



REINVENTING BUSINESS MODELS FOR NEWS

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Sustainable solutions for local media in the time of COVID-19

The coronavirus has changed how local media companies do business – maybe permanently. We ask 9 companies what they’re doing to adapt to changing conditions, and exactly what’s working

Report by Brooke Warner
Consultant, Local Media Association

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About the author

Having passionately dedicated her 25+ year career to helping local and niche media thrive, Brooke Warner is an award-winning Internet pioneer and media transformation thought leader always on the lookout for trends and market opportunities to build revenue models, and create significant audience wins. She's worked in markets of all sizes, rolled up her sleeves with individual small/medium businesses, been instrumental to the success of a handful of early stage start-ups, and has had the distinct pleasure of working strategically with some major brands such as Red Bull, Adidas, and Shark Week for Discovery. She has ecommerce experience with Amazon sales optimization and advertising, and has been a prolific content producer of every type including news, online media, television programming, OTT, and feature films. Brooke firmly believes that local media health and community health go hand-in-hand.



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Introduction

Necessity isn't just the mother of invention, it's also the mother of reinvention. Nothing has created greater, more urgent need in local communities and their media than the crucible we now find ourselves in with the COVID-19 pandemic.

While already challenged by pressures from current changes in consumer behavior and the economic realities those create, seemingly overnight the key drivers for media companies moved from business as usual for dealing with that situation, to asking the question: What do we all need to do, right now, this second, to keep our communities healthy and, literally, to stay in business tomorrow? Prior to COVID-19 the discussions about transformation were seen as — depending on your point of view — arguably nice to have and have been pursued to varying degrees and urgency across media companies of every size and shape.

In April 2020, we interviewed leaders at nine media companies, representing broadcasting, radio, newspaper publishing, digital, and magazine publishing and covering local markets of every size. We asked them to share with us how they're approaching this crisis, if they can see results, and any thoughts they have for moving into the future.

What we learned is that the need to stay home and the immediate pain felt by retracting local communities has been approached by the media companies with nearly the same burning focus on providing service to those communities. Whether intuitively or through experience, all of these companies immediately understood that the shortest route to survival was in helping community businesses, and got to work. Not surprisingly, that focus on service aligns with common prescriptive recommendations for sustainable transformation; and what we saw was that media companies that have already begun to make that shift in earnest, are not having to pivot as hard. They're simply turning up the volume, breadth, and intensity of that effort to make the most out of the situation. Those who have lagged are having to step on the gas, get moving and hope it's not too-little-too-late. In either case, it's not yet clear if either are enough. There is a reason April is called the starving season. The garden is planted, but everyone is still living on winter's stores and waiting.

In reading this report, you'll notice there are some recurring themes for serving the community.

1. **Content:** All communities are hungry for solid COVID-19 information, specific details about how their town and businesses are currently operating, and a bit of entertainment to help pass the time while at home and to give some psychological relief. Content offerings are designed to serve advertisers and consumers alike. Live and social technologies are extending the reach of this content, giving local media brands a stronger presence in the ongoing fight for the living room. However, with companies like Netflix becoming household names, and new streaming services like Quibbi and Disney+ entering the fray, it's an intense time to be fighting for audience attention -- and we haven't even mentioned the dark 800 pound horse known as Twitch. The drive for local, relevant COVID-19 information is giving local media a competitive edge across all demographics.
2. **Business Expertise:** Nearly all media companies were using their platforms to pull the business community together to get them the information they needed to survive. If advertising information is the first step in a seller's evolution, and marketing solutions the second, then business expertise is the final and highest calling. Sales teams who are already on the evolutionary path have a greater level of preparedness to move forward. The goal for providing this expertise (besides survival, and maybe as a result of survival) is as much about building long-lasting relationships as immediate sales.
3. **Technology:** All companies are using new technology to do their jobs, and to provide service. Legacy sellers and operations became instantly more technology-dependent and have had to adjust quickly. With people being encouraged, and even forced to stay at home, the rate of media use and disintermediation has intensified. Universally accessible technology is facilitating that.
4. **User Experience:** The media companies are extremely conscientious of the fact users are at home and using all their screens all the time. The need to deliver solid experiences to a large number of people to get critical public health information out there has never played a more important role.
5. **Donations and Subscriptions:** The urgency of the crisis has given many publishing companies courage to ask for donations and support from

their readers, and are now aggressively looking for ways to promote their fundraising at every audience touch point. Paywalls have been lowered, or partially lowered, and that change is being used to drive subscriptions. Like donation drives, subscription drives are in full swing.

6. **New Platforms:** Several companies have created sites or microsites as a special destination to showcase and promote what their local restaurants and businesses are offering.
7. **Traffic and Audience Spikes:** Hockey-stick trends for skyrocketing traffic and audience numbers are not unusual and reflect the new captive reality; and the one-two punch is entire families being stuck at home and having a high drive for information. This presents new challenges and opportunities for owned-and-operated sites.
8. **Special Advertising Programs:** All have created advertising and marketing packages and programs for this situation, and where possible have worked to make things easier and more affordable for local businesses.
9. **Operations and Expenses:** All have been impacted by the pandemic. Those interviewed for this white paper who are in the position to share those changes did so.
10. **Creativity:** Every company has applied great creativity and energy in developing solutions for themselves and their community. It's there in abundance, and is often the driver behind successes we see.

Advance Local

Bob Geiger, Vice President Sales, PA Media Group, Advance Local

[Advance Local](#), one of the largest media groups in the United States, operates the leading news and information companies including MLive Media Group, Advance Ohio, Alabama Media Group, NJ Advance Media, Advance Media NY, MassLive Media, Oregonian Media Group, Staten Island Media Group, PA Media Group.



Like others in our industry, our team has rapidly pivoted these past few weeks to create ways to best serve our advertisers and readers during this crisis. We won't know the total impact of our efforts for weeks to come. However, we are encouraged by what we're seeing. Our focus has really been on several fronts.

First, one of the things we have had early success with is putting important information out there for the community. For example, we've placed our coronavirus content in front of our pay meter. We found a local medical center to sponsor that critical content, which was significant new revenue for us. We've also produced special sections covering the virus, a daily COVID-19 e-newsletter, and a Facebook Live series (which airs everyday around noon) with our opinion editor who does a live interview with local businesses like the CEO of Giant Foods to give consumers insights as to what's going on with these businesses in their community during a critical time. Our readers have rewarded our efforts with the highest engagement we've ever seen across all these platforms.

Second, we just kicked off a program that we're really proud of called Rally4Local (#rally4local) with [Rally4Local.com](#). The Rally4Local program works by strengthening our relationships with the business community through education, and by giving them an affordable platform for reaching out to their customers during this challenging time. This same platform gives the people in our communities a place to go to get information about their local businesses and appropriate offers.

Our development team worked around the clock on the dedicated [Rally4Local](#) microsite and it just launched last week. It currently has over 350 business listings. The new site showcases local business gift cards, information such as whether or not they have delivery and pickup, open hours, or if they offer ecommerce, all at no costs to the local businesses. We're also extending it to the Chambers and non-profits (including adding donate buttons). We've also been working to pre-populate it with advertisers' information so there's value when we drive people there for the first time. We'll be doing a full print promotion, social media, blogging, and marketing blitz for the new site and Rally4Local program.

The Rally4Local program offers virtual training for SMBs for crisis marketing, message pivoting, and deeper education for how to thrive during the pandemic. For attendees of those webinars we've developed and are offering 90-day packaged advertising solutions that

allow them to have a presence online plus participate more deeply on the Rally4Life microsite. In addition to promoting these webinars, we've tasked our sellers to do a phone blitz to drive attendance for the webinars. They're to focus on new business, and to re-activate old business for this initiative. We think this is lead generation on steroids for both our team and our advertisers!

Through these efforts we've made a lot of new friends and we're even more engaged with the community than we used to be. This is relationship building pure and simple. When the community sees we're flexing our muscles for them, they'll see our brand in an entirely different way.

In the longer term (beyond the 90 day point), that's when we hope and expect to try to be getting back to the "new normal", the business strategy is that we're now communicating with a whole bunch of new businesses we haven't before because we've offered so much good will and service when it counted. It's an investment in them so that we can combine strengths in the future to grow our businesses together post-COVID-19.

#RALLY4LOCAL PA MEDIA GROUP

Big Hearts. Local Business. Your Community.

In our current environment, it's important for you, the small business owner, to know that you can still have a strategy for success. At PA Media Group, we are driven to lead this effort.

Our first virtual learning webinar series launches on April 15th.

When: Wednesday, April 15, 12:30 - 1:30 PM

Topic: PA Media Group #Rally4Local Virtual Training - Rally4Local Website/Google My Business

Register Today!

My advice for other people in my position — and everyone that I know of addresses it this way — we need to lead with our hearts and good will, and not come at it with an opportunistic mindset, so it's a mission to help our communities come out the other side whole.

Baltimore Sun Media Group

Sharon Nevins, Vice President Advertising, Baltimore Sun Media

[Baltimore Sun Media Group](#) publishes three major daily newspapers, three websites, 20 community newspapers and three glossy magazines. Additionally we operate as a full service agency offering digital solutions offsite as well as branded content and creative services.



I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling like our industry just got punched in the gut. As leaders we experience the pain, take a deep breath, and start fighting back. The key for us is keeping our sales teams focused on the positive, and when dealing with work from home environment, management is more important than ever. All of our meetings are video to help keep the teams engaged (more than just voice), and managers hold meetings twice a day with the teams (one in the morning and one end of day). Where once we would have typically focused on where we are to goal, instead are now focused on the wins (new contracts) and saves (keeping a customer from cancelling).

Where we're winning contracts:

1. Certain categories – When faced with a health pandemic like COVID-19, there are industries that need our services more than ever. Examples include those in health care (where important public safety messaging needs to reach the community), finance (where there's opportunity for new loan campaigns), and government organizations (that need to reach aging communities); and include smaller businesses that are essential and still open for business.
2. Storytelling – While storytelling is always an important way for brands to communicate, it has become the most important recommendation we make to brands trying to get messaging out during this crisis. This is a key component to shifts in crisis management marketing and really makes a business a part of a community if you can help it tell its personal story.

Next, we talk about and train on saving revenue by keeping customers from cancelling their contracts. We've had the greatest success with this from customers who need to (and can) change operationally in order to stay in business during this crisis, and we're there to advise them at a core business level. Restaurants are a great example. Some have shifted to carry-out, others are pivoting to e-commerce. So, rather than just letting them close up shop, we give them options by helping to guide them in their marketing efforts to shift tactics and new KPIs. We advise on how to get the word out, and to keep the revenue flowing by shifting gears. It's times like these when solid client relationships that we've built over time have laid the groundwork for this moment. The trust is there, so they feel you are there to help, not "selling" them. They want our business advice and ask for it.

Content is still king

A big plus in our world as publishers is our ability to create content as a critical source of news and information for the communities we serve. Because of that credibility and reach, our advertisers want to be adjacent to that important content to capitalize on the huge growth in eyeballs to our sites. We have a great relationship with our newsroom and are collaborating with them 24/7 on content ideas that advertisers and readers are equally interested in. Some great ideas that have come out of this crisis are:

1. [Hero of the Week](#) – We shine a light on [someone in the community](#) going above and beyond. For this we've partnered here with a local credit union as a sponsor.
2. Critical COVID-19 coverage – We have a wonderful health insurer who partnered with us to help put our critical coronavirus content outside of our paywall.

CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield is partnering with The Baltimore Sun to make this important information paywall-free for non-subscribers. To support essential reporting, please consider [becoming a subscriber](#).

3. We've pivoted some of our sports pages to kid-centered content that's fun and educational for kids who are stuck at home.
4. Our health reporters are doing Q&A videos answering the most critical COVID-19 questions.

All of the above examples are sponsorable, and all have found sponsors. We're constantly working to find new opportunities to connect the businesses who want meaningful ways to reach our audience. The public health crisis makes it more important than ever.

It will be interesting to see how this will affect our industry and others in the short, mid, and long term. We will have learned a great deal about what success in the future will look like as we come out the other side, and most likely, some businesses like health organizations who've been very successful in the shift to telemedicine will continue to use this new skill set after COVID-19 is a memory.

Beasley Media Group

Rik Ferrell, Interactive Sales Manager, Southwest Florida, Beasley Media Group

[Beasley Media Group](#) owns and operates 69 stations (50 FM and 19 AM) in 16 large-and mid-size markets in the United States.

The mantra that we're all embracing is that we're here to help the clients and community get through this. Revenue is important, but to protect the future is to help protect the local businesses. What do we want people to say and think about us at the end? Did we pursue our interest, or did we help them through it. We're taking that approach in nearly everything we do. We're helping them fight the fight, and this is really forcing everyone to move to a more consultative role, and to stay there. It's not lip service, it's critical to our economic health.

Our service seems to be working, owned-and-operated web traffic is through the roof, including an increase in our average number of pages consumed per user. Because of this we are providing more web-centric content, including the latest COVID-19 updates, but also information and entertainment specific to our area. This additional traffic has allowed us to create owned-and-operated packages that include no cost promotional activities and options for customers who really need them. We're actually offering several programs that have different levels of spending options, with no long-term commitments. It's more important for us to be able to have all the businesses in need have an option for participation. Here are a few:



Operation Gift Card

If you're a restaurant in our market and you have gift cards available on your website, we'll promote those gift cards, and [drive people to buy them](#) for use in the future. Those restaurants are then offered a half-price deal (Neofill is our provider) and a month of in-kind dollars for online and on-air ads or promotion. A business doesn't have to be currently open to participate.

Keep Calm and Carry Out

For a small, flat weekly rate (per station) local restaurants can get streaming spots (at discount rates) to promote their take out menu and services, and be listed on our dedicated microsite. We have made it weekly because we don't want anyone to feel that they have to commit to something longer with everything changing so quickly. If the restaurant has no money, we're still going to list it with links to their site, but they won't get any spots. This gives the restaurants another option, and takes advantage of our uptick in traffic. Our local chambers of commerce have pushed this out to their memberships and we've had a strong response so far, and many thank-yous.

We are promoting these programs and driving some additional traffic through our "Keep it Local" banner. We're offering packaged, low-cost options for:

- Owned-and-operated streaming and display.
- Addressable geo-fencing display (as a much more effective alternative to social media ads and traditional direct mail).
- Video display ad program incorporating our on-air staff to soft-endorse clients under our "We're all in this together" community focus. This program will use third-party programmatic targeting at each station.

We're helping businesses fight the good fight in other ways, too. We're finding that creativity and community involvement go hand in hand to create even stronger success. Here are two examples that illustrate how that can work.

1. Our morning show is very community-focused and is organizing a medical supply drive for gowns, masks, and other PPEs. We'll pick up and drop off to med centers and retirement homes, and others who need them. We got a local medical supply company to sponsor this effort which is a great fit. Revenue plus service is a great win/win.

2. Wicked Dolphin Rum is a very community-focused rum distiller in our market. They've taken the over proof from the rum to create hand sanitizer. We've promoted it and it completely "sold out" twice. The business offered bottles of rum for sale at the same time for staying at home and "drinking in place," combined it drove significant business for them. They're currently looking at "Buy a bottle of rum, get a free roll of toilet paper" promotion.

As an organization, we're absolutely open for business and pursuing sales. Working from home has not changed that. We even have jocks broadcasting from home. As digital sellers who know how to use technology we have an advantage, but this situation means we're taking solutions sales to the next level by helping with more than marketing. We have a real opportunity to prove our value to build great relationships for the future; and we're taking advantage of it.

The way we do business after this is definitely going to change forever because it already has. Everything we've been developing our team for is critical for success, now. There's no excuse. If we're doing our jobs right, right now, our partnerships will be forever strengthened. Surviving together with our community creates strong bonds which I see lasting for some time to come.

Capitol Broadcasting Co., Inc.

John Conway, Vice President, WRAL Digital at Capitol Broadcasting Co.



[Capitol Broadcasting Co., Inc.](#) is a diversified communications company which besides owning its flagship television brand WRAL, also owns and operates a variety of radio broadcast entities, CBC New Media Group; WRAL Digital Solutions, and Microspace. The company also owns other non-media companies across North Carolina.

Our strategy has been on two fronts. First, we're making sure we're personally reaching out to all of our current clients; then we're looking for ways to source new business. In both cases we're focused on helping the individual businesses figure out how they uniquely need to respond to the crisis. For example, we work to discover if they have new and immediate hiring needs, or are pivoting to change their messaging or services, etc. It's still a solutions-based approach, but the virus has intensified their needs and urgency.

Second, we're using technology and content to offer key information, advice and guidance to our community through a webinar series. We're bringing in our business reporter and tech-editor to disseminate critical information. For example we just did one webinar on the SBA loans encouraging people to get in early on the first round which we think will go fast. Others cover a wide range of topics unemployment, taxes, etc. While this might be a little out of the ordinary, the thinking is the same; we're still working to deliver the information and advice everyone needs, but now we're focused on that which helps businesses and people to weather the storm. In both cases it keeps us engaged with our community.

We're getting used to offering these sessions through technology, and are getting better. So far they've been very successful. We registered 375 businesses over the first two sessions. Will we continue to do this? We could. I

could see it continue to live past COVID-19, we're seeing relationships grow from this.



We've also started a [Support Local Business initiative](#) that included a fundraiser for restaurants statewide that helped raise more than \$350,000 and also built a database highlighting more than 600 businesses still open. We count this among one of our biggest successes.

Internally, we're using technology for working from home, too. There are very few people working in the building on our digital side. The TV stations have more people working on due to the proximity-demands required to get programming on air.

Heartland Media / Allen Media Broadcasting

**Lisa Bishop, Chief Digital Officer,
Heartland Media / Allen Media**

[Heartland Media](#), LLC is a local broadcast media company, operating local broadcast TV stations and digital media assets across the continental United States.

From a digital perspective we're working with all of our stations to keep serving our audiences, keep things running on all cylinders, and to take advantage of the opportunities that exist. We're also tackling many initiatives across the company that are not sales-driven, but are designed to serve the communities and enable us to help them succeed, tightening our relationships along the way. For example, several are working with the local school district to do educational programming for kids. Others are offering virtual cooking classes. Another market is doing Hometown Heroes, featuring content that showcases essential businesses and people out there doing the important things to keep our communities working and people safe. Another station is doing a video contest of kids washing their hands, asking kids to send in their best hand-washing routine, and for viewers to vote for the best one. We're doing what we can to offer support at every level. We're offering a COVID-19 newsletter sign up which is a great service to our communities, helps us build our email lists, and it's sponsorable.

On the broadcasting side, we have all the mixed TVU units working and are maximizing their use. Anchors are either broadcasting alone at the desk, far apart when necessary, or even from home.

In terms of sales, everyone is working from home remotely. We've been getting all of our sales managers together to do coffee chats since we find it can be challenging for sales people who are often extraverted, and used to being



out and about, to be holed up all day on their computers. These coffee chats are not just about business, they let us connect, share, and vent, in a more social and casual way. It really helps keep morale up, and keeps everyone focused the rest of the time

We have had some stations miss their goals, but many made it, and there's still new business coming in. We'll have a better sense of things in May. To adapt we've launched some sales initiatives company-wide, but many of the stations are creatively focusing on solutions that work for their particular markets and local businesses on their own. We think it's important to focus on the categories that can really still do business either from an essential status or because they can conduct a service from afar or with social distancing. One example is automobile services because they will often come to people's houses and do the procedure curbside. People can pay from afar, digitally.

Other categories and examples:

1. Restaurants: We've created restaurant and business directory listings for who's open, who has carry out and delivery, etc. Some stations already had some minor "foodie" product/page before, but we really took the lead with needs created by COVID-19 to start putting this information together for the public for free. The restaurants get a free listing and some online advertising to go along with it since our online traffic is through the roof and we have plenty to offer. Success is being measured in the enormous number of thank you notes we've received. We know this will pay off for us in lead generation down the road; it's clearly building relationships, and trust.
2. Home services: Roofing companies and HVAC are largely serviced outside, and since people are home, it's something that can be done well outside of six feet distances — especially if billing is done by mail or online. Many nurseries and greenhouses will do curbside deliveries. We've begun offering email campaigns for home improvement. We've also started looking at a virtual Home Show, much like what we've done for restaurants and if we move forward will be using it as a lead generation model.
3. Home healthcare and telehealth: We had a run of about two weeks where these companies were working quickly to change their messaging to reflect current consumer needs and their offerings. These ranged from delivering products (like oxygen) and prescriptions, to doctors being open and seeing patients by using technology. When we

see these calls coming in, we know there's an opportunity to do more by reaching out to the other businesses in that category to check in, see what their needs are, and learn what we can do to help.

4. Salon and beauty: We're working to create a gift card market for these categories so that people can buy gift cards for future use. There's a lot of pent up need for beauty services and at some point people will be lining up to get an appointment. In the meanwhile, they can buy their services in advance and keep the shops going.

Nevada News Group

Matt Fisher, Chief Financial Officer, Nevada News Group



[Nevada News Group](#) is a media company that encompasses the Nevada Appeal, The Record-Courier, the Lahontan Valley News, the Northern Nevada Business Weekly, the Humboldt Sun, Battle Mountain Bugle, Lovelock Review-Miner, and Nevada Rancher Magazine.

We're tackling the problem of sustainability in the time of COVID-19 from both the revenue and the expense/operations side. There's equal duality in how we're dealing with our community: We haven't forgotten our relationships and responsibilities to our communities, and are obsessively looking for ways to help the businesses and people we represent. But we're also being fearless in asking for help. We know we're in this together, so each side of the equation has to do the best it can for all concerned for the long haul.

Revenue

On the revenue side, we've definitely been impacted by the coronavirus closures. Revenue is down by 30% March, and almost 40% in April. However, there are things we've been able to do to keep advertising coming in, and even find new customers along the way.

1. We're working to save contracts through crisis management marketing around COVID-19 messaging and information for businesses such as restaurants.
2. We're running special buy-one-get-one sales initiatives so that the local businesses' advertising dollars go further and keep flowing.
3. We're lowering the barrier to entry for buying for new customers by waiving the requirement to pre-pay. We are still running credit checks to minimize risks to the best of our ability.
4. We're making sure content management systems and the online subscription payment systems are as solid as possible. People are being driven online in greater numbers, so we need to make sure there is a

positive customer experience. They're counting on us, and we're counting on them. The fact that so many people physically touch a paper before it hits someone's doorstep — and yes, our customers are calling to ask how many times — means that we are now selling more digital subscriptions.

5. We're pushing the inside sales teams to make outbound calls with a focus to selling more than classifieds. This includes subscriptions, data, and native content. This effort is a double win because we know that it works, and the cost of sales is lower.
6. We've put out a call to action to the community for donations to support local journalism. We're promoting it online and through the paper and it's working. Our first two donations were \$100 each, with the largest \$200, and average \$80. As of this writing we've raised a total of \$3,000 and have been up for less than a week. We've also set up a call bank to make phone calls for donations. We are using this as an educational opportunity, too. We make sure the person at the other end of the line learns something about what it takes to produce a paper and regular news.
7. We have a full suite of papers that cover a wide region and niche topics. We're offering a subscription special that, for \$75, subscribers get an annual subscription to any one of those mailed to their door and full access online. We're using both of these promotions to educate our community what it costs to produce and deliver the quality news they're used to receiving. We see this as a promotion that can continue into the future.

Expense

Our focus for expenses are designed to keep us healthy in every way, and in legal compliance. We're working diligently to keep the head count requirements for paycheck protection loans available through the SBA since we've applied for that. That's a balancing act — especially as an essential business. We moved everyone in circulation to 32 hours and week-long furloughs in keeping with the State of Nevada guidelines. We're keeping all health insurance and frozen all bonuses. We're taking extraordinary measures to clean our cash and other things touched by the public.

The world will continue to change, but we feel if we do it right and capture the hearts and minds of subscribers, they'll be the ones that keep us in business and we'll be around to continue to return the favor.

Nexstar Media Group

Bill Caudill, VP of Digital Media Sales, Nexstar Media Group

[Nexstar Media Group](#) is America's largest local television and media company with 196 full power stations in 114 markets addressing nearly 63% of U.S. television households and a growing digital media operation.



As you can imagine, I had a knot in my stomach at the thought of 1,800 sales people not being able to be physically in front of advertisers, so I knew we had to reinvent ourselves by pivoting to virtual sales. I also knew that digital sales people and national reps have often sold over the phone, to the tune of millions of dollars every day (think Hibu as an example) so it could be done. This is not new. At that point I knew that in order to make this pivot, and for the team to be successful, it was going to be a significant communications strategy that needed to be broken into specific steps and tasks:

First, we had to communicate to the team that selling over the phone; and that technology-based appointment selling is not only possible, but that it can work as a model. Second, we had to educate the team on the different communications tools and technologies available to them, and how to use each effectively.

We had to demonstrate and teach the sales team how to actually sell remotely. This included how to set up virtual appointments, showcase ideas that could work for the client. To do this we've held a series of internal webinars and tutorials; and captured videos of both to make them available universally.

Since ideas are the new currency, we've stepped on the gas on idea-sharing, putting in extra effort and technology to enable the cross-pollination of the ideas that are working. This goes a long way to reinforcing the idea that advertisers are actually still buying. Our sellers can see the examples with their own eyes, and not just hear about it anecdotally. Further, this sharing puts collective information in everyone's hands and builds

empathy. Speaking of empathy, we found it's important that for both customers and sellers, be sure to be super sensitive and make sure people understand that you are trying to help when you share ideas.

Our repository of ideas and success stories has about 400 PowerPoint examples from 196 stations: These include everything from teacher appreciation awards to a 20 minute block of time for a local school system. We also asked 115 markets to send in their COVID-related commercials. We reviewed and saved the best examples for sharing on our intranet; combined covering a wide variety of categories and themes (such as crisis marketing), all searchable, to be used for inspiration for our teams and their customers. (We also made sure to teach them how to share them with customers.)

We also continue to celebrate wins by creating a saved account section on our intranet. Sellers are asked to drop in what they did, how they did it, and post the PowerPoint that went along with it. Not only does that give other sellers a valuable resource, but it gives the seller with the win the recognition they want and deserve. As a communication tool, it's a real esteem boost for them, too.

In acting as a source for information, and a bank of ideas, we've moved from marketing experts to acting as real business consultants for the local community in helping them succeed, too. For example, we are able to give them government information and SBA loan advice on what's available to them. We're also offering crisis management marketing webinars, using the same technology and communications strategies to help them. Sometimes it's as simple as one of our sellers reminding them to send out a note to their customers: "Hey! I'm Open for Business!"

Another area we've applied a strong communications strategy is in taking extra care to work with our National rep firms to let them know what they can access directly for our National advertisers, and not just programmatically.

Like every broadcast group, we've been challenged by the cancellation of the tent pole programming like Olympics, The Masters, etc. much of it sports-driven. To work to offset some of that impact, we are looking for ways to pivot there, too. For example,

For our group wide NCAA Brackets we pivoted to using the Second Street platform, moving to voting brackets for the "Best Chicago Athlete of All Times." In cases like these creativity can save the day.

With our communications-focused pivot, we find we're even busier than ever before - we've got 46 states, 1,800 sales people, all getting up to speed at

the same level with Zoom and other technologies to get the remote selling going. The results are coming to fruition. We may not be growing, but we're not falling behind because we've mitigated the challenge by moving quickly to use communications and technology on the digital end.

Hopefully it'll go back to the way it was, but, the additional challenges we've been put under have improved our skills and abilities to be able to be more savvy in technology, and in working, communicating, and selling remotely.

Swift Communications

Bryce Jacobson, Director of Advertising Shared Services, Swift Communications



[Swift Communications](#) has 22 publishing brands with associated websites and social media in 11 communities, offering both media and marketing products.

From an operational and shared services position the disease hasn't really changed what we do, but it has shifted focus away from in-person interactions, to technology-supported ones; and it's driven us to speed up action around some of our existing consumer-focused, online-enabled initiatives to get further faster.

1. Donation and Subscription Drive: We've increased our efforts to improve products in ways that engage and convert customers to subscribers, and provided the mechanisms for donations. For example, we've added donation buttons everywhere that makes sense, sent out emails, posted on social media, and written columns. We're measuring success simply, by numbers of touch points of communications, conversions and, most importantly, by dollars. [Editor's note: While Jacobs declined to note the amount, he says the efforts have been successful and the money is coming in, with the greatest return coming from the email drives.]

2. Webinars for All Customers: We're using webinar technology to connect and engage with all our customers.

Since mostly everyone is working from home (some location-critical staff, like carriers, have to come in), our leadership and publishers have been hosting webinars for their teams to connect with each other and across our various business units. This helps everyone stay on track, share success stories and challenges, and continue to work as a team. Publishers are meeting daily to discuss challenges, opportunities, and ideas. I really love that meeting, it's really brought us together. We may be at home, but we're closer than ever.

For our readers, topics have included general information related to public health issues surrounding COVID-19. This includes everything from minimizing the spread of the disease, to how to deal with the mental health issues this situation can create. For those we've had panelists and experts from all areas. For those we've had anywhere from 250 to 1000 live viewers at a time. (We generated 166 leads from those.)

For businesses we're offering insights in the best ways to handle the crisis from a marketing perspective, but also as a resource for businesses to learn what resources are available to them (SBA loans) and how to access them. Our panelists here, too, have come from varying areas. Our goal is to offer real value.

These efforts have really intensified our relationships with the local businesses. For our business webinars we've had about 100 live at one time. Like most people are seeing, our online views are going through the roof. We extend the reach and power of these webinars by taking the videos of the sessions and re-distributing them through our online platforms.

One of our more successful webinars with our advertisers was with [Gordon Borrell and Associates](#) focused on crisis marketing. We had one for our Colorado markets and one for the Northern California market.

While we're definitely moving quickly to offset the challenges we're experiencing, we are still experiencing them. For example, classifieds are struggling, but to deal with the fact that isn't ringing as often, we've pushed the classifieds sales team to move their outbound conversations from transactional to consultative (marketing solutions). This is another one of those things we're working on anyway, but the need to do it has increased. The team is responding faster than expected, and it may put us in a stronger place coming out the other side of this current crisis.

Internally, we have to change in how we're spending our time as both leaders and staff, not just because we're working from home, but because we have to stay focused on what we have to do now. I also meet with my team (virtually) twice a week to focus with intention to figure out where the puck is going to be so that we're not just reacting, we're where we need to be when this is over. We don't want to be caught dead on our feet, we want to be forward thinking.

Ramona Home Journal

Michael Raher, Publisher

The [Ramona Home Journal](#) is based out of Ramona, CA, which is just 45 min north east of downtown San Diego and has a population of 40,000. With a readership of 13,500 (directly mailed circulation) this community's major industry is wine with over 30+ wineries.

We've made a couple of changes operationally that we think will help us stay in business, and also help our customers. As just one example, we've moved from publishing twice a month to publishing one time a month.

We'll be offering the same amount of content, but going to print less often will cut our costs and allow me to keep people employed. We'll go back once the economy recovers. We've also begun to offer deferred payments on advertising buys. We encourage advertisers to continue to advertise and stay in front of customers, so they don't lose momentum, and we give them an opportunity to pay us later – in 60 days rather than up front - which is our normal policy. The expense cuts in publishing allows us to do this since we are now just printing and shipping/mailing once.

We have everyone on staff working from home to help keep them safe. Our number one priority is to keep them safe, and second, to keep them employed as long as possible. So far we're able to do that. I have kept the office open, and go in every day, in a show of community solidarity. We



know that there are businesses who need to keep their offices partially open and can't go completely silent. We're here with them.

Content, Business, and Community

For content, we are also putting extra effort to be a resource for positive, useful, lifestyle information for the local community, designed to complement the hard news that the local stations and papers are doing. There is life still happening, and we want to showcase what's here, plus offer other ways to engage, inform, support, and entertain. We're also working with businesses in creating these efforts so that it helps all parts of our community.

Other examples

1. [Business as \(un\)Usual](#) – A section that shows which local businesses are open, and what they're offering for this new normal. Businesses [can list what they're providing](#) (for example curbside or home delivery for restaurants and how're they're open, etc.) Then, readers can tear this page out and keep it on their refrigerators as a reference. The piece is designed for keeping. We have a similar page on our website for restaurants only.
2. We're running promotions – Ramona's Cutest Canine. It's a great time for people to enjoy showing off and voting for their best pet. Everyone has a dog they think is cute, and especially since they're staying home and are on their computers, they're ready to vote. The success we've had shows that:
 - 278 entrants
 - 8,445 votes
 - 18,633 page views
3. Crisis management marketing help for local business is where things can really get creative to make a difference.
 - There's a local pawn shop that offers cash loans. We've worked with them to make sure they let people know that you're available for quick loans during these times for people to bridge their home finance gap. This let's the people of Ramona know that the shop is here for them when they're needed.
 - For the local hardware stores it's a great time for offering help for DIY projects. We had a local client take that angle and he saw

an uptick in foot traffic. We were careful to make sure that they gave people instructions for safely getting in, and out, with what they needed to do their home projects. The same approach can be taken with auto shops services such as oil and fluid changes, battery changes, and tire changes, and detailing because people can get this done, and it can be done from a reasonable social distance when you drop it off. (Auto shops and hardware stores are often considered essential, and remain open.)

4. We've partnered with our chamber of commerce, naming them as the official provider of COVID-19 business news and have distributed important, relevant, and useful information for them.

The Future

In the future we have some new things developing that have been inspired by current circumstances, but which will work for both the new normal or if we return to a more traditional way of doing business:

1. We're going to start promoting/featuring "Ramona Strong" section that will showcase how everyone is coming together virtually, emotionally, and spiritually to show all the ways we're connected as a community.
2. In June we're going to give away a BBQ with the local hardware store with a theme that focuses on grilling at home.
3. We're planning a Re-boot Ramona promotional content in conjunction with the Chamber. The goal will be to get 20 businesses offering \$100 gift certificates that people can enter to win to use any time in the future.
4. Because Ramona is such a strong wine community and dependent on wine tourism, we're looking at creating an online local wine club.

The future may not be as bright as it was a few months ago, but there's much we can do to work with the local businesses and community to make the most of the opportunity that exists, and help to create more. We have much to be thankful for.