

WTTW

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Northwestern | MEDILL
Local News Accelerator



How WTTW News discovered an unmet need that journalism could address, built a new email product to fill that need, and plans to research and connect with its new audience to enhance WTTW News' influence and brand.

WTTW News used multiple rounds of market research and SMART goals to draw in a more diverse, younger audience seeking a specific role for news media in their lives.

As a result, WTTW:

- Launched a newsletter that...
 - drove a 29% increase in subscribers in the first two months and
 - yielded a 28% increase in open rate compared to the organization's other branded newsletters.

A brief history of WTTW in relation to the communities it serves.

WTTW News is the journalism arm of Chicago's PBS member television station in Chicago. It includes a nightly news show, Chicago Tonight, and delivers additional online coverage of the arts, politics, crime, education, health, science and other topics for Chicago's diverse neighborhoods and communities.

WTTW was originally founded in 1955 to provide educational television content to the City of Chicago. Since then, WTTW has expanded to a multiplatform public media organization and destination local news site, all while maintaining a focus on producing audience-driven content that enriches the lives of Chicagoans.

WTTW's programming reaches a diverse audience of over 1.9 million monthly viewers in Chicago and surrounding Midwestern states.

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

WTTW is facing a shrinking donor base and a decline in viewership on its television station. The news audience is increasingly homogeneous and aging. Internal research suggests that WTTW's overall mission—to "enrich lives, engage communities and inspire exploration"—still resonates in the Chicago area. WTTW News also has strong credibility in Chicagoland.

But the WTTW News team knew that it must expand beyond its focus on hard news topics like politics. It also needed a specific strategy that attracts a younger audience and a plan to reach out on digital platforms. Without new plans, the entire news department at WTTW was at risk.

WTTW joined the Medill Local News Accelerator with plans to launch a newsletter, *The Daily Chicagoan*, that would serve a younger audience.



WTTW's Initial Goals

WTTW began the Local News Accelerator program with a mission statement and a series of tangible goals spanning growth in audience demographics and newsletter open rates.

Mission: Our newsletter will inspire Chicagoans to explore the city; see and learn new things; feel more connected to the Chicago area and one another; and be informed about things that are important to their lives.

Metrics:

- *Double newsletter subscribers by the end of 2024*
- *Increase open rate to 40%*
- *The newsletter audience will be more reflective of the makeup of Chicago*
- *After six months, one out of four subscribers will say they “explored” Chicago based on what they read in the newsletter, or if they better understood the backstory of Chicago’s major news stories*

On the final two metrics, WTTW teamed up with the Accelerator to conduct a survey to determine demographic changes in its audience and determine how many subscribers used the newsletter to explore.

How did WTTW go about solving its project?

WTTW began changing its newsroom ahead of the Accelerator process. It reallocated resources from its television broadcast to hire additional digital media personnel, including someone specifically to manage the email newsletter it would create with help of the Accelerator.

Then, as part of the program, WTTW:

1. Embarked on a series of unique, product-driven research projects meant to uncover topics and approaches that were neglected by most local news outlets.
2. Built SMART goals that included metrics, such as growing email newsletter subscribers, and community-focused goals to measure whether WTTW News’ work was having an impact in the lives of its readers and viewers.



3. Launched a new email newsletter based off its research and goals, and built a system to continue to improve the newsletter based on direct consumer feedback.

Research

WTTW knew it had to think differently to understand Chicagoland news consumers. It took a three-pronged approach:

- Traditional market research: The Accelerator sent out online surveys targeting area news consumers to ask about their interests and used a graduate-level Medill market research class to do in-depth interviews with younger news consumers about their preferences.
- A competitive analysis that examined existing email newsletters, what they covered and their approach to the news.
- A product approach that asked respondents how important and how satisfied they are with different aspects of news.

The third item was a new approach for WTTW and was intended specifically to identify unmet needs in the community that its new newsletter could fulfill.

For example, WTTW asked respondents to tell them how important it was for them to get:

- More of the “back story” on local political issues, such as historical context.
- Immediate updates on the latest political news: votes, new proposals and other announcements from local political leaders.
- Basic facts of a political issue (a quick explanation of the issue, dollar amounts, specifics in the proposal and similar facts and figures) with no other analysis.
- Multiple perspectives on the major political decisions including your point of view, those that conflict with yours, and those in between.

It was no surprise that respondents thought each was important to varying degrees. WTTW then followed up, asking how satisfied they were with what they were getting.

For example, over half of respondents said it was important to get immediate updates on political news, yet 18% were dissatisfied with what they received.

Meanwhile, 71% of respondents said getting the back story was important and nearly half (44%) were dissatisfied with what they were getting.

This approach, coupled with the competitive analysis and additional market research, pointed the team to strategies that would fill an information need in the community.

Below are examples of this approach, with green highlighted sections displaying areas respondents indicated as important to them also being areas they felt unsatisfied with in regard to current content.

Politics: Important/Satisfied Comparison

| | NOT IMPORTANT | UNDECIDED | IMPORTANT |
|-----------------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|
| Back story | 11% | 18% | 71% |
| Immediate updates | 14% | 29% | 56% |
| Basic Facts | 11% | 23% | 66% |
| Multiple perspectives | 11% | 18% | 71% |

| | DISSATISFIED | NEITHER SATISFIED NOR DISSATISFIED | SATISFIED |
|-----------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|-----------|
| Back story | 44% | 31% | 25% |
| Immediate updates | 18% | 35% | 47% |
| Basic Facts | 29% | 36% | 35% |
| Multiple perspectives | 40% | 32% | 28% |



WTTW took a similar approach to entertainment, events and arts coverage. The publication asked its current WTTW digital subscribers and non-WTTW digital subscribers how important it was to visit parts of Chicago they had never been to and how satisfied they were in their ability to do so.

The results showed a stark difference between the audience it had and the audience it sought to attract. Less than half of current WTTW users thought it was important to explore Chicago, but nearly three-quarters of non-users considered it important. There was also a difference in their satisfaction. The chart below shows the difference and dark purple shaded areas highlights the point of view of non-WTTW subscribers.

Visiting Chicago: Important/Satisfied

| | NOT IMPORTANT | UNDECIDED | IMPORTANT |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|
| Visiting Chicago: WTTW Users | 20% | 33% | 47% |
| Visiting Chicago: Non-WTTW Users | 8% | 19% | 73% |

| | DISSATISFIED | NEITHER SATISFIED NOR DISSATISFIED | SATISFIED |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| Visiting Chicago: WTTW Users | 28% | 34% | 38% |
| Visiting Chicago: Non-WTTW Users | 36% | 36% | 29% |

Traditional market research and the competitive analysis helped complete a full analysis to inform the WTTW strategy. It identified certain topics of interest to the Chicago audience, such as the environment, entertainment, history, crime and politics.

But it also suggested that this next generation of news consumers were less interested in reviews of food or how a great concert hall looked than they were how these places connected to their communities and to Chicago. WTTW needed to add all these things to its steady diet of “hard” news on politics and other topics.

Finally, WTTW conducted a competitive analysis, breaking down which news outlets were trying to address these needs, how they wrote about them, and how they arranged their email newsletters.

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| BRAND | WHEN | FREQUENCY | WHAT | SUMMARY/ANALYSIS |
|----------------------|----------|-----------|--------------------------|--|
| CBS Chicago | 2:00 PM | DAILY | “Your Morning Headlines” | One main story (a shooting at a highway car crash), four mini local stories, the weather, four sports stories, and four stories about CBS shows. |
| CRAINS CHICAGO | 3:00 PM | DAILY | Afternoon 10 | Linked images and headlines of 10 Crain’s stories |
| CRAINS TRIBUNE | 2:30 PM | DAILY | Afternoon Briefing | -200 word intro followed by several top stories from the tribune. each story has under 100 words of explanatory text |
| SUN TIMES | 3:00 PM | DAILY | Afternoon Edition | What we should model our newsletter after. |
| AXIOS | 6:50 AM | DAILY | Axious Chicago | One of the best local newsletters going. |
| CHICAGO ON THE CHEAP | 4:00 PM | DAILY | Chicago On The Cheap | “Your local resource for freebies, discounts, and deals.” |
| CHICAGO READER | 11:00 AM | DAILY | Daily Reader | One main story plus four smaller stories. Bare bones but busy. |



Results



Based on research and workshops through the Local News Accelerator, WTTW News launched a new email newsletter The Daily Chicagoan, which included customized, original writing and a mission to give Chicago the backstory and inspire exploration of their communities and the news itself. The newsletter launched in August, replacing the publication's previous email, which automatically distributed the latest news headlines on a daily basis.

The Chicagoland area responded immediately. In the first two months:

- Email newsletter subscribers increased by 29%
- Open rate of the email newsletter increased 28%

Often, when a new product is introduced, there is a natural spike in subscribers and open rate. But soon after that, a significant number of new sign-ups unsubscribe or their engagement declines. That hasn't been the case with The Daily Chicagoan. It has kept its subscribers, and the open rate has remained steady.

WTTW News also built a way to continue to survey new subscribers to see how many will utilize the newsletter in alignment with its mission of exploration into both the city and news. Results are expected after the first six months of publishing and will help WTTW News continue to evolve its product and overall mission.

In the end, WTTW went:

| FROM | TO |
|--|--|
| A newsletter where decisions were driven by internal opinions or how people used their content (TV ratings, Google analytics). | A newsroom that asks consumers questions that draw insight into unmet needs and other questions that make it easier to build new or enhance existing products. |
| Automated email newsletter designed to drive traffic back to the website. | A newsletter written by a staff member that serves a specific purpose and is designed to stand alone as a unique product that serves the reader’s needs. |
| An audience that is mostly wealthy and older than 60 and included established civic leaders in the Chicagoland area. | An audience that includes its current readership and viewership, in addition to a 30s-to-50s cohort that is more racially and geographically diverse and is included in the next-generation of civic leadership. |
| A newsroom with an emphasis on “Hard” news about politics and other news of the day. | A newsroom that also serves as an outlet for greater arts, entertainment, science and nature coverage. |
| A television-focused newsroom. | A more digitally focused newsroom. |



What worked?

- *A written* email newsletter: The newsletter is integrated with WTTW's TV program and web platform. For example, there are links from the newsletter back to the website. But the newsletter is designed as a stand-alone entity, so it does not require engagement with TV or website content.
- Survey research: Through Medill-sponsored research as a part of the Accelerator, WTTW gained a more in-depth understanding of the audience they hoped to reach, allowing the team to carefully curate newsletter content for this audience.

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

- The initial plan was to launch five email newsletters on different topics. The team quickly determined this was impossible within the timeframe and decided to hone in on just one new product, The Daily Chicagoan.

What was surprising or challenging?

- Subscriber plateau: After an initial wave of newsletter sign-ups, the number of new subscribers plateaued. The team is examining new email acquisition tactics.
- Integration of the newsletter into the day-to-day workflow of the newsroom: WTTW staff are working on the best way to discuss the newsletter in editorial meetings, which will create more unique content for the newsletter and leverage more of the editorial team.
- The scope of the newsletter: Because of the expectation of original content on topics like entertainment, as well as unique angles on daily news to include the backstory, it has been difficult to deliver a consistent product that emphasizes backstory and exploration.

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

- Tactics, metrics and strategies will change (and that is OK). The concept of measuring and defining “exploration” started to evolve immediately as the newsroom began executing the newsletter. It’s natural for an innovative new product to change its metrics and goals based on consumer feedback, workflow, execution and other realities. That’s fine to do as long as the long-term mission remains the same and the decisions are data- and consumer-driven.
- Consumer focus and feedback should never stop. It’s critical to keep getting feedback from the audience on what is working and what isn’t. In addition, the team needs to regularly review the product. WTTW has a weekly meeting that reviews the performance of the newsletter through the lens of its unique brand and mission. One week after launch, WTTW News sought out critiques of the newsletter from Medill Local News Accelerator coaches to get perspectives they may have been missing.
- Internal communication and evangelization can never begin too early. The earlier newsroom staff understand a new project, the earlier they will be able to meaningfully contribute to it. In addition, other department notices need to be updated through the CEO. Executives must be solicited for feedback and hear the strategy and mission over and over to be on the same page.
- Find new ways to survey consumers. Newsroom surveys still rely heavily on direct questions like: What would you like us to cover? These are increasingly ineffective. Review how other industries are doing market research and mimic it.
- Even in a news market like Chicago with plenty of competitors, there are still unmet needs. Any new initiative has to answer this question: What does the community need from us? And is anyone doing it (or is no one doing it as good as it needs to be done)?
- Start focused, define success and scale up. Trying to execute a broad vision for a new product may be the end goal. But are there smaller milestones you can build out? For example, WTTW scaled back its plan for more newsletters. The newsroom still plans to launch more newsletters. But the emphasis now is mastering its primary newsletter, learning from it and launching from there.

Where is the newsroom going from here? How will WTTW apply what it learned in LNA moving forward?

WTTW continues to expand The Daily Chicagooan, seeking new ways to build its email subscriber base and exploring ways to integrate the newsletter into the day-to-day newsroom environment. The organization also aims to continue gathering audience feedback and survey results to better inform their newsletter content decisions.

WTTW plans to apply what it learned from the Accelerator and the launch of The Daily Chicagooan to future newsletter products and launches.



Our newsroom has changed, the revelations of what the audience wants has had an impact on all our reporting. We are more focused on the audience than ever before, more dedicated to developing new ways of telling stories and delivering the stories and information our audience wants and needs.

Jay Smith, news director at WTTW

