

Daily Herald

CASE STUDY | SEPTEMBER 2023



How the Daily Herald focused on a young audience and found newsroom evangelists on its mission to grow digital subscriptions

The Daily Herald used SMART goals to power content aimed at turning busy families into paying subscribers

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

The Daily Herald, based, in Arlington Heights, Illinois, is the third-largest news organization in the Chicago area. It covers a large footprint in the northwestern, western and northern suburbs. A team of leaders from the newsroom and the VP of strategic marketing and innovation know their digital subscription growth had plateaued, and their older print audience won't sustain them forever. The sooner they could start growing digital subscriptions, the better. The Daily Herald newsroom isn't immune to the shrinking local news landscape, and they want their content to drive new digital subscriptions to secure their future.

What was the process for solving the problem?

The Daily Herald joined the Medill Local News Accelerator, which is part of Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. As part of the program, the Daily Herald leadership team clarified their goal to increase digital subscriptions and framed it as a three-part challenge statement.

- **Part 1:** The vision, an aspirational statement of what they want to achieve.
- **Part 2:** Concrete measurements, both quantitative and qualitative, that describe success.
- **Part 3:** Strategies and tactics. These are major themes and specific actions that will ensure the newsroom realizes the vision.

Here's an example from the Daily Herald of their vision statement, along with one of their strategies, the tactics that support that strategy, and concrete measurements that describe success.

**Our vision
(aka what we'll do)**

The Daily Herald will become an indispensable part of a larger and more diverse set of residents in the Northwest suburbs. We aim to grow from 13,500 to 20,000 paying digital subscribers by the end of 2024 by appealing to a larger percentage of young, suburban families with a product they find impossible to live without. We aim to hit 14,000 digital subscribers by October of 2023. This will reinforce the Daily Herald's goal to be the voice of the suburbs and ensure our financial stability. We want to be around for another 150 years.

**Strategies & tactics
(aka how we'll do it + how we'll know it worked)**

Strategy 2: Re-examine coverage and beat structure, creating two new beats by the end of July. Maximize other popular content aimed at families, with results by end of August.

With new chef's table series, Hey Nonny owners tap into chef's culinary, interpersonal skills



Supporting tactic 2A: Launch new dining beat by July 7. Aim for at least two additional stories per week beginning immediately. Attract 20 additional digital subs with dining copy by 8/31. Create trending news reporter beat, and shift reporter to the beat by 7/31.

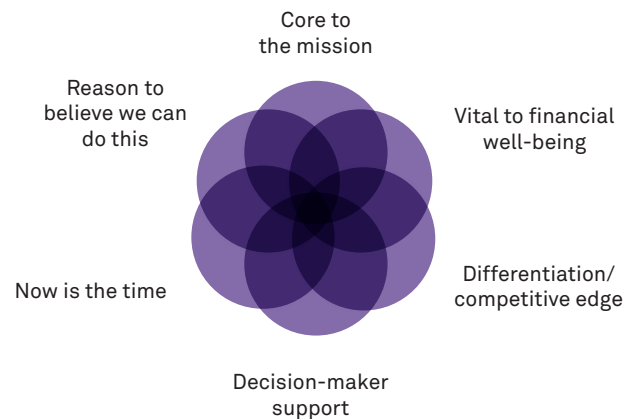
Supporting tactic 2B: Increase usage of already available, popular listings. Add at least one new curated list for the web weekly. Attract 10 subscribers with listings by 8/31.

Supporting tactic 2C: Extend preps coverage to the summer and give understaffed preps team additional help during peak seasons. Attract additional 20 subscribers with this content by 8/31.

One of the other tools the Daily Herald used was SMART goals. SMART is an acronym for Specific, Measurable, Aspirational Yet Achievable, Relevant and Timebound. Here's how it worked:

- **Specific:** The Daily Herald will become an indispensable voice of the suburbs, growing digital subscriptions from 13,500 to 20,000 by the end of 2024 by appealing to young, suburban families with a product they can't live without.
- **Measurable:** 13,500 to 20,000
- **Achievable:** This is a stretch goal, but the Daily Herald wanted something to rally around.
- **Relevant:** It's the most important goal of the organization.
- **Timebound:** End of 2024.

They used a feasibility filter to test their vision.



The news organization knew the vision was central to their mission, it was aspirational, and it was specific. They were ready to go, and the scope was big enough to make a difference. The question: Was it small enough to do? The group decided to go big because of the buzz the goal would create in the newsroom.

They went to work immediately and focused on quick wins, including “the power of one.” To add thousands of paid digital subscribers is daunting. To add a single subscriber is doable. For example, the Herald launched a new dining beat and got five new digital subs in two weeks.

They chose dining because stories about new restaurants and closing restaurants are a big draw at the top of the audience funnel, and they guessed that busy families more often ate out. Their website has a tight paywall, so they wanted to see if intentional dining coverage would lead to more digital subs. They also promoted their dining email newsletter on social media and increased signups by 36. They Daily Herald leaders knew people who sign up for email newsletters are in the middle of the audience funnel. They’ve given their email address, which is more of a commitment than popping in and out from social media. If the email newsletter is filled with interesting stories, they figured people will hit the paywall quickly.

Other steps they took:

- **Trained** the newsroom on writing tighter, more engaging stories and improving web headlines.
- **Developed** a trending news beat. In addition to the dining beat, the Daily Herald was moving positions in the newsroom to serve the younger, family audience.
- **Blew up** the sports department. High school sports reporters had moved to news during the pandemic, and they never moved back. With the sports revamp, the reporters returned to beats they loved and ones that served the family audience.
- **Generated excitement**, especially among news staff in the new beats, who wanted to be a part of creating the future of the newsroom.
- **Tracked and shared** metrics about how the work was attracting new digital subscriptions.

Another useful framing for change is a from/to statement. The Daily Herald worked a from/to into their vision statement: moving from 13,500 to 20,000 paid digital subscriptions. The from/to tool also provided clarity and leverage to undertake the above five qualitative tactics. For example, they moved from a

sports staff dislocated and refocused by COVID to an aspiring subscription-generation machine focused on valuable family content tied to prep sports.

Early in the process, the team also used a SWOT analysis to determine strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Here's a look at where the Daily Herald started.

In the SWOT analysis, the Daily Herald listed as a weakness that they need to identify their target audience. In another example of from/to,

SWOT WORKSHEET

INTERNAL	<p>Strengths (Leverage)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have a ton of data • Brand Name • Institutional Knowledge • Dedicated staff 	<p>Weakness (Address)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silos (business/communication) • Staffing • Identity target audiences • Identifying things that aren't working and cutting them • Getting data to dedicated staff • Bottom up content creation
	<p>Opportunities (Seize)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletter • Defining our audience • A steady stream of new customers 	<p>Threats (Mitigate)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition • Resistance to change
EXTERNAL	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE

they went from not knowing their target audience

to choosing to focus on a younger, more diverse family audience segment. They articulated a gap with another from/to: They want to move from having a strong digital subscription base during super events (prep sports season, elections and big news events) to keeping those subscriptions year-round.

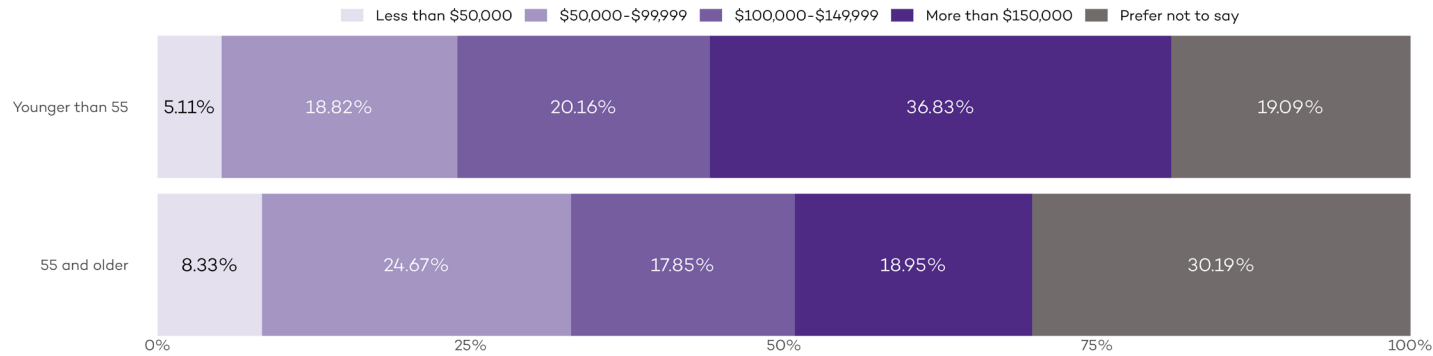
Understanding audience

In addition to paying attention to what stories drive digital subscriptions, the Daily Herald was eager to learn more about their younger family audience, some of whom already subscribed and some who may have subscribed and dropped their subscription. These younger readers had some connection to the Daily Herald, and they represented the demographic the newsroom seeks to build.

Partnering with researchers at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, the Daily Herald sent a survey to its email list and compared respondents in the younger age group with their more traditional readers (55 and older). While growing their family segment, the news leaders were cognizant of continuing to serve their large older audience. They are especially interested in the empty nesters in their 50s, who have disposable income.

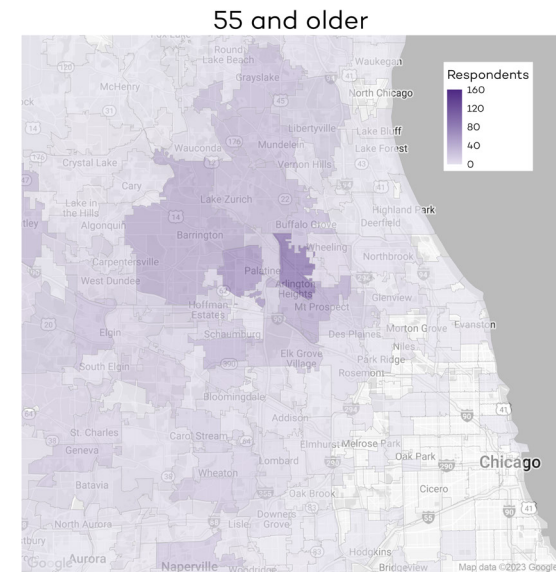
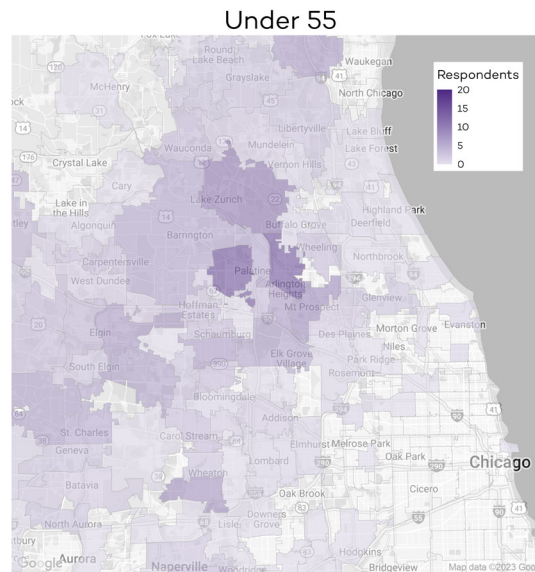
Takeaways from the survey paint a picture of respondents:

- Mostly white.
- Educated, with bachelor's degrees or higher (67%).
- Household income before taxes showed 39% earning \$100,000 or more, with almost one-third preferring not to disclose their income.
- Two-thirds of the 55+ respondents were retirees (67%), but the earning power among the younger group (57% made \$100,000+) makes the family audience a desirable demographic.



Five survey takeaways:

- Geographically, the survey and U.S. Census data analysis show potential in suburbs with growing populations that are increasingly young and diverse. The Daily Herald will prioritize those suburbs with time-limited sprints to learn what works and what doesn't. In the maps (below), the younger group (on the left) shows Lake Zurich in the darker pink, while the older group is more concentrated in Barrington in the large pink area north and west of the two most concentrated groups overall, which are Arlington Heights and Palatine.



2. Respondents were highly engaged with news, checking news at least once a day. They also trusted local news sources more than national news, social media, or family and friends. The younger respondents checked news most on their smart phones, which backs up the need for reporters to write tighter.
3. The younger, target audience said they didn't think people should have to pay for news, but about 40% said they subscribed to the Daily Herald. Younger respondents who no longer subscribed often said they didn't have time to read it.
4. The younger audience also was more likely to sign up for email newsletters. The Daily Herald has launched a new family newsletter and has breathed new life into the dining and prep sports newsletters. The goal is to drive people through the funnel by offering excellent content in newsletters that propel people to the website enough that they find they need to become subscribers.
5. The Daily Herald has some work to do to make the case to both younger and older audiences for why they need to pay for local news. A paying audience is key to the Daily Herald's growth and its future.

What worked?

- **Early sports success:** As part of the family focus, the Daily Herald knew high school sports is a digital subscription driver. They decided to start writing about high school sports earlier in August even before the season started, and they had 103 digital subscribers from high school sports in August alone.
- **Family email newsletter:** The Daily Herald launched a family-focused newsletter and attracted 542 signups in August.
- **Building staff buy-in:** The leadership team started small, with the power of one. The dining reporter was excited about working toward digital subscription goals and targeting young families. From there, a trending news team was born, with the same excitement. Then the prep sports team reunited, and they are ready to grow digital subs.
- **Communicating success:** A daily newsletter celebrates the stories that are garnering digital subscriptions. The managing editor also communicates directly with reporters when their stories generate digital subscriptions.
- **Leadership competencies:** The Daily Herald leaders took the Medill Enterprise Sustainability Assessment, which is a self-assessment of 60 competencies. The survey was fielded just before the program started, at the mid-point, and at the end. At the mid-point, the Daily Herald team showed a surge in self-reported mastery of 33% in business strategy and 30% in research and insight.

What didn't work?

While the dining beat is great at attracting top-of-the-funnel readers, it hasn't generated the number of digital subscriptions the Daily Herald was hoping it would. Certain stories attract digital subs, so they are examining the data and adjusting coverage.

The success of food-related content in attracting audience (sometimes food stories make up three of the top five stories in pageviews) has won over some reporters who previously would have said "who cares?" about this type of content.

What was surprising or challenging?

Winning over the newsroom has been a challenge. The leaders who want change are training and encouraging the staff to move from an attitude of "this is a great story or an important story, everyone should want to read it" to "let's write that important story in a way that attracts the audience." Training has focused on writing tighter and using metrics to learn about the topics that resonate with readers. Editors are also giving reporters feedback on how to approach stories and what stories they're writing. They are winning staff over, but it's taking time to create real change.

Another challenge was learning what was in the newsroom's control and what wasn't. As a result, readers found ways to focus on what was important that was in their control. In a way, this process has been about breaking down silos and winning over people throughout the whole organization, not just the newsroom. In some cases, this remains a work in progress.

What did the news organization learn?

In examining metrics, whether on content that brings people to the website or helps people become paying subscribers, the team learned that paying closer attention to their audience can help them question the status quo.

- **TRENDING NEWS:** In managing reporters who often work remotely, editors at times would struggle to find someone to respond to breaking news. The Daily Herald created a trending news team of staffers who now generate stories and take the burden off editors. When the news organization responds quicker to get something up right away, they have a better chance of appearing higher in

Google searches. Training on using Google trends has also created opportunities for coverage for stories they had missed.

- **SPORTS COVERAGE:** The Daily Herald learned that the priority they had placed on pro sports wasn't yielding the results they expected. This broke down some misconceptions about what their local audiences want. The younger audience they seek to develop prefers coverage of prep sports to their pro sports coverage. The leaders made adjustments to prioritize prep sports in the newsroom.
- **ADJUSTMENTS IN STAFFING:** This challenge hasn't led to an overall reorganization of the newsroom, but it has led to strategic changes in beats to serve their younger audience or draw more readers to their site. As is the case in many newsrooms, they didn't have more money to work with, so the decisions to move a reporter into a new beat meant jettisoning coverage somewhere else.

What are key takeaways for other news organizations?

OPEN TO CHANGE: The Daily Herald newsroom had been reluctant to try new things in the past. Sometimes newsrooms are doing all they can to respond to news, plan big projects, deal with the stresses of budgets and provide the overall leadership needed to commandeer a newsroom. The Local News Accelerator helped this team learn new tools to help them look at their audiences and resources strategically, from the three-point challenge that helped them understand the vision, strategies and tactics to execute change to the from/to framing that helps them ensure that at any moment they can articulate clearly where they are on the journey, where they came from and where they're headed.

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My advice to other newsrooms is to be open to radical changes, even if they're radical experiments.

Lisa Miner, Daily Herald Managing Editor
Team leader for the Local News Accelerator program

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An example of a radical experiment is the sprint on one of the suburbs in their coverage area that came up strong in the U.S. census trends as becoming younger and more diverse. The Daily Herald will blanket sports, entertainment and news, plus they will present people there with digital subscription offers for one month to see what works, measuring data before and after.

USE TOOLS SUCH AS SMART GOALS: When it comes to the radical experiments, newsrooms can also use SMART goals to ensure they know specifically what they want to achieve, how they'll do it, and how they'll know it worked. For example, during the Daily Herald's sprint, they will develop a goal that's specific; they will measure their progress, using data before and after to see how their stories are working to draw digital subscribers and pageviews. They will ensure the goal is aspirational and achievable. They already know this goal is relevant because it will provide them with information to do future sprints. And they have the timebound element: one month.

BUILD EXCITEMENT: Find a core group of people in the room, not just the bosses, to be evangelists for the change, who are excited when people buy a digital subscription from one of their stories and who are upset with the story doesn't take off as they hoped. To find those evangelists, leaders looked for reporters with energy and enthusiasm. Leadership had built trust with the early adopters, so they were excited to try new things. As Miner said: "I really like winning people over."

BREAK DOWN SILOS: The newsrooms who undertake change can only go so far on their own. The Daily Herald found an ally in their Vice President/Director of Strategic Marketing and Innovation. She had previously worked as a reporter and an editor in the newsroom, and she led the marketing efforts to grow digital subscribers.

Did they grow digital subscribers?

In the first three months of the program, the Daily Herald grew digital subscribers by a net 388 subscribers, taking into account those who dropped subscriptions during the same time. Their overall goal to reach 20,000 by the end of 2024 is a bit closer, but change takes time. What sustains the leaders is the importance of their vision. They know they need to grow their younger audience. Those young families represent their future. And they are armed with tools to experiment, to test ideas and to continue to win over the newsroom.