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New England Association of Circulation Executives WWW.NEACE.COM

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Ideas & Best Practices for a COVID-19 World

Most industry discussion about how we are dealing with the COVID-19 emergency is, of course, focused on our editorial content. In such times, newspapers are traditionally a key and credible source for community information. But editorial is only part of the publishing job. What about the business part, our part? Is it just business as usual? Hardly.

COVID-19 news coverage and shelter in place put increased demands on circulation and production as well. We know everyone in our world is working crazy hours, often remotely and short handed. The results are new products and procedures to deliver the goods and make it look like business as usual to readers.

We thought it would be helpful to take stock and share with NEACE members some COVID-19 related ideas and best practices we've collected. Use them to inspire your own actions now, or for whatever comes next.

Why the interest? With no playbook, the only way to learn about our quickly changing crisis economy is from hands-on experience. It is critical to understand how business workarounds, implemented to get through the COVID-19 emergency, fared in the real world. From anecdotal reports it seems everyone discovered some new way to work that will remain in place well after shelter in place is past.

Bottom line -- don't expect the business of our recent past to return as the business of the future.

Circulation & production have the tools

As we've seen, the COVID-19 crisis creates frequent institutional and business change, requiring frequent communication to the public. Realize that your readership is probably the most valuable resource in this situation. Newspapers have regular, direct contact delivering physical and digital news products to some of the most aware, involved and influential community members. To handle a crisis that breaks convention, here is a perfect opportunity to break publishing conventions and try new things. No one expects normal.

The collage features several advertisements:

- National Bank of Cossackie**: "says Thank You" to businesses remaining open during the crisis.
- Simone's Kitchen**: "10% Off Mediterranean Inspired Bowls".
- Yann's Too Restaurant**: "Takeout Special \$5 Off Any Takeout Order".
- Silver Spoon Cafe**: "Now Available - Delivery & Curbside Pick Up".
- Trackside Pizza**: "Delivery & Pick Up Only 756-3339".
- Paul's**: Three locations in Cossackie, NY.
- The Case and Rasher**: "Great Beer & Great Food".
- The Tasting Lab**: "Don't Stress We Have Growlers!".
- Red's Restaurant**: "There's just something about Red's!".
- Marco's Diner & Restaurant**: "Awesome Food Fast Friendly Service & Great Prices!".
- Sign Up Today & Get 1 Month FREE!**: Offer for The News-Herald and Pioneer.

Complementary newspaper provided with home delivery meal. Paper used this wrap featuring bank sponsor and ads for participating restaurants. (see #3)

Ideas & Best Practices

1) Local Fact Sheet Directory

For weeks, updates were regularly reported about changes in government services, public health requirements, schools closings and recovery programs. These updates are frequent and sometimes contradictory. How will readers know the current situation?

Create a comprehensive status directory — listing current status of stores and services compiled mostly from recent news coverage. Topics typically covered:

- Contact info & hours for police, emergency, hospital, town hall, SBA, schools
- Status of services like trash pickup, parks...
- Contacts for government COVID-19 relief programs
- Directory of local business, open/closed status, hours, contact
- Special restaurant listing noting hour, deliveries, curbside, URL.

To keep costs low and avoid changes in regular production, create the directory in any application, formatted for 8.5" x 11" (for easy home printing and on-screen reading) and export as PDF. Distribute via email and/or website download.

The directory must be kept current to be useful and credible. Make sure all the listed businesses have an email contact at the paper to send in updates or other news. While listings in such a directory are typically free, this is a perfect opportunity for sponsorship from the local hospital, bank or other town-wide business.

2) Community Activities Bulletin Board / Calendar

Since shelter in place, social media is used for much informal community news and communication. But this leaves some out of touch. Social media usage is neither universal nor accessible to everyone, nor can it fully replace door-to-door leafleting, signage and even traditional cork bulletin boards at coffee shops and schools.

This is another opportunity to publish a community activities directory as a letter-size PDF, sent via email and with business sponsorship. As with most community news, ask readers to send in organization announcements and event dates. Your newspaper reader mailing list represents a broader and more inclusive audience than members of a single social media site or group mail list. Announcements via your activities directory PDF, extends your reach to the whole community.

3) 500 Free Papers: A Deal with Home Delivered Meals

How about a complimentary paper and restaurant coupons with your home delivered meals? One paper worked with a local bank to have them sponsor 500 print copies for restaurants to handout free with home delivered meals. Each paper had a special wrap noting bank sponsorship, plus the bank gave free wrap ad space to participating restaurants. This program can be extended by posting the wrap on webs or sent as part of a newspaper push email. All participants were very happy with the results.

4) Local Store DIY “Catalogue” Sales

With no foot traffic, local stores have limited ways to drive business. Transitioning to phone or on-line sales with pickup or delivery generally requires new infrastructure and changed customer habits. Printed or web catalogs are common tools of on-line sellers, but rarely do local stores have either.

News publishers can offer businesses a quick alternative. Have your advertisers or designers put together a simple “catalogue”. Use a simple insert or flyer layout of 1 or more pages, formatted letter size, with a listing of popular products or sale items. For example, a hardware store could list paint and garden materials for homebound DIY fix up projects, with artwork taken from recent ads. Distribute via your newspaper push email list and post on web. Consider doing some pre-prints for insertion with print copies. Make sure the flyer contains instructions how to order by email or phone and use curbside or home delivery. This works for both B2C and B2B businesses.

5) COVID-19 crisis temporary help wanted

Despite the crisis, certain businesses (delivery, grocery...) are hiring to staff for high demand or absent employees. These are hyper-local job opportunities are not generally a focus of web job boards — and perfect for local newspaper push email newsletters.

6) Zoom Business Roundtables

NEACE president, Warren Dews, runs unique roundtable discussion sessions in the communities where his two papers are located. Each session runs about 30 minutes and is broadcast on Facebook live and recorded and posted for demand viewing. Participants represent different aspects of the community and are selected to discuss pressing topics. In short, Warren is using his good office to get leaders together to discuss how the crisis effects them, how they are coping and what anyone can do to help.

One recent session included a bank, restaurant, marketing agency, pharmacy and university expert in public affairs & policy. No surprise the topic was about stimulus loans and SBA programs. Another discussion involved how to encourage former walk-in customers to use phone ordering and make curbside pick-up competitive with drive-through alternatives.

Roundtables are not a thinly veiled ad pitch. Significant change is underway now and for the foreseeable future. Every roundtable topic revealed the need for public outreach to communicate changes. As publishers, NEACE members are all about local and certainly in the communication business.

- 30 -

About

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