity about the project scope and priorities early on. Acknowledge for your team and project managers that it's a significant investment of time, and consider if it's worth it. Think about that with intention. What day-to-day tasks can you delegate; what projects can be put on the back burner? If you can invest the staff time and resources to ensure the project is successful, the result can be transformative.**

Kristen Fallica, City Bureau Director of Communications



**What shared resources would most greatly benefit City Bureau?**

City Bureau suggested creating templates for high-level, flexible project plans for product redesigns or other common projects. Or, templates to help operationalize insights from research studies. For example, there could be a template for revising newsletters, a template to modify donation landing pages, or a membership strategy. What takes time is creating the roadmaps and project plans.