

Evanston RoundTable

CASE STUDY | JANUARY TO MAY 2025

Background

Founded in 1998, the Evanston RoundTable is a local nonprofit newsroom serving Evanston, Ill. The publication focuses its coverage on city government, education and arts and culture. Its mission is to provide fair and accurate reporting on issues that impact the everyday lives of Evanstonians in order to build civic engagement and community trust. The RoundTable has always been available at no charge.

The RoundTable’s goal in the Medill School of Journalism’s Local News Accelerator (LNA) was to launch a newsletter about raising kids in Evanston. The team believed that this newsletter could serve two important purposes: For the community, it would be a valuable resource for parents and other caregivers. For the RoundTable itself, the newsletter would help it reach a valuable set of younger readers (20- and 30-something parents of school-aged children, in particular), a group that is essential to the long-term sustainability of the publication.



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

From	To	To (future)
A publication looking to engage younger parents in the community but unsure of the exact strategy to use and lacking a product that targeted that group.	Developed a new parent and caregiver-specific newsletter, Raising Evanston, that utilized an opt-out strategy, which lead to its launch with 10,000 subscribers. Raising Evanston connected them to a new part of their community.	A long-term growth strategy that monetizes this work through advertising and audience support.

Highlights

The team's initial goal was to launch Raising Evanston during the program and grow to a modest total of 300 subscribers within three months of launch. Using the research and tools provided during the LNA, the team reoriented its strategy and more aggressively used its existing newsletter list to launch the newsletter. By the end of the program, it had more than **10,000 subscribers** because it had chosen an “opt-out” strategy that enrolled existing subscribers automatically. Raising Evanston has continued to see high engagement from those subscribers and is drawing strong early interest from advertisers.

The LNA program was crucial to launching Raising Evanston. The research findings shaped the plans and confirmed important theories about what potential subscribers were interested in. The tools within the program helped the team continue to refine the product. The LNA also provided structure and momentum to overcome long-standing hurdles — editorial, technical and organizational — that had blocked this idea from moving forward in the past. And the team left the program with a concrete roadmap for continued progress on monetization.

“Like many small news organizations, we have no shortage of great ideas, just limited time and resources to bring them to life. Participating in LNA made our long-standing dream of launching a parenting newsletter possible.”



Tracy Quattrocki
Publisher and Executive Editor

The process

The RoundTable entered the LNA with a clear goal: launch a parenting newsletter to reach a younger audience and lay the groundwork for a new donor and advertiser base. That goal didn't change, but the team refined it throughout the program. The path to the final product included a few key pivots — most notably, deciding to switch from an opt-in to an opt-out newsletter strategy.

Research insights

That decision was one of many informed by the audience research conducted by Medill. One important part of the project was learning more about the target audience's needs. The tools used in the LNA and the tight timeline for the project meant the RoundTable had to start moving

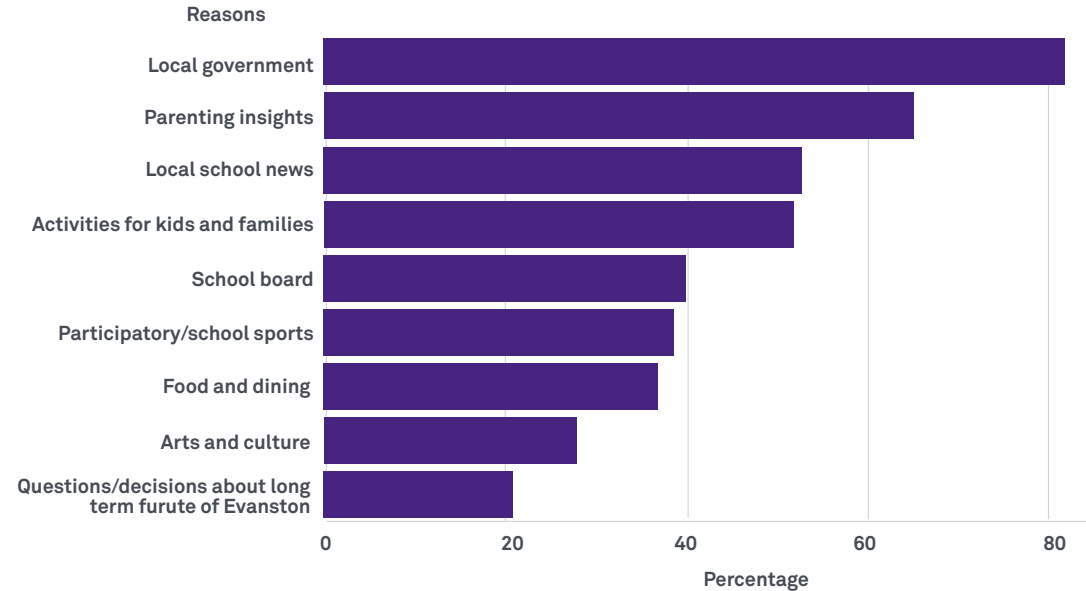
forward immediately. This proved essential to getting the newsletter over the finish line, but the team needed the research to feel confident moving ahead and to shape the idea.

The first crucial finding was that there really was a need and a desire for a product like the newsletter the RoundTable team had been envisioning. More than two-thirds of parent respondents said they checked local news sources daily. And other research findings supported the long-term belief that this group believed in local news and might pay to support it. More than 60% of respondents said they trust local media, and the vast majority believed consumers should pay for journalism.

The research also gave clarity on the types of information worth including in the newsletter:

What topics parent respondents would be most interested in reading more about, in regards to Evanston

Respondents were asked to choose their top three out of a list.



A snapshot of data Evanston RoundTable received through LNA research.

This information helped the team land on the editorial mix for the newsletter. Editions start with a conversational, first-person note from the editor, include practical information – like events for kids over the next week – and also feature a section of links to relevant local news coverage.



A screenshot of Raising Evanston

The second noteworthy finding was that interest wasn't limited to parents. When shared with the RoundTable's own audience, researchers received a meaningful number of responses from non-parents who still had interest in (and opinions about) the coverage they would want to read. Some indicated their interest came from their roles as grandparents or other important figures in a kid's life, whereas others seemed interested out of a larger sense of supporting the future of the community.

This finding led to two key strategic decisions:

- The first was to reframe the newsletter as being about “raising kids,” as opposed to positioning it as a parenting newsletter. This expanded the potential readership without changing the scope of the project itself. This finding also led to the name: Raising Evanston.
- The second key decision was to pursue an opt-out strategy instead of an opt-in strategy for the newsletter. The team realized: If many existing subscribers to their general daily newsletter expressed interest in this content, whether or not they have school-aged children, then why not build on the RoundTable's highly engaged newsletter list of more than 10,000 people? The subscribers would still have an easy way to decline to receive Raising Evanston, but the RoundTable suspected that for most, this would provide added value. And by jumpstarting the project with a larger following, the team could make later progress – including attracting advertising support – much easier.

With these insights, the RoundTable hired a strong set of freelancers to shape the newsletter. An experienced writer/editor took the lead, and a rotating set of contributors were hired to add different perspectives. The team had one editor lined up to own the events calendar, a foundational part of the newsletter, but that person had to bow out at the last minute. As a result, the RoundTable formed a partnership with a local events calendar that ultimately gave it an even stronger resource.

Business strategies and tools

The tools in the LNA were crucial throughout the process, and the team will continue to utilize them on projects moving forward.

- Business strategy tools like the business model canvas and marketing personas forced the team to think concretely about the potential consumers. Those tools, plus the research findings, resulted in a stronger newsletter that’s better able to serve the community.

Business Model Canvas

Customer segments	Parents of school-aged kids in Evanston; businesses who want to reach those parents
Value propositions	Build connection + community w/ each other; Deep knowledge of community; Resources for school-aged kids; Provide need-to-know and nice-to-know information; in one place; short and efficient
Channels	Parenting newsletter; existing newsletter; website; social media; existing parenting groups
Revenue streams	Business sponsorships; individual donors; major donors (?)
Key resources	Freelance writer; in-house editing; marketing staff; socila media editor; salesperson
Key activities	Content creation & curation; marketing of newsletter (in-house); sell sponsorships; design NL
Key partners	Medill researcher; Freelance writer; vendor (already have); community orgs

An example of Evanston RoundTable's marketing persona:

The Busy Mom

Values:

- Education
- Family-oriented activities
- Structure
- Child Development

Pain Points:

- Wants to improve work/life balance
- Seeks consistent/well-rounded kids activities that fit into her schedule
- Overwhelmed by researching family activities

Local news behavior:

- Does not subscribe to local news
- Gets news secondhand from socials
- Preferred channels: FB and IG via smartphone

Elementary-aged kids

Mom of 2

Female

Age: 40

Lives in Evanston


Married

High Income

Business Professional

Graduate Degree

I read "Raising Evanston" to be more in the know when it comes to school related news. I am passionate about investing in my kids' development and college potential.



- The SMARTIE (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound, Inclusive and Equitable) goals were also important. Although the strategy ultimately shifted in a way that meant the initial goals were too conservative, the need to reach those concrete goals fueled many brainstorm. Just launching the newsletter wasn't enough – the RoundTable needed to figure out how to get readers to it and how to make money from it.

- A lot of time was spent on the low-cost/no-cost marketing plans as a result. Some of those strategies, such as how to promote it on social media, became important parts of the launch plan. Other discussions, such as how to utilize the existing newsletter subscribers, ended up going in different directions. Without those discussions about our SMARTIE goals, the team may not have had the crucial insight to make it an opt-out product.

Another SMARTIE goal sets the team up for future growth. The RoundTable set specific goals at the beginning of the process around revenue – both attracting advertisers and finding new donors. The team decided partway through the project that the timeline of the LNA didn’t match the timing we needed to reach those goals; sales cycles for ads and building new donor relationships both take more time. But it didn’t scrap those goals completely or set them aside. Instead, the team extended the timeline for them and kept moving ahead on those ideas. (For example, one goal shifted to finding a new advertiser by September.) As a result, the team left the project with a strong prospect list of potential advertisers, key plans for how to integrate them into other opportunities, such as a community event in September and even added an email to its Spring Fundraiser campaign announcing the newsletter. Without those goals, it would’ve been easier to set aside this work. But revenue growth and diversification is an essential part of the newsletter’s purpose and the team is stronger moving ahead because of the groundwork laid in the LNA.

Watch for your copy of *Raising Evanston* next week ... but for now, I encourage you to show your enthusiasm for the RoundTable by [supporting the Spring Fundraiser](#). The RoundTable is a nonprofit newsroom, dependent on community funding; your donation of any amount will be put to good use!

Donate during May

Talk to you soon, and thank you!
Claire Zulkey
Editor, Raising Evanston



A donation call-to-action from Evanston RoundTable.

The results

The RoundTable had two major wins during the program. It launched Raising Evanston after years of wanting to bring a parent-focused newsletter to the community. And it vastly exceeded its initial goal for subscribers thanks to the opt-out strategy.

Starting with more than 10,000 subscribers is significant. The newsletter is an investment of time and resources because the RoundTable believes in its long-term value to the community and to the organization's sustainability. One major concern at the start of the project was that the long, slow road to growing the newsletter would mean that real monetization to support the project could take years. Now, there is far more scale to offer advertisers, and the additional growth from the target audience only enhances the value of the audience.

The "opt-out" strategy felt, at times, like a cheat code to jump a few steps ahead in the process, but the results achieved took significant work and commitment. The RoundTable hadn't launched a new newsletter for years, and this project took place just as it switched its CMS and email service provider. The technical challenges felt daunting at points in the project, but the process ended up being much easier than expected and left the team with expertise if it decides to undertake another project of this type.

Another concern early in the project was advertising sales. Initially, the team assumed it'd need to build a separate sales structure for this newsletter – because of the expected smaller size, they thought plans might need to look different and might require a separate part-time seller with a different compensation structure to handle the work. Through the LNA, they realized they could integrate this newsletter into the existing advertising pipeline. That discovery saved time and allowed the team to move faster. Today, it has a long list of potential advertisers, and it's actively pursuing new partnerships.

On the fundraising front, the newsletter was previewed in a spring campaign email that helped build anticipation. But the team believes there's still untapped potential here. In future campaigns, *Raising Evanston* will be used as a storytelling hook to engage donors who care about local education and family life in the community.

The RoundTable is excited about where the project stands at the end of the LNA, but it's still just a starting point. The work done on the project, and all the process and insight wins, fuel the team's future plans to grow Raising Evanston, drive revenue from it and continue to find new ways to serve the community.

A snapshot of Evanston RoundTable’s wins

The chart below illustrates the wins Evanston RoundTable achieved throughout the LNA:

Process	Insight	Capability	Outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handled the technical steps needed to launch the newsletter Began outreach to new potential advertisers Built editorial workflow for newsletter Launched a new newsletter! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research backed up the RoundTable team’s instincts that there was a need for the type of newsletter it wanted to launch Research pointed to “opt-out” strategy by showing strong interest in family content—even beyond parents themselves A number of valuable findings from the research helped shape what exactly went into the newsletter Research backed longer-term belief this group will pay to support journalism Existing sales process will work for advertising support on this plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Built a new part-time team with strong community ties and editorial voice Managed the technical aspects of the launch Built strong list of potential advertisers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reached 10K+ subscribers with a strong open rate

A Q&A



Bill Carey, coach:

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



Tracy Quattrocki:

As always, the most challenging aspect of the process was making time for the project. But the LNA team’s weekly meeting kept us focused on the launch, which was critical to our success.



Carey:

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



Sue DaMario, marketing manager:

The dedication of the LNA team at Medill kept us on task. Having a fabulous coach, an inspired intern and robust research to support our project carried us to the finish line.



Carey:

Did Evanston RoundTable have to pivot? If so, what led to the change?



Quattrocki:

About a month before our launch, we lost a key contributor to the newsletter and had to regroup quickly. In response, we partnered with another community organization to help fill the gap, an unexpected shift that ultimately led to a stronger, more collaborative approach.



Carey:

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



Quattrocki:

Like many small news organizations, we have no shortage of great ideas, just limited time and resources to bring them to life. Participating in LNA made our long-standing dream of launching a parenting newsletter possible.



Carey:

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



Quattrocki:

We learned that our audience is eager for specialized content, starting with a newsletter geared toward families. This success has given us a strong blueprint for expanding into additional RoundTable newsletters focused on food, the arts and other areas of interest.