

Media Maven

Want to Launch a Local News Website? Been There. Done That. Here's What You Need to Know

News organizations, particularly those that cover small cities and local communities, have been struggling for years. Google and Facebook are taking the ad revenue. Nextdoor and Patch have tried to take the readers. And anyone who can pay for a hosting service and type on a laptop can claim to be a journalist.

But there is a way to create an impactful (and profitable) hyperlocal news site. I've been there and done that. Now I want to share my story in the hope that it will help.

In 2011, after 20 years in New York City (and a brief stint in Atlanta where I worked as a consultant to help a struggling alternative weekly), I moved to Los Angeles. West Hollywood, to be precise. It's a 1.89 square mile city with 37,000 residents and is the 17th most densely populated city in America (not that that would convince any WeHo'ans, as they are called, to give up their cars).

My intent was to continue my media consulting business, where I had worked with clients across the country such as Prodigy, the Wall Street Journal, the Dallas Morning News, the Tampa Bay Times, Complex magazine, Scholastic, Businessweek, and many more. But soon after I moved into my new apartment in West Hollywood, I found myself dealing with an annoying nightly blast of loud music from an outdoor bar at a nearby hotel. I complained to City Hall (as had hundreds of people over the years) and eventually learned that no one there was going to do anything about this violation of the city's noise ordinance. (As the then-code compliance officer for the city told me, "We prefer to work with our local businesses rather than fine them.")

I launched the "Mute the Mondrian" campaign, which led to that hotel being forced to build a sound wall around its outside bar and pool and start obeying the law. And I realized that there was no one writing about this and similar issues in West Hollywood that I was hearing about from new friends and neighbors. There was one exception, a "news" site run by a man with no experience as a journalist and a habit of writing a nice story about someone who paid for an ad and pretty spiteful opinion pieces, which he presented as news stories, about some local politicians.

In September 2012, I launched WEHOville.com. West Hollywood is known as "WeHo," and "ville," is a French word meaning village or city that is commonly used as a suffix attached to the names of many American cities. I got some pushback over that name, with people saying that it seemed like a reference to Dr. Seuss's "Whoville." Well, I said, if you don't have a sense of humor, you shouldn't live in West Hollywood, a city where life turned out to be much more hilarious than I imagined.

My idea wasn't only to provide the news of West Hollywood to the residents of West Hollywood. I also wanted to test the digital hyperlocal news concept firsthand. I had decades of experience as a journalist and as a media business executive and consultant. I had taken The New York Times online for the first time in a deal with America Online in 1993. But I had never run a

hyperlocal digital news site. No better way to help a person or media company trying to launch a site and/ or make it profitable than to have done that myself. “Been there. Done That. I Can Help,” is now the slogan for my Media-Maven LLC consulting practice

What Is News in West Hollywood?

As a newbie to West Hollywood, I realized that I needed help getting a grasp on what the city was all about if I was going to launch a news site. I started with some research on Google for information on the creation of the city (which was founded in 1984 by a coalition representing older adults, renters, and the gay community). Then I went onto sites like Patch and Next Door to find out what people were talking about, what were the issues. I also put together a list of “influentials,” people who turned up often in my “West Hollywood” Google searches and/or who headed local organizations. I set up meetings with some of them, including the head of the Chamber of Commerce, a neighborhood activist concerned about historic preservation, and a major local real estate broker. What advice would they give to someone considering launching a news website in West Hollywood? They gave me some very useful information about the big issues in the city. My reaching out also was an informal way to promote the website well ahead of its launch. People told me they were looking forward to seeing it.

I also researched the demographics of West Hollywood, something that’s easy to do using the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey data, which is available online. I learned that about 11% of the city’s population was Russian-speaking (older adults who had emigrated from the former Soviet Union) and using data from other sources I learned that roughly a third of the population was composed of gay men. Most residents were not married, and only 5% of residents were under the age of 18. Also, 78% of residents rented apartments rather than owning homes.

That information would guide me in creating WEHOville. No need to cover high school sports, given the small number of residents who were attending high school. Problems faced by renters such as rent increases, evictions, and difficult landlords would be on WEHOville’s agenda. It would be important to narrow in on the gay community and whatever news was specific to its members. Immigrants from the former Soviet Union made up 11% of the city’s population, but that Russian-speaking community was declining sharply and aging fast. So that was a community whose issues WEHOville could cover but not one that advertisers would want to reach.

Where’s the Money?

I decided to put some (a lot, actually) of my savings into launching WEHOville. But I knew that a news site ultimately couldn’t survive without a regular revenue stream, which wasn’t going to come from my bank account. I needed to build one. The typical source of that revenue for local news publications is advertising, although there has been evolution there that I will discuss later in this story.

So, now I had to take off my reporter’s beret and put on my businessman’s fedora. A journalist sees the mission of a news organization or platform, whether print, video, audio, or digital, as

keeping its readers informed about what is going on. Ideally, that is reporting the truth without fear or favor. That is what Adolph S. Ochs promised to do in a “Business Announcement” published on April 18, 1896, in The New York Times, which he had recently acquired. Truth and integrity remain The Times’s most important asset. And if you’re launching a local news publication, it should be yours. But when you’re the publisher, sitting behind a business desk (aka your computer) exploring ways to make money, you need to view the mission of a news organization or news platform from another perspective (although it’s not a contradictory one.) A publication’s job from a business point of view is to aggregate an audience or audiences for advertisers. Great content and great design don’t matter if there isn’t a great audience to appreciate it, an audience advertisers want to speak to.

Years ago, the American Magazine Publishers Association (now known as the Association of Magazine Media) asked me to speak before a group of young entrepreneurs hoping to launch their own publications. To make my point about aggregating the right audience to make money, I used the example of Prison Life, a magazine produced by prisoners for prisoners. On the plus side, it was well-written and well-designed. I told my audience that it also had one big advantage — it had a captive audience. But on the downside, no advertisers were interested in pitching their products or services to prisoners. Prison Life aggregated an audience that no advertisers wanted to speak to. Founded in 1993, it died in 1994. (Although it was resurrected later that year by a former prisoner who helped it get to 20,000 paid subscribers and kept it alive a little while longer. Mafia boss John Gotti was said to be an avid reader.)

So, if the audience was going to be the residents of West Hollywood and adjacent neighborhoods and communities (what I called Greater WeHo), who were the businesses that wanted to reach that audience? That’s where things got tricky.

I learned that West Hollywood’s economy is centered around nightlife and tourism. Before this current pandemic, the hotels were close to full and the restaurants and bars were packed, but mostly with people from other places, people who weren’t going to be reading WEHOville to see what the City Council was doing about homelessness or whether it would approve a controversial real estate project. Tourists and night-lifers were audiences we couldn’t aggregate and present to advertisers. West Hollywood also had a bustling Design District, full of shops and showrooms that catered to interior designers who might fly in from New York City to find a perfect set of living room furniture for a client on Fifth Avenue. In other words, most locals weren’t shopping there, so why would those businesses want to advertise in a news publication focused on West Hollywood?

However, there were businesses and service providers that did serve local customers — convenience stores, watch repair shops, dry cleaners, a few clothing retailers, doctors, and dentists, etc. There was only one major car dealer, and its inventory of Range Rovers, Land Rovers, and Jaguars was more of a draw for really rich people who were happy to be chauffeured into WeHo to shop for a new limo. But there also were dealers of more affordable car brands not far away who knew that a customer might be willing to drive from West Hollywood to get a great deal on a Mini Cooper. To identify the local businesses, I asked West Hollywood City Hall to provide a list of all businesses licensed by the city to operate in West Hollywood. The city

initially refused, until I pointed out that under state law it had to release that information to the public.

Another obstacle to establishing a solid advertising revenue base was the lack of a viable competitor in West Hollywood. I learned the importance of that in my work as a media consultant launching publications like Metro New York, the free daily newspaper, and reviving publications like Out magazine and the Creative Loafing alt-weekly. It's hard to convince a business that has never advertised that it should advertise with you. "Why would I? My business is doing fine," is something I have heard often. It's easier to go to a business that already is advertising and make a pitch for why your publication would be the better choice. I must admit that I enjoyed doing that. I am a fierce competitor (but only in business. I'm not much into playing sports.) I went after local businesses that already were advertising in a zoned edition of the Los Angeles Times, or L.A. Weekly or the "pay for play" WeHoNews.com or the Beverly Hills Courier, using a simple pitch: "The most expensive ad you can buy is one that no one sees."

Creating the Site

The site was created with a standard WordPress template; however, I hired a designer to customize it so that it met our needs. With WordPress, there are thousands of templates, but it was a challenge to find a news template that included enough areas for ad placements. Another issue was finding a template that allowed you to present a lot of content "above the fold," a print newspaper publisher's description of that half of the front page that first got a reader's attention. A digital publisher would want many stories to appear on a reader's computer screen when that reader first accessed the site. Not everyone is willing to scroll down to find something of interest.

I also had to decide what subjects should be displayed most prominently on the website's homepage. There were tabs for a menu of subjects on the top of the page that one could click on to go to a page listing those stories. A menu of less important subjects was underneath that. The menu's primary subjects were News, Real Estate, Crime & Public Safety, and Let's Discuss, the page where editorials and op-eds were posted. Under that menu was a smaller one that listed pages that contained information about Advertising and stories that were part of a regular series such as WeHo@Work.

The site had a "slider" at the top of the home page, which was a series of five large and automatically rotating photos with headlines and brief captions calling out the stories they were associated with. That rotation was eye-catching. All a reader had to do was click on one of the photos and the story would pop up.

The website was designed to feature different ad units, all of which were sized as dictated by the Internet Advertising Bureau's Standard Ad Unit Portfolio. The IAB'S portfolio is used by major advertising agencies in putting together creative for their clients. It is constantly evolving, and now includes Emoji ads, 360-degree image and video ads, and virtual reality ads.

There was a space for a leaderboard ad unit (728 x 90 pixels) at the very top of the home page. Then there was a large leaderboard unit (970 x 90 pixels) spanning the home page just below the menu. Most other ads were posted on the right side of the home page, with the skyscraper (600 x

300 pixels) that largest, followed by the medium rectangle (300 x 250 pixels). Another popular ad unit integrated into the design was what we called an in-story banner (615 x 115 pixels). I developed rates for each of those units by looking at what other publications in the area were charging and what that translated to on a per thousand users/readers basis.

There was much to learn about WordPress. I had to create “categories” to tag each story so that it appeared on the proper page on the site. I had to create “users,” which was an ever-growing list of freelancers and op-ed contributors who I asked to provide a brief bio and photo to post with their work. There were hundreds of other “add-ons” that I could choose from, such as Akismet to scan for and block spam posts on stories.

One thing I didn’t do when I launched WEHOville but should have, was make the site workable on a mobile phone. A few years into publication, when I saw Google Analytics data reporting that the majority of our readers were using their mobile phones, I hired a tech expert to do that.

Sell, Sell, Sell

I couldn’t do all of this by myself. So, when I launched the WEHOville, I hired three people to help. One to serve as editor and reporter. One to sell advertising. Another to handle a variety of other tasks. I found freelance writers and photographers to help. I also engaged a few people to sell advertising under contract on a commission basis. Eventually, I served as editor and publisher and engaged others on a contract basis to write and sell.

At the start, I gave Google AdSense a try. If you’re a local news publication, not a national one that attracts millions of views, it makes no sense to let Google AdSense automatically post ads on your website. At the end of the month, I would get a payment from Google of no more than a few hundred dollars, a payment based on the “clicks” or “impressions” (aka views) that Google determined a story had gotten. Almost all of those ads were part of national or regional campaigns by big businesses. I decided to focus on local advertisers.

The biggest challenge I faced in getting local businesses to advertise was finding good sales reps. I realized that the salespeople need to be trained to use the “consultative sales” approach. That is where the salesperson acts as a consultant who is there to help the client build his or her business. That sort of advertising sell is not a simple make-a-pitch, shake hands, and walk out with a check approach. First, the salesperson must sit with the client (or talk, actually talk, over the phone). The salesperson’s first question should be: How would you describe your business? That’s where it gets interesting. The guy who owns a watch store will tell you that his business is selling watches. But, as I have said to several watch store owners, these days people use their mobile phones to tell time. Watches today are bought to tell the time. They are jewelry. And a watch retailer’s competitor is that jewelry store on the next block. Most restaurant owners will tell you that their business is serving food. But there are lots of ways for people to find food. A restaurant may be successful because of the quality of its food, but equally and perhaps more important is its vibe. What does it look like? Who else dines there? Is it a celebrity hotspot, or is it the cozy place for a first date?

Identifying the audience was an issue for a number of my publishing clients. The publisher of a major metro daily that had engaged me as a consultant had been startled when I asked him what business he was in.

“We publish news,” he said, clearly wondering why I would ask such a question.

“Yes,” I said. “And you also aggregate audiences for advertisers to speak to.”

I had analyzed the newspaper’s digital readership and told that publisher that it was clear they owned one audience in their circulation area. The publisher smiled, waiting to hear the good news.

“It’s widows and widowers,” I said. “And funeral homes aren’t likely to be big advertisers. The audiences you don’t reach are people from 18 to 24 and people who have only recently moved to your city.”

The next question one asks a potential advertiser is: Who are your competitors and what do you offer that they don’t? Do you offer easier parking? Longer opening hours? Lower prices? Better customer service? Better-known brands? Higher quality products or services?

Then ask the advertiser to define his or her typical client. Is it just affluent people over 50 who come in to shop for watches? What other sort of clients would the advertiser like to attract? Could one get a Millennial to try on a Rolex? If you’re the owner of a West Hollywood coffee shop that opens at 8 a.m. and closes at 7 p.m., should you consider staying open until midnight to attract the singles that these days like to mix and mingle at such places? And if you do, how will you let those singles know about it?

Finally, ask the prospective advertiser: “What are your expectations, and what is your budget?” If the advertiser wants to promote a sale to get the product quickly moving off the shelf, that takes one approach. If the advertiser wants to build awareness of his or her business or service (which any and all should), that takes another approach. If it’s building brand awareness, I recommend a three-month ad run. My rationale for that, which resonated well in West Hollywood, home of the Sunset Strip, is that an ad on a popular local website is like a billboard on the Strip. The first time you drive by you might not notice it. But over time, if it’s well designed and it’s pitching something you’re interested in, you’ll become very familiar with it.

It takes time. However, promoting a sale on a specific date or over a specific stretch of time requires ad creative that makes clear that the reader has to act now. And it certainly doesn’t require a three-month run. Give the advertiser a week or two. If the ad campaign is a success, pitch the brand awareness campaign idea as a follow-up.

I have surprised advertisers (and salespeople) by suggesting other ways to promote their business or services, which I regard as a very important part of the consultative sales approach. During the year I worked with the Creative Loafing Atlanta alternative weekly, I looked all over town for other publications and built a little library of them for our sales staff (there were quite a few, including a Russian-language magazine!) I did some research on the content and audience and

reach of some of them. So, when a salesperson met with a client who was interested in not only our readers but also another audience, we could offer up an option for that. At a meeting with representatives of the Atlanta Botanical Garden, I stunned my Creative Loafing sales rep by telling the Botanical Garden staff that our alternative weekly wasn't the right fit for them. They saw their audience as affluent people living in the city's posh northern suburbs. Our audience was younger people living in and around the city center. I suggested some other publications they might consider. The Botanical Garden was so impressed that it bought an ad with us anyway! That's actually the only time I've told someone not to advertise with my publication (well, there also was that gun vendor I said no to).

To keep those sales reps selling, you need to think about how you're going to pay them. A flat commission structure is a dumb idea. Instead, you should create a tiered commission plan that encourages the salesperson to keep making those sales calls. For example, you get a 15% commission if you sell \$5,000 of advertising. But the commission jumps to 20% on any revenue you bring in over that amount. I also recommend signing up for an online service such as KarmaCRM. It lets you put together a database of potential advertisers, but more importantly, it lets you track the interaction of your sales representatives with those advertisers. At the end of each week, take a look at how many sales pitches were made and how many responses were received. Salespeople who don't ask aren't going to get an answer.

You also must craft an insertion order (a contract) for the advertiser to sign. You can easily find one of those online and make changes necessary to reflect that it is a contract with your business in your state. A signed insertion order is essential because it makes clear that you and the advertiser have the same understanding of what the ad campaign will be like, and what it will cost. It was useful in several cases where advertisers failed to pay WEHOville. Two I took to Small Claims Court (and won). Others I bullied into paying up by reminding them that they had signed a contract requiring them to.

Also, never, ever pay a sales rep his or her commission until the advertiser pays the bill. I've seen multiple situations where salespeople created fraudulent ad contracts, raking in commissions on ads that never appear. The contract that you sign with your contract salesperson should stipulate that how and when that salesperson will be paid.

Clicks? Impressions? What Did We Charge and Why?

From the beginning, I declined to use the "pay-per-click" revenue model. That is a good advertising revenue model for websites with millions of users, but the average click rate is ridiculously low, which means it's unlikely to generate much revenue for a hyper-local publication. WEHOville charged a flat rate (with a discount based on the frequency of an ad's run, and of course always a willingness to negotiate the rate). The rationale was that we were the only medium that local businesses could use to reach their prospective customers ("Our audience is your audience," was our slogan.)

Also, I explained to advertisers that the likelihood someone would click on their ads had a lot to do with what product or service they were offering and whether the ad creative was engaging. To help them get attention, I allowed advertisers to post an ad with up to four rotating units, or a

video ad, at no additional charge. And I told them that we had learned that an ad featuring the face of a human being was always likely to attract more attention.

There's More Than a Simple Display Ad

Over time I've learned the importance of taking a creative approach to ad sales. When I pitched the owner of a newly opened "custom" dog food store in West Hollywood, I didn't just ask him to buy an ad on the WEHOville home page. I asked if he would like to sponsor a "WeHo's Cutest Dog" contest. In a small city whose residents are obsessed with dogs — and where the City Council formally adopted a statement that owners of dogs should be referred to as their "guardians" — that contest was very popular. Over a couple of weeks, WEHOville invited residents to email us photos of their dogs, which we posted on Instagram. We then assembled a team of veterinarians to decide which dogs were cutest — a move that heightened awareness of WEHOville among another group of prospective advertisers. The winner and the runners up got free fancy food from the Just Food for Dogs shop. To find out if your pooch was a winner, you had to show up on a special Saturday afternoon in the parking lot behind Just Food for Dogs, where I took the stage to announce the winner and the runners-up. Hundreds of people and their pets turned out for that. The owner invited them into the store to look around and shop.

I also won over a dentist who was somewhat reluctant to advertise with the idea for a "WeHo's Sexiest Smile" contest. In this selfie-obsessed world, it was easy to get lots of submissions. The winner and the three runners-up would get some free dental treatment from the sponsoring dental clinic and have their smiles posted on Instagram and WEHOville. And I convinced a major real estate marketing agency to promote its two new West Hollywood apartment buildings by having us reach out to local businesses and ask them to offer discounts to anyone who had signed a one-year lease in those buildings. I explained that it was a way to attract new residents to their buildings. Renters received a card confirming that they were eligible.

I made modest efforts to start an events operation, which I think can be very profitable if done right. I just didn't have the time or resources then to launch an annual Health & Fitness Fair in a local parking lot, where advertisers would also pay to place tables from which they would pitch their products to those attending. At Creative Loafing in Atlanta, I found a local events promoter who helped us stage a craft beer festival. Hundreds of locals showed up to sample various craft beers on a closed-off block of an Atlanta street, with the brewers paying us for a booth and buying an ad in our publication to promote the event.

Events are important. I describe them as the third of three legs of revenue necessary to keep a media stool from wobbling or falling over. The first leg is advertising. The second is subscriptions, which are an increasingly important revenue source. A fourth leg — embedded e-commerce — is emerging. Dagens Nyheter, Sweden's leading daily newspaper is now selling DN-branded products on its news site using a service called Tipser. Tipser collects a commission from each sale, sort of like Amazon.

Where's the Proof?

I have always been surprised at how many small business owners don't ask for evidence of a publication's readership. In the old days, when print ruled, a major metropolitan or national

publication paid the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) to provide an independent assessment of its readership. That was something major advertisers always asked for.

Given that I was focusing on businesses that already were advertising elsewhere, it was important for me to educate advertisers about the importance of readership data. As WEHOville's traffic grew, I took screenshots of its Google Analytics data and presented them to advertisers. I was blunt in telling business owners that most digital media owners lied about their readership, which is so very true. I suggested they request screenshots of Google Analytics traffic data from other publications, noting that any publisher could get access to that data for free and that it was harder to fudge the numbers on a screenshot document. I also used Amazon's Alexa.com, which was free for anyone to use, to see how WEHOville.com ranked in traffic with its competitors. And I solicited rate cards and media kits from other media to learn what they were charging and what they claimed to offer. That was helpful when I met the owner of a local wine shop who had been advertising in a zoned edition of the Los Angeles Times. He complained that he wasn't seeing any results for the money he was spending. I explained to him that the zoned edition of the Los Angeles Times, which covered West Hollywood, also included readers as far away as Santa Monica and Malibu. Wonderful as his wine was, people weren't likely to be driving from the Pacific coast into West Hollywood for a bottle of merlot. Yet he was paying to promote his business to them.

Given that a third of West Hollywood's population identified as gay men, and that it's a nightlife destination for that crowd, I decided to also incorporate that audience into WEHOville, with a separate section called GayLifeLA. The goal was to go after the gay audience in Greater Los Angeles, an audience that with a large number of prospective advertisers. One advantage was that there were plenty of competitors, whose advertisers I went after. One competitor was a long-running magazine (now out of business) named Frontiers, which was distributed free in racks around Greater Los Angeles every two weeks. On the last day of a particular issue's run, I often would use my mobile phone to take a date- and time-stamped photo of racks that were still full of that magazine and share them with advertisers. Noting that the full rack was evidence that no one was picking up the free magazine, I told the advertiser: "The most expensive ad you can buy is one that no one sees."

About Subscriptions

Will your readers really pay for the news you spend so much time and money reporting, whether online or in print?

If you are The New York Times, the answer is "yes." The Times started charging for digital content in 2011. It earned \$598.3 million in revenue in 2020 from its 7.5 million digital subscriptions, an increase of 2.3 million from the year before. Advertising revenue last year (both print and digital) was only \$392.4 million last year, a decline of 20% from the year before.

However, if you are focused on a small city or community, requiring readers to pay for access to the news you publish isn't a good idea. That's especially true if you are just launching the publication. You need to quickly build an audience to attract advertisers, and that will be tough because people aren't going to pay for a subscription to a publication they don't really know.

But there are other approaches. I implemented a subscription program with WEHOville.com, but a subscription wasn't required to get access to our stories. Anyone could go to WEHOville.com and read WEHOville. A subscriber, however, got an email message each morning with links to all stories published in the previous 24 hours. Subscribers appreciated the fact that they wouldn't have to remember to check the website every day to find out what was going on. They got daily alerts about the news that mattered sent directly to their email boxes.

I used a Mailchimp template to design the daily alert. Then I set up a Stripe account through which people could pay for a subscription. And I promoted the subscription service with an ad on WEHOville that offered links to a page where you could choose a monthly subscription (\$4.99 a month), a six-month subscription (\$23.94), or a one-year subscription (\$35.88), which was the most popular choice. This did require some extra work. Every time I got a notification from Stripe that someone new had subscribed, I had to enter the Mailchimp site to set up an account for that subscriber. And sometimes people had trouble canceling a subscription. They would reach out to me, and I would do it for them.

In addition to running an ad on WEHOville promoting the subscription program, I sent out occasional email blasts. I used email addresses that I found on a database of West Hollywood registered voters that I got from the Los Angeles County Registrar's office (although the list didn't show email addresses for most of the voters). I also collected the email addresses of commenters on the WEHOville site. And I hired a young tech geek to digitally scrape websites of a few local membership organizations that publicly displayed their members' contact information. All in all, we had about 7,000 email addresses. I then created a separate email blast on Mailchimp to send a message to 1,000 potential subscribers.

The message I sent announced that they would, for one week, receive a daily email with links to all WEHOville stories published in the previous 24 hours. And they could continue to receive those emails if they bought a subscription. Each weekly email subscription pitch brought in some new subscribers. I limited the subscription promotion to 1,000 people each time.

WEHOville's subscription revenue grew, albeit slowly. One of the reasons for the slow growth was my failure to send out the subscription pitches more often. I am convinced that this is a very important revenue source for hyperlocal digital news publishers, and I should have promoted it more aggressively. We need to test it by offering different subscription options and prices and trying different pitches.

How to Get Your Name Out There

"If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" I think the answer is "no." With the launch of WEHOville.com in September 2011, the big question was how to let people know it existed, how to make a sound that was loud enough for local residents to hear it. I could have (and perhaps should have) engaged an SEO expert to improve the chances of WEHOville popping up in Google searches about West Hollywood. However, I didn't want WEHOville to adopt a habit of publishing "clickbait" stories that weren't all that relevant to

West Hollywood. So, I took to social media, setting up Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook accounts.

I launched a contest in which WEHOville offered Facebook users a chance to win a weekend stay at an upscale Palm Springs resort if they “liked” WEHOville. I posted an announcement of that on WEHOville’s Facebook page and paid a small amount for Facebook to promote it to users within five miles of West Hollywood. That helped WEHOville quickly get a lot of “likes,” which was important because Facebook was an important platform to promote each story WEHOville published. The last time I checked WEHOville had 8,623 “likes” and 8,865 followers, big numbers for a publication covering a city of 37,000 people. Other important platforms were Twitter and Instagram. I “followed” local influentials on Twitter and also followed those I hadn’t heard of but who had a large Twitter following (I called them “the digitally famous.”) Often someone you follow will then follow you, meaning that Twitter user will get alerts about new stories in your publication and might share them with his or her followers.

I used a tool called Buffer (a subscription was only \$15 a month) to promote stories on social media platforms. When I published a story, I pasted the url linked to it in Buffer and wrote a short pitch line. Then I chose what day and time I wanted Buffer to post the alert on each of the social media platforms. I also paid for a United States Postal Service bulk mail permit and paid someone to design and print a postcard announcing WEHOville that I mailed to local businesses. Unfortunately, that had no impact (except on my budget

There were other ideas I considered but didn’t implement, although perhaps I should have. As managing director (aka publisher) I had used more creative ideas to promote the Metro New York free daily newspaper when I launched it in May 2004 for London-based Metro International (which later sold it). With a circulation of 330,000 copies, Metro New York was the largest circulation newspaper in Manhattan (most of The New York Times’ circulation was national). Metro New York had a \$400,000 marketing budget. While that might sound impressive, it wasn’t much for New York City, where there were three other prominent newspapers and another free daily — AM New York — not to mention the weekly Village Voice and New York Observer.

Metro New York had a website, but Metro’s focus was primarily print in New York and at all its papers around the world. That wasn’t the best approach for a publication whose target audience was the 18-to-34 age group. One way we promoted (and distributed) the print paper was with news racks, which we placed on busy streets in Manhattan. We also hired real people to stand near subway stops, waving the paper and handing it out to those entering or leaving the station. Metro’s stories were short, and the idea was it allowed a subway rider to quickly get a grasp on the important news of the day while headed to or from work.

We got really creative at Metro when we hired Cunning Stunts, a London-based company known for its unconventional approach to marketing. One of the craziest campaigns had me and a group of paid “demonstrators” march to the headquarters of The New York Times (then on 43rd Street) and to the headquarters of the New York Post and the New York Daily News. I led the march carrying a bull horn. When we got in front of the headquarters of the daily newspapers, we began

a chant. For The Times, it was “New York Times. Dollar a Day. Metro Gives the News Away! What Do We Want? Free News! When Do We Want It? Now!” The fact that The New York Times was then sold for a dollar gives you a sense of how long ago this was.

Metro’s launch also caught the attention of Keith Kelly, the media columnist for the New York Post, who had a big following among others in media, including those in the advertising business. Kelly described my newspaper as “cheesy.” An insult, yes. But as I like to say, in these crazy times any publicity is good publicity, so long as they spell your name right. So, I was sort of happy to see that Kelly mentioned Metro, even if it was in a negative way. To thank Kelly, I had a staffer buy a pound of really, really smelly cheese and hired a stripper to deliver it to Kelly’s office. It was the start of a useful relationship.

I didn’t try the Cunning Stunts approach with WEHOville; however, I did consider other untraditional ways of promoting the site. While I didn’t implement any of them, I think some of those ideas might have worked. One was to hire people to walk along the sidewalks on West Hollywood’s Santa Monica Boulevard carrying signs saying something like “WEHOville.com: The News You Need” and handing out business cards with the WEHOville.com url on them. Another was to create signs with a similar slogan and pay people to put them on the sides of their cars.

Digital or Print?

“Print is dead,” is something I hear quite often. My response used to be: “You need to call Warren Buffett and tell him that.” Over several decades, Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway had bought many local newspapers. That, I said, is proof that print isn’t dead. But in January 2020, Berkshire-Hathaway sold off all 31 papers. Buffett, who had described himself as a “newspaper addict” said that now he thinks most newspapers are “toast.”

If you are a news organization focused on a small town or community, I think there are both risks and rewards in launching a print publication (and in any case, you must have a website.) On the plus side, a print newspaper distributed in racks on the street or in local shops (for free, because no one will pay), is a great promotional device. Think of those papers as billboards that promote your business, and its website. However, these days not that many people pick up free print publications. I’m guessing that’s because it’s hard to leaf through a print tabloid when you are holding your mobile phone in your hand. A print product is more expensive to produce. And local governments have all sorts of regulations as to where you can put those newspaper boxes.

Another plus is that a prominent local print newspaper is likely to garner advertising from the local government. Most states have laws that require cities to post legal notices in the local newspaper and incorporators of new businesses often are required to announce that with a legal ad. Also, when talking with business owners about buying an ad on Creative Loafing Atlanta’s heavily trafficked website, I sometimes heard the advertiser agree to make the buy but then say that he really liked seeing his ad in print. While a newspaper quickly makes it to the trash bin, there is a strange and perhaps illogical sense of permanence about something in print.

I did launch a quarterly print magazine in West Hollywood. Initially called West Hollywood Magazine, we changed the name to WHM. The magazine's focus was on art, style, design, and other creativity in a city that billed itself as "the creative city." What distinguished WHM from other city magazines (and particularly a sad competitor that emerged after our launch) was that its focus was just West Hollywood. If we did a fashion shoot, I insisted that it be done at a place that readers would identify as a WeHo location.

The magazine was expensive to produce — our photoshoots sometimes required a photographer and a stylist and a lighting associate and the paper it was printed on was very high quality. We gave it away for free because launching a magazine subscription campaign would be very expensive. And given the constant rotation of subscribers to any and all magazines, such a campaign would never end. Circulation was a challenge. I convinced the owner of one prominent hotel to put the magazine in its guest rooms. Then I called other hotel owners to tell them that he was doing that, and I hoped they also would. They all said yes. Doing that meant we were able to aggregate an audience of tourists and business travelers and thus be able to pitch design stores and upscale restaurants about advertising.

On the plus side, the magazine boosted my company's reputation among the city's leaders and influentials. The first-anniversary party for West Hollywood Magazine attracted way more than a hundred of them to the roof of the Andaz hotel, including all members of the City Council. On the negative side, producing the magazine took an enormous amount of work and didn't generate enough profit to compensate for that. (The freelance writers and photographers and copy editors and designers were expensive.) Also, to my dismay, someone launched an incredibly tacky competing magazine. She was a member of the local Chamber of Commerce and offered to publish a story about any Chamber member who bought an ad. That "pay for play" practice is highly unethical, and it's easy for readers to figure it out. Why read a magazine whose content is based on what an advertiser pays for instead of what readers might want or need to know?

So, I eventually scaled down the magazine, changing its paper to a much cheaper type. Each issue of the new version focused more on the season ahead than on individuals we would have to interview and photograph. For example, there was a welcome to Summer that included information about the annual LA Pride event that drew hundreds of thousands of people to town.

The magazine also was where we published the results of the annual Best of WeHo contest, which was a tool for raising WEHOville's profile among local businesses. That contest involved putting together lists of businesses and non-profits in select categories in West Hollywood and posting them on the website. We used a WordPress-friendly add-on where readers could post their votes. We also scanned for the same IP addresses among the voters in a particular category to ensure no one was voting more than once.

The Best of WeHo contest focused on important parts of our local business world and on businesses that dealt directly with our readers. We didn't ask anyone to vote on the Best Real Estate Developer or the Best Billboard Company. Instead, it was categories like Best Burger Joint, Best Hair Salon, Best Dentist.

WEHOville did publish a tabloid print election guide, which featured statements from all candidates in the upcoming City Council election and paid advertising from most of them and from others running for countywide office. It was a free publication distributed in news racks around the city and on counters at some shops and restaurants. It was quite profitable.

What Is the News in WeHo?

You've identified your audience (ours was the residents of West Hollywood and adjacent neighborhoods). Now, what do you report on and how do you do it?

When I launched WEHOville.com, I was overly ambitious. I knew that we had to cover basic city news — meetings of the City Council and other important boards and commissions, local elections, crime, etc. I also found a restaurant critic to do reviews of some of the 227 restaurants then operating in WeHo. He was a legitimate one who didn't share his identity with the server and whose meals were paid for by WEHOville. I engaged someone to write about local nightlife — clubs and bars and their events. I contracted with a writer and a photographer to do a regular feature called "The Streetwalker," in which she and the photographer would stop one of the many beautifully or eccentrically dressed people on the street, take a picture and ask why they were wearing what they were wearing. And I found people to write about the history of West Hollywood.

I used Google to set up alerts to things posted online that mentioned West Hollywood. I included the names of the city's leaders and major businesses in my list of alerts. Soon I was getting hundreds of emails each week with links to everything from stories published by TMZ to announcements posted on the city's official website. That helped me, a newcomer, to learn what the rest of the city and the rest of the world was saying and reading about West Hollywood, stories that WEHOville needed to cover. If Justin Bieber was involved in another car crash on the Sunset Strip, TMZ reported it, then Google alerted me, and then I reported it, citing TMZ as the source. Another useful source of information was City News Service, which I describe as the Associated Press of Southern California. CNS charged WEHOville a subscription fee of \$350 a month, and on the average month, it published five or six stories that were relevant to West Hollywood. It often covered trials that I didn't have the time or resources to cover.

Thousands and thousands of dollars later, I ended the restaurant reviews and the nightlife features and The Streetwalker to focus on those stories that people really were reading, which I could tell by reviewing Google Analytics data and data on WordPress. I also laid off the full-time editor I had hired and took on those duties myself. My use of Google Analytics to see what people were reading doesn't mean WEHOville would only cover news that generated a lot of clicks. But when it came to ancillary content, I used reader data to decide what to offer. Instead of restaurant reviews and reviews of rock band performance, the primary stories that West Hollywood residents were reading were about local politics, real estate development (a big issue, which meant regular coverage of the city's Planning Commission meetings was important), crime, and the city's history. That was the sort of news WEHOville had to cover. I was lucky to find a freelancer who once had been editor of the local Patch. He knew the city well and enjoyed covering the Planning Commission meeting. I sat through and wrote about the City Council meetings.

It took a lot of work, but I managed to find a few other freelance writers who helped. One was tasked with writing profiles of local business owners and managers for a series called WeHo@Work. I also was approached by a brilliant man obsessed with analyzing data. He pitched a great series called WeHo By the Numbers, where he wrote stories based on data about things like crime, housing costs, and the city budget. Other series included The Grownups, a series of profiles of people 80 years old and over who were still active in city life, and The Artists, which featured profiles (mostly written by me) of the many talented but unknown local painters and sculptors in West Hollywood. We also published an occasional story about one of the Originals, a term used to describe eccentric locals like the Pink Lady, who dyed her and her dogs' hair and painted her apartment and everything in it in that color. Another was WeHo Jesus, a man who wore a long robe and carried a cross as he walked on Santa Monica Boulevard. There also was the "human Ken Doll," a man who had spent a massive amount of money on plastic surgery so that he could look like Barbie Doll's other.

Freelance writers are often treated poorly by those who engage them. So many have told me stories of never getting paid for the work they did. I made certain that a writer was paid within a week or two of the publication of his or her story. My standard rate was \$125 a story (I didn't pay by the word, which is a practice that would encourage a writer to make what should have been a pithy story into a long one). I increased that rate if it was a particularly complex piece that involved more work than usual. Payments were made through Venmo and PayPal. I also paid a "kill fee" in the rare instance that a story written for WEHOville or the magazine turned out not to be something I would publish. That almost never happened, and if it did it was because I came to realize that the story was outdated or no longer relevant to West Hollywood. Making a living as a freelance writer is quite difficult. I tried to ensure that the best freelancers working with WEHOville would continue to be available by referring them to other (non-competing) media for which they could write and report.

I did a fair amount of data-based and investigatory journalism myself. It was that investigative reporting that really burnished WEHOville's reputation in West Hollywood and made it a must-read publication. Every two years there was a City Council election in which hundreds of thousands of dollars were donated to candidates, with the majority of that going to incumbents. Using Google, I researched the many donors to figure out what connection they might have to issues the city was dealing with. Then I published stories after the deadline for each donation report that called out what people and business groups were giving the most money, and to who. It turned out that real estate developers and their lobbyists and lawyers, most of whom lived in West Hollywood, were by far the largest source of donations to City Council incumbents. The second-largest group was composed of companies that did business with the city — like the one with the 15-year trash collection contract that was worth an estimated \$150 million — and others who wanted to get a contract or a permit with the city.

The research turned up fascinating information. That young woman attending college in Manhattan who gave the maximum donation to one Council incumbent running for re-election? It turns out she was the daughter of a major developer who already had hit the legal limit on the amount he could donate. So he had his kids (and wife) chip in. The homemaker in Las Vegas? She worked in Human Resources for a billboard company that had successfully applied for

permits for many billboards on the Sunset Strip. The poor carpenter from Columbia and that housekeeper from Poland? They had no idea that they have given the then maximum donation of \$500 to a City Council incumbent. It turned out that their boss, who wanted to curry favor with the Council member, did it under their names, a violation of state election laws.

Other regular areas of research included:

— Lawsuits. At least once every month I went to the L.A. County Superior Court website and the PACER site that gives access to information about federal lawsuits. I routinely checked for suits involving the City of West Hollywood and for prominent local figures, particularly those with a history of getting in trouble with the law.

— Donations to candidates for national elections. When it was time to elect a new president, I checked the Federal Elections Commission’s website, which is a great tool for finding out who in a particular community is donating to which candidate. That’s how I found out that one of the most prominent developers in West Hollywood, and a major donor to all City Council incumbents, also was a big donor to the election campaign of Donald Trump. While some City Council members issued public condemnations of Trump and of specific donors to his campaign, they didn’t return the money from that developer nor did they criticize him.

— Crime. The local Sheriff’s station issued a weekly crime report which listed all Part 1 (serious) crimes that had taken place in the previous week. But a more useful resource was Crimemapping.com, which provides that same data and more about crime in cities around the country. It lets anyone, for free, find out what specific crimes have occurred, and when and where they occurred for as long as five months back. I could take screenshots of its maps, helpful for that story about where in West Hollywood you were most likely to get beaten up.

— Mandatory filings by elected officials. In West Hollywood, elected and some appointed officials had to file financial annual reports that stated a range of income and what businesses they were associated with. All were available to the public upon request. City Council members also had to file “behest statements,” which listed the names of businesses they had approached to request donations to charities they favored. One Council member was the chair of a gay charity that raked in hundreds of thousands of dollars from businesses that had contracts or otherwise did business with the city. He stepped down from that position after I published a story revealing his inappropriate sexual conduct with young men associated with the charity.

— Background checks. For each city election, I turned to Google to research the history of all of the candidates. That’s how I learned that a well-known local man running for office for the first time had had 12 claims filed against him in New York State for election campaign violations. I also learned that a member of the city’s Historic Preservation Commission had been involved in many criminal activities while living in another state. All it took was researching on Google where those people had lived before West Hollywood, then going to the websites for the courts in each of those states to see if they had gone to trial.

That sort of research helped ensure that WEHOville could, from time to time, publish what I called the “Holy sh-t, Mabel” story. That is the label that my managing editor at the Charlotte

Observer used to describe the sort of story he wanted on the front page. Mark defined it as a story that would lead a nice housewife hanging her laundry in the back yard to lean over the fence and shout to her neighbor: “Holy sh-t Mable! Did you see what was in the Charlotte Observer today?” People began doing that about WEHOville, using that and many different expletives.

An old-fashioned journalist, I was influenced in my reporting by what my editor at the Charlotte Observer once told me: “If your mother says she loves you, check it out!” said Stuart Dim. That led me to investigate the City of West Hollywood’s bragging points and report facts that contradicted them. “The safest place to live, work, and play”? Not according to the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Station, whose database I used to learn WeHo ranked fourth among the more than twenty communities it served when it came to Part 1 (serious) crimes. A “diverse” city? Well, that depends on what you mean by diverse. Nearly 80% of West Hollywood residents were non-Hispanic white people. A city committed to providing affordable housing? That was indeed a commitment, a goal. But my story noting there were about 2,500 locals on the city’s affordable housing waitlist, and only six available apartments, called into question what the city was actually doing to realize that goal. The truth is often inconvenient, but our readers wanted to hear it.

WEHOville’s honest reporting upset some city leaders. But the city manager and others at City Hall came to respect WEHOville for its honest reporting that didn’t show favoritism to anyone. The City of West Hollywood began an important advertiser.

Opinions

In addition to reporting the news, without fear or favor, WEHOville’s mission was to provide a platform or forum where residents could raise and discuss important local issues. Local residents were invited to write op-eds (for which WEHOville did not pay) so long as they were focused on an issue important to West Hollywood and didn’t include personal attacks on others.

Such op-eds were quite popular. Once one was published, I often would reach out to people on the other side of an issue and invite them to submit an op-ed. I offered to edit the op-ed and even help them write it, ensuring them that it wouldn’t be published without their final approval. I helped a local politician write one op-ed that was critical of WEHOville because of a piece I had written. It was very important to do that to ensure that people understood that WEHOville was a place for opinions from all sides of an issue.

WEHOville also allowed readers to comment on stories. (And on op-eds and editorials.) My decision to allow people to comment without using their real names was somewhat controversial. However, I did that because there were people who had very insightful remarks to make but feared that if their names were attached to them, they might lose their jobs. One rule was that you could only use one artificial name for all of your comments. I personally moderated the comments, checking every couple of hours on my computer or mobile phone to read and post them or reject them. We had a stated policy that all commenters had to focus on the issue and not engage in personal attacks. I also did occasional searches on WordPress of the IP addresses of

commenters to catch those who were trying to comment under different names, sometimes on the same issue. Those people got an email telling them they had the right to use only one name.

WordPress also allowed for the blocking of comments that included certain profane and libelous words that would never be printed.

I also published occasional opinion pieces explaining why WEHOville did some of the controversial things that it did. For example, some people were outraged when WEHOville published photos of the bodies of two men who, in separate incidents, jumped from buildings and died when they hit the ground in a public area. Whether to publish such a photo is a tough decision. But I decided to do it and explained why.

Expanding the Reach

As noted earlier, West Hollywood is a 1.89 square mile city. It is bordered by Beverly Hills on the west, Hollywood on the east, and Fairfax and Beverly Grove, and other neighborhoods on the north and south. There are three ZIP Zones — 90046, 90048, and 90069 — that cover West Hollywood as well as nearby communities. I also learned that many people thought they lived in West Hollywood but didn't. And some did live in West Hollywood but thought they didn't. That meant that any scandal story mentioning West Hollywood and published by TMZ or another gossip channel had to be checked. That Black rapper who cut his penis off and threw himself from his apartment building? North Hollywood, not West Hollywood. And Justin Bieber was not beaten up at a West Hollywood coffee shop by LA Clippers star Blake Griffin.

One day I visited a shop on Beverly Boulevard, a number of blocks south of the West Hollywood city limits. I heard the owner say that her shop was located in "Lower WeHo." So I expanded our coverage area to include what I called Greater WeHo. Readers responded to those stories. And so did advertisers. A business opening in the Fairfax District to the south of West Hollywood would reach out to inquire about advertising.

For-Profit or Not for Profit?

As news organizations struggle to stay in business, many have turned to the non-profit model. They seek tax-deductible donations from foundations and individual supporters. That is a model I tried. I entered an "affinity" relationship with the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN). With an affinity relationship, I didn't have to go through the lengthy and burdensome process of seeking nonprofit status from the Internal Revenue Service. Any donations that I solicited, whether personally or on the website, would go to INN. It then would pass the donations along to WEHOville, taking a very small percentage to cover the costs of managing INN.

INN provided a variety of services. Its members engaged with one another online, sharing ideas and asking and answering questions. It seemed to me, although I can't confirm it, that most of its members were focused on particular issues such as health, preservation, education, rather than hyperlocal news coverage. It also alerted its members to a large number of organizations that were making grants to nonprofit news organizations.

I eventually decided to end the INN relationship. It was useful but attracting donations from affluent West Hollywood residents who agreed they couldn't have influence over WEHOville's content wasn't easy. I sought funding from some foundations, but the process was lengthy and cumbersome. And the grants weren't very large.

Mission Accomplished?

Was WEHOville successful? The answer to that depends on how you measure success. The site's traffic grew and grew and grew. For example, Google Analytics showed 327,000 users during the seven days ending on Sept. 28, 2020, which wasn't unusual. That translated into about 1.3 million users (readers) a month. Quite a lot of reading from residents of a city of 37,000 people (and its next-door neighborhoods.)

Another measure of success is the impact WEHOville had on the community it was created to serve. Readers appreciated the investigative reporting and demanded action by elected officials to address the scandals. Stories attracted a lot of comments, with debates that City Council members carefully followed, although most didn't join in.

Was WEHOville profitable? Yes. But the revenue wasn't huge. It was approaching \$200,000 a year before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. If you doubted my earlier statement that I had never worked harder and made less money in my adult life, that should verify it. The largest expense was freelance reporting.

Last fall, like most of us, I was feeling ground down by the pandemic. Someone reached out to ask if I was willing to sell WEHOville, and for the first time, I was interested. I didn't sell to that person. Instead, I listed WEHOville for sale on Flippa, an online marketplace. The listing attracted a lot of attention, with more than one hundred people signing online non-disclosure agreements required before I would share financial data. After lots of back and forth with potential buyers, I accepted a bid (the largest one) from two men who had no evident experience in media. One ran a digital marketing firm in Las Vegas and the other was a senior executive at a real estate agency in Beverly Hills.

The sale was completed on Nov. 8, 2020, and at my recommendation, the owners hired the former Patch editor who was WEHOville's most prolific freelance contributor. I agreed to help guide them, and I moved back to New York City, my home of 20 years. It quickly became clear that they didn't know what they were doing. They wanted a focus on news stories that would attract a lot of clicks, no matter where those clicks came from. As I have told people with those aspirations, no one is flying from China to buy a pair of jeans or a bottle of wine in West Hollywood. They likely won't even be driving from downtown Los Angeles or Santa Monica. The focus on clicks only makes sense if you have a massive national audience and you are seeking advertisers interested in running national campaigns to promote and sell their products. That is what Google is all about.

Five months after acquiring WEHOville, the new owners, who mysteriously declined to share their identity with WEHOville's readers, sold it to a local business owner in West Hollywood. The new owner has no experience in journalism and WEHOville.com no longer offers deep

coverage of the news. (And the grammar and style errors! The last time I had access to the WEHOville.com Google Analytics data, its traffic was down by 80 percent.

My work there taught me more about the ins and outs of publishing a hyperlocal news site than I would have learned in any university. Now I'm proud to say that I've been there, and done that. And I'm available to help.