

Growing Audience

Innovation in Action: The Shelby Star



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Multimedia on a McNugget Budget

By David LaFontaine

What is it?

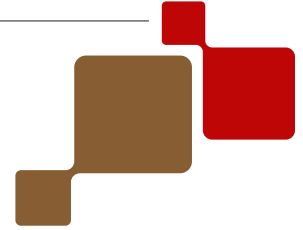
Why Should I Care?

Can I Adopt This?

The Star Institutes the “No Jumps” Rule

Training the Staff and Training the Community

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THE SHELBY STAR: A Smalltown Paper Putting Big Ideas into Practice

What is it? The (Shelby, N.C.) Star is a small-circulation daily in an economically challenged area that is experimenting with many cutting-edge audience-building strategies. Stories are not permitted to run longer than 12 column inches or jump to an inside page. For less than \$2,000, the Star has equipped its reporters with high-tech cellphones that allow them to wirelessly beam in stories, still pictures, audio and video.

Why should I care? Web viewership is up 82 percent, and the move to the Web has energized the community to start caring about and getting involved with their newspaper again. With a relatively small investment, they have done what bigger papers have been edging towards for years: emphasizing the Web, converting reporters to multimedia content generators, throwing open the paper to reader-generated content and chopping stories into bite-size pieces.

Can I adopt this? The low price tag associated with the Star's redesign makes their strategy very appealing to small-circulation dailies facing similar challenges. The young staff has demonstrated a willingness and ability to adopt new technology and train themselves how to use it. That enthusiasm has also inspired the community to participate.

By David LaFontaine

The 911 caller complaining about the “big black bear, b-e-a-r” on her back porch had an accent as thick and sweet as Southern molasses – a detail that Star readers could fully appreciate only by listening to the MP3 of the call featured on the paper's increasingly popular Web site.

The home page nearly melted down under the traffic generated when the paper posted video of the local high school students walking down a red carpet, arriving at the senior prom, and treated it in the same breathless, “Who are you wearing?” way the world media treats the Oscars.

During the hotly contested 2006 elections, a Star reporter was assigned to drive from polling place to polling place, uploading photos taken with his cellphone camera to the paper's Web site, so readers could see in real time where broken voting machines had caused delays and long lines.

www.growingaudience.com

These are just some of the interactive multimedia and breaking news stories the Star has brought to its readers since initiating a ground-up “re-imagining” of the newspaper.

The Star has transformed its reporters into real-time multimedia content generators, re-invigorating not only the newspaper and its community, but also making it the showpiece of the Freedom Communications chain.

The results of such a small capital investment are dramatic – The Star's Web viewership is up 82 percent over 2006, ranking them in 7th place in traffic for all Freedom community newspapers even though they rank 19th in circulation size. In addition, their recent investigative series led to an arrest in a 40-year-old murder case. The community has reacted enthusiastically, and the once-moribund Web site and message boards crackle with energy. No story is allowed to run more than 12 inches or jump to another page. The Web site features MP3s,

The screenshot shows the Shelby Star website's interface. At the top is a navigation menu with links like Home, Sections, Advertising, Circulation, About Us, Shopping, Special Features, Message Board, Special Reports, and Share Your Story. The main content area is titled "Have you seen the bear?" and features a map of bear sightings according to 911 calls. The map shows several orange markers indicating bear sightings in various locations around Shelby, NC. To the right of the map is a "Message Board" section with the question "What do you think about the bear being in your backyard?" and a list of 911 calls, including "There's a bear in my yard!" and "There's a giant black bear in my yard!". Below the message board is a video player showing a bear in a yard, with a timestamp of 05/19/07 11:44:31. At the bottom of the page, there are links for "View Comments" and "Make a Comment", and a footer with the address "315 E Graham St., Shelby, NC 28150" and a copyright notice for Freedom Communications.

The Star featured video of a marauding bear

streaming video of bank robberies, scans of court documents, live photos sent from reporters in the field, and pages and pages of user-generated content.

The Star is pushing forward with even more daring innovations, such as the “Star Car,” (which the reporters have nicknamed “The Batmobile”) an SUV packed with cameras, computers, high-speed internet connectivity and sporting a GPS tracker that allows readers to follow a flashing dot on a map on the Star home page, as the reporters speed to their latest breaking news event. The “Star Car” is a project in partnership with the IFRA Newsplex.

However, if there is one thing that stands out about The Star’s strategy, it is that they have taken all the dense, scholarly recommendations generated by the extensive studies of the newspaper industry, and implemented them in a way that is in keeping with the tough, simple, blue-collar ethic of its readership. The Star is ruthlessly practical.

“Well, Freedom helped us on this project, but not that much,” Publisher Skip Foster said, explaining that they wanted to implement changes they could do on their own. “The idea was that there ain’t going to be money growing on trees, you’re not going to add a bunch of people. What can you do without breaking the bank?”

“The answer was, ‘A lot.’ Our first video camera was the Sears floor model. And that was good enough. I just don’t believe a small newspaper has got to go buy a \$4,000 video camera.”

Instead, the Star did research and in October of 2006 equipped its reporters with Samsung A990 cellphones so they could take and upload pictures, audio and video, and even post to their moblogs and file short stories from the road. The cellphones, which at the time cost about \$300, have been used by the reporters to help turn the newspaper into a 24-hour-a-day news operation.

Foster is quick to point out that “while we won’t be entering pictures from the cellphones into the Pulitzer competition,” The Star has run pictures from the phones as their centerpiece photo on the front page. The reporters use the phones to shoot mugshots of everyone they talk to, which not only frees up the photographers to shoot compelling and unique photo essays, but also increases the number of faces that appear in the paper.

“The cellphones fill that gap really well,” Managing Editor Alan Jenkins said. “Basically, you just invest wisely in the

equipment that can be the most diverse and you hope it’s enough. And I think that we’ve proven that it has been.

“Sure, it would be nice to have all that great, wonderful stuff, but at the same time, if you do what you can and rely on the ingenuity of the people around you, you’ll find a way to overcome whatever obstacles are there.

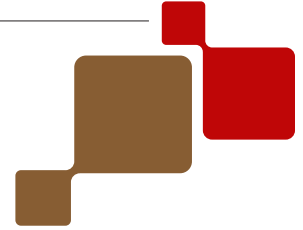
“That’s one thing that I can’t say enough, that we have a top-notch staff here of reporters that are very interested in doing what it takes to see that the end result is taking care of our Web site. And, more importantly, getting our readers involved in absorbing the content.”

The Star has learned – from the well-publicized mistakes of its big-city brethren – that it was not enough to simply invest mountains of money into building and populating a cutting-edge multimedia site, if at the end of the day, their audience didn’t care about the content. So before they embarked on what was not just a redesign, but really a total re-imagining of the newspaper, The Star and the Freedom chain conducted in-depth research and demographic studies.

On the surface, conditions in Shelby would not seem favorable for a newspaper looking to reinvent itself as a cutting-edge multi-platform multimedia information warehouse. Cleveland County, N.C. is one of the depressed areas in the Carolinas that presidential candidate John Edwards talks about, where the withering of the U.S. textile industry has left behind ghost towns. Unemployment has been high, the level of education is not, and the advertising base hasn’t been rolling in cash either.



The Star Car



As was amply demonstrated in Rust Belt cities during the 1980s, once people start feeling like they are locked into a downward spiral, they stop paying attention to newspapers, or just about anything else, for that matter. It can be very hard to reverse that kind of inertia.

“It is an uphill struggle, but I think a lot of it ties to getting the reader involved,” Jenkins said. “It’s one thing to read a story in a newspaper. It’s another thing entirely to be able to watch a video, see the documents that we created the story from and feel that you’re a part of the reporting process.

“Then you can turn around and comment on our message board or post a comment at the bottom of the story saying, basically, anything. Like, ‘This story was written really well, this story was crappy, this is what I really want to know.’

“I think the biggest way to overcome a lot of the forces that are killing newspapers is to create enthusiasm in the product. And I think it is that enthusiasm that has helped us come a long way.

“You encourage people to become part of the process, and the rest kind of takes care of itself.”

The Star Institutes the “No Jumps” Rule

One of the most difficult and controversial changes The Star made to its paper product was instituting the rule that no story would jump. That means lead stories are sometimes – but not always – limited to 12 inches. Stories that require more depth are organized into shorter pieces, breaking down the content in a way that’s easier to consume by the reader. This has been advantageous in that it has not only delivered the information in a format that the readers can actually digest, but it has also meant that The Star is publishing a wider range of stories about a wider range of subjects.

“It really cuts down on the stupid stories that you used to feel obligated to put in the paper,” says Reporter Graham Cawthon. “A story that we would have spent 15 inches on before, well, now we’ve gotten to the point where we can churn it out maybe in four inches, give the same importance to it, and not spend all day on it.

“So we can move onto something more important, and that means that we then get something else that we can get in the paper real quickly.”

The Star is still wrestling with the issue of what to do with investigative journalism stories, since these complex narratives are difficult to follow when they’ve been broken down into such small pieces. However, since the community has flocked to the redesigned Star, the story ideas and tips coming in from the boards and forums have greatly expanded the breadth of the paper’s coverage, if not its depth.

The Star maintains that while the basic information being served to its readership is being delivered in smaller packets, the cumulative effect is still the same.

“All it is, is chopping it up,” said Foster. “It’s just turning a chicken breast into chicken nuggets. You’ve got the same amount of chicken and it sits on the same plate, it’s just chopped up.

“People won’t read those 60-inch takeouts anymore. Maybe on Sunday, but you know people go to work on Monday.

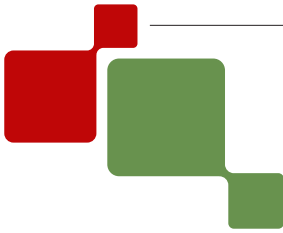
“I mean, what the hell? They’re going to sit there and be late to work just to read some story? I don’t think that’s realistic.”

Still, while the story itself may be limited to only 12 inches, The Star makes liberal use of all manner of other devices to convey information, such as pullout boxes, charts, graphs and mugshots. They also break what would once have been a 40-inch roundup on the employment situation into a series of related stories about unemployment benefits, new economic incentives and struggling families.

Local TV newscasts have long used the tactic of teasing information throughout their broadcast, while withholding the full story until the end, to keep viewers riveted. The Star’s abbreviated story format and constant updates to the Web site have made it possible for the newspaper to start adopting some of these strategies.

These strategies, in context, are something of a “back to the future” approach – a return, if you will, to the days when newsboys stood on street corners and yelled, “Extra! Extra! Read all about it!” for the multiple editions of daily newspapers, back when newspapers were the primary means for the public to get the latest news.

“If you think of cable news, they don’t wait until they get the whole story,” Foster said. “They tell you what they



know when then know it. And sometimes they tell you what they don't know when they don't know it.

"When they come on at 4:30, between the commercials to promote their six o'clock newscast, they don't say 'A gun was found at Shelby High School and two people were arrested.' They say 'Find out what shocking new thing happened at a local high school involving a firearm.'

"So that's a tease; we dribble out what we know when we know it, as opposed to waiting to know everything.

"In other words, if you know a bunch of stuff, is there any rule that says you have to type in everything you know before you move it as breaking news? That's going to drive traffic."

One of the places that played out recently was with a bank robbery story that was updated five times on the Web site. Eventually, Cawthon was able to post photos, video and a round-up piece on the whole incident.

Meanwhile, the other story that helped drive record traffic (60,000 page views in one day) to The Star's Web site was the shooting death of a popular area high school student. Once again, The Star threw open its Web site to the community, which responded by flooding the site with messages of condolence to the family, as well as treasured photos and remembrances.

All this user-generated content sent to The Star's Web site was gathered to be turned into an entire page in the newspaper.

"Our philosophy here is that we are a Web site first that puts out a print edition the next day," Jenkins said. "But at the same time, I'd like to think that both products feed off of each other, and just basically make for good easy content all the way around.

WHO KILLED BRENDA SUE?

PHOTO GALLERY | CHAPTERS | INTERACTIVE MAP | VIDEO | NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS - 1966

1966

On the morning of July 27, 1966, Brenda Sue Brown, 11, walked her little sister, Patricia, to school. Brenda didn't return home. Hours later, searchers found her body in a thicket off South Lafayette Street - between school and her home on Cameron Street. Branches and leaves covered her nude body. Someone had beaten the little girl to death with a rock.

2006

It's been 40 years since Brenda Sue Brown was killed. Her sisters, Mary McSwain and Patricia Buff, have kept her memory alive by telling stories to their six brothers who were too young to remember their big sister. The women have also kept the memory of her murder alive in the memory of police. They press police to keep looking for their sister's killer.

Chapter 01: Go on Ahead
Chapter 02: "Our Baby's Dead!"
Chapter 03: A Tremendous Fight
Chapter 04: Disturbing Questions
Chapter 05: The Hunt for a Killer
Chapter 06: Proof
Chapter 07: Charge Him With This One
Chapter 08: The Trial
Chapter 09: Modern Day Detectives
Chapter 10: Where the Trail Ends
Chapter 11: Missing Evidence
Chapter 12: "They Way She Had to Leave"
Chapter 13: The Sister's Return

Anyone with information about this crime is asked to call Cleveland County Crimestoppers at (704) 481-TIPS (8477) or Shelby Police at (704) 484-6845.

Anyone who provides information that leads to the arrest of a suspect could receive an award.

Designed by Chad Thomas, The Star

Mary McSwain, Brenda Sue's sister
"Well, the loss is the same and the fear, it's still there and I'm ready to let it go."

Shelby Police Det. Todd Vickery
"There's somebody out there that's got that last bit of information. Or someone to say, 'I lived with it all these years and I just can't take it anymore.'"

Gladys Brown, Brenda Sue's mother
"Whoever it is, I'd like him to pull time for it, But I know that he won't get by, he has to stand in front of his maker one day."

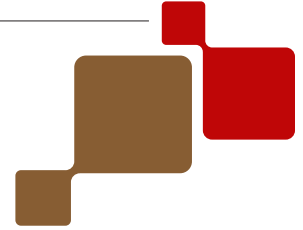
Web site for a 40-year old murder case, which generated interest and lead to an arrest

"I don't think there's a loser in this situation - at least not if it's done right and done well, and I'd like to think that we're doing both."

Training the Staff and Training the Community

The Star has benefited greatly from a combination of luck and circumstance; like most small dailies, many of their staff are young, if not fresh out of college. This lack of experience has actually turned out to be a positive boon, since the young reporters and editors have shown themselves willing and able to take the initiative and, in many cases, train themselves.

"It was a tough transition for some of the reporters because some of us are used to a certain way." Cawthon



said. “There was a little frustration when we were first changing over, but at the same time, I think it’s helped that we haven’t been doing this for too long, and we’re young enough to adapt.

“People felt constricted by having to shorten their stories so much. I never had any problem with that, but it was kind of frustrating to some people. You know, you get a good story and you’re focused on writing a kind of narrative story – the longer ones, maybe the 25-inchers that are going to win awards.

“But that never bothered me, because I just tried to write a good story. You had to think about the larger picture here and ask yourself, ‘Is it more important to write a 25-inch story or is it more important for me to provide the best information to the public in the least amount of space?’

“I look at it this way: We’re able to provide the news of the day, rather than the news of yesterday.”

The Star’s staff has taken it upon themselves to help each other out with learning how to best use the new multimedia technology. The photographers have been giving tips to the reporters on how best to use their cellphone cameras, and the reporters who have experience shooting and editing video try to help out the ones who don’t.

The Star uses Microsoft Movie Maker, a very simple video-editing program that comes bundled with many new computers, and the young staff has been encouraged to take all their new toys home with them and learn how to play with them.

“It certainly was the case here that the staff kind of trained themselves, in part because to some degree we were the blind leading the blind,” Jenkins said. “All of us had various experience, but depending on the age of the person and life experiences, some of us were more comfortable with multimedia than others. But we all stepped up and embraced the initiative, and everybody contributed pretty equally to our online presence.”

Now that readers are getting more and more used to watching video on the Star’s Web site, the next step is to make it easier for them to contribute their own videos to the newspaper,

in much the same way that they are now submitting photos and stories.

One of the biggest successes for the paper has been the ClevelandCountyKids.com site that they launched to allow local residents to show off cute pictures of their children and to share stories of their kids’ triumphs. They were expecting to get two or three pictures a week.

Instead, The Star has received more than 2,000 photos in the last 18 months, and the site also generates story leads for the reporters to follow up on.

Each reporter also has a blog, and while they are not required to post, the reporters are finding that the less-formal format is transforming the attitudes of the community towards the journalists. The most popular posts on the blogs are those that have nothing to do with a news event, but rather are stories about the reporters’ home lives or random thoughts about the lyrics to their favorite songs.

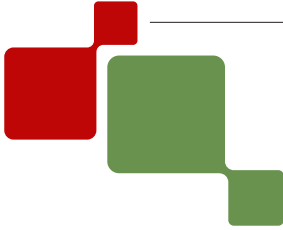
Readers have reacted very positively to this, saying that they like the feeling of familiarity, that the staff of The Star are “just regular folks” that they feel that they can talk to and trust.

The screenshot shows a web browser window. The main content is a video player titled "Brenda Sue Brown and the Oxygen Network (7/9)" with a timestamp of "July 9, 2007 10:12 AM". The video player displays a "CARTER CHEVROLET" advertisement with the website "www.cartershev.com" and phone numbers "704-482-4341" and "1-888-290-2514". Below the video player, there is a caption: "SHELBY — 1966. It was the year 11-year-old Brenda Sue Brown was killed. The year folks began locking their doors. The year Shelby lost its innocence. Now, just months after police made an arrest in the 41-year-old killing, The Oxygen Network is preparing to tell the story to a nationwide audience. A production crew turned The Star's newsroom into a filming location Sunday as former Star reporter Megan Ward shared her story, the research that went into her 13-part, award-winning series on the killing and how dusting off the case after so many years helped lead to an arrest. 'It was a collective memory of Shelby, North Carolina, in 1966,' said Ms. Ward, camera lighting bouncing off her face and a sound mic hovering just above her head. 'It's part of our history here.'"

On the right side of the browser, there are several advertisements:

- A weather widget for "Partly Cloudy" with a temperature of "95°F" and "Winds From the Southwest at 13 Gusting to 20 MPH".
- A "MOTEL 6" advertisement with the slogan "We'll leave the light on for you." and a search box for "City" and "State".
- A "Yellow Pages" search box with fields for "Search:" and "Location: Shelby, NC".
- An "AP Video" section with several video thumbnails.
- A "Tag Cloud" section with the text "brown rates online brenda sue oxygen classified video site obituaries network".
- A "Vonage" advertisement for "FREE Calls for 30 Days" and "unlimited calling for only \$24.99/month".
- A "Cleveland County Kids" advertisement with the text "Find out how to get your copy" and "Advertise your business on shelbystar.com. Click here to find out how."

Advertisements on Shelbystar.com



This open and somewhat freewheeling attitude has been made possible by the open corporate culture that the Freedom chain has attempted to nurture.

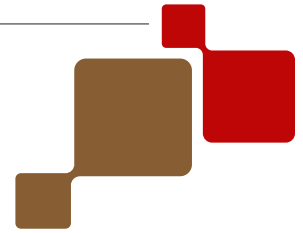
“They’ve been pretty upfront,” Cawthon said. “Whenever a new policy goes into effect, they always sit us down and say ‘Here’s what we’re going to do. We think you guys can do this. If you can’t do this, we won’t do this. But let’s experiment and maybe it’ll pass and maybe it’ll fail, but let’s throw it out there and see how we do.’”

One area that still has to be resolved is advertising. Local advertisers, while seeing the dramatic rise in Web traffic, are still leery of committing their money to such a new and radical medium. In this, they mirror the attitudes of many other advertisers hesitant to trust the Internet.

“As far as getting advertisers to buy into this strategy, we figure that if we build the traffic, it will pay off in the long run,” Foster said. “We’re having some success educating local advertisers on the effectiveness of being on our site, but there’s still a long way to go.

“I think part of the problem is that newspapers still aren’t organized to sell online advertising. It’s not as difficult to change the way a newsroom operates as it is to change the whole way that the business operates and makes money.

“At some point, there’s just got to be faith that this traffic will ultimately be linked to dollars. How that will happen, well, if we had the answer to that, I’d be too busy making sure my new island was properly serviced to be talking to you.”



Author Biography

David LaFontaine is a freelance writer/videographer who lives in Los Angeles, Calif. He began his journalism career as a copy editor at the Arizona Republic, then went on to become managing editor of the Caracas Daily Journal in Venezuela. He moved into the digital media area as managing editor of Singe Parent Magazine and then the streaming video site, Filmson.com. He has produced segments for ABC's Prime Time, and his multimedia work appears in the Online Journalism Review.



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