



COLORADO MEDIA PROJECT CASE STUDY:

Collaborative Memberships to Build Community

Based on a survey of more than 2,000 Coloradans in 2018, Colorado Media Project forecasted that there was an untapped market of 1 million residents across the state who were both interested in local news and willing to pay for it.

Such a statistic paired with the continued financial struggle of local news organizations everywhere meant Colorado Media Project wanted to quickly experiment with finding new ways to connect Coloradans who are willing to support local news with the organizations looking to strengthen their audience-driven revenue.

With support from Membership Puzzle Project, Colorado Media Project selected five newsrooms in summer 2019 – The Durango Herald, The Grand Junction Daily Sentinel, KDNK Community Radio, Chalkbeat and The Colorado Sun – to join its five-month experiment of testing a collaborative membership program. The goal was to make local news more relevant for Coloradans and broaden support for newsrooms.

Colorado Media Project sought to explore a membership model that was driven by community support.

It looked at “how collaboration could make the whole greater than the parts,” rather than focus on growing individual subscriptions or donations for each of the five news organizations varying in coverage area, business model and primary publishing format.

A membership model emerged as the best path forward, because the goal was to engage Coloradans in local news coverage through a two-way relationship between newsrooms and the residents they’re serving.

“Membership isn’t just ‘subscription by another name’ (though it’s often referenced that way), or about giving consumers access to a product,” explains [Membership Puzzle Project research director Emily Goligoski](#). “It’s participation in a larger cause that reflects what they want to see in civil society. In membership, there’s a different social contract or value proposition between the site and its members. At the basic level of: What do you give? What do you get? Subscribers pay their money and get access to a product. But members join the cause and participate because they believe in it.”

THE CHALLENGE:

How might five Colorado news organizations (with different business models, coverage areas, target audiences and community engagement strategies) come together to test a collaborative membership model that could benefit the group as a whole?

This group of newsrooms gathered to develop a strategy, and it became clear that it would be difficult to develop a one-size-fits-all solution to quickly test that would be relevant for the audience members of three community-specific news organizations, one statewide news organization and one niche-focused news organization covering statewide education issues.

Rather than trying to fit a square peg into a round hole, Colorado Media Project shifted to an audience-centered approach that asked the guiding question of, “how can news outlets design and launch collaborative membership offerings that provide a value-add to the Colorado residents they’re seeking to serve and benefit newsrooms’ organizational sustainability?”

Instead of bringing these five newsrooms together to design one holistic offering, Colorado Media Project

challenged them to think about strategic partnerships – with fellow news organizations or non-newsroom partners – that would benefit their target audiences.

The news organizations were then guided through a modified Lean Canvas framework (a [one-page business plan template](#) often used by startups and lean businesses to quickly design new offerings) to design their new membership offering based on expressed audience needs and wants.

The results of this exercise led to several designed partnerships between regional news organizations and The Colorado Sun, a statewide news organization, as well as plans to develop partnerships with non-newsroom organizations and institutions with overlapping target audiences – including local museums, historical societies, outdoors communities and professional membership organizations.

THE EXPERIMENT:

Launch a membership program, with partnerships in mind

The Durango Herald – a 139-year-old family-owned newspaper based in a small mountain community of around 17,000 full-time residents – decided to [launch a membership program](#) for the first time.

It was a major cultural shift for the news organization to ask its audience to make a financial contribution mostly for “the joy of supporting local, independently owned quality journalism.”

In order to test which membership offerings converted sales, The Herald adopted a collaborative mentality by partnering with 10 local businesses to offer discounts to Herald members when they shopped at their establishments. The “Loyal to Local” card was included in three of the four membership tiers.

THE Durango HERALD

THANK YOU

to these local businesses for participating in the Durango Herald's membership program supporting local journalism.

Loyal to Local

To receive the deals offered below, become a member at durangoherald.com/beamember and be a champion of the Fourth Estate.

GREAT DEALS FROM LOCAL MERCHANTS!

- salt 360 10% off a 60- or 90-minute float session
- Prohibition Herb 10% of any purchase
- Chainless Brewing Free pint with purchase
- Down the Rabbit Hole 15% off bill (alcohol excluded)
- Pedal the Peaks 20% off any purchase (bikes excluded)
- Thrive Chiropractic Studio \$37 for initial, first-time office exam and consultation*
- SRA Pain & Laser Free infrared imaging evaluation of problem area (\$125 value)
- Animas Chocolate & Coffee Company 15% off any beverage on the menu
- Napa 10% off items under \$200 (sale items excluded)
- Bakers Bridge Vet Clinic 10% discount on office exams

*Please call for more information. Card must be presented to receive discounts.

The Herald also worked with The Grand Junction Daily Sentinel and The Colorado Sun to expand access to Colorado news for its members. The lowest two membership tiers – “Bronze” for \$50 per year and “Silver” for \$250 per year – included a basic one-month membership to The Colorado Sun.

The two highest membership tiers – “Gold” for \$500 per year and “Platinum” for \$1,000 per year – both included either a basic or premium two-month membership to The Colorado Sun (based on the tier), as well as a digital trial membership to the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel for one month.

All members received personalized thank-you emails for signing up, some even received hand-written thank-you notes from journalists working in the newsroom, and gold and platinum members had gift baskets personally delivered to their homes.



OUTCOMES

Between its launch on Oct. 28, 2019 and Dec. 31, 2019, The Durango Herald’s membership program earned **66 individual memberships, bringing in \$10,000 in revenue.**

Breakdown by tier:

Bronze (\$50/year): 50 memberships totalling \$2,500
Silver (\$250/year): 8 memberships totalling \$2,000
Gold (\$500/year): 5 memberships totalling \$2,500
Platinum (\$1,000/year): 3 memberships totalling \$3,000



MEMBERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Join today and be a champion of local news

Advice to share with organizations looking to launch collaborate in this way:



“Just do it. It’s daunting, and if the process is like ours, it’s wiggly. Do it, learn, make it better. We now have so many ideas of how we want to shape this, present it to people, etc., but as of now, we as an organization and a newsroom know that there are 55 people who support us financially, who want to see us do well and who want us to succeed. And those were the easy people. The hard work is ahead, but our organization knows where we want to go and where we can go.”

— Claudia Laws, who left her position as The Durango Herald’s Audience Development Director to join The Salt Lake Tribune as Marketing and Analytics Director in January 2020

THE EXPERIMENT:

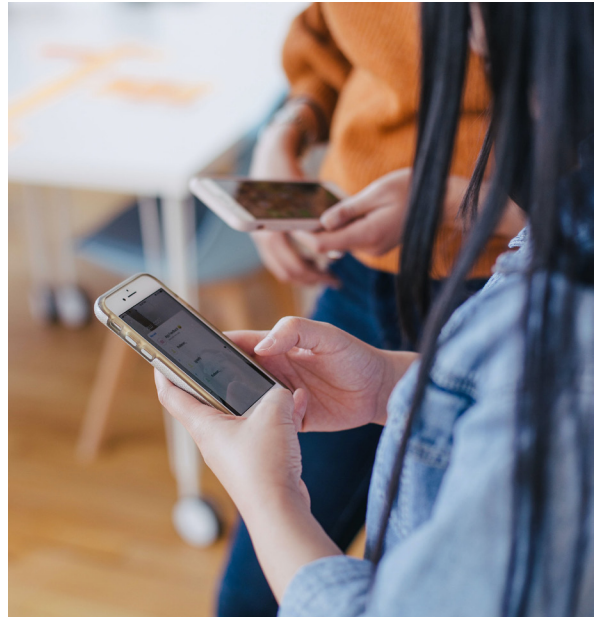
Expand awareness and access to statewide news coverage for regional communities

Similar to The Durango Herald partnering with The Colorado Sun and The Grand Junction Daily Sentinel to add membership benefits to its new program, The Sun, Daily Sentinel and KDNK Community Radio also focused on collaborative experiments to support each other's growth goals regarding membership, subscriptions and donations.

During a scheduled membership drive to collect one-time and recurring donations, KDNK Community Radio offered an additional benefit to those giving at the "family level" or above (\$120 per year) — a free three-month basic membership to The Colorado Sun.

The Grand Junction Daily Sentinel worked to expand access to more Colorado news to its local coverage area by planning to offer two new collaborative subscription offerings to non-subscribers: a bundled trial membership to The Daily Sentinel, The Colorado Sun and The Durango Herald; or a bundled trial membership to The Daily Sentinel and The Colorado Sun.

While providing free trials to its membership program to regional news organizations, The Colorado Sun also worked to identify its current email



newsletter subscribers and members who live in the coverage areas of The Durango Herald, The Grand Junction Daily Sentinel and KDNK Community Radio to promote supporting those local news organizations, as well.

LESSONS LEARNED

The internal logistics and technical support needed for the four newsrooms to create a simple workflow for users to have their information effectively and ethically shared between news organizations proved difficult and time consuming.

Advice to share with organizations looking to launch collaborate in this way:



"Collaboration is a beautiful thing but you must have patience and tenacity. Start with a unified 'big picture' goal and THEN work out the logistics and minutia. Don't get stuck in the weeds and lose sight of the big picture. Adjust as needed, and it will most definitely be needed. Other media organizations have incredible ideas and we are all rooting for the other to not just survive, but thrive."

— Bonnie Davis, Grand Junction Daily Sentinel's Director of Marketing and Events

THE EXPERIMENT:

Identify strategic partnerships with non-news organizations to boost memberships

Chalkbeat identified a Colorado education organization to create a combined membership offering with the two organizations in order to have the opportunity to cross-promote and increase memberships for both organizations.

“Both organizations are unique to the Colorado education landscape, benefit from little competition and are trusted experts,” Chalkbeat Director of Development and Major Gifts Kimberley Spencer explained while creating the service design plan with her team. “By partnering, both organizations have the benefit of reaching potential members that have trust in each organization.”

The plan was to leverage a four-week combined marketing campaign using each organizations’ email newsletter subscriber lists, social media presence and on-site and in-person promotion to increase access and awareness of each other’s membership programs.

While both organizations came together in agreement, some roadblocks were hit because Chalkbeat’s community partner had it’s large annual gala happening during the beta test period.



Advice to share with organizations looking to launch collaborate in this way:



“When screening community partners, take into consideration what other fundraising and marketing events are happening during the same timeframe. The community organization that we worked with did not have the internal staff resources to fully dedicate to the pilot during the timeframe.”

— Kimberley Spencer, Chalkbeat Director of Development and Major Gifts

Moving Forward

While the three experiments had varying degrees of success in a very short period of time due to some unpredictable factors, the lessons learned and processes refined during these experiments are valuable assets to any organization looking to develop a collaborative membership offering.

We've created a guide with resources and templates to replicate this process:

1. Design the new potential collaborative service or offering
2. Identify potential strategic collaborators, conduct outreach and clearly define the partnership
3. Prepare for a successful launch: Setting goals
4. Prepare for a successful launch: Making a plan, establishing key roles and defining your test group
5. Launch the beta test, assess and iterate

Project Timeline

MAY 2019

Membership Puzzle Project selected Colorado Media Project as a grantee for the Membership in News Fund.

JULY 2019

Newsrooms selected to participate in collaborative membership experiment.

Designed collaborative membership ideas to test (in-person workshop with 5 participating newsrooms).

AUGUST 2019

Finalized membership offering service design.

Finalized goals and launch plans.

SEPTEMBER – NOVEMBER 2019

Launched collaborative membership offerings.

DECEMBER 2019

Assessed and refined collaborative membership offerings.

Are you interested in launching a collaborative membership offering? Get in touch with Colorado Media Project to learn more about potential partnerships!

Participating Organizations

Chalkbeat Colorado is a nonprofit news organization that covers education issues for Denver and Colorado. It is part of a national network of newsrooms committed to covering one of America's most important stories: the effort to improve schools for all children, especially those who have historically lacked access to a quality education.

The Colorado Sun is a journalist-owned Denver-based news outlet that strives to cover all of Colorado so that our state – our community – can better understand itself.

The Durango Herald is a family-owned newspaper founded in 1881, based in southwestern Colorado. As the paper has worked to engage community in new ways, three years ago it launched **Durango Diaries**, an in-person storytelling series designed around citizens sharing stories on a variety of topics.

Grand Junction Daily Sentinel, founded in 1893, is the largest newspaper in western Colorado, serving six counties. The paper recently acquired a radio station serving the area's Latino population, and would like to publish more local news in Spanish.

KDNK Community Radio, based in Carbondale, serves the Roaring Fork Valley and beyond with 9 FM signals. The station is a member of the **Rocky Mountain Community Radio Coalition**, which is comprised of 19 public radio stations in Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming and Utah, which share regional news and state capitol coverage.

