

Windy City Times

CASE STUDY | DECEMBER 2024





How Windy City Times focused on growing its Chicago Social Butterflies newsletter as a means to expand the publication's digital reach and subscriptions. The Windy City Times team surveyed current and potential readers to determine their events-related interests and leaned into social media to garner additional subscribers and subsequent ad revenue for the publication's newly launched newsletter.

As a result, Windy City Times:

- Increased newsletter subscribers to 4,893 (from 200 at the start of the LNA program)
- Grew its newsletter open rate to 55%
- Created an Instagram account from scratch and gained 1,574 followers

A brief history of Windy City Times in relation to the community it serves.

The Windy City Times is the only news organization in Chicago devoted solely to covering the city's LGBTQ+ community. In publication since 1985, Windy City Times has published monumental stories—from an interview with then-Chicago Mayor Harold Washington about various gay rights issues, to a story revealing then-state senate candidate Barack Obama's views on marriage equality. Previously concentrated on print production, the publication adapted to the digital-age in 2020, switching to online-only with a focus on newsletters.

As part of its project with the Medill Local News Accelerator, Windy City Times aimed to significantly expand its subscriber list for its newly-launched Chicago Social Butterflies newsletter. The newsletter launched just over one month prior to the start of LNA with the goal of acting as a one-stop shop for all LGBTQ+ events in the local community. The newsletter is meant to help community members feel more engaged and connected in a post-pandemic world.

"As a newly out transgender woman, I'm looking for guidance on how to newly connect with the LBGTQIA+ community in Chicago, particularly (but not exclusively) with fellow trans individuals. I recently came out both personally and professionally, and I'm about to start HRT through Northwestern's Gender Pathways program. ... Thank you very much for the newsletter, it's going to be wonderfully helpful." - newsletter response.

What problem was Windy City Times trying to solve, and why was solving this problem strategically important for the news organization?

After moving to online-only in 2020, Windy City Times hadn't updated its newsletters to focus on its digital audience. The publication recognized a gap in LGBTQ+ coverage: with so many organizations (over 200) in the local LGBTQ+ community, there was no streamlined way to stay informed about everything happening; it was also challenging for people to feel connected because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the decentralization of information. So, the WCT team decided to generate an updated, digital-focused newsletter to fill this gap.



Focusing on launching newsletters also became of strategic importance as an additional means of generating ad revenue. The movement toward diversified revenue sources and emphasis on digital products is another step of building a more sustainable model for the publication.

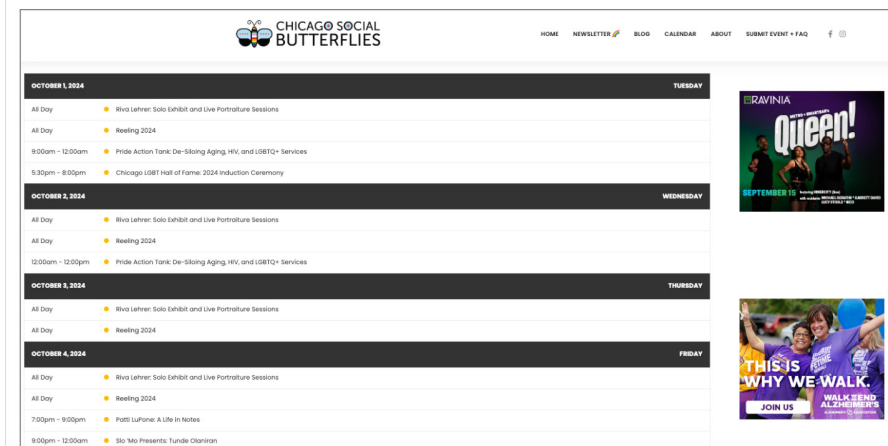
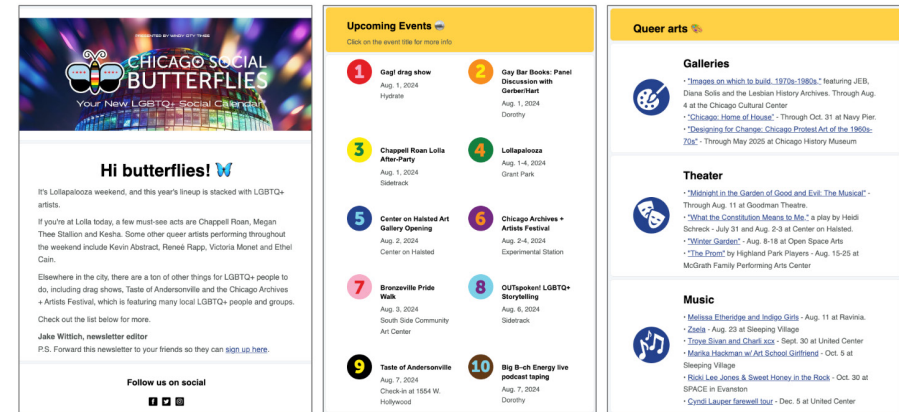
Windy City Times' Initial Goals

At the outset of the Windy City Times' involvement with the Local News Accelerator, the organization aimed to:

1. Reach 4,000 newsletter subscribers (up from 200 when it launched in March 2024).
2. Achieve a 50% newsletter open rate.
3. Gain at least 1,000 Instagram followers (up from 0 in March 2024).

How did Windy City Times go about solving its project?

Just over a month before the onset of LNA programming, the Windy City Times launched the Chicago Social Butterflies newsletter– and its associated website ChicagSocialButterflies.com– to build a centralized space for a calendar of local LGBTQ+ events. The team also created Instagram and Facebook pages to work in conjunction with the newsletter, further generating subscriptions and ad revenue.



Upon entering LNA, the organization set the stage for success in the program by turning ideas for Chicago Social Butterflies' mission into a narrowed vision statement:

"Chicago Social Butterflies is a free LGBTQ+ events calendar and weekly newsletter from Windy City Times. Currently, many LGBTQ+ folks feel disconnected, and it's hard to keep tabs on what the 200+ organizations and other event-makers in our community are up to. We aim to be a one-stop shop for local LGBTQ+ events and to strengthen our community by promoting connection."

The staff also utilized the From/To framework early in the program to outline comprehensive goals for the newsletter:

FROM	TO
Bi-weekly newsletter	Weekly newsletter
No formal website to house our calendar	Soft-launch phase of the Chicago Social Butterfiles website
Manual and infrequent posting on social media (just Facebook and Instagram)	Using Loomly as a scheduling software to post at least once daily on FB and IG
No social media ads for CSB	Running ads on FB and IG to recruit newsletter subscribers

Windy City Times worked to further develop the ChicagoSocialButterflies.com website. The website went from being only a means of gaining subscriptions to an additional product that hosts the community events calendar and complementary Instagram and Facebook profiles. The publication also tailored its social media strategy by investing in social media ads to boost sign ups on both Facebook and Instagram.

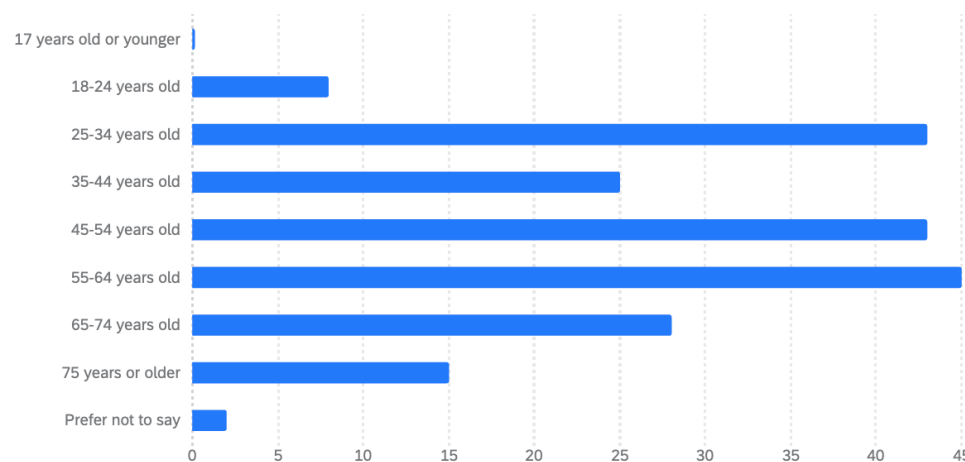
Medill surveyed readers to understand how they engaged with the Windy City Times and what they hoped to see from the publication in the future. Survey links were distributed via the publication's social media, email lists, and fliers that were distributed across neighborhoods of key readership. The survey received over 200 responses from a diverse range of audience members. The sheer amount of responses generated through email lists demonstrated that readers are invested in these products and their communities.

The survey revealed key insights into the publication's audience and readership, of which the Windy City Times used to tailor the content in its Chicago Social Butterflies newsletter.

1. Audience Age Demographic: The Windy City Times has strong engagement across many age groups. The high number of survey participants aged 25-34 is notable because this age group is often interested in attending social events. WCT could benefit from increasing outreach to the 18-24-year-old age group and developing news consumption habits among younger generations.



What is your age? 209 ⓘ



2. **Audience Gender/Sexuality Demographic:** The Windy City Times has a high number of readers who identify as gay (41%), white (83%) and male (45%). Survey respondents expressed a desire for growth surrounding lesbian and BIPOC coverage that would help increase connection with potential readers of alternative demographics.
3. **Audience Employment:** Interestingly, 22% of respondents said they are retired, so event coverage that takes place during a work day or allows older readers to engage with their communities through volunteering may cater to this segment of readers.
4. **Types of Events:**
 - a. Two-thirds of survey participants said they would not be interested in learning about more family-friendly events across the city. This suggests it may be important to direct different messages to different segments of the audience, with information about family-friendly events going only to readers who would be interested.
 - b. Nightlife events appear to be more widely popular with 14% of respondents saying they visit nightlife locations weekly and 31% saying they do so a few times a month.
 - c. Sixty-eight percent of survey participants expressed interest in sober events.
 - d. Community involvement proved important in this area, with many requests for events such as protests, activist organizations, benefits, political and intellectual meetups and service work opportunities.
 - e. Lesbian and women's events were requested and stated as previously lacking content several times.
5. **Events-Related Behaviors:**
 - a. In terms of events-related behaviors, a majority of respondents (58%) said they make plans both spontaneously and by planning ahead. However, only 8% of respondents said they are consistently spontaneous, whereas 34% said they usually plan ahead.
 - b. Over 31% of survey participants said they would be willing to travel over 10 miles, while only 16% said they would prefer to remain within 3 miles.
 - c. Money did not seem to be too much of a limiting factor when deciding on plans for a night out. Only 1% of respondents said they usually spend less than \$10 on a night out, whereas 34% responded they typically spend over \$50.
6. **Topics Lacking Coverage:** When asked what topics they wished the Windy City Times covered more, many survey participants mentioned suburban events, lesbian news, BIPOC issues, nonprofit features, volunteer opportunities and politics.

The Windy City Times utilized these results when curating events for future newsletters so as to appeal to the events-related needs, behaviors and interests of readers.

Creating a stronger LGBTQ+ community in Chicago is at the core of the Windy City Times and Chicago Social Butterflies. The survey provided valuable insights into the specific types of events readers are most interested in learning about from the Windy City Times and Chicago Social Butterflies.

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I read WCT for info about local and regional LGBTQ news, issues and events. I appreciate a perspective from LGBTQ lens.

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Windy City Times has been entertainment as well as a guide in one form or another for decades. The resources provided to our community and me personally have been invaluable.

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Information that isn't filtered through a corporate lens. I trust what I read there.

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Amazing work being done by dedicated people.

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News that may not be a part of the mainstream conversation.

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“

I want to find out the news about our LGBTQ+ community. I get information that isn't filtered through a corporate media lens. I trust what I read there.

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“

It's the best local LGBTQ+ news. Other outlets don't cover a lot of the stories that WCT does and it's the only reliable way to keep up with what's going on.

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Results

The Chicago Social Butterflies newsletter grew to 4,893 subscribers by the end of the program in early October, after beginning with 200 in March 2024. The Instagram account also grew from zero in March to nearly 1,600, while the newsletter had an open rate of 55%. From the time the program ended through the end of October, Chicago Social Butterflies hit the 5,000 subscriber mark and gained more than 200 more Instagram followers.

What worked?

Blue Engine webinars were helpful in showing best practices and different approaches for building the newsletter's audience to meet their goals. The organization also benefited from a Newsletters 101 course and the newsletter review conducted by Blue Engine.

There's still more work to do in terms of adjusting the website to better promote the newsletters, but these courses provided a foundation to think about how to best approach making those improvements.

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

While the organization far exceeded its goals for growing newsletter subscribers and audience, it still wants to spend more time improving newsletter ad placement on the Windy City Times and Chicago Social Butterflies websites and creating a more streamlined process for newsletter sign ups. Ideas have included pop-up forms to sign up for newsletters and use of more prominent banners promoting the newsletters within stories.

What was surprising or challenging?

After the success Windy City Times saw with the Chicago Social Butterflies newsletter, it launched a second newsletter, News on Q, focused on news and features. However, it was originally being sent to subscribers' Gmail Promotions tab.

Ultimately, the problem was resolved after adjusting the original email (eblast@windycitymediagroup.com) to look less like spam (news@windycitymediagroup.com).

What are key takeaways or advice for other news organizations to learn from and/or apply to their own LNA experience?

The organization emphasized the value in short two-week sprints as a helpful way of organizing its goals into achievable slices and keeping everything on track. It also allowed time for reflection, evaluation and data collection to see what was working, what wasn't and what to prioritize over the next two-week sprint.

"Lean on your networks and relationships you have with other newsrooms. We have a lot to learn from each other, and this collaboration across newsrooms was really helpful to us throughout this program." - Windy City Times Managing Editor Jake Wittich

"Giving monthly presentations about our project, goals, successes and pressure points was really valuable in helping us learn how to tell our story and pitch it to potential readers, funders and other supporters." - Windy City Times Managing Editor Jake Wittich

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

Based on the success of Chicago Social Butterflies, Windy City Times now plans to revive its sister publications En La Vida and BlackLines as newsletters focused on Chicago's Latin and Black queer communities.

Both En La Vida and BlackLines were previously community newspapers from 1996-2004, and most of the archives have since been digitized by Windy City Times. These newsletters will include news stories and features and look at their archives. Both are planned to launch in early Spring 2025.

The lessons Windy City Times learned through the Accelerator will help guide the publication's focus on these new newsletter products. For example, WCT found that running ads on social media for the Chicago Social Butterflies newsletter was their most successful way of gaining new subscribers. They plan to take a similar approach with En La Vida and BlackLines.

The publication also plans to promote these newsletters on its website and use data collection and insights to better understand the impact their work is having.

