

The Lansing Journal

CASE STUDY | JANUARY TO MAY 2025



Background

The Lansing Journal had a good problem: It was blowing up on YouTube. A seven-year-old all-digital newspaper serving the Chicago bedroom community of Lansing, Ill., the outlet’s two-person team had started to make YouTube videos to be more visible in their coverage area. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these early videos — which covered local happenings, shops and council meetings — had a modest following.

But then Thornton township, where Lansing is located, became the center of a huge YouTube phenomena when the outrageous behavior of a local politician (Tiffany Henyard, the self-proclaimed “Super Mayor”) began drawing attention from across the Internet. While gossip channels covered this as a tale of corrupt and crazy politics, The Lansing Journal was at these council meetings providing on-the-ground coverage to serve their local audience. These videos went viral, and suddenly The Lansing Journal’s YouTube engagement exploded.

In 2024, The Lansing Journal YouTube views grew by 15x over the prior year (from 115,000 in 2023 to 1.7 million in 2024), with streams matching website visits that year. Due to this growth, the videos began to be monetized on YouTube, and The Lansing Journal received small advertising checks from Google each month. Other YouTube influencers started using the outlet’s reporting, and people from across the country started tuning in specifically for The Lansing Journal coverage, some inspired by their authentic journalism, others drawn to the antics of Supervisor Henyard.



Publisher Melanie Jongsma wanted to know: Could The Lansing Journal capitalize on this attention? This was the focus of her team's work with the Medill School of Journalism's Local News Accelerator (LNA) — uncovering ways to turn this political moment into something sustainable for her organization. Was there a way for them to go from viral YouTube stars to sustained growth on YouTube?

What Jongsma and her team learned is that their expertise with YouTube could be leveraged to build a stronger publication, but not in the ways they had first anticipated. Through their work with the Local News Accelerator they uncovered a significant local consumer audience who prefer seeing their news on YouTube. These were not the people across the country they had originally focused on who'd been drawn to the viral videos, but people who live in Lansing. This local audience demonstrated an interest in The Lansing Journal's content and has a strong preference for YouTube. By learning more about this through the LNA, the organization adjusted its content strategies to further engage and grow with this audience.

Just as importantly, Jongsma discovered a market opportunity with local businesses in Lansing who are interested in, but inexperienced with, using video to grow their businesses. Through the LNA, she developed advertising solutions that capitalize both on The Lansing Journal's YouTube reach locally, and telling its story and meeting its audience via video.

Highlights

The Local News Accelerator helped The Lansing Journal reach these insights in several ways:



- **Audience research:** A comprehensive survey of Lansing news consumers helped identify the impressive reach of video: three-quarters of The Lansing Journal readers accessed content on YouTube, and two-thirds said they visited the YouTube content at least once a day. This research also helped highlight which content areas readers wanted more of (local government, arts & entertainment, community).
- **Improved branding:** LNA coaches helped The Lansing Journal professionalize their YouTube presence. The consistent branding complemented their authentic reporting and worked toward improving user trust and engagement.
- **Integrated content strategy:** Instead of YouTube content being written and produced separately, The Lansing Journal developed a comprehensive content strategy that aligned all of the content regardless of form with an audience-centered holistic approach to what they cover.
- **Innovative advertising strategies:** Instead of chasing low-value YouTube ads that depend on viral traffic, The Lansing Journal developed a few new ad products that meet the marketing needs of local businesses in Lansing. These produce higher revenue, are more sustainable and serve the mission of improving their community.

Summed up, The Lansing Journal refocused their YouTube work from chasing viral to serving local.

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

From	To	To (future)
Working to gather a large viral audience that could be monetized using national methods.	Transformed the YouTube channel to serve The Lansing Journal’s core audience and overall mission while contributing increased revenue.	Increasing local ad revenue by 46%, more than doubling revenue from YouTube advertising.

As if to underline the importance of reframing YouTube work, Supervisor Henyard was voted out of office in the middle of the LNA. Predictably, the traffic to The Lansing Journal’s video “Back to Boring Board Meetings” did not perform as well as their coverage of the brawl centered around Henyard at the township meeting a month earlier.

From	To
 <p>THE LANSING JOURNAL Keeping our community informed and connected</p> <p>Fistfight caps off otherwise productive Thornton Township meeting</p> <p>By Carole Sharwarko • January 29, 2025</p> <p>This brawl is not us, Thornton Township 250128</p>	 <p>RESET: Back to Boring Board Meetings 250204</p>

But through the LNA, The Lansing Journal was not just prepared but also excited about its future on YouTube. Armed with audience insights, a fresh brand, new advertising products and importantly a new approach to YouTube, the team developed confidence that their expertise and investments in video and YouTube are central to their mission and sustainability.

“It’s exciting for us to have these new YouTube products that are authentic to our local expertise and that meet a real need in our local community. And it’s a relief to move away from chasing views and clicks to generate revenue from YouTube ads, affiliate links and other non-local sources.”



Melanie Jongsma
Publisher, The Lansing Journal

The process

Building this confidence was not a straight path. During the period of the LNA, there were multiple pivots that were informed and enhanced by tools and focus that came with the program.

The Lansing Journal’s original intent was to capture and monetize the viral audience through an exploration of YouTube monetization and growth hack methods. YouTube is filled with videos where content creators share or sell tips and tricks for the seemingly infinite list of ways to grow your channel. The first bit of research identified that YouTube visits made just 4% of the revenue as site visits, essentially suggesting that growth would have to be massive for YouTube advertising to be compelling. This led The Lansing Journal to examine alternative ways to make money on YouTube including evaluations of making paid classes, selling merchandise, gear recommendations, commerce links and referral sponsorships. None of these were particularly promising due to a mix of not matching The Lansing Journal audience or not providing significant revenue opportunity.

Around this time, it became clear that the viral traffic was about to come to an abrupt end, leading to some soul-searching about the value of even using YouTube as a key content distributor. It takes significantly more time to make a good video, and if The Lansing Journal couldn’t drive even small revenue would it make sense to keep doing it?

Business strategies and tools

Two resources from the Local News Accelerator helped Jongsma and her team sort through this challenge. The first was the Business Model Canvas that helped clarify the business case for making YouTube content. Specifically focusing on the key value propositions and the market segments provided the insight that there was more than the viral audience to focus on. Further, guidance from LNA coaches encouraged The Lansing Journal to think about separate Business Model Canvases for consumers and businesses. It was this distinction that helped identify opportunities with local advertisers that would eventually be the bedrock of the commercial approach.

Business Model Canvas

Customer segments	YouTube watchers outside of Illinois; YouTube watchers in Illinois; local YouTube watchers; other YouTubers (local and non-local; advertisers/sponsors/philanthropy)
Value propositions	For the segment of our YouTube watchers who value community and want to understand (not simply be entertained by) the Tiffany Henyard saga, The Lansing Journal's local, in-person coverage will give them insider knowledge and inspire them to be more involved in their own communities. Unlike typical YouTubers who are sensational and transactional, our channel will inform and connect people respectfully because we are a trusted, careful, local presence.
Channels	Newsletter; YouTube; social; sales calls; YouTube comments; website
Revenue streams	What kind of relationship do I want with my customer? transactional, exclusive, occasional, mutual — define it
Key resources	YouTube advertising (increase views of existing videos); national sponsor (influencer); local advertisers who need a larger audience (Kdulche, Gayety's chocolate, Tiny's Flowers); philanthropy
Key activities	Camera; tripods, audio equipment; software; data analyst; analytics; design help; on-air reporting; video editing help covering meetings; sales calls; making sales materials; downloading; editing; uploading/SEO stuff; comment responses; research
Key partners	Medill; Is there an association of YouTube journalists?; board members; other local newspapers (Harvey World Herald, H-F Chronicle); other YouTubers
Cost structure	Production; time; opportunity costs

Research insights

The second asset was receiving audience research. The data was surprising to everyone because it illustrated the depth of the penetration YouTube had with The Lansing Journal readers. While the local videos looked small compared to their viral hits, they were significant when compared to the actual size of the local audience. The research also provided vivid detail about what kinds of coverage people wanted on YouTube — a list of over 100 suggestions that will be mined for content plans well into the future. Survey respondents also identified the channel as needing graphic improvements.

“Changes in our news cycle led to changes in our North Star,” said Jongsma. “It gave us a chance to refocus and refine what we needed from the Accelerator.”

With these insights, the project was reframed around the organization’s core mission. Focusing now on local consumers and advertisers, the team developed a new approach to YouTube with confidence that the defined value proposition and customer segments would deliver a sustainable revenue stream that will help The Lansing Journal grow.

This was immediately validated when Jongsma tested the new ad products with some key customers. The interest level was high, and she made her first sale before the Local News Accelerator completed. The Lansing Journal anticipates this trend continuing through the rest of 2025.

Customer value proposition builder

For (What customer segment?)	Adam Advertiser
looking to (what problem are they trying to solve? What situation are they trying to improve?)	Coasting on word of mouth but senses that might not be enough over time.
our (Product or service)	Video projects
will (Provide that benefit or alleviate what challenge?)	Convey Adam’s value to an audience that he’s not reaching and build confidence that he’s thinking about the future and participating in modern marketing
Unlike (list the primary alternative)	Other advertising he could / doing nothing
our (Product or service)	Video products
will (How are you setting yourself apart)	use local expertise at modern national scale
because (why should they believe you?)	He trusts us, has seen the value of our work and we have done video for ourselves and can prove the benefit in this market

Now, re-write your value prop so that it flows easily and can easily be read or stated.

For Adam Advertiser who is relying on word of mouth for customers’ senses this might not be enough. He is very busy but could be willing to hear about ways he could improve/modernize his customer acquisition efforts.

Lansing Journal video products will tell Adam’s story in a modern format that drives new customers and builds his confidence that he’s ahead of the curve.

Unlike other customer acquisition programs, LJ video products leverage local expertise (what LJ learned YT expert) and influence (LJ staff are known and trusted in video).

He will pick us because:

- 1) He trust us
- 2) He is compelled by the numbers
- 3) He doesn’t want to be behind the curve

For the segment of our YouTube watchers who value community and want to understand (not simply be entertained by) the Tiffany Henyard saga, The Lansing Journal’s local, in-person coverage will give them insider knowledge and inspire them to be more involved in their own communities. Unlike typical YouTubers who are sensational and transactional, our channel will inform and connect people respectfully because we are a trusted, careful, local presence.

The results

As predicted, audience engagement on YouTube has dropped since Henyard lost her election in February, but this decline has been entirely with out-of-market consumers. Against this backdrop, the positive results from participating in the LNA program hold even more value:

- New video products are forecasted to increase ad revenue by 46% and overall revenue by 9%. This will more than offset losses from reduced YouTube advertising, which would have been a net loss without these new products.
- Program of asking YouTube audience to sign up for emails increased email list size by 2%.
- Audience data informed the content strategy that serves as the backbone for content production, and suggestions from survey respondents are now reflected in daily work.
- Process of assigning and executing YouTube video work was streamlined into a global content plan which serves as an overall guide to content projection.
- The YouTube channel looks professional, increasing engagement and confidence of readers.
- Developed personas now a part of business and content planning.

Final Thoughts

“It feels good to know our audience through the extensive data Medill surveys provided,” Jongsma said. She recognizes and embraces her expertise that benefits readers as well as advertisers in her community.

Jongsma notes that it is common for The Lansing Journal to get affirming comments from YouTube viewers. “These comments are not just strokes for our egos; they are road signs that tell us whether or not we are serving our community,” she said. “These commenters are not just social media characters; they are real people that I occasionally meet in person at the post office or in the grocery store. These are the people The Lansing Journal has always wanted to serve. They found us on YouTube, and with help from the Local News Accelerator, they helped us find ourselves.”