



AN RJI RESEARCH PROJECT:

Trusting News

The Trusting News project offers guidance on those questions. With the help of 14 news outlets, we spent a year studying users' reactions to social media strategies designed to enhance trust. What we've learned can help journalists influence what the public chooses to believe, and to pass along.

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Questions? Ideas for further work on trust? Contact project lead [Joy Mayer](mailto:joy@joymayer.com) at joy@joymayer.com.



Process and methodology

Beginning in January 2016, we interviewed practitioners in and out of journalism to get a sense of the elements that create trust and credibility between communicator and receiver. We read related academic research and industry best practices. (See the reading list and interview list at the end of this document.) From that work, three themes emerged around what journalists need to do. They are explained at the following links:

THEME ONE: [Tell their own stories](#)

THEME TWO: [Engage authentically](#)

THEME THREE: [Deploy their existing fans to help share their content](#)

We turned each theme into several specific strategies we wished journalists would experiment with. In the spring, we put out a call for journalists willing to work with us. We were hoping for diversity of coverage type, medium, geography and size.

Here's how we described each strategy.

THEME ONE: TELL YOUR STORY

Offer users a way into the story of you as an organization. What are your values? What do you offer? Talk about the "why" of what you do, not just the day-to-day "what." As an organization, make sure you know what user needs you fill.

STRATEGY: Communicate your core value in stand-alone posts. Craft a post designed to make one of your core values clear. It might be about transparency (here's where our funding comes from), content (we're committed to your neighborhood, or we get the news first), expertise (our staff has a combined 150 years of experience) or the relationship with the community (we're your neighbors). METRICS: Watch reactions, comments and shares.

STRATEGY: Communicate your core value along with other content. Tie specific content to one of your core offerings. (Here's a story, here's why it's believable or important, and it's an example of our commitment to ...) METRICS: Watch reactions. Watch click thrus to content and engagement from this post vs from a post that is a straight sell. Watch responses to your invitations and questions.

STRATEGY: Introduce the organization and staff to your users. Build trust and connection. Try a live video with reporters talking about what you're working on, or some footage of a boss talking about what the organization offers. Have staff share what they like best about their job or their take on something going on in your coverage. Try also introducing the staff to users or content priorities, one at a time, through videos or a photo album. Have each person answer key questions about their job, their relationship to the community or what they cover, etc. METRICS: Take a quantitative (how many) and



qualitative (how good/interesting/diverse) look at the response. Take note of any that express an interest or disinterest in knowing more about you as an organization or as individuals.

STRATEGY: Share the process of a story. Pick a story to share the process of on social. It could be in text or in a quick, informal video with a journalist. Why is it worth investing time in? Why should users believe it? Include invitations, if possible. Pose specific questions and offer clear ways for users to share feedback or ideas. **METRICS:** Watch reactions. Watch click thrus to content and engagement from this post vs from a post that is a straight sell. Watch responses to your invitations and questions.

THEME TWO: ENGAGE AUTHENTICALLY

Encourage conversation and interaction. Listen and respond. Invite people to get to know you. Participate in a way that feels natural to the user. Admit what you don't know. Be human.

STRATEGY: Interact like a human. Every day, in posts and comments, look for opportunities to be conversational with your users. Look for any comments that merit a response and answer them. Look for ways to expand users' understanding of topics or fact-check comments. Click like on comments that don't merit a response, to let the users know you're listening and appreciate their involvement. Also, be thoughtful about the tone and style you're using. What's the organization's voice on Facebook? Include any notes about the voice you're going for in your post description. **METRICS:** Look for acknowledgement of your participation in the forms of likes on your comments or new comments responding to you. Look for responses that might be attributable to the voice you used.

STRATEGY: Share yourselves and your process. Find a way to invite your followers to know you better, as a brand or as individuals. Demonstrate transparency, and show why you can be believed. Posts to consider: A roundup of what you're working on, with an invitation to contribute ideas. Information about your web analytics or listener info (what is most popular, demographics of your audience, etc.). An explanation (maybe with an informal video?) of how a piece of coverage came together. A post saying what your staff members are doing this weekend (or what they love most about summer, or what they love about their moms, or anything else timely) with an invitation to participate. Also be willing to say what you don't know or what you mess up. Ask for help in your reporting. Consider, when appropriate, publicly thanking people who help you do your job. **METRICS:** Take a quantitative (how many) and qualitative (how good/interesting/diverse) look at the response. Take note of any that express an interest or disinterest in knowing more about you as an organization or as individuals.

STRATEGY: Host meaningful conversation. Select a topic you want to talk about. Picture a physical room full of interested listeners and brainstorm what you wish you could get them all to talk about. Choose informal, conversational language. Craft a post that gets people in the mood to talk about the issue and includes your question. Consider not including a link, or including a parenthetical short link as part of the text instead of as a link preview. Consider also having a staff member sign his/her name if it



feels appropriate. METRICS: Take a quantitative (how many) and qualitative (how good/interesting/diverse) look at the resulting comments.

STRATEGY: Invite and value interaction. Look for ways to communicate how people can be in touch with your organization. Don't assume they'll go your website and look it up. Make a graphic that has all that information. Make a text post or video that lists and links to all social channels. Talk about why you hope people will get in touch and what you invite them to do. METRICS: Watch reactions, comments and shares.

THEME THREE: DEPLOY YOUR FANS

STRATEGY: Specifically encourage sharing, as a part of healthy contributions to their social networks' information diets. Invite users to make a relationship with you part of their social identity, and to join you in your mission to make the world better informed. METRICS: Watch for reactions and shares. Follow the shares (when they're public) to see reactions from those wider networks.

THE PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Here's what we asked interested newsrooms to commit to doing:

- Work with us to determine which of our strategies were a good fit for their goals and their staff capacity. Newsrooms picked as few as two strategies to test or as many as eight.
- Commit to at least one post per week for each selected strategy, for about three months. Some newsrooms began in May, and the last ones finished up in September.
- Keep a log of each post, tracking how the audience responded (qualitatively and quantitatively) and how the newsroom felt about it.
- Add us as analysts on their Facebook insights, so we could compare metrics between strategies and between posts made for the project and typical posts.
- Participate in a Slack conversation with the other partners.
- Allow us to publicly share the results of their experiments.
- Allow us to interview them about what they observed and what they learned.

Of the 16 newsrooms that signed up to participate, 14 were able to commit to the project and produce usable data. ([Find comments from the project leads and descriptions of what each newsroom tested at this link.](#))

- A Plus
- Coloradoan in Fort Collins
- Enid News and Eagle in Oklahoma
- Fort Worth Star-Telegram
- The Fresno Bee in California
- Herald-Tribune in Sarasota, Florida
- Kansas City Star
- KLRU in Austin, Texas
- Newsy



- Standard-Examiner in Ogden, Utah
- Religion News Service
- Schools Week in London
- St. Louis Magazine
- WCPO in Cincinnati

Two other newsrooms, The Journal Record in Oklahoma City and The Daily Dot, participated in the project but were not able to complete enough posts to produce useful data.

In some newsrooms, one project lead was responsible for all of the related social posts, while in others, there was collaboration among social media team members. (In fact, in some newsrooms, one person handled basically all social media posting in addition to other duties, while larger newsrooms had specialized social teams.) Some newsroom partners sought feedback and ideas while deciding what to post each week, while others operated more independently.

PLATFORMS

All newsrooms tested strategies on Facebook. Because of Facebook's widespread adoption, user behavior and deep metrics, it's a natural fit for experimenting with factors for influencing relationships, not just clicks. A few newsrooms also worked with Instagram and Snapchat, but they did not produce enough data to have those platforms included in the results.

METRICS

For each strategy, we identified quantitative metrics that we would be focusing on to measure success. Those metrics were combined with editor observations to determine how both users and journalists responded compared to expected responses.

We compared posts made as part of the project to averages for all posts made during the same time period. For each newsroom, we calculated the following average metrics for the time period of that newsroom's participation in the project:

- post reach
- engaged users
- comments
- likes/reactions
- shares

We also added our own metric: engagement rate. This number shows the relationship between the number of users reached (which we don't control, Facebook does) and the number of users who engaged with the post (which we try to influence). By dividing the engaged users by the reach, we see what percentage of people who SAW the post chose to engage with it, leveling the playing field a bit between high-reach and low-reach posts. (This was a less useful number for live videos, however, because their reach was so inflated by Facebook during summer 2016.)



Here are the partner organizations with the size of their Facebook audience, ranked in order of their Facebook post average engagement rate during their participation in the project.

	Average Engagement Rate	Approx. number of Facebook Followers*
Coloradoan	6.31%	44,000
Enid News & Eagle	6.00%	17,000
Ogden Standard-Examiner	5.12%	30,000
Sarasota Herald-Tribune	5.10%	24,000
Fresno Bee	5.00%	103,000
Kansas City Star	4.81%	129,000
Fort Worth Star-Telegram	4.74%	91,000
Schools Week	4.73%	10,000
WCPO	4.72%	252,000
Religion News Service	4.38%	23,000
St. Louis Magazine	3.72%	36,000
Newsy	3.10%	1,100,000
KLRU	2.64%	23,000
A Plus	2.59%	538,000

*as of October 2016

ANALYSIS

We first went newsroom-by-newsroom and analyzed each strategy. We first discarded posts that newsrooms logged but that were deemed not a true execution of the strategies. We recategorized some posts that were logged under one strategy but fit better under another. We discarded strategies that didn't have enough posts for conclusions to be drawn. (Some newsrooms switched strategies partway through the project or didn't hit the desired number of posts for each strategy.) We also discarded posts logged for Instagram or Snapchat because not enough posts were made for conclusions to be drawn.

In total, 487 posts were included in our analysis.

We selected three to five posts that were typical of how audiences responded to the strategy. We then found posts from outside the project that were comparable in terms of topic, post type and style/tone. We used the metrics listed above, in combination with the newsrooms' observations and expectations,



to draw conclusions about whether posts for each strategy overperformed, underperformed or were typical for the newsroom. We created a report for each newsroom on the success of each strategy.

We then compared each strategy across newsrooms and drew conclusions about whether certain strategies were generally successful or generally unsuccessful. We also noted where strategies' success differed by newsroom, type of post, style/tone, content or topic.

A total of 11 posts included in our data were ones the newsrooms paid money to “boost,” or get seen by a larger audience. They are indicated as boosted posts in our database.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

In this project, we identified behaviors that signal connection and trust, and we devised strategies meant to encourage those behaviors. We did not interview users about whether the presence of those strategies actually influenced their behavior.

For example, in Deploy Your Fans posts, we used techniques designed to encourage sharing. We then tracked how much those posts were shared and examined how these posts compared to typical share rates. But we can't know exactly how much the posts' writing style and word choices influenced users' decisions to share.

The most influential limitation on our findings is Facebook itself. The “success” of Facebook posts isn't something entirely in the control of the people doing the posting. Facebook's algorithm isn't transparent, and we often can't predict how many people will see a post. In addition, the success of an individual post is influenced by many factors, including what else is being shared on Facebook at that time, or what else the page has posted that day. We are therefore limited as researchers in our ability to execute experiments.

Why did The Fresno Bee have huge success with [back-to-school-tips from teachers](#) but flopped with [a parent's survival guide to moving their kids to college](#)?

Another example from Fresno: [This #NationalSelfieDay photo had a total reach of 1,800](#) — way less than is typical. (The average reach of photo posts during the time period of the experiment was more than 17,000. If we don't factor in one exceptionally successful photo with a reach of more than a million, the average reach is still 7,700.) So Facebook's algorithm decided the photo would be relatively uninteresting to followers of the page and didn't show it to many of them, making it difficult for us to know how a wider swath of users would have responded.

Much like social media professionals do every day, we scratched our heads over examples like this. We had to decide along the way not to obsess over specific posts but instead to look for useful patterns.



Key findings

Across the strategies, successful posts anticipated users' needs, moods and motivations.

They were framed around what the organization could do for the user. Instead of shining a spotlight on yourself, highlight what users get from you. Don't talk about how great your story is, talk about you help users live their lives.

They were about things people are already inclined to interact with. (That requires knowing what your specific audience is inclined to interact with.) Show that you understand your audience's interests and motivations. Don't try to force them to talk about or care about something that doesn't fit with their other activity and interests. And recognize that those interests vary by platform. Your audience members might care about national sports or local government in general, but that doesn't mean they want to use their social feed to talk about it. Respect that.

They gave people something specific to react to. Not "here are the facts from the RNC." Not "here's how we did this story." But "here's why we made this very specific decision" or "here's one thing you might not know."

They read like they were written by real people. Embrace your humanity. Users are inviting your voice into their social feed, which is full of people talking to other people. Try to be a natural part of that ongoing conversation. Think about language that highlights common ground and values. We believe in, we value, we support. We're watching out for you. We're holding officials accountable. We love living here too. We want you to be informed. We're responsive to you. We help you live your life. We're qualified to do this job.

They invite people to be their best selves. There's an aspirational quality to social media. Users want to present themselves, their intellect and their motivations in the best possible light. They want to share things that are consistent with their values. Appeal to that desire and help them fulfill it.

They respected the organization's existing relationship with its users. Newsrooms that had worked hard to build engagement and trust already had success with bigger asks — with asking for conversation or sharing on more difficult or personal topics. In your personal relationships, you wouldn't hesitate to ask a longtime friend to walk your dog when you're out of town, or share details of a medical situation. It wouldn't be appropriate to ask those things of a new acquaintance. A similar philosophy applies here. Newsrooms starting from scratch have to earn the right to ask that much of their users.

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF LISTENING

When you try to spark interest in who you are and what you do, users will often respond. That's great, right? And that's how it works in real life — when you say something interesting, you hope for a response.



On social media as in real life, it's polite to acknowledge those responses. Trust happens when people feel heard. That means that when engagement is a goal of journalism, journalists have an opportunity — and really, an obligation — to be listening.

In the course of this project, we repeatedly saw that when journalists participate and respond, users like it. And the newsrooms that have a habit of responding often saw higher engagement in general.

When there's no answer: When a user posed a question in a comment to the Fresno Bee about [why all their interns were white](#), she didn't get an answer. It would have been a good opportunity to explain if diversity efforts are made in the recruitment and hiring process. The same was true when an A Plus user asked a question about [an invitation issued by the organization](#).

An example of good listening: On the flip side, when Newsy was questioned about their use of the term ["American Indians" instead of "Native Americans,"](#) they answered. And their comment got 624 likes.

Sometimes, users will see the articulation of your value statement as an opportunity to be critical. As you choose whether to respond, remember that you're not just responding to that naysayer. You're speaking publicly to anyone who's listening (most of whom won't react publicly). Take the time to [have a back-and-forth](#), like Enid did here, when you can. And [sometimes you'll get compliments](#).

When you have a goal of hosting conversation and promoting genuine engagement, there's no good excuse for being absent. If you throw a ball, you need to be ready to catch it. If you have a huge audience, of course you can't respond personally to each comment. But you absolutely can demonstrate that you're present and listening.



Detailed findings: Tell Your Story

Telling the story of your work begins with knowing what that story is. What should journalists say about themselves and their work? What will users find interesting? And how do you encourage journalists who have been taught to stay out of the story to instead do the opposite?

With these strategies, we were especially interested in ways to communicate the value we offer our followers and what variables might affect how users respond to those statements. Articulating the story to be told was the most challenging thing about this strategy, and the range of attempts was broad.

As you look through these posts, think about the mindset needed to produce them. These journalists learned to be thinking about connecting their purpose, process and personalities to their posts.

WHAT WORKED ESPECIALLY WELL

Key takeaways:

- Demonstrate that your newsroom reflects your audience's values
- Look for reasons to point out makes your staff credible or knowledgeable on a specific topic
- Explain the process behind a high-interest newsroom decision or project

The Ogden Standard-Examiner had a nice touch with sharing the process of their journalism. An especially successful attempt was a DIY photo album showing their audience how they could replicate a photo technique.

In another post, when a visual journalist went out to shoot a meteor shower, the paper lightheartedly shared the fact that she'd gotten up at 1 a.m. to go to work. These posts were based in a knowledge of the kind of thing their audience was interested in. Engagement on both of these posts was pretty high (7.85% engagement rate on the DIY photo album and 4.91% on the meteor photo), and a few people commented on the meteor shower photo, tagging their friends and telling them they should make sure to watch the meteor shower. Someone also commented on the DIY photo album and tagged a friend. Both posts earned several reactions and had pretty good reach.

One reason those probably resonated is that they weren't forced. They naturally paired behind-the-scenes info with high-interest topics.

Here are more especially successful examples of this strategy, organized by type of post. The examples are mostly posts that were especially successful in terms of user engagement. We also included posts that didn't get as much engagement but that we think were successful examples of the strategy and should be repeated.



In many cases, of course, it's hard to separate the value statement from other factors. Did users react more or less to [this WCPO post about Baton Rouge](#) because it includes humanizing information about the reporter? Did [this breaking news post from Enid](#) resonate more because it included a statement about the staff's long connections to the community? Did the excitement in the writing of [this St. Louis Magazine post](#) translate to engagement, or do the readers just love the topic? We can't know for sure. But we did identify some types of posts that are worth trying in your own newsroom.

- Establishing the brand's credibility and dedication
 - [Staff's collective years of experience](#)
 - [Staff's collective years living locally](#) or [years of combined history](#)
 - [Check out what we looked like 40 years ago](#)
 - [Who better to cover this than this reporter?](#)
 - [Examples of award-winning designs](#)
 - [Staff members in a group photo](#)
 - [We're experts in what we cover](#)
 - [We cover all angles of our niche](#)
 - [We cover all angles of a story](#)
 - [Our staff is qualified to cover their beats](#)
 - [We hold officials accountable](#)
- Establishing the impact of our work
 - [A prosecutor was fired after our series of stories](#)
 - [Advertising with us is good business](#)
- We're committed to important discussions
 - [Discussions are important, no matter how controversial they might be](#)
 - [We highlight voices that might otherwise get lost](#)
 - [We commit lots of resources to stories that matter](#)
 - [We celebrate people who make the world better](#)
- We're here to help you
 - [Ask us a question](#)
 - [We set the record straight when rumors are flying](#)
 - [We provide solutions](#)
 - [We help you do your part to inspire positive change](#)
 - [We do the work so you don't have to](#)
- We're in this together
 - [Let's please talk politely](#)
 - [We're investigating this because we're affected too](#)
 - [We give back to the community](#)
 - [We don't like sad news either](#)
 - [We share "good news"](#)
 - [We're a local business](#)
 - [We love the same places you love](#)



- [We're proud to live here](#)
- Behind the scenes
 - [Were were out at 1 am to photograph the night sky](#)
 - [Explaining the unusual photos of chalk photos](#)
 - [Reporters as regular people](#)
 - [Celebrating a retiring reporter](#) or [a departing reporter](#) or [a new staff member](#)
- Explaining the journalistic process
 - [Why we used a graphic novel to tell this story](#)
 - [Why we told this story of Trump and Putin](#)
 - [Why we chose "American Indians" instead of "Native Americans"](#)
 - [Who we trust to help us select the list of the best doctors](#)
- Introducing the staff and their personalities
 - [Introducing new interns](#) (though they missed a chance to respond to questions — see below)
 - [On Women's Equality Day](#)
 - [Caught playing Pokemon Go in court](#)
 - [Editor writes about riding bike around NYC](#)
- A Plus is a niche site that publishes positive news. They said brand-building was a primary goal of their participation in this project, and they tried a lot of ways to communicate their mission. In general for A Plus — with this strategy and overall — live videos outperformed still images and links, and adding value statements did not have a noticeable affect on user engagement. Here are some examples:
 - [We highlight the good](#)
 - [We shine a light on organizations doing good](#)
 - ["Stories like this are why we do what we do."](#)
 - [We help inspire positive change](#)

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

We thought posts like [this one from St. Louis Magazine](#), sharing its very local perspective, would be more popular. But they often weren't. It could be because the only point of connection for the user — rather than a piece of content — is the narrative of the magazine itself. The same is true for [posts like this one from the Fresno Bee](#). And [this free press quote from the Coloradoan](#). Sometimes [quotographs work decently well on their own](#), and [sometimes they don't](#).

What tended to resonate more is when the staff identified value statements like these and looked for content to pair them with. In general, stand-alone values statements did not do as well as posts that attached values to content. There were exceptions, of course. When the Coloradoan [highlighted its scholarship fund with a stand-alone photo](#), users responded much more than when [a post focused on the newsroom's backpack drive](#) and tried to drive traffic to a story about the project. And why didn't users respond to [this Fresno watchdog post](#)?



Posts that feel like ads consistently got little response. For Fresno, that was true for [highly designed reporter branding](#), [digital subscription promotions](#) and even [a quote from the paper's mission statement](#). Everyone needs an editor, and don't overlook that step when telling your own story. When [Enid had too much to say about its own history and mission](#) or [offered many ways to get in touch in one post](#), its reach and engagement were low.

St. Louis Magazine tried several times to direct users to its online events calendar, but [those posts just didn't get traction](#). Users seem more likely to respond to something specific (here's what you need to know for this weekend's festival) than something general (we enjoy helping you figure out what's going on around town).

Another story St. Louis Magazine wanted to tell about itself is that it invests in longform journalism. That's not an idea that resonated with users, either when [linking to a specific story](#) or [when highlighting a collection of long pieces](#).

A few newsrooms experimented with branding reporters, and it was difficult to nail down patterns of success there. Perhaps the differences in engagement when Fresno highlighted these [music](#), [TV](#) and [restaurant](#) reporters can be attributed to varying interest in those topics, but it's hard to say for sure. [Ogden](#) and [Enid](#) both created Facebook albums highlighting individual staff members, and neither got a lot of response. (Tagging the individuals increased engagement with those specific photos, but it was likely from people who know them already, not from readers.)

In general, highlighting general newsroom credibility performed better than focusing on specific personalities.

Posts designed to take users [behind the scenes of investigations](#) just didn't get engagement. Perhaps with a different type of story, or with a more lively description?

Posts emphasizing newsrooms' commitment to fact-checking didn't get much engagement. Examples: [We fact-check candidates' claims](#), [we fact-check widely shared opinions](#) and [we want you to know the facts](#). It could be that the political climate during the summer of 2016 was influencing news consumers' appetites for fact-checking. Given the importance of this role, it's worth continuing to experiment with how to frame and describe it.

WRITING STYLE AND FRAMING

The key to these strategies is anticipating what your users will genuinely connect with. Where's the line between telling your story and bragging? How do we draw attention to what we're doing without seeming self-serving? That line is found with careful post selection and writing.

Post selection: Consider what your users are in the mood to talk about and respond to. When Newsy [shared a photo of its all-female social team on Women's Equality Day](#), it was received differently than if



that fact had appeared out of nowhere on a different day. Is your community talking about charitable giving? Back to school days? College sports allegiances? Think of what you have to offer by way of your staff or your mission that might be especially appropriate.

Writing: Think about language that highlights common ground and values. We believe in, we value, we support. We're watching out for you. We're holding officials accountable. We love living here. We want you to be informed. We're responsive to you. We help you live your life. We're qualified to do this job. [Don't talk just about yourself](#). Think about how to frame that message in ways that show what you offer from a user's perspective. And [give people something to respond to](#).

Length: When adding elements of brand storytelling to a post, several newsrooms struggled with length. Posts like [this one from St. Louis Magazine](#) suffer from too much text, as evidenced in both a low reach and a low engagement rate. Sometimes, value can be communicated with a well-chosen word ([like "transport" in this post](#)) rather than extra sentences.



Detailed findings: Engage Authentically

Some of the newsrooms working on this project had a goal of creating engagement. Others had already worked hard to cultivate engaged audiences and were ready to move to Jedi-level strategies.

Fresno, Enid and Ogden, for example, really took their already engaged audiences out for a test drive to see what they could do. Take a stroll through examples of hosting conversation from Fresno and Ogden, and watch how they masterfully offered opportunities for conversation that their audiences were eager to take them up on.

St. Louis Magazine [did a timelapse of proofs of the print magazine being put up on the wall.](#)

Fort Worth [invited questions about past crimes, then answered them.](#)

KLRU hosted a town hall event to identify common ground and work toward a kinder, more open minded community. The station [live streamed it on Facebook](#) and got a huge response in terms of reactions, comments and shares. That helped spur [the creation of a Facebook group with 1,100+ members](#), focused on continuing the conversations started at the event. There's even [a spinoff book club](#) that bubbled up from conversations in the group.

Would your newsroom be brave enough to ask "What does #BlackLivesMatter mean to you?" The Standard-Examiner [hosted in-person conversations in the newsroom and published a series of videos.](#) The resulting online conversations were mostly productive and civil, due in large part to a history of productive discussion on the page. And when users shared the videos, oftentimes they started a conversation with their network or praised the concept of the project. It was particularly great to see that when a commenter was confused about why a police officer in the video didn't weigh in on an issue, the reporter who worked on the series took the time to clarify, and his comment got positive feedback as well.

As you look through these posts, think about the mindset needed to produce them. These journalists continually considered typical user behavior and learned to think about what they hoped would happen as a result of each post.

WHAT WORKED ESPECIALLY WELL

Key takeaways:

- Reward productive comments and publicly challenge harmful ones.
- Look for appropriate times to inject your own emotion or perspective into how you write.
- Especially as you get started, focus on hosting and participating in conversations people are eager to have. As you earn your users' participation, they'll reward you by being willing to jump in on more nuanced or difficult topics.



- Be a vehicle for users to share strong emotions — especially appreciation, outrage, pride and nostalgia.
- Try making conversation the main purpose of a post (rather than treating it as subordinate to the sharing of a link).

Hosting conversation:

The success of conversations varied quite a bit by newsroom. To some degree, newsrooms have to work their way up a ladder of difficulty when it comes to conversation prompts. As users get more accustomed to interacting with a page, the page can offer prompts that have a higher degree of difficulty. But if a page without much history of engagement throws out a question about taxes, they're unlikely to get much in return.

A sweet spot seems to be asking a question that people feel compelled to answer because of strong emotions. Ask about something like the worst traffic in your area — a question that taps into people's own experiences and opinions and also into their outrage.

Don't start by asking something that takes a lot of thought (like opinions on a tax increase) or that asks people to open up personally (like how they feel about their fathers). Work your way up to those kinds of questions.

Ogden has a well-trained audience. They can get people to talk about [property taxes](#) or [starting a business](#). And when they [ask about a controversial gun issue](#), they get thoughtful responses, not just people yelling at each other. That's because they've earned it. They join conversations, validate participation and show that they understand what their community wants to talk about. (Even they can't get people excited about [what's important when electing a commissioner](#), though. That's the kind of question journalists wish people wanted to answer, but few people really do.)

Enid has a similar situation. They've earned the conversations they host through careful tending and by knowing their community so well. Whether they're inviting conversation about [Pokemon Go](#), [wind farms](#), or [a harassed restaurant server](#), their users tend to play along.

As the Sarasota Herald-Tribune works to build engagement, however, users are not well enough primed to jump in on [a complex question of beach renourishment](#).

WCPO, a commercial TV newsroom, had a large audience that engaged more easily than some others. Users tended to respond to more general questions than other newsrooms would succeed with. The journalists there got away with prompting conversation by attaching a simple "what do you think" to a provocative headline.

- [Editorial: We need leadership on an assault weapons ban](#)
- [Melania Trump's speech: Plagiarism or coincidence?](#)
- [How early is too early for Halloween decorations?](#)



WCPO also used the franchise topic of weather to drive conversation.

- [Ask questions of our meteorologist](#)
- [Watch until a package of cinnamon rolls pops in a hot car](#)

That engagement also sometimes translated to more serious topics.

- [Why have heroin and crack addiction been approached differently?](#)
- [Are you an undecided voter?](#)

People felt a connection to the WCPO brand and sometimes were quite willing to share their personal lives with the station.

- [Share your back-to-school pictures](#)
- [What does your vanity license plate say?](#)

Newsy, the newsroom partner with the biggest audience, also had one of the lower engagement rates. They experimented across a variety of topics. Here are some successful posts:

- [Live Q&A with journalists reporting from Ferguson](#)
- [What questions do you have about candidates' finances?](#)
- [Can we stop acting like periods are something to be ashamed of?](#)

In general, the newsrooms looked for ways to go beyond announcing the news and instead anticipated what users would want to do in response. They looked for opportunities to gather perspectives and respond. Here are successful examples, organized by topic.

- Leisure:
 - [Share favorite restaurant memories](#)
 - [Were you at the Garth Brooks concert?](#)
 - [Are bigger movie theater seats a good idea?](#)
 - [Is alcohol in movie theaters a good idea?](#)
 - [What's your favorite Mexican restaurant?](#)
 - [An Obama-inspired poll: ketchup or mustard on hot dogs?](#)
 - [Where's your favorite place to get ice cream?](#)
- Weigh in on civic or political issues:
 - [A trolley project](#) (what do you think?)
 - [What makes this city a good place to start a business?](#)
 - [Would you pay higher taxes to increase police pay?](#)
 - [How are the new kind of turn lanes working?](#)
 - [What's the most dangerous stretch of road in our region?](#)
 - [Have you been in an accident on this stretch of highway?](#)
 - [What do you think about the area's wind farms?](#)
 - [When is it okay to use a killer robot?](#)
 - [What do you think of the VP choice?](#)
 - [What do you think of the new fire stations?](#)



- [Is a school policy on paying for school lunch fair?](#)
- [How young is too young to talk about university plans?](#)
- [How about this guy for party leadership?](#)
- Other:
 - [Emotionally remembering a beloved community figure](#)
 - [Did you have a Galaxy Note 7?](#)
 - [Are you okay with an after school Satan Club?](#)
 - [How far should parental discipline go?](#)
 - [Has Valley Children's Hospital cared for your child?](#)
 - [How do you feel about Pokemon Go?](#)
 - [What do you think about a waitress's harassment?](#)

Joining and moderating conversation:

Some newsrooms experimented with having journalists stay engaged in comments or sharing about their own lives. Here are some examples of times the willingness to engage led to positive user response and meaningful interactions.

- Ogden did [a fantastic job day-to-day](#) on responding to comments.
- [Providing more information about a carnival](#)
- [Responding to a snarky comment with an appropriate gif](#)
- [Try tagging a frequent commenter](#)
- [Fact-checking a commenter](#)
- [Answering follow-up questions](#) or [confusion](#)
- [Explaining why a story was posted a certain way](#)
- Fort Worth shared [their own Father's Day tributes](#)

Live video:

For some journalists, experimenting with sharing their process meant going live. Live video was

- KLRU got a positive response from users when they [did a live interview about Juneteenth Jamboree](#).
- Fort Worth [went live with a Pokemon Go event](#) and [with a lunch review](#).
- A Plus [went live from a fundraiser at a comedy club](#).
- Kansas City [went live for a Q&A with a Royals reporter](#) and got high views but not many questions.
- A Fresno reporter [got some good questions during a marijuana chat](#).
- Fort Worth [handed over Facebook Live to a student correspondent](#) to do post-game interviews.
- A Plus came into the project with little user engagement, and live video was a big part of their strategy. They went live around [whether the media accurately portrays division in America](#), [the future of gun control](#) and [an editor taking a citizenship test](#).



WHAT DIDN'T WORK

Broad questions often flop. You don't want users to have to think hard to understand what you're looking for. Instead, you want them to have a response pop into their head as soon as they see a prompt.

[It's easy for questions to feel rhetorical, too.](#) If your goal is a response, lead into the question in a way that makes it clear you're not just throwing it out for people to think about. Adding a "do you think" to the beginning of this one would help.

Asking for questions for reporters had really mixed success. It didn't work well [when WCPO was interviewing a high school football coach](#), or [when Newsy was sending reporters to Ferguson](#). When trying this variety of crowdsourcing, be sure you pick a topic your audience has a lot of curiosity about. That doesn't just mean something they're interested in. It means something about which questions come quickly to mind.

Inviting Facebook users to take actions in other places is hard to track the success of, since the desired actions wouldn't necessarily appear on the post. In general, little Facebook activity resulted when newsrooms [tried to send users from Facebook to Snapchat](#). They had better luck, though, when a post both gave them something to respond to on Facebook AND [offered them a Snapchat tease as well](#). Other newsrooms also tried driving traffic to other platforms, without a noticeable bump in engagement or follows on those platforms.

Also tricky is [asking people to be creative or witty](#). It takes a lot of thought for most users to participate in something like a caption contest, so be sure you have just the right topic before offering this up.

WRITING STYLE AND FRAMING

Length of posts: When prompting conversation, some newsrooms felt the need to use a lot of words to set the stage. St. Louis Magazine sometimes [got way too long](#) and other times [could have used an edit of perhaps 30 percent of the words](#). Kansas City too often used the first sentence of a post to basically state what was in the headline ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Schools Week, on the other hand, had a knack for picking the right few words to use as a provocative prompt and let the link preview do the heavy lifting of the story topic ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). In general, if a post looks like a lot of work, users are likely to keep on scrolling or swiping. Be as brief as you can.

Be specific with prompts: Try to go beyond adding "what do you think?" to a post. Try [what comes to mind](#), Or what would this mean for you. And if you ask what do you think, be sure [what you're looking for is general reflections](#).

Include emotion: Journalists often get nervous when asked to add emotion or opinion to a post. But doing so does not always run counter to journalistic mission. It likely would not be at all controversial to



[congratulate schools officials for keeping kids safe](#) or say that [your staff is saddened by the death of a child](#).

Who's the post for? Try leading off with the most interesting part of a post. That often means NOT [kicking it off by talking about yourselves](#) and what you want. Instead, start with a provocative question.

Choose user-focused language: Your readers don't go around [talking about "story ideas."](#) Instead, try asking people what's going on in their lives or what they wish people knew more about.

Identify why users might care: This might seem obvious, but too often a post leaves out the angle that will invite an emotional response. [This Fresno story is about supporting teachers and fixing schools](#), but the text of the post and link preview just talk about a bond. If you make users work to find the interesting part, you'll lose them.

Enable action: Think about what people might want to do in response to hard or sad news, and include information that helps them act. [Newsy's framing on this Aleppo post is very human](#).



Detailed findings: Deploy Your Fans

This strategy focused on directly encouraging followers to share our posts with their own networks. This summer was the perfect time to be testing this particular strategy, given [Facebook's announcement](#) that it would rank friends' posts higher than page posts.

The eight newsrooms that tested this strategy had success in emphasizing why users might want to share certain types of stories. The most successful examples were ones that framed posts in ways that emphasized the “pass this along” factor and recognized users' potential motivations for sharing. You'll see examples of where the journalists could have merely described a story but instead stated explicitly why someone might WANT to share it, or who they might want to share it with. It worked well to ask users to think about [who they want to explore the hiking trails with](#) and [who they know who has a Yahoo password](#). Users again and again showed a willingness to [help share positive news](#).

In some cases, the highly successful posts were what you might expect, with stories that users would be inclined to share anyway. In some cases, word choices and the framing of the post made a story more shareable than it might have otherwise been. This [St. Louis Magazine post on segregation](#), for example, is written in a way that makes sharing feel like something a responsible, aware resident should do.

WHAT WORKED ESPECIALLY WELL

Key takeaways:

- Encourage sharing on posts and topics users will WANT to share, not ones you WISH they would share.
- Start with easy asks (posts that are obviously helpful, positive or fun).
- Invite sharing on posts that are in the public interest. When police need help finding a missing child, or a food recall endangers peoples' health, lots of users will see it as a civic duty to help spread the word.
- Emphasize emotion when appropriate. If users are likely to share because they're proud, outraged, scared or excited, consider whether the framing of your post includes that angle.

Here are some especially successful examples of this strategy, organized by topic. The examples are mostly posts that were successful in terms of user engagement (the number of shares or comments with tags). We also included posts that didn't get as much engagement but that we think were successful examples of the strategy and should be repeated.

- Hot topics: Stories that call out to be shared and talked about.
 - [medical marijuana Q&A](#)
 - [a controversial religious debate](#)
- Utility news: Posts that help people live their everyday lives.
 - [event map and logistics](#)



- [free school supplies](#)
 - [back-to-school tips](#)
 - [night sky viewing guide](#)
 - [technology safety alert](#)
- Public safety: Posts that involve crime and safety.
 - [need help finding missing child](#)
 - [911 call center problems](#)
 - [crime warning](#)
 - [new street drug](#)
 - [suspects sought](#)
 - [scam warning](#)
- Public health: Posts related to issues of physical or mental health
 - [a food recall](#)
 - [Alzheimer's research](#)
 - [a video editorial about funding behavioral health](#)
- Leisure: Posts that help people (and their friends!) figure out what to do, eat or drink.
(RELATED: See the Host Meaningful Conversation results for more on posts like this.)
 - [concert announcement](#)
 - [restaurant announcement](#)
 - [restaurant behind-the-scenes pieces](#)
 - [beer trends](#)
- Community spirit: Posts that celebrate good things in the community or invite togetherness around hard things.
 - [law enforcement officers doing good](#) (and [this one too](#))
 - [a business giving back to law enforcement](#)
 - [rallying around a sick child](#)
 - [a message focusing on our shared humanity in a troubled time](#)
 - [celebrating a successful resident](#)
 - Or the gold mine, [combining law enforcement AND free food](#)
- Pets: Posts that invite people to help animals in need.
 - [pet adoption](#)
 - [pet rescue](#)
 - [donations needed for animals](#)

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- Posts that feel like assignments. The Coloradoan asked users to “[share an editorial with their friends and talk about how to respect human life](#).” That’s a big ask. It’s a weighty subject with a very broad question attached.
- Posts that are so general they’re not useful. Newsy asked users to [get and share the facts about Trump and the RNC](#). Because that sounds like it covers so much, it doesn’t give users a specific jumping-off point. It also doesn’t offer anything to react to. It’s a label, not a story.



- Posts that are late to the game. Why did Fort Worth [get 850+ shares on its post about Yahoo passwords](#) but [Fresno got just one](#)? One reason: Fresno's was a day later. The conversation had moved on.
- Posts that pinned engagement on topics people don't necessarily talk about publicly. In a post about a job fair, WCPO invited users to [tag friends who are job-hunting](#), something people aren't always open about. The Coloradoan asked people to [share a post with friends who can't afford child care](#). Perhaps the posts were shared privately, but they're not going to be topics people discuss with their whole networks.
- Posts that asked users to call out friends with unpopular opinions. Some users surely want to publicly accuse a friend of [narrow-minded views on Muslims](#), but it's likely a small group.

WRITING STYLE AND FRAMING

Try adding simple words: There are lots of ways to encourage sharing. Some newsrooms had great success (on certain topics) with adding a simple "share the news" or "spread the news" to a post. The Enid News and Eagle found [their audience followed those directions quite well](#).

Emphasize the public interest: Make sure not to make the post about you. Don't ask people to help spread your really great story. Ask people to make sure their friends know about this very important thing.

Tagging friends is a form of sharing: Ask people who they want to [hike with](#), and they'll often respond by tagging friends in the comments. Invite people to have specific friends in mind. Know people who love craft beer or Garth Brooks? Know people who qualify for this free meal or might be interested in free school supplies? Or any pregnant women, as highlighted in [this post with 3,500+ shares](#)? Share this post with them or tag them in a comment.

Call to mind to a higher purpose: St. Louis Magazine had great success in a post by [appealing to a desire for informed conversations about race relations](#). Other wording options: [Help us educate people](#). Or help [set the record straight](#). These sometimes didn't work, too. Here's one we thought would work, inviting users to [combat misinformation](#).

Be human: Remember that one of the reasons the project focused on sharing is users often trust their friends and family more than they trust brands. So in encouraging sharing, it can be especially effective to write like a human being — informally and with emotion. Posts [like this one about Alzheimer's from the Kansas City Star](#) are humanized when they use language like "this horrible disease" rather than just focusing on the research.

Here's a list we circulated on the project's Slack team for wording ideas.

- What about appealing to a shared goal? Like ... Wouldn't it be great if the facts of this story were shared as widely as the finger pointing? Or ... In the middle of the hype around this issue, the facts seem to be getting lost.



- We wish more people understood this....
- Do you know anyone who's got this wrong ...
- Who do you know who needs to read this ...
- Help us educate people by sharing this ...
- Help us spread the word ...
- We know there's confusion about this. We can help explain ...
- We thought you might also be wondering about this ...
- Or a specific group ... Teachers, are you still confused about ...
- Let's make this conversation bigger. Share with someone you know who ...
- We can't be the only ones who think this needs more attention ...
- So and so said people don't understand this. Let's change that.
- Share if you wish more people understood ...
- Share if this issue has affected you ...
- Share if you want to help raise awareness about ...
- You may not be a public figure, but you still have a microphone. Help us keep our community informed and accountable.



Worksheet: Deploy Your Fans

We know that social media users are motivated by seeing what's important to their friends and family. We also know that Facebook's algorithm [favors posts made by individuals over posts made by pages](#). It stands to reason that encouraging our followers to share our posts with their networks is a good way to get those posts seen, increasing our reach and ultimately growing our audience.



But how? Tacking "please share this" onto each post isn't the answer. (But sometimes it actually works!) Here are some steps to take.

START WITH DATA: The first step is understanding what posts from your page your users already share. Download a few months' worth of your Facebook Insights. In the Excel file, look at the tab called Lifetime Talking About This, which has a column dedicated to shares. Sort the spreadsheet by that column, and start by focusing on the top 20 percent. You can do a similar look at retweets on Twitter. Look for patterns in topics (do users tend to share leisure information? crime?). But also look for patterns in these factors:

- Emotion. How do the posts make people feel? Outraged? Proud? Excited?
- Reputation. What does sharing the posts say about the person doing the sharing? Are they knowledgeable about the news? Snarky? Good citizens? Advocates?
- Voice. Does the brand have an easily discernible personality? How are the posts written?

Then take a scan through the bottom 20 percent — the posts that aren't shared much or at all — and ask those same questions.

THEN LOOK AT THE ACTUAL SHARES: Go to a post that had high share numbers. Click on the number of shares, and you'll be able to see the shares that were public (as opposed to private to the user's network). What did the users say when they shared the post, and what can you learn about their motivation for sharing?

  122

Top Comments ▾

60 shares

19 Comments

Also look at your website analytics. For stories with high social referrals, take a look at the posts that prompted the clicks. (If your analytics tool doesn't give those to you, try pasting the story's url in the search bars on Facebook and Twitter.) What can you learn about the posts that drove people to care about the content?

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS: Talk them through with your colleagues. Compare what you learned to what you think you know about your audience.

Our followers like to share posts that are about

Our followers like to share posts that make them feel

Our followers like to share posts that make them look this way to their own networks



Worksheet: Deploy your fans *(continued)*

Here's a list to consider when thinking about whether a post is likely to be shared, based on what has worked for other newsrooms. (Don't trust this blindly. Compare it to what you know about your own audience.) Consider posting it for easy reference.

People in general are likely to share posts that help them:

- ☐ Express pride or thankfulness
- ☐ Express outrage
- ☐ Fulfill their civic duty or contribute to the good of the community
- ☐ Make their friends better informed
- ☐ Make their friends healthier or safer
- ☐ Invite their friends to participate in something fun
- ☐ Tag specific friends who might be interested

People in general are less likely to share posts that:

- ☐ Feel like complicated school assignments
- ☐ Are too general to inspire reactions
- ☐ Are late to the conversation
- ☐ Are about things too personal for public conversation
- ☐ Emphasize the journalism ("share this great story") rather than the topic
- ☐ Are written formally rather than with personality or humanity

Want people to share? Try these ideas for wording your post:

- ☐ Help educate people by sharing this ...
- ☐ Help spread the word about this (exciting, scary, hopeful) news ...
- ☐ We know there's confusion about this. This link helps explain ...
- ☐ We've seen a lot of questions about this. Here are some answers. (Or a specific group ... Parents, are you still confused about ...)
- ☐ Let's make this conversation bigger. Share with someone you know who ...
- ☐ We can't be the only ones who think this needs more attention ...
- ☐ Share if you wish more people understood ...
- ☐ Share if this issue has affected you ...
- ☐ Share to raise awareness about ...
- ☐ You may not be a public figure, but you still have a microphone. Help us keep our community informed and accountable.
- ☐ Wouldn't it be great if the facts of this story were shared as widely as the finger pointing?
- ☐ In the middle of the hype around this issue, the facts seem to be getting lost. Help us fix that.
- ☐ Who do you know who needs to read this?
- ☐ Who do you want to share this with? Tag them in a comment.

Questions? Ideas for further work on trust? Tips to share from your work? Contact project lead Joy Mayer at joy@joymayer.com.



Worksheet: Engage authentically

Real, authentic engagement goes beyond distribution on social platforms. It involves writing and talking in a way your audience can relate to. It involves meeting people where they are, listening and responding. It involves hosting conversations users want to participate in. It involves humility and humanity.

Look at the types of posts your users interact with now. This is partly quantitative (what gets the most reactions? comments?). It's also qualitative (what prompts meaningful conversation, not just a high volume of likes?). Try to separate where the crafting of the post seemed to contribute to its success, not just the topic of the story. Make special note of posts that explicitly ask a question, but don't limit your analysis to those posts. Users have a way of deciding for themselves what merits a response, regardless of whether a response was sought.

Look for patterns in topics. But also look for patterns in these factors:

- Voice. How would you describe the tone or style of the post?
- Motivation. What about the post inspired responses? A specific, emotional angle of the story? A desire to add more information? Share their own experiences? Frustration at how the story was reported?
- What was the level of commitment needed to interact? Did users mostly sound off in a few words? Did they share personal experiences? Reply to each other?

REMEMBER, CONVERSATION ISN'T ONE-SIDED: Who wants to keep talking if you can't tell someone's listening? Newsrooms that engage successfully are often ones that have a culture of respecting and appreciating user participation. That involves:

1. Validating participation by liking comments and thanking people for contributing.
2. Asking follow-up questions in response to comments.
3. Using comments to share more information on a topic.
4. Answering questions posed to the newsroom.

SO, WHAT CONVERSATIONS HAVE YOU EARNED? Think about types of conversations and invitations as requiring different levels of difficulty. This is certainly true in personal relationships — you earn the right to ask friends more personal or complex questions as you get to know someone better. If you ask a neighbor you just met about their medical history or ask them to take care of your pet while you're out of town, you're likely to cause offense. You have to work your way up to those bigger asks.

How committed are your users? What have they shown themselves willing to participate in? Read through the following descriptions and check the option that best represents where you fit.

LEVEL ONE: EASY

If your page doesn't host much interaction, start here. Users need to get used to the idea of talking back to you. Think about what conversations people are eager to have and ease them with easy asks. Go both for quantity (a high volume of responses demonstrates a basic level of engagement, both to users and to Facebook's algorithm) and quality (interesting answers encourage more responses). What about users' own experiences, opinions or expertise might they be excited to share publicly? The answer will be different for each organization.

Your easy invitations to engage with the newsroom could include things like:

- Here's a reporter out at the carnival enjoying a chili dog. What is your favorite carnival food?
- Congratulations to these staff members, celebrating 30 years with the newsroom.
- On this Mother's Day, Editor John Smith says he'll always be thankful his mom taught him proper table manners. What are you grateful to your mom for today?



Worksheet: Engage authentically *(continued)*

Some successful conversation prompts from other newsrooms tap into:

- Frustration (traffic, customer service)
- Gratefulness or pride (thank a teacher, celebrate a sports team, share your favorite park)
- Nostalgia (memories the good old days, how the city used to what used to be in this building)
- Easy opinions (should movie theaters sell alcohol, how early is ok for holiday decorations)

___ LEVEL TWO: MEDIUM

If your users have already developed a habit of talking back to you, you might have earned the right to ask them more personal questions, or to ask questions that require more time to answer. (Keep in mind whether you are likely to get thoughtful responses, not just a high volume of responses.)

Medium-level invitations to engage with the newsroom could include:

- What questions do you have for our reporter covering the new marijuana laws?
- Our public safety team is taking your questions about old crimes. What cases do you want updates on?
- Watch this behind-the-scenes tour of the newsroom, and ask us questions.

Consider conversation prompts that:

- Address politically charged topics (climate change, elections, taxes)
- Address other controversial issues (parental discipline, public salaries)
- Invite personal experiences (what's your favorite meal in town, have you been in a car accident)

___ LEVEL THREE: HARD

This is the Jedi level, in which you ask a lot of your users, and they step up to the plate. As in personal relationships, if you jump straight to this level when you haven't established a baseline of trust and respect, you could cause offense. But if you feel confident that you've mastered the first two levels, you might be ready.

High-level invitations to engage with the newsroom could include:

- Can you help identify any of the people in this historic photo?
- Here's how we moderate online conversations to promote civility. What advice do you have for us?
- Who do you know whose work the community should know more about? Email or call this reporter with your ideas for future coverage.

Jedi-level conversation prompts could:

- Address highly personal and charged issues (Black Lives Matter, guns)
- Require more work (read this proposal and tell us what you think)
- Ask for more personal information (Have you had a seriously ill child? Have you started a business?)

CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESS:

- ☐ Start by asking yourself what about a topic or story people are likely to respond to. Frame the post around that, not necessarily around the newsiest element.
- ☐ Use user-focused, conversational language. Avoid journalism-focused language like "share your story ideas." Instead ask people what they wish people knew more about, or what's going on in their lives.
- ☐ Keep it brief. If a post looks like a lot of work, users are likely to keep on scrolling or swiping.
- ☐ Avoid tacking on a question that will feel rhetorical. Make it clear you want people to answer. Avoid "what do you think" in favor of more specific questions.
- ☐ Try making conversation the purpose of a text post (rather than as subordinate to the sharing of a link). For example: "As the community deals with yet another traffic fatality, we'd like to hear from you. What do you consider the most dangerous stretch of road in town? (Details on the latest accident: bit.ly/xxxx)"



Worksheet: Tell your story

How would you describe the value you offer your users? What sets you apart? What do you want them to think or feel when they see you in their social feed?

Start by looking at your mission statement, if you have one. Keep in mind, though, that mission statements are often internally focused, using insider language and orienting around the people who work there. Your challenge now is to face those values out. Think of real people in front of you — your neighbors, your kids' teachers, your dedicated users and casual users. What do you offer them?

The story you need to tell is about your customers/audience/users, NOT about you. People don't care about you. They care what they get from you. They are the stars of the story.

Your story is about things like:

- The reason your organization or product exists
- What types of news consumers find value in what you provide
- What motivates your staff to come to work everyday
- A transparent view into the people behind the brand and who you are as an organization

Your story is not:

- Long
- Boring
- Relegated to a blog post or mission statement
- Reserved for the marketing team or business-side folks

Keep these tips in mind:

- Be conversational. Practice explaining it to friends over coffee.
- Be human (we are invested in this community as neighbors, not just as journalists).
- Describe your competitive advantage (we help you live your life by giving you _____ no one else does).
- Describe your goals (we get beyond the headlines to help you understand your community).
- Consider your relationship to user feedback (we respond to what you tell us you want us to cover ... we know from how many of you read and shared a story last month that this kind of news matters to you ... here's more).
- Demonstrate your fairness (today, we bring you this side of a story ... here's a link to yesterday's story that focused on another angle).
- Challenge assumptions (we haven't reported on rumors because they haven't been verified yet, not because we're hiding something).
- Avoid jargon (we value immediacy, we're digital first, etc.).

As you work on this very important story, think about it can be incorporated into the jobs of anyone who communicates with your users. How can reporters and sales reps bring it into face-to-face interactions? How does it show up in your editors' columns? Your social strategy?



Worksheet: Telling the story of your journalism *(continued)*

PREP QUESTION NO. 1: What do you do better than anyone else in your market or niche?

PREP QUESTION NO. 2: How would you want your users to describe you to their friends?

THEN FILL OUT THIS CHART:

What do you as an organization believe in or stand for? What values do you want your users to associate with you?	What specific content could you attach to those characteristics and values? List them here and draw a line between the two columns.

Try this with your colleagues

1. Get a stack of post-it notes. Have everyone write down key words or phrases that best describe your organization. Put them on a wall, window or white board.
2. Elect a few people to take a stab at sorting them into categories or themes, then come back together to look at it. Move post-its around until you have themes you're happy with and label the themes.
3. Have people vote for the themes that matter most. (Try making hashmarks on the labels.) Rank them in order of collective priority.
4. Get into groups, with each group taking a theme. Draft multiple sentences describing each theme, working to get as specific as possible. Put those sentences on post-its on a new wall.
5. Have the whole group vote for their favorite sentence under each theme.

Questions? Ideas for further work on trust? Tips to share from your work? Contact project lead Joy Mayer at joy@joymayer.com.



Checklist for building trust on social media

As part of the Trusting News project, 14 newsrooms tested social media strategies designed to build trust. Across the strategies, successful posts anticipated users' needs, moods and motivations. Here is a checklist of strategies and factors to consider in your newsroom as you decide how to interact with your audience on social media.

TELL THE STORY OF WHAT YOU DO

- ☐ Explicitly state what gives your brand or your staff members credibility, and point out their expertise.
- ☐ When you share content, include what about that content provides value to users. Demonstrate your commitment, expertise, values, etc.
- ☐ Write in a way that demonstrates your relationship to your community. Focus not on why you're great but on what you do for the user.
- ☐ Include language that shows what you hope your stories help people do.

HOST MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS

- ☐ What does your audience want to talk about? Tap into their outrage, pride, nostalgia or excitement.
- ☐ Everyone's an expert in their own experience. Look for opportunities to invite conversation around experiences.
- ☐ Give users something specific to react to, not just a general topic or issue.
- ☐ Find issues that are easy to have an opinion on, and use those to train your users to talk to you.
- ☐ Questions that are personal or especially controversial work best if your users already are used to talking to you. Earn the right to ask those questions. Don't start there.
- ☐ Stay involved in the conversations you host. Validate comments and respond to questions.
- ☐ To prioritize and value conversations, try posing questions without a link attached.
- ☐ Sometimes the best conversation happens on users' shares, not on your original post. Follow the shares.
- ☐ If you pose a question, try getting right to the point. Don't use two paragraphs setting up the question.

BE A HUMAN: INVITE AND VALUE INTERACTION WITH USERS

- ☐ Make time to fact-check comments and prevent false statements from going unchallenged.
- ☐ Admonish or ban trolls. It respects the participation of the more constructive commenters.
- ☐ Write informally, with humanity or personality. Acknowledge your users' emotions or values.
- ☐ Invite people to get to know your journalists as people or neighbors.
- ☐ Ask for your community's help in your reporting process.
- ☐ Take users behind the scenes or explain your storytelling approaches.
- ☐ Make it easy for people to get in touch with you, and make it clear that you encourage that interaction. Sometimes trust begins with good customer service.
- ☐ Find a way to share and validate quality reader responses, and you're likely to get more of them.

ENCOURAGE USERS TO SHARE YOUR CONTENT

- ☐ Shares are often high when information is seen as being in the public interest.
- ☐ Shares are often high on "good news." Consider writing in a way that emphasizes that angle.
- ☐ Some users value being a source of information for their friends. Emphasize when you have news people will be eager to hear or practical information that will be especially useful.
- ☐ Users like to share things that are consistent with their values. It reinforces their social media persona.
- ☐ Try suggesting specific types of friends users might want to share with, in terms of demographics, interests, opinions, etc. Inviting users to tag friends can be an effective way to encouraging sharing.

Questions? Ideas for further work on trust? Tips to share from your work? Contact project lead Joy Mayer at joy@joymayer.com.



About the team

PROJECT LEAD

Joy Mayer is a community engagement strategist based in Sarasota, Fla. Her work focuses on the continually evolving notion of audience engagement in journalism — how communicators can foster two-way conversations, collaborate with their communities and know who they're serving and how well they're doing it. She is a consulting fellow at the Reynolds Journalism and an adjunct faculty member at The Poynter Institute and the University of Florida. She spent 12 years teaching at the Missouri School of Journalism, where she created an engagement curriculum and a community outreach team in the newsroom of the Columbia Missourian and also taught web design and print design.



MISSOURI SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM STUDENT RESEARCHERS

Anna Brugmann is a Columbia, Missouri, native living in Sarasota, Florida, learning to live without seasons. Although she majored in emerging media at the University of Missouri, she landed a gig in the least emerging media — print. While working on this project, Anna was inspired by how newspapers were experimenting and adapting. She often gets asked why such a young person is working for a newspaper. It's because she believes stories matter. She hopes this project will help storytellers cover their communities better and maybe even tell their own stories.



Amanda Byler is a Phoenix, Ariz. native who studied convergence sports journalism. She is hoping to pursue a master's degree in sports administration and use her multimedia and social media skills to work for a Division I athletics department. The project interested her because she believes engagement goes beyond 140 characters and should always be at the heart of storytelling. Amanda loved the opportunity to dig deep into analytics and discover the strategies' impact on different newsrooms.



Katie Grunik was born and raised in St. Louis. She graduated in December 2016 and hopes to bring her talents to a TV newsroom. She loved tackling this project from the ground floor to get a sense of where our industry is when it comes to social media policies and practices. She enjoyed interviewing journalists from all mediums and newsroom sizes around the country to see what their biggest successes and hardships are when it comes to social interactions with their audiences.





Emily Rackers is from Columbia, Missouri. She loves animals, comfort food and giving back to the community she grew up in. In the future, Emily hopes to focus on social media and branding for a local news or media company. Her favorite part of this project was seeing how different newsrooms implemented the same strategies, and thinking about how she could apply them in the future.



Micheala Sosby is a journalist from Northwest Indiana who's excited by community outreach and digital innovation in local news. A recent graduate of the convergence journalism program, Micheala is staying at MU to pursue an MBA. Her favorite part of the social media and trust project was helping the newsrooms measure the success of their efforts and reflect on what they learned. She loves bookstores, macaroni and cheese, and Great Lakes.



Hannah Smith, originally from Webb City, Missouri, majored in journalism with an emphasis in convergence. Upon graduating, she interned for Missouri Senator Roy Blunt and later began working for Missouri Congressman Billy Long as his press secretary. She hopes to continue her work in politics with a focus on outreach and engagement across digital platforms.



Sources and Resources

INTERVIEWS

Thank you to the dozens of staffers in our partner newsrooms for sharing their time, their observations and their audiences with us. In addition, thank you to these practitioners in a variety of disciplines for sharing their work and expertise with our project:

Elissa Adair, public health communicator
Sheetal Agarwal, communications strategist
Ashley Alvarado, KPCC
Dorothy Amatucci, U.S. Department of Education
Cory Bergman, Breaking News
Jim Brady, Billy Penn
Kari Cobham, Cox Media Group
Jane Elizabeth, American Press Institute
Nick Gass, Politico
Cubby Graham, charity: water
Joe Hadsel, Joplin Globe
Gloria Huang, FEMA
James Janega, Slalom Consulting
Mandy Jenkins, Storyful
Genevieve Judge, Sarasota Police Department
Lauren Katz, Vox
Michelle Lee, Washington Post
Sally Lehrman, The Trust Project
Ryan Martin, Indianapolis Star
Jan Oldenburg, participatory health consultant
Matt Pearce, Los Angeles Times
Jen Reeves, AARP
Teresa Schmedding, Daily Herald Media Group
Abbie Schmid, VML
Jeff Sonderman, American Press Institute
Jessica Stahl, Washington Post
Carol Stark, Joplin Globe



READING LIST

Here is a partial list of research, writing and projects that have informed the Trusting News project.

[First Draft News: Your guide to navigating the digital information ecosystems](#)

[The Engagement Lab](#), an applied research and design lab dedicated to reimagining civic engagement for a digital culture

[Media Education Lab](#), working on improving digital and media literacy education

[The modern news consumer: News attitudes and practices in the digital era](#), Pew Research Center 2016

[Online chaos demands radical action by journalism to earn trust](#), Richard Gingras and Sally Lehrman, 2014

[The Trust Project](#), exploring how journalism can stand out from the chaotic crowd and signal its trustworthiness

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