

# Shaw Media

---

CASE STUDY | JANUARY 2025





**How Shaw Media went from capturing a family audience with readership primarily revolving around high school sports seasons to creating a digital product to entice those sports fans to continue their subscriptions long after the season ends.**

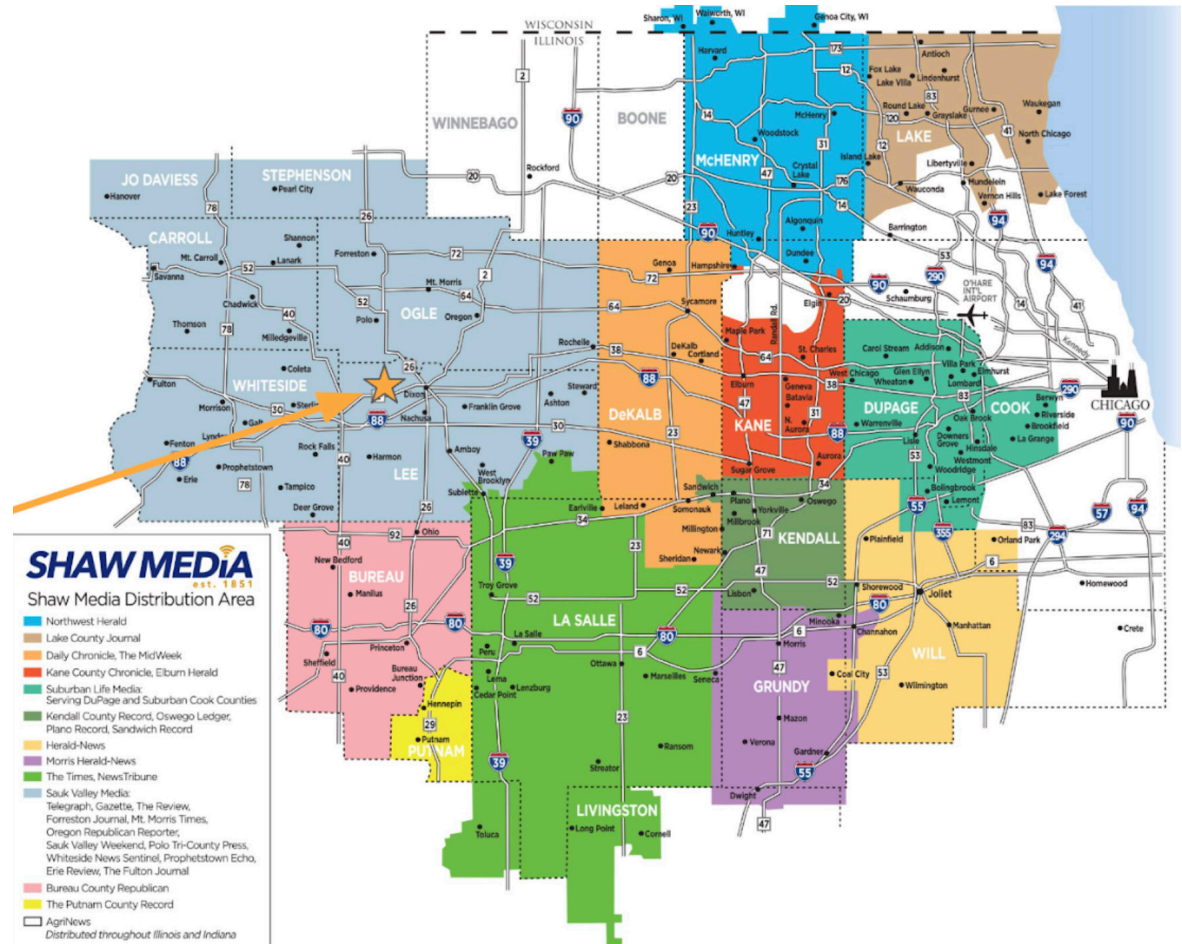
Shaw Media used SMART goals and agile methods, such as scrums, sprints and design thinking to test and prioritize ideas to achieve those goals.

As a result, Shaw Media:

- Increased net paid digital subscriptions, achieving 95% of its goal of reaching 24,0000 subscribers
- Utilized strategic promotional emails to target audience segments, increasing retention of high school sports subscribers postseason by approximately 12%
- Adjusted website headers, leading to an increase in internal traffic by 300-400%
- Used print-only content on their websites to generate 120 subscriptions with no additional content production

**A brief history of Shaw Media in relation to the communities it serves.**

Shaw Media has a long and proud history serving communities in Northern Illinois. In fact, the company owns the third-oldest continuously owned-and-operated family newspaper in the United States. What started in Dixon, Illinois, in 1851 has expanded to print, online and two radio stations in Illinois, and several counties in Iowa. The media company currently serves 14 markets in Illinois and Iowa, reaching over 2.5 million readers and listeners monthly.



## What problem was Shaw Media trying to solve, and why was solving this problem strategically important for the news organization?

Shaw Media's overarching goal coming into the program was to grow digital subscriptions to drive revenue growth. They had seen a boom during the pandemic, but as the world opened up, digital subscription growth began to shrink. The Shaw team saw two major reasons this growth was strategically important:

1. To sustain their business.
2. To improve life in their communities by providing trusted, valuable information that only they could offer.

## Shaw Media's Initial Goals

Shaw Media entered the program with a range of potential goals. The publication quickly narrowed its focus to target a specific audience segment: families with school-age children, as Shaw Media felt targeting a younger audience leaned into a sustainable business model, as it would allow for continued growth for years to come. Additionally, the publication had noticed increased subscriptions during fall and spring sports that then decreased during the off-season. So, Shaw planned to increase retention by creating useful content that would resonate with the target audience with a goal of reducing churn and increasing net subscription growth.

As a means of determining the publication's success throughout the program, Shaw created one primary measurable goal: They would aim to hit 24K digital subscriptions in 2024: 24 in '24.

## How did Shaw Media go about solving its project?

Shaw Media first used a SMART goal framework to guide the project's progression:

**Specific:** The team initially went from a general goal of increasing digital subscriptions to a goal that targeted a specific audience segment: families with school-age children.

**Measurable:** Hit 24,000 subscribers by the end of the year.

**Achievable:** This was a stretch goal, especially since success would mean changing a downward trajectory, but the team believed even if they got close, the goal was worth doing.

**Relevant:** The goal would strengthen the publication's business and allow Shaw to improve offerings for the communities it serves, consequently making them better places to live.

**Timebound:** Achieve the goal by the end of 2024.

Once the goal was established in clear, specific terms, Shaw used a feasibility filter to test whether the goal would withstand potential challenges. The publication knew its goal was central to the news organization's mission and vital to its financial well-being. The team discussed its competition, which included blogs and social media. Shaw determined its differentiating factor is the company's established reliability and trustworthiness.

The Local News Accelerator program began during spring sports, giving the Shaw team the perfect opportunity to test retention techniques to address the subscribers who would normally drop after the season. The team planned to test learnings from spring sports with an even larger audience in the fall— families who subscribe for high school football content.

The team further established a plan by identifying a vision, strategies and tactics to accomplish its goal:

The vision was clear:

Shaw would create a must-have resource by delivering news that aligns with the needs and values of a family audience with the ultimate goal of improving the communities the publication serves.

Families are pressed for time, and the team knew that by subscribing to Shaw Media, those families could get what they needed faster than a Google search. Ranging from what to do for a weekend with kids to school safety at the beginning of the school year, Shaw

envisioned its network as a one-stop informational hub for families in small, rural and mid-sized communities west of Chicago.

One strategy:

The most important first step toward meeting this lofty goal was to fundamentally change Shaw’s approach to writing news stories. In the fast-paced newsrooms focused on writing quickly and moving on to the next story, journalists fell into the habit of producing content without focusing on topics of interest for their audience. So, journalists needed to alter their coverage approach to hone in on high-interest topics.

One tactic:

Shaw Media decided its journalists needed training to think differently about how to cover their communities. Instead of doing an overall training of all journalists as a webinar, the editors worked with specific journalists to set initial goals and provide training on how to utilize analytics to learn more about their audiences’ interests. The journalists used free self-paced Poynter trainings and then met weekly with their respective editors to discuss how to apply these trainings to their work.

From-To statements were a useful framing as Shaw Media envisioned its future, as they allowed the organization to clearly define key changes it intended to implement with the help of the LNA program.

FROM	TO
Writing for sources without an audience in mind.	Writing for a specific audience: young families
An audience that came just for high school sports.	An audience that sees value in other Shaw content, such as education and things to do.
An organization with contracting net subscriber growth	An organization that reduced churn using a combination of tech tools and improved content.
Covering events after the fact	Providing more info beforehand

## Medill Research

Shaw Media utilized Medill-funded research to gain further insight into the publication's audience. In an initial survey of 1,085 people, contacted via Shaw's mailing lists, 147 respondents fit the criteria Shaw was looking for: families with at least one child under the age of 20 living in the house. This first survey confirmed these families were on-the-go, and revealed that the most important topic they were looking for more information on— but were not finding— was schools/education. Reporters were covering school board meetings, but the stories they produced didn't match the type of information people were looking for. For example, if the school board passed a budget, the story would be focused on quotes from school board members about the budget generally instead of focusing on what in the budget was most interesting to readers. The survey gave the team information to help reporters understand a reason to change.

One of the questions that the quantitative research failed to address: Why were non-subscribing respondents answering 'didn't find it useful' when asked why they weren't subscribed? Researchers reached out for more insight. Answers ranged from wanting local issues addressed with greater depth to wanting quick practical information. One respondent gave a specific example, citing a desire for more coverage of local candidates, including congressional and state representatives during elections. Other reasons included finding information elsewhere without cost, the price of subscription and the price for value. Some wanted more news about their towns, and others were frustrated by paywalls or having to log in every time, even if they subscribed.

The qualitative answers gave the team confirmation of needed changes and allowed them to establish key insights, based on repetitive responses, to create meaningful content changes.

Here are examples of responses generated through this survey, of which led to corresponding takeaways:

Response	Takeaways
<p>“I can look on funeral home sites for obits. Websites provide information I may need. I don’t have kids in sports, and Facebook provides community events. Otherwise I watch TV news.”</p>	<p>Focus on news you can’t find elsewhere to differentiate content. Make the case in marketing materials by linking to news stories with value for readers. Train reporters using Poynter resources.</p>
<p>“When I did access (information), it was never my city. There are so many choices, and it was confusing to get to my city information.”</p>	<p>Change headers on the website to make town names clearer to help online consumers find information they seek.</p>
<p>“I wanted local news, especially coverage of local high school sports, but there was insufficient coverage to warrant continuing my subscription.”</p>	<p>While Shaw Media puts a lot of effort into covering high school sports, and the quantitative survey showed people easily found their sports coverage, it doesn’t have the staff to cover some sports with smaller followings. Lacrosse came up several times in the quantitative survey, and it might be worth a test to see if a small, loyal audience would pay for coverage.</p>
<p>“Tribune has so much more in their daily paper. I am trying to support the local media, but their prices make it very difficult.”</p>	<p>Shaw Media has tried various introductory offers with reduced prices. They also are working on improving content by writing for their audience to improve the value.</p>

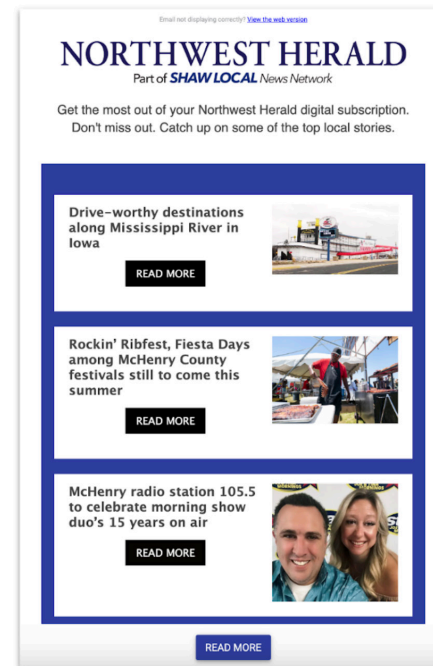
## Results

Shaw ended the Local News Accelerator program in early October having achieved 95% of its initial goal of reaching 24,000 net paid digital subscriptions, up from an initial 21,941 at the start of LNA programming.



Some other wins included:

- Spring sports audience re-engagement:** Shaw Media added news links to promotional emails, displaying content that would appeal to a targeted audience segment– in this case, families. Promotional emails with these featured stories were sent to spring season high school sports subscribers at the end of the season. The result: retention of 94% of subscribers vs. a previous 81% when promotional emails were sent without the linked news content.



- **Increased internal traffic:** Shaw Media adjusted its website headers, including a shift from print language to digital, which kept people onsite longer and increased internal traffic by 300-400%.



- Removed Subscribe, added **Crime & Courts**
  - Swapped “The Scene” for **Weekend Plans**
- Used print-only content (property transfers and short business stories) on their websites. In the first month, they converted almost two dozen casual readers to subscribers with no extra effort for already stretched reporters. By the end of the year, this tactic generated 120 subscriptions, and the number continues to grow.

### What worked?

The Shaw Media team used agile thinking to prioritize actions. This included:

- Daily scrums: quick meetings to report on results and make adjustments
- Weekly/biweekly sprints to test ideas
- A sprint planning tool that helped to measure the ease of doing something and the impact of doing it.

This framework helped the Shaw team keep track of tests and ensure movement. They also kept pushing for outcomes and impact instead of getting stuck in activities.

An example of successful planning that kept Shaw Media on track:

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impact
Group Editor	Eyes on Enterprise Property Transfers Onsite stop/saves	3 mkts, 97 stories 9 mkts since 8/1 Discount rebuttals	22 subs/166K pv's 34 subs/53K pv's Targeting 20/wk	Grow Audience
Digital Team	Launch Business Newsletter	Fill Bus. interest	Expect 400 by eoy	Grow Revenue
Mktg Budget	Reporter Training Premium testing Website Headers Content Rec's Grace Emails HS Football new initiatives	1 Reporter/market Guidelines +Internal traffic List stories +1 7 emails, 20 days Early promo, previews, magazine bundle...	Project +10% subs +30 subs m/m  Time onsite +8 sec  Gains up y/y in 2 weeks leading to 1st games	Become the go-to trusted news source for families.  Strengthen our communities.

“

**The tools and resources offered in the Local News Accelerator helped our team to complete tasks we wouldn't have done (or been able to do) on our own. It also provided our team time for focused conversation about our goal, which is so important to continue making progress.**

Rebecca Meyer, Former Shaw Media Consumer Sales and Marketing Director

”

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

In using agile design-thinking methods, the Shaw team found some activities took longer to execute than imagined.

Former Consumer Sales and Marketing Director Rebecca Meyer said, “Some sprints are more like a slow jog.”

Newsrooms under the Shaw Media umbrella were not fully aware of the project underway during the program. Shaw didn't have a group editor in place to communicate to the individual newsrooms or to enforce the ideas the team generated.

**What was surprising or challenging?**

Bringing in new subscribers was a lot easier than keeping them. This wasn't a huge surprise, but retention issues were disheartening. Passive churn (expired credit cards, for example) hurt, and the team battled through a slow tech process for getting a tool in place to address that issue.

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

Take full advantage of the Northwestern research that's part of the program.

Get everyone in your organization involved as early as possible to build momentum and generate energy. Newsrooms will always be busy, but if leadership is on board and tells people this is important, more are committed to the process, ultimately generating success.

"Make sure you have as many people from your organization on board with the project as possible. The more people that are thinking about the common goal, the more realistic it becomes." -- Rebecca Meyer, Former Shaw Media Consumer Sales and Marketing Director

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

When the program ended, Shaw Media had not yet reached its goal of reaching 24,000 paid digital subscriptions but it remains fully committed to growing digital subscriptions.

Shaw has entered a second round of Poynter training and is pursuing a grant for a project in one of its markets as a result of data deep dives, including those conducted during LNA.

Marketing provided editors with a weekly conversion report to highlight the stories and authors bringing in new subscriptions. This helped to motivate staff who were successful, and it helped editors understand the topics and types of stories driving digital subscriptions.

Shaw Media intends to continue the momentum generated through LNA programming with the goal of reaching 25,000 subscribers in 2025.