

2023-2024

REVENUE
BEACON
COHORT
CASE
STUDIES

WELCOME

Starting in late 2023, five innovative and creative newsrooms — AL.com, Civil Eats, The Dallas Morning News, The Keene Sentinel and WSHU — explored new ways of earning revenue tied to their solutions journalism. They prototyped and tested new solutions journalism-based products, honed their pitches, and sought support from community organizations, businesses and their audiences. Details of what they did and what they learned can be found in the case studies below. Shorter summaries can be found [here](#).

Linda Shaw,
SJN director of beacons and advanced practice

From late 2023 through most of 2024, AL.com sought sponsorships for some of our outlet's education journalism, particularly the work that highlighted solutions coverage.

Staff members at AL.com are used to developing content that will be pitched to sponsors, but that content is typically sports- or entertainment-focused. Pitching news coverage was a new experiment for everyone on our editorial and sales teams.

We pursued and won a \$15,000 sponsorship for a weekly education newsletter that frequently highlights solutions coverage. And we pitched underwriters on a package of solutions-focused teacher profiles. These projects helped our team explore new revenue streams, learn how to pitch solutions news coverage and develop more relationships across the company.

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Who we are & what we did

AL.com is the largest news outlet in Alabama and one of the largest local news brands in the country. We reach more than 1 million viewers each day through online and social media brands. Our newsroom gets revenue in a number of different ways, including locally sold advertising, programmatic revenue and subscriptions. Several newsroom teams, such as sports, also often get sponsors to underwrite certain types of content.

A number of our news teams, such as The Alabama Education Lab, are experimenting with different ways to diversify revenue.

The Ed Lab staff regularly reports solutions stories with the goal of highlighting best practices in K-12 education and encouraging more schools and communities in the state to adopt them. We also produce two weekly newsletters and social media posts.

As we explored revenue for education coverage and Education Lab projects as part of The Solutions Journalism Network's Revenue Beacon Cohort, our main challenge was helping our advertising and sales teams to think of education journalism and other hard-news content as a sales opportunity.

Initially, we had a few different ideas for products and revenue strategies geared around a central operating aim: The Alabama Education Lab wants to be an empathetic partner for

parents and communities through radical engagement that meets specific needs.

We ended up with two main ideas: One, an effort to land a sponsor for Ed Chat, a newsletter with about 15,000 subscribers that explores a topic in education each week; and two, finding an underwriter for a series of profiles of teachers successfully helping schools make gains on state testing.

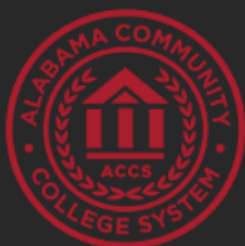
Both projects offered opportunities for our sales team to see education coverage – and solutions journalism coverage – as attractive options for corporate partners.

The sponsored newsletter essentially served as a practice run for our education editor, Ruth Serven Smith, to learn how to develop a sponsorship pitch, work with the sales team and manage the project.

We began publishing newsletters with a sponsor blurb in May; it has been a very straightforward campaign, with updated text weekly. (Since the newsletter had already been created, there were no new costs associated with the project.)

A message from our newsletter sponsor:

What matters to you? What matters to you matters to your local community college, too. Give us a call at 1-855-206-2671 or visit www.alabama.edu to find a local community college whose programs can help you reach your goals to achieve what matters.



REAL. *Life.* **EDUCATION.**

Number of the week: \$6.4 billion

A proposed budget is just that – a proposal, likely to change substantially in the next nine months before the legislature and Gov. Kay Ivey sign off.

But it's always worth taking a look at the State Department of Education's requested budget to see what officials are prioritizing.

Serven Smith began developing our “Teachers of Alabama” project in November 2023. Reporters identified and interviewed teachers in February 2024. Stories published on AL.com in October 2024.

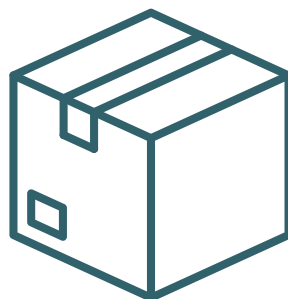
Serven Smith had worked on standard newspaper “special packages” at previous outlets, which started with an idea, then the selection of people to profile. The Education Lab team approached “Teachers of Alabama” differently. Eligible schools and teachers were identified through a rigorous analysis of state test scores and data — proving that the teachers indeed were effective — rather than basing selections on a teacher’s personal story or a nomination. We then interviewed other educators to ensure that each article could stand up as a solutions story that demonstrated specific techniques teachers used to improve student outcomes, which other teachers could adopt, too.

The package included written content that would be published online. We also identified other opportunities for sponsor placement in accompanying social media and video content. News and sales teams developed a package that both advanced editorial goals and also provided an attractive, well-rounded option for corporate partners. The project was pitched at around \$35,000, and underwriters would get 40 placements in written and social media and video content. This project did involve more time and resources than the newsletter sponsorship, since we wanted in-person interviews and professional photos, which required visits to schools two to three hours away. In addition to reporting time and expenses, we spent about \$1,000 on freelance photo assignments.

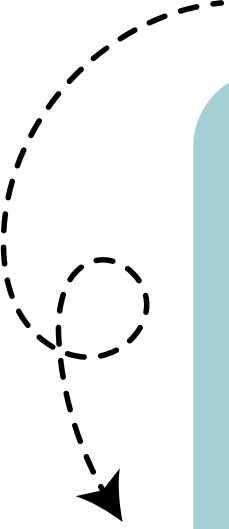
Our sales team made good progress pitching to banks and other local businesses, but the package didn’t sell by our editorial deadline. AL.com still published the teacher profiles, and is gathering metrics and tracking responses. We’re interested in developing the package again next year and are hopeful we can sell it then.

Takeaways

- AL.com journalists learned to avoid journalism jargon when talking with sales colleagues, and to refer to solutions journalism simply as “news stories that demonstrate positive change in a community, and an opportunity for a brand to demonstrate that it also cares about that community.” That was language that sales and marketing could understand and successfully take to clients.
- Both editorial projects — the newsletter and the teacher profiles — were ones we already wanted to do, which helped motivate the reporting team to do the work even though the finished product and timeline remained dependent on help from sales.
- While we didn’t end up selling this package before our editorial deadline, we ironed out some kinks between news and sales teams, figured out how to build the project together and hope to work on a similar package again in 2025.
- Initially, these sponsorship efforts were assigned to the education sales team, which manages accounts with colleges and universities. And while the newsletter underwriter is a community college system, we eventually realized that a better target audience for “Teachers of Alabama” would be businesspeople who serve and support local communities around Alabama.
- While our sales team has successfully attracted underwriters for sports journalism and our “This Is Alabama” brand, it was much more difficult to get buy-in for a news project, and it took time for the sales team to understand how to incorporate “Teachers of Alabama” into what they do. One big breakthrough happened when we had a chance to pitch “Teachers of Alabama” in a large meeting between our news and advertising departments. Serven Smith pitched the idea as a new, innovative approach to revenue, which top leaders supported, and suddenly things began moving.



Coach Virginia Arrigucci's Insights



In its approach to revenue, AL.com's Education Lab in many ways feels similar to a nonprofit, even though it is housed within a much larger newsroom with a traditional advertising sales team.

While EdLab has strong potential to attract support from a revenue stream like foundations, there wasn't enough time to develop an entirely new revenue stream during this time frame. It was clear that EdLab was going to have to work with AL.com's ad sales team and pursue corporate sponsorships, which it had not done before.

I was impressed by how quickly Serven Smith built a relationship with the sales team and got up to speed on how its process works. It was natural for EdLab to start with the person who sells advertising to educational institutions. EdLab gained a newsletter sponsorship in pretty short order, which was a great win.


The bigger win, though, was continuing to make the case for how EdLab could be supported by other corporate sponsors, countering the perception that education content was too negative. Internal relationship building is an often-overlooked part of the revenue process, and this team was persistent in making the connection.

What was critical to the win was listening to the needs of EdLab's revenue colleagues at AL.com, and starting with something familiar. Profiles were a familiar concept that sales had sold successfully in the past, so it was a solid entry point into selling education.

I hope the team keeps going with its pursuit of corporate sponsorship, and I hope it considers more projects like these that engage a more general audience. Bringing in new readers beyond policy-minded super fans has been a goal of Serven Smith's, and solutions journalism is a great way to attract those audiences while appealing to corporate sponsors.

This team showed that there is room for innovation within traditional ad sales, and I have no doubt that AL.com can make EdLab self-sustaining by continuing to build corporate sponsorship as well as other new revenue streams.

Civil Eats



Our independent, investigative journalism about the U.S. food system is supported by members and donors like you.

[Become a Member for \\$6/mo.](#)

Check Out Our New Crash Course

We are excited to announce our first-ever **Crash Course: Climate Solutions in Food & Farming**.

This email-based course will cover the basics of how climate change is affecting the food system, and some of the solutions that can address them.

Every week in June, you'll receive a newsletter guiding you through the analysis of the climate issues, examples of climate solutions and a curated list of related reporting. You'll also have access to a Slack discussion group with our team and fellow participants and an online discussion led by Civil Eats' Senior Staff Reporter and Contributing Editor, Lisa Held. We are offering this course at a low introductory price of \$15.





Three Stories You Need to Read

Water vs. money vs. farming: Jennifer Clithorn's 2022 investigation, "As Drought Hits Farms, Investors Lay Claim to Colorado Water," offers a deep look at an important issue: When water policy reshapes farm country.

This course is for you if you want to:

- Get up to speed quickly on how climate change is affecting the food system
- Learn more about solutions to the climate crisis
- Join a community to connect and share ideas and best practices

For the past 15 years, Civil Eats has explored the intersection of food, agriculture, and climate. This course draws on our expertise to help you understand the powerful climate solutions that exist in the food system today.

Join us to get up to speed on climate solutions in food and farming for just \$15!

Civil Eats entered the Solutions Journalism Network's Revenue Beacon Cohort hoping to build connections with educators — presumably at the university level — to bring our reporting to students. Through working with other newsrooms in the cohort and our coaches, we began conducting informational interviews with educators and others working with students.

After struggling to talk to enough professors, we ended up making a pretty significant pivot to creating an email-based learning course, with the goal of helping people get up to speed on a topic on which Civil Eats has deep expertise: How climate change is affecting the food system, and some solutions that can begin to address it.

We created the course in about six weeks, promoted and sold it for an additional five weeks, and hosted a Zoom meeting to discuss the course at the end. We earned \$5,280 in revenue from the 350 people who signed up, brought in another \$384 from 10 new paying members, learned a lot about how to create and promote paid products like this, and will be adapting this work for future courses.

Who we are

We are a small nonprofit newsroom celebrating our 15th year of covering the U.S. food system, focused especially on the intersections of agriculture, climate, food policy and food justice, and emphasizing solutions journalism in most of our reporting.

The problem we are trying to solve

We joined the cohort with the initial idea of expanding our audience among college students, teachers and professors, and also to explore other ways to use our 15 years of largely solutions-focused reporting to create new offerings that could generate revenue and reach new audiences.

What we decided to prototype and why

We created the course in May 2024; we announced the course and opened sales on May 29, and started sending the weekly emails on Thursday, June 6. New emails were sent every Thursday; participants were added to the list when they signed up, and received any emails that had already been sent.

We also created a Slack channel where we led conversations about the topic featured in each email to encourage discussion among the participants. In mid-July, after the email course was complete, we hosted a Zoom event to bring participants together to hear from one of our writers and one of our editors, and to talk with one another about what they learned.

Internally, we had a lot of discussions about the price of the course. We debated giving it free to paying members, giving it free to everyone, or charging anywhere from \$5 to \$50. We settled on \$15 because that was low enough to make it an impulse purchase, but high enough that it might generate real revenue. Also, 2024 is our 15th anniversary, so \$15 seemed like a good way to help celebrate that.

Pivots along the way

We initially started with the idea of creating a learning curriculum for professors — could we build a single lesson or multiple lessons out of our climate solutions reporting? In order to do it in a way that would be helpful to professors, we spoke to a number of them, and found that their lesson planning was far ahead of our timeline, so we would need to revisit it in a few months or a year to figure out if it would work. The budget would also pose a problem, as most educators don't have enough discretionary funds to spend on lessons like these.

Had we not been in this cohort, we probably would have pursued this project anyway, since we have had a goal of doing more educational work for a couple of years now.

Other pivots included talking to student leaders at campuses to see if they would bring us to their school to present to a sustainability club or other group, and leading a teach-in to bring a bunch of educators together to learn the topic from us and take it back to their classrooms. None of these seemed feasible, either in the eight-month timeline for this cohort, or with the bandwidth we have.

What worked best

The fact that we were able to create this course in less than a month (after several months of brainstorming) was a huge success.

The iterative process encouraged in this cohort really helped us explore the possibilities that different approaches could offer. Without the support of the coaches and the cohort meetings, we would have stuck with one idea much longer, and not tried other options.

The technology situation worked really well — we were able to automate the emails so that once we created the content for each of the four emails that constituted the course, we could focus on sales and promotion, and everyone received all the emails no matter when they signed up.

What could have worked better

We would have benefited from more time to promote and sell the course, so we could create more of a campaign sales plan and try to reach more audiences outside our core readership. (From the time sales opened to the start of the course was about a week.) We also could have done a better job of setting expectations early on, with a more detailed welcome message (and a “let us get to know you” survey at the beginning), and had more time to get participants to fill out the survey at the end.

This course required a lot of work. Civil Eats staff spent dozens of hours creating it, with more work needed to manage the Slack conversations, create the Zoom event at the end, and so on. We expect future courses to be slightly less work since the template is built, but we will still need to invest time and energy in creating and promoting them, so we will need to modify our approach a bit to ensure they will be worth the effort.

The Slack discussion groups were not as dynamic as we would have liked, and the Zoom event at the end also had pretty low participation. It would be great if the discussions were more self-directed or participant-led.

What we learned/biggest insights

This worked! We discovered very quickly that people were interested in this new product, and that there was a pretty strong demand for an offering like this.

The course brought us new people who were not subscribers, members or donors. Survey results indicated that people experienced Civil Eats journalism in a new way.

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One key was making the sales part as frictionless as possible — having an easy sign-up and a relatively low price were key. It was definitely an “impulse purchase” for some participants.

Don’t despair when you’re in the inevitable ‘messy middle’ of a design process. We benefited from learning the whole process — especially the fact that you can’t see your way out of it in the messy middle. But when we finally got out of that part, it was such a relief and crystal clear. The Civil Eats team was very enthusiastic about finding a new way to showcase our work and also to bring in new readers and new revenue sources. Before we do future courses, we will need to think more about how we capture the traffic, how we drive participants to our site and how we encourage them to stick around after the course is done. And how to get them to become paying members or donors, of course. We also need to learn how to set up a way to track and report sales, so we can see more about how people get to our payment page to better keep tabs on referrals.

How much we earned – and expect to earn

We took in \$5,280 from 350 participants. We also signed up 10 new members, which meant \$384 in new member revenue, and (as part of the total) brought in \$930 in additional revenue from existing members, who paid for the course in addition to their membership fees.

Resources required

Our membership manager, Kalisha Bass, and our operations director, Matt Wheeland, probably spent about 60 hours developing the course. We brought in our audience engagement editor to help create the newsletters, which took several hours. Our senior staff reporter was key to shaping the email content and was the co-host of the Zoom event. We had additional editorial help from several editors in fine-tuning the emails themselves.

We also got several hours of assistance from our revenue consultant, BlueLena, to create the automations that let participants receive the emails. This work will be useful for future courses, but it was a significant expense — around \$1,500.

Overall the course work probably cost us roughly \$12,000.

What’s next

We have strong support and encouragement from our executive director, and plan to create another crash course soon at the basic level.

The next course will be much more scaled-back — just the emails with no Slack or Zoom component, and we will probably offer them continually, so that anyone can buy them at any time.

In addition, based on the post-course survey (which, with only 22 responses, was not a super-representative sample), the majority of respondents wanted a more in-depth course with more features; they also thought the existing course was worth \$15 but not more. We are thinking about exploring various ways to supply a more indepth course.

The respondents were open to just about any future topic we would want to pursue.

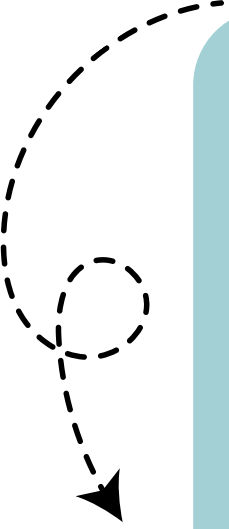
When we launch the next course, we plan to include a basic “who are you” survey in the welcome email, asking more questions as a starting point: Who are you, where do you live, how are you connected to Civil Eats, how are you connected to the food system, what would make this course successful for you?

Best advice

Be flexible and open; it’s worth figuring out how to give course participants information quickly and in a frictionless way. Find a way to repurpose your evergreen content. Find out what your readers want from your solutions journalism, and what you have the capacity to create. There is value in making it easier for people to learn about solutions on any subject.

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Insights from Coach Virginia Arrigucci



The Civil Eats team was the smallest newsroom in the cohort, and I was so impressed by how dedicated they were to serving their readers and their mission throughout the cohort.

Their first concept was rooted in feedback they heard from professors who wanted to use Civil Eats content in the classroom. The revenue piece was pretty difficult for that idea, but they kept trying to make it work. They really wanted to help the professors!

The team finally made the tough decision to pivot more dramatically to a new idea that was much easier to execute. It worked because newsletters were something the team members were already familiar with, and Bass already knew the tactics for reader revenue.

Some essentials that made the course work were having a marketing and design person engaged and creating a technologically smart sign-up process.

The promotion included displaying a pop-up on the Civil Eats site and cross-promotion in its other newsletters. The name Crash Course drew people in, and the logo and design scheme were fun and attractive. They conveyed the concept of the product well, which was something light and approachable.

Civil Eats put a lot of effort into the checkout process for the course, and it paid off. I wouldn't underestimate how much something like Apple Pay integration can increase sign-ups.

Overall, the members of this small team were effective working within their wheelhouse using the tools they already knew well. They had strong support from everyone at Civil Eats — from leadership to reporters to designers — which was impressive.

I hope the Civil Eats team will continue to build on the Crash Course concept, and I hope it develops more products based on audience feedback. It has loyal readers who are quite eager for more opportunities to support Civil Eats. I'm very proud of the determination of the members of this time, and how they didn't let the frustrating process of pivoting stop them. In the end, they created a great product.

The Dallas Morning News and KERA (Arts Access)

We used SJN's Revenue Beacon Cohort to elevate Arts Access, a community-funded partnership between The Dallas Morning News, a major metropolitan daily news organization, and KERA, a public media organization with radio, digital and TV offerings. Arts Access covers arts, music and culture through an equity lens. Sparked by the coaching we received as part of the cohort, we hosted a series of events to build engagement with a younger, more diverse audience, introducing many to our outlets for the first time and producing solutions stories from those conversations.

We drew hundreds of attendees, and are making progress on sponsorships. In part because of this community work, Arts Access won a \$16,000 grant to support a live event and received a renewal of \$125,000 from two local foundations. More broadly, we included the solutions journalism concept in our fundraising campaign for the Future of North Texas, an initiative to cover the impact of population growth on health care, workforce development, energy, natural resources, infrastructure and equity. To date, we have raised \$450,000 for Year 1 and \$375,000 for Year 2 of that initiative.



Who we are

Arts Access is a community-funded partnership between KERA and The Dallas Morning News. Funding from North Texas foundations and philanthropists supports the Arts Access coordinating editor, Samantha Guzman, and two reporters. We launched the initiative in early 2023. Arts Access stories run in digital, print and audio. More broadly, Arts Access is one of several community-funded initiatives that Tom Huang, The Dallas Morning News' assistant managing editor for journalism initiatives, has been spearheading since 2020. That work includes foundation support for The Morning News' education and science reporting. He has been working to incorporate more solutions journalism in DMN's coverage, which has attracted support from funders, who see value in a solutions approach to journalism. The Morning News solutions stories can be found at <https://www.dallasnews.com/topic/solutions/>.

The problem we are trying to solve

Like many local newsrooms, we are challenged by a disconnect between legacy news outlets (KERA and DMN) and a younger, more diverse audience. The disconnect means the next generation doesn't even know what our outlets are and what we do. And so they don't consume our journalism. And as local newsrooms struggle for resources, we often don't know what this younger audience needs or is interested in; our journalists are not often in the places where the audience gathers; and we don't produce a lot of stories on the platforms where the young, diverse audience gets its information.

What we decided to prototype and why

We decided to use Arts Access as the frame through which we'd experiment with community engagement with young, diverse creatives and artists. With the support and coaching offered through the Revenue Beacon Cohort, we first had conversations with arts stakeholders to learn about whom we should connect with. We decided to prototype a series of community engagement events to get to know this young, diverse audience in a non-extractive way, and look for ways to create a more equitable arts funding environment in Dallas through solutions reporting and other resources.

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How we tested the prototype

- We hosted a “writers’ room” — essentially a listening and brainstorming session — with a group of 10-12 young, diverse artists and creatives in the Tin District in West Dallas, which has a lot of art studios and galleries. We listened carefully to what they asked of us and brainstormed possible events and story ideas.
- From that brainstorming session, Guzman, Arts Access coordinating editor, and the rest of the team followed through. They designed and hosted the Arts Access funding fair, partnering with community stakeholders like Southern Methodist University, a private school; the Dallas Public Library; art gallery owners; and several nonprofits. Experts at the funding fair provided guidance and know-how on how artists can apply for grants and find support for their work.
- Arts Access continued to show up at events across Dallas-Fort Worth, including at the Dallas Public Library in Pleasant Grove, the Dallas Arts District Pride Block Party and The Wild Detectives bookstore in Oak Cliff.
- Arts Access hosted a follow-up lunch with creatives who attended the funding fair to get feedback, and hear from them about what the next community gathering should look like.
- The next iteration of the funding fair idea, called Art Hack, was held in early November. It was a conference-style event that featured breakout sessions that equipped attendees with the tools they need to succeed in the arts world.
- Arts Access also produced several solutions-focused stories related to insights that came out of the funding fair and listening sessions, including tips on [how musicians can thrive](#) and [how to write a successful grant application](#). Our solutions stories can be found at <https://www.dallasnews.com/topic/solutions/>.

Pivots along the way

- The Dallas Morning News and KERA are forging a stronger relationship as they continue to build the Arts Access partnership, and it’s a testament to Guzman’s vision and fortitude that the team is working in and across two newsrooms.
 - Our original proposal was to organize some sort of live storytelling event to attract potential sponsors. But through our listening sessions, tabling at events and the writers’ room, we didn’t get the sense that this would resonate with our target audience. We may still do a live storytelling event someday, but for now we are focused on other approaches.
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What worked best

- The in-person meeting in Dallas that launched the Revenue Beacon Cohort was incredibly effective because it helped each team think big, brainstorm ideas and come up with an initial proposal. And it also allowed teams from participating newsrooms to meet, share ideas, and root for one another.
- Our Revenue Beacon coaches strongly encouraged us to take time in the beginning to hold several listening sessions with leaders and stakeholders — and to do so in a non-extractive manner. They suggested we go into breakfasts and coffees and listen intently and learn about community members' interests and needs, without asking for anything. We think this worked well, as it helped build trust.
- The writers' room also worked well. We learned a lot from the small group of young artists and creatives. There was a somewhat loose agenda; we were there just to listen and learn. The idea of the funding fair came out of the writers' room, and later brainstorming sessions led to the idea of Art Hack.
- It was essential to partner with community members who already knew a lot of artists and creatives, and who already had their trust. We teamed up with the young leader who runs Creators Don't Die, an arts space, and that went a long way in attracting 100 attendees to the funding fair. Huang has organized a lot of engagement events for DMN, and he remarked that it was the youngest, most diverse audience he had ever seen at such an event.

How much we earned – and expect to earn

- Arts Access received a \$16,000 grant from the City of Dallas for our Art Hack event, and we are still working on building connections with other potential event sponsors. The Morning News recently hired a new events director, Jessica Cates, and we look forward to her support in our efforts to find sponsors.
- In addition to the \$16,000 sponsorship for our upcoming Art Hack event, we've raised \$125,000 from two local foundations to support Arts Access. And we have applied for more than \$100,000 in additional Arts Access grants; we expect to hear back on those applications before the end of the year.

Resources required

- Overall support from upper management at KERA and The Dallas Morning News has been key.
 - Staffing resources in editing/reporting/community organizing were important, so having Guzman and her team focused on the Revenue Beacon Cohort was essential.
 - Staffing resources in fundraising and events have been and will continue to be important. Having Huang as a newsroom fundraising lead and Cates as the new events director will be key.
 - We spent roughly \$5,000 on both the writers' room and funding fair event.
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What's next


- More events, more stories and more fundraising.

Best advice

- Engagement and fundraising is all about building relationships, and nurturing strong relationships takes time. No one is going to give you money the first time you talk to them. In fact, Huang has a philosophy of not asking for money — to try to meet as many times as you can with potential funders without asking for money. Often, the potential funder will be the one to bring up funding, which is ideal.
- With solutions journalism, you have to learn what it is and is not, and you have to learn how to talk about it and teach it. Then you need to get early adopters to produce solutions stories in your newsroom, and hopefully spread that awareness. Finally, you have to show potential funders what solutions journalism is and why it's so important for your community.



Insights from Coach Joaquin Alvarado



The leadership of Guzman and partnership of Huang generated the energy and creativity necessary to solve the really hard challenge they set for themselves. Newsrooms that engage directly with communities develop more sustainable and effective programming, but often fail to absorb the strategic lessons of the work. Guzman and Huang understand how these two streams interact and are nimble in their approach, letting the work guide the direction. Now their direction is stronger and retrofitted by the successes they've had along the way.

Collaboration between newsrooms looks good on paper, but the map is not the territory. Guzman and Huang were honest about the need to evolve the relationship and did good work to get it there. This will pay off in many ways. Most fundamentally, it is critical for communities to know where partners are coming from and they can innately sense the dynamics in a collaboration. Harmonization unlocks trust, and there was good progress on this.

With enough space and support, leadership emerges. Guzman is an important next-generation leader who showed real poise and power in pulling this project together. Her vision honored the core of solutions journalism by rigorously reporting on what works and inviting community stakeholders to engage directly in addressing their own challenges. A job very well done.

The Keene Sentinel

The Keene Sentinel is developing a valuable, original product to help our community easily scan a complex local health care landscape. We are leveraging our reputation as a trusted source and civic partner to step beyond solutions journalism and also provide an actual solution to an information challenge in our community. We are learning that a complex, ambitious project like this requires us to develop new workflows and think differently about bringing resources together. As a small team, we are also learning to balance multiple priorities, while always making incremental progress on this project.



Who we are

The Monadnock Region Health Reporting Lab is a solutions-focused, philanthropically funded project of The Keene Sentinel, a 225-year-old locally and independently owned news organization in southwest New Hampshire.

The problem we are trying to solve

Externally, we are trying to bridge the gap between the community we serve and quick, easy and free access to trusted health care information and resources residents need to make decisions for themselves and their families. This work is especially important in our small, rural community, where comprehensive health care is often difficult to access, both logistically and financially.

It's not uncommon for our neighbors to travel more than an hour, at significant personal expense, to receive the care they need because adequate resources do not exist in our community. Our project is part of our solutions-oriented work, providing both robust solutions journalism and needs-driven service information. Internally, we are trying to solve for the problem of generating community and philanthropic support for our solutions-centered Monadnock Region Health Reporting Lab.

What we decided to prototype and why

We are prototyping a comprehensive, searchable online database of local health resources and information, which will be the first of its kind in our community. We will supplement this online product with a series of one-page printed guides centered around specific health topics. These resources will include contact and price information as well as descriptions of what local medical providers and programs offer.

The Keene Sentinel has found success with similar, but more narrowly focused, projects in the past, and we want to increase the impact of our work by providing a more comprehensive health care resource. By rooting this project in community engagement and meeting our community members where they are, we also hope this initiative will serve as a launching pad to help The Sentinel play a larger role in convening and amplifying existing local medical resources.

Community engagement and listening have been the most successful pieces of this project so far. Pretty much everyone with whom we have shared the idea sees the value in it and offers insightful, thoughtful feedback to help make it even better.

How we are testing the prototype

We are building and testing this product on three levels: with users, with our internal team and with funders and other community supporters. We started by identifying who we believe the core audience will be for this product: nonprofits, social service agencies and the clients they serve. With the core of our idea for a comprehensive online resource set, we quickly took it out to seek feedback from the people we think will use it most, and have proceeded to (and will continue to) use their feedback to adjust our idea and ensure we are building the most valuable product possible.

Internally, we recruited a core team to work on the project. We have one team member dedicated to collecting and verifying information, another focused on developing the online infrastructure to host our resource, and others focused on community engagement, user research and fundraising.

Lastly, we have been pitching the idea to community partners who we think would find our work valuable, including local health care providers and community-minded businesses like local banks. In pitch meetings, we have found it just as valuable to listen as to present, because we are often meeting with experts who can help us optimize the utility of what we are building. So, we aim not only to generate revenue through these meetings, but also generate enthusiasm for our project, and secure buy-in from key community stakeholders.

Pivots along the way

As a small but ambitious team, we have to be nimble and balance multiple complex projects at once. On this project, that has meant periodically putting it on the back burner to prioritize more urgent issues with tighter deadlines, but always keeping an eye on progress for this important initiative.

We have also had to pivot with some staff turnover on the internal team working on the product, but at every fork in the road, we have been able to bring new, enthusiastic team members on board. Finally, we also went on a bit of a journey to find someone to handle the web development piece of the project, but ultimately brought our internal digital operations director onto this team.

What worked best

Community engagement and listening have been the most successful pieces of this project so far. Pretty much everyone with whom we have shared the idea sees the value in it and offers insightful, thoughtful feedback to help make it even better. We have engaged our journalists to do much of the community listening and user research, which plays to their strengths of asking questions, listening and synthesizing what they hear.

Pitching the product has also worked well. President and COO Sean Burke put a lot of work into an excellent pitch deck, and we found a lot of value in practicing the pitch with our coaches and peers in the Revenue Beacon Cohort. The people we have pitched in our community have been excited about the idea, even if they are not in a position to support it financially. The questions they have asked and feedback they have provided have strengthened the product immensely, including connecting us with additional partners and introducing the idea of including additional news and information content in the online database. The need we are seeking to meet is deeply understood in our community, and The Sentinel has built strong, trusted relationships with many of the stakeholders we are engaging in the project.

What could have worked better

We could have adjusted our timeline better, recognizing that we are a small team with numerous important projects competing for our time and attention. The feedback we have received so far indicates that we have a valuable idea, one that will continue to be valuable for some time, so we will continue to work on this project outside of the Revenue Beacon Cohort.

We could do a better job prioritizing this project, and infusing it with a sense of urgency. We have opportunities to grow here by instituting mechanisms to hold ourselves accountable, like more regular check-in meetings, designing sprints, etc.

How much we earned – and expect to earn

Our goal is to raise \$20,000 to support this project and our ongoing solutions-oriented local health care coverage. We have secured funding commitments from two key partners, and have several strong leads for additional funding. We also seek to convene community health providers and advocates to amplify their impact for the readers we serve.

Resources required

An editor spent time laying the groundwork of collecting and compiling the information for the database. We also have one person leading the development of the web platform, including building a system for providers to submit their own information, rather than having the editor constantly requesting and updating it. These two people are both existing staff members whom we have paid extra to take on this additional project beyond their typical job responsibilities.

Two more people have taken the lead on community engagement and fundraising, and three additional people have helped with community listening and user research (all within the scope of their current roles, for 5-10 hours per week).

What's next

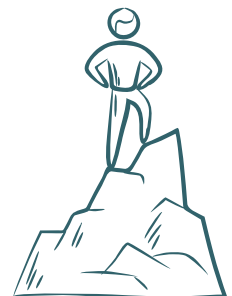
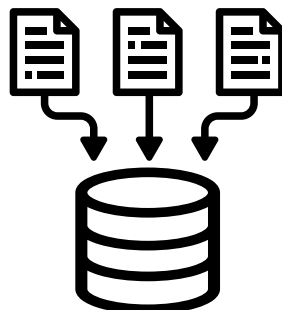
We continue to work on this project, including community engagement and fundraising. We are building this product as we go, and with community input, so we expect it to keep changing and growing in the coming months, even if we aren't certain of the exact path we will follow. As we approach the end of the year, we have completed several large deadline-dependent projects aside from this one, so we are in a good position to refocus and make significant progress.

Best advice

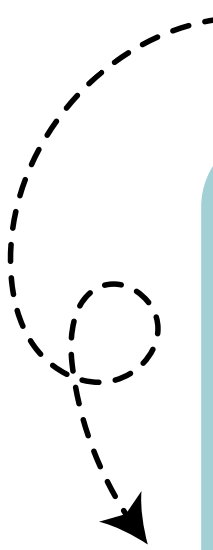
Don't be afraid to step in and try to provide a potential solution yourself. While what we're trying to do is not strictly solutions journalism per se, it is part of our solutions-oriented focus, and is adjacent and complementary to our solutions health coverage. As a trusted local news organization, we are stepping up to fill an information void, and creating a space for people in the health care field to connect with one another.

We have been focused on solutions journalism about health care in our rural community because the challenges of access and affordability are ubiquitous here. Instead of writing mostly about the challenges themselves, we look for responses to them, and evaluate them with rigorous journalism. This has led us down the road of thinking about a solutions practice, using information that historically would have lived only in our traditional outlets (print, digital, audio, visual) and actually stepping in to fill critical information gaps.

We are thinking about our news organization's role in the community and how we can help as a purveyor of trusted information and a convener of community resources, while still producing solutions journalism along the way. The further we get into this project, the more we will find ideas for solutions stories for the Monadnock Region Health Reporting Lab.



Insights from Coach Joe Whitwell



There are kids in the Monadnock region who are missing school because they are in dental pain or need to travel to get dental work done.

When Burke and Jack Rooney, managing editor for audience development, shared that fact with SJN's Alec Saelens and me, I remember sitting up and staying very still.

The insight had come up in one of their community listening sessions where they were exploring information gaps around local health care.

They found plenty of information gaps and also just gaps in health care more generally.

Their approach to building out a revenue prototype — getting in front of their community, asking questions and listening — is both good journalism and good product development.


It has meant that they have used their limited time — and time is always limited in local newsrooms — very effectively, pushing in the direction that will serve the community most.

This grounding in their audience's needs has also helped during their conversation with sponsors for funding. They know that they are not just designing another website widget; they are prototyping an idea that will have an impact on the health of their local community.

I'm sure that with a little further development, and a little more pushing at doors, The Keene Sentinel team will unlock the revenue they seek and deliver the results that their community deserves.

WSHU

SOLUTIONS-ORIENTED



CLIMATE REPORTING

At WSHU, we are dedicated to providing solutions-oriented climate stories to allow our listeners to feel more informed, more engaged, more empowered... and more hopeful.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Climate reporting on WSHU is supported by [Your Name Here].

Who we are

WSHU is public media for the civic-minded and culturally curious of Connecticut and Long Island. We serve our audience primarily by over-the-air radio, but also through digital-only stories and features. We are the clarifying voice for our community.

The problem we are trying to solve

How to monetize our award-winning and impactful solutions journalism reporting on climate.

Solutions

1. For listeners: If we give our listeners hope by discussing realistic climate solutions, then we will increase our membership.
2. For major donors: If we empower our community through our solutions climate reporting, then we will become attractive to major donors who want to support the community.
3. For underwriters: If we share with potential corporate sponsors how our listeners and members are actively engaged with climate solutions, and how this benefits them, then they will increase underwriting spending.


Challenge #1: How to get station staff to talk about solutions journalism

Challenge #2: Getting news staff to understand financials (business model)


Challenge #3: Raising revenue

What we did

WSHU developed strategic language to talk about our solutions reporting to each of three groups of stakeholders, focusing on the benefit to them, not to the station. We learned that we needed to be flexible and willing to let go and pivot if our strategy wasn't working. Similarly, we also came to realize that one size does not fit all. Ultimately, underwriters care about two things: delivering our audience to them and/or using the WSHU/NPR "halo" to build reputation (and increase sales) in the community. Listeners look for actionable solutions, information and responses to issues that affect them, while major donors look to create and support a sense of community. Our efforts included in-person engagement with listeners and donors, creating underwriting packages specifically geared to businesses perceived to be open to a climate solutions message, and a personalized approach to major donors. To date, we've raised \$41,400 from this effort, and are in the process of pitching more donors, sponsors and listeners.



Listeners look for actionable solutions, information, and responses to issues that affect them, while major donors look to create and support a sense of community



What we decided to prototype and why

Our first objective was to create underwriting packages and talking points for our sales team. This initially involved working with members of our sales team to ensure that they understood the pillars of solutions journalism and could create packages around solutions journalism. Our second objective was to talk to nonmember listeners about how becoming a member supports our solutions journalism work and encourage existing members to continue or increase their support. Finally, our last objective was to steward major donors to specifically support our climate solutions work. Here are [some examples of the language](#) we used.

How we tested

We first tested the underwriting portion by creating a climate package for underwriters. This was a very "traditional" package but tended to be impersonal. We then crafted packages for larger underwriters that we thought might be a natural fit for our climate work. Finally, we approached smaller businesses that had expressed an interest in being underwriters but could not afford to do so. Using a commercial radio tactic, we proposed a lower entry price point, which would team them with a few other businesses in their underwriting message.

WSHU held two engagement events. We participated in an Earth Day Expo at the Groton Public Library in April. We had a table at the event and collected email addresses from listeners and nonlisteners alike who stopped by to pick up seed packets and enter a drawing for gifts. Members of the WSHU news staff were on hand to test language surrounding our solutions reporting. In addition, we ran a “climate confessional” in which participants could go into a recording booth alone and speak to their hopes and fears about the climate emergency. Everybody who signed up for our newsletter or entered the contest also received a personal follow-up email thanking them for stopping by. In June, we held an open house at the station in which we invited members of our Leaders’ Circle for a tour of the station and to meet our staff (both news and music). Talking about our climate solutions work was an important part of both our presentation and personal one-on-ones with the news staff and station leadership.

Finally, we tried to develop the right touch when approaching major donors. We decided not to do an immediate or specific ask of donors, but to meet them where they are and steward them into contributing toward our climate solutions work. As it turned out, a “soft ask” was the one that netted results. Our development director simply sent an email to a major, environmentally conscious donor with the embargoed news that one of our climate solutions series won an award for Best Continuing Coverage, and we received a check from the donor for \$20,700.

How we pivoted

WSHU’s first big pivot was to move away from a major engagement event that we originally envisioned, realizing it was too ambitious and didn’t have enough focus. Instead, we decided to concentrate on honing our messaging to each of our constituent groups. The second major (and continuing) pivot was how we handled underwriting. We also realized that we had to change the way that we discussed solutions journalism across different departments at the station. The news department sat down with the underwriting team to explain what solutions journalism is, and how to talk about it to clients. One side benefit was members of the news department got a chance to understand how underwriting works, as well as the business model of the station. Station management and underwriting created a climate package, which we shaped through the course of the program. [Here’s how Development Director Laura Ballou approaches solutions journalism pitches now.](#)

What worked best

For listeners, members and major donors, we found the “soft” ask was most successful. In telling our story informally, discussing the benefits of our climate and environmental reporting and weaving our solutions work into our narrative, we found that people were willing to engage. Our most successful contact points were usually one-on-one: reporters talking to listeners at the Earth Day Expo, informal conversations after our open house, and our development director’s stewarding of major donors.

The other important transformation in the station was the cross-departmental teamwork — the business side working with the journalists. For the journalists, this was something new; many believed they shouldn't be “compromised” by the business side. The realization that they can work together with the business office without compromising their independence was key.

What could have worked better

We were disappointed in our results with underwriting. This could have been due to our message not resonating, or simply the underwriting environment. Was it a mistake to go after big clients with big asks? Do we need to bring the same one-on-one stewarding to the underwriting process? It was also very hard to determine how our messaging resonated during fund drives for listeners.

Resources required

Because of our size and budget, we did not have much money to devote to this effort. Our two engagement events cost little or nothing, but they were successful because of the cross-departmental cooperation. Time was our biggest resource: While we didn't script the engagement conversations or underwriting pitches, we rehearsed them.

What's next

As we transition into the future with a new general manager, we need to fundraise around local news to ensure that we have the resources to cover Connecticut and Long Island. Underwriting has made a \$100,000 pitch to Hartford Healthcare, part of which is to be sponsor of our climate/environmental coverage. In addition, WSHU is looking to refine its small business package for underwriters and is currently working to identify members who also own small businesses in our listening area. We still have to develop ways to better talk about solutions journalism as part of our on-air drives. It's all a matter of weaving climate and solutions reporting into conversations about the station, both internally and externally.

Best advice

Everyone in the organization needs to be part of the team and contribute to the effort. If you are still “selling” solutions journalism internally, it's difficult to sell it externally. There also needs to be a willingness to quickly pivot and change if something is not working. Being married to an idea is not helpful. Finally, play to your strengths — lean into what you do best. In WSHU's case, it was talking about the value we bring to our community on a daily basis in a personable and informal way.



Insights from Coach Claudia Laws



WSHU earmarked more than \$40,000 for its solutions work, and learned some valuable insights for monetization that every team needs to replicate.

- Bring your business folks along for the ride; when they understand the work, they sell it. Without this breadth of knowledge and insight, sales teams find solutions tricky to explain and monetize. (Plus, we want everyone moving as a team.)
- Test language. One ask doesn't work for all your audiences, and — most likely — your audiences don't understand the term solutions journalism. Explain the impacts this work has for readers, advertisers and donors. The personal impact on them is the key.
- Be patient: Testing language can take months to fine tune, pitches will need to be redone based on new advertisers and feedback, donors can take their time.
- Be willing to pivot. This team was willing to adapt and change their methods multiple times. That ability to iterate resulted in reliable language and pitches to iterate off moving forward.