Journalism Live: How News Events Foster Engagement and Expand Revenue

By Josh Stearns

INTRODUCTION: WHY ARE PEOPLE INVESTING IN EVENTS?

Across the journalism industry, more and more newsrooms are turning to events as part of their engagement and revenue strategy. And advertisers and residents are responding. In Texas last year, The Texas Tribune made roughly $1.5 million from its journalism events, most of which were offered free to the public. In Philadelphia, Billy Penn made 84 percent of its revenue on events.

In this guide, we will draw on lessons and case studies from news events run by newsrooms of all sizes and share some key lessons for publishers who are just getting started.

But first, why are news events gaining such popularity?

For newsrooms, events are a proven way to diversify a publisher’s revenue stream. Live events are hard, and there is no guarantee of success, but the event model has clearly proven itself in a range of settings and styles. We’ll look at each kind of news event in the sections that follow. At a time when too many of our relationships with audiences are mediated by platforms like Facebook and Twitter, events can create a direct connection with your community. They are places to get feedback from local residents and foster their involvement. Events can build affinity, be linked to a membership model, and produce more content for your website.

In communities, event attendees talk about wanting a sense of connection with their neighbors. In some cases, attendees are looking for a social activity to meet people offline; others want professional opportunities for networking. From film cameras to vinyl records, there has been a resurgence of analog media, and events play into that trend. But people don’t attend events just to meet others, they are also interested in deeper connections with individual journalists and news organizations. Finally, people report wanting news that connects to their daily lives and helps them learn something new.

Advertisers are drawn to news events because they are guaranteed to be seen (unlike some ad formats) and because they get to associate their brand with something cool or fun. For a local business, an event can prove to be super-targeted advertising. Businesses know whom they are reaching and have the opportunity to connect with them face to face. Many newsrooms report that advertisers who had turned them down for web or print ads were excited about event sponsorships.
At its best, a good event strategy can reinforce other parts of your business model and help produce great content, engage readers, and market your work. Events can help publishers and media companies reclaim their vital role in supporting and expanding the public square as a place for meaningful conversation and connection.

Chapter One:
Seventeen Lessons for Running Local News Events

Journalism has long brought people together through shared rituals — reading the morning paper, watching the evening news — but as audiences find the news on more platforms, on their own schedules, those rituals have diminished in importance. What hasn’t changed, however, is the potential role of local news organizations to build community around the news. And increasingly, newsrooms are experimenting with events as a way of convening people, engaging their communities, and facilitating critical local conversations.

It is starting to pay off:

- *MinnPost*, a nonprofit online newsroom in Minnesota, [made $160,000 off its annual "MinnRoast" comedy and politics event last year.](#)
- *The Chattanooga Times Free Press*, a daily print paper in Tennessee, [brings in “well into seven figures in income” with the 12 events it hosts each year.](#)
- *The Texas Tribune*, a nonprofit journalism organization dedicated to Texas politics, [brought in roughly $1.2 million through events in 2013.](#)
- *The Atlantic* now hosts more than 100 events each year, and [they make up almost 20 percent of the organization’s revenue](#).

Some of the most notable events are sponsored by organizations covering major metropolitan areas or whole states. But how does an event strategy scale down to the very local level? If your organization wants to develop an event strategy, here are key lessons from newsrooms that have made it work.

**PLANNING**

- **Plan Well:** Events take a tremendous amount of planning, especially in the initial start-up phase. Give yourself the space to balance planning around big ideas and themes and detailed logistics. Talk to others in your community who run events (churches, universities, businesses) and find out what they have learned. *The NJ Spotlight* does a good deal of research before green lighting an event. For any event, Kevin Harold, *NJ Spotlight’s* publisher, asks who are the stakeholders, what are the diverse perspectives, what policies intersect with the issue? He then tests ideas with community members and civic leaders and brings that feedback back to his team to inform the shape of the event. *NJ Spotlight* takes roughly 90 days to plan most events.
• **Pay for What Matters**: Decide early on what is going to define your event and what matters the most. Spend the bulk of your money on creating an exceptional program. “I’ve never once had someone say, ‘Gee, that free lunch sucked,’” *The Texas Tribune’s* event manager told Jake Batsell. “It’s okay if it’s on paper plates … you only want to spend as much as you have to.” Other costs (meals, coffee breaks, open bar, music) can also be sponsorship opportunities.

• **Find a Gap**: Events are a growing business, and more people are investing in them. Before starting out, talk to people in the community about a topic or style of event that is missing. Listen to your community for ideas. “You’ve got to find a spot that’s empty, that’s open,” Joel Kramer of *MinnPost* told Jake Batsell. MinnPost discovered that many of the city’s nonprofit events were serious, somber affairs, so it decided to do a news and comedy event. Jason Taylor, president of *The Chattanooga Times Free Press*, also suggests finding events that are “immune to economic cycles” — for example, bridal shows.

• **Work with a Pro**: Almost anyone can run a good event, but experienced event planners can help make your event more successful, more efficient, and more profitable. *The Texas Tribune* hired Tanya Erlach, who spent seven years running the *New Yorker* Festival. She imported that model to Texas. But you don’t have to bring someone on staff. Depending on the frequency of your events, you can work with local event planners or local nonprofits that hold events. Learn from those around you.

**EVENTS ARE JOURNALISM**

• **Don’t Silo Your Events**: Interviews and articles about journalism events have repeatedly shown that newsrooms with successful events position them as central to their mission. “Events are journalism — events are content,” says Evan Smith, the *Tribune’s* chief editor. “The content that comes from these discussions are our journalism,” Tim Condon of *The Washington Post* recently told Dan Kennedy.

• **Engage the Whole Newsroom**: Your journalists are often the public face of your organization, and they should be active participants in the events. People want to meet journalists, and their ethics, skills, and knowledge will strengthen your events. Kevin Harold at *NJ Spotlight* said that its policy roundtables always begin with the editorial team, often with a beat reporter flagging a hot or emerging issue as a potential topic for an event.

• **Connect Events to Stories**: Link events to your current reporting or important content on your sites. Create a feedback loop where events build on your reporting and breathe new life into stories you have covered, thereby driving traffic and attention back to your site and building on stories in your archives.

• **Repurpose Content**: Live stream the event, post the video or audio afterward, *Storify* the social media coverage, and write a follow-up piece. Video highlights from events can have a life of their own long after the event. Reports and publications based on the events can help promote and raise awareness about your next event. Chop up the best clips from your events and share them on social media.

• **Events Can Create New Content Channels**: In Chattanooga, the *Times Free Press* “Kids Expo” proved so successful that the paper launched a new magazine aimed at local families and opened up new revenue and advertiser opportunities.
LEVERAGE MULTIPLE REVENUE STREAMS

Don’t assume that ticket costs will cover your event. They probably won’t, especially if you want to make the event open to more people.

- **Sponsors**: Most of *The Texas Tribune’s events are free*, but it sells sponsorships.14 Big ticket events have multiple levels of sponsors (signage on stage, for example, marketing materials in registration bags, and ads in the program). [Jason Taylor tells Ken Doctor](#) that events can tap different budgets of sponsors.15 Businesses may have one line item for ads and another for promotions or events. Don’t be afraid to approach businesses that aren’t advertisers on your site, or even ones that have turned you down. Events present a new opportunity to reintroduce yourself and offer a new way for businesses to reach the community. *NJ Spotlight* suggests that if you need three sponsors, you need at least six prospects.

- **Exhibitors**: Create opportunities for local businesses to interact with your attendees. Provide space for them to exhibit or distribute marketing materials.

- **Attendees**: Charging a small ticket price can help offset some event costs and ensure people who register actually show up. You can also ask for donations before, during, and after. For bigger events, like festivals, look at comparable examples from other areas and price accordingly. You can always create discounts for students and others.

BUILD ON YOUR MEMBER PROGRAMS AND SUBSCRIPTIONS

- **Use Events to Reward Members or Subscribers and to Expand Those Programs**: Members can get discounts to events, early invitations to upcoming programs, or special access to speakers backstage. Members can also be engaged to help build events, brainstorm topics, or submit questions for panels in advance.

- **Take Advantage of the Face Time with Members**: Get to know your members and connect those who show up for your events with those who show up online. *NJ Spotlight* surveys attendees after every event and tracks them and whether they regularly attend events. “*The St. Louis Beacon* also conducts surveys, and has built a tool that tracks users who sign up for the site’s newsletter at events.”16

TRANSPARENCY AND ETHICS

- **Ethics Shouldn’t Stop at the Newsroom**: Events can be important sites to highlight newsroom ethics. Working with sponsors, politicians, and vendors, events can raise questions about journalistic independence and spark potential conflicts with advertisers.

- **Tackle These Issues with Care**: Make them part of the early planning process, address concerns from your community quickly, and be as transparent as possible.

This chapter draws heavily on earlier reporting of specific case studies by [Jake Batsell](#), [Ken Doctor](#), [Dan Kennedy](#), and [Justin Ellis](#), as well as my own experience running events.17 I’ve tried to link back to specific articles and examples whenever possible.
Chapter Two:
Eight Categories of News Events

When you see something working for one news organization, it is tempting to replicate that in your own newsroom. But if you duplicate a model wholesale, you risk trying something that does not fit your organization or community.

Much attention has been paid to the ways journalists use events to diversify their revenue streams and engage their communities. But events are not one-size-fits-all. In fact, analyzing how different newsrooms implement event strategies reveals that the most successful events are uniquely positioned to leverage newsroom strengths and meet community needs.

Looking at the field of news events, there is an astounding diversity of models to explore — ranging from serious political debates to social meetings. Below is a breakdown of news events into eight categories, with examples of each. This is part of a larger project to surface best practices and create templates for local newsrooms to use in planning and developing their own event strategies. See Appendix Two for more information about the events discussed below.

**CORPORATE/INDUSTRY EVENTS**

These events convene leaders in industries the newsroom covers and often focus on panels and interviews paired with elements of a trade show or demo session.

- **TechCrunch** holds a number of these convenings under its “Disrupt” brand.
- **Re/code**, building on the success of the All Things D conference, has held major news-making events in the tech sector.
- **Technical.ly Philly** is a great model of a local newsroom pulling together tech leaders around Philly (and the nation) at Philly Tech Week.

**IDEAS FESTIVALS**

These events tend to focus on big social or political ideas and issues, bringing scholars, innovators, activists, and professionals together for debate and discussion.

- **The Atlantic’s Aspen Ideas Festival** is one of the longest-running examples of this model, but it is just one of roughly 100 events that AtlanticLIVE sponsors.
- **The Texas Tribune** modeled its successful **Texas Tribune Festival** after the **New Yorker Festival**.

**POLITICAL EVENTS**

Like the “Ideas Festivals” above, these events seek to tackle timely issues of public concern, but often with more of a political focus. Rather than a multiday festival, these events are smaller 1-3 hour panels and discussions.

- **NJ Spotlight** holds a series of public roundtables on current issues such as water quality, healthcare, and state infrastructure.
• The Texas Tribune’s TribLive events are held across the state, featuring intimate and focused conversations with policymakers and other political figures.

SOCIAL EVENTS
Not all events have to be serious affairs about critical community issues. A number of news organizations are building community and connecting reporting to people’s lives through fun social gatherings like trivia nights, ping-pong, and singles meetups.

• WNYC hosts singles nights in its theatre and Technical.ly Philly hosts networking meetups and job fairs.
• GeekWire hosts a summer bash and ping-pong tournament and Politico Pro hosts trivia nights.
• Brooklyn Based sponsors a pub crawl.

LIFESTYLE EXPOS
These are big-budget events, like trade shows, that bring together businesses from across the region, or even the country, to serve a need in your audience. Events like bridal expos or home and garden shows dovetail with wedding announcements and real estate, which are still popular sections for many news organizations.

• The Chattanooga Times Free Press holds a series of lifestyle events — for example, bridal expos and kids expos. You can see their full range of events here.
• The New York Times hosts a travel expo called the TravelShow.

CULTURAL EVENTS
Tapping into the cultural energy and passions of a local community can be a powerful way to bring people together. Events like film festivals, food festivals, and theatre and music performances can draw revenue from both ticket sales and sponsorships.

• Hyperlocal site Morristown Green organizes a yearly film festival.
• Chicago public radio station WBEZ throws chef battles and drive-in zombie movies.
• Brooklyn’s Sheepshead Bites hosts the Taste of Sheepshead Bay.
• The New York Times’ TimesTalks events bring together celebrities from a wide range of disciplines.

GALAS AND AWARDS
More formal events, often organized around a dinner or reception, with awards and presentations from the stage, have long been a staple of many nonprofits and associations.

• The nonprofit MinnPost, seeking to avoid the earnest charity event model, decided to hold a political roast dubbed MinnRoast.
• *Smithsonian Magazine* holds an annual *American Ingenuity Awards* ceremony. (Hat tip to Jan Schaffer for pointing this out.)

**EDUCATION AND TRAINING WORKSHOPS**

Education events fit very well with the mission and goals of many news organizations and play to their strengths. These vary from small-scale workshops to huge lectures.

• *Brooklyn Based* runs a series of classes focused on everything from crafts to cooking.

• Andaiye Taylor of *Brick City Live* has been running digital marketing classes for local businesses.

**LISTENING AND COMMUNITY EVENTS**

A number of newsrooms have held listening events to either convene important community conversations about local issues or to provide feedback to the newsroom about its own work.

• *Carolina Public Press* is holding listening sessions all over North Carolina.

• *Chalkbeat* hosts reader listening sessions regularly.

As with any categorization, there are some events that fit in multiple categories. This outline of models is intended to help newsrooms organize their planning and better define the kinds of events that they might pursue. Many newsrooms host a mix of events, depending on their market, the expertise of their staff, and the needs of their communities.
Appendix One:
Samples and Templates

The following samples and templates are based on numerous examples generously shared by local newsrooms around the country. Our goal in providing these templates is to help you avoid recreating the wheel and give a jumpstart to news organizations interested in building an events strategy.

Below are two sample budgets, one for a small panel or evening event and another for a larger (1–3 day) conference or ideas festival. Each sample has been adapted to provide a general outline to guide your planning. The finer details and dollar amounts are simply a guide and should be replaced based on your own research on the local event marketplace and your newsroom’s goals.

In addition, we have created a sample marketing timeline and a social media planner to help you manage the outreach and promotion of your events. We have also created a template for a speaker agreement to pay speakers at your events. Nothing in this guide, including the samples linked to below, should be considered legal advice or guidance. You should have your lawyer review any contracts and agreements.

### SAMPLE BUDGET FOR SMALL PANEL EVENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expenses</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Venue — labor and equipment</td>
<td>$2,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographer</td>
<td>$200.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol permits</td>
<td>$50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing materials — design and printing</td>
<td>$300.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinks/bar — labor and equipment</td>
<td>$300.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifts for speakers</td>
<td>$50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catering</td>
<td>$250.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>$3,150.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revenue</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tickets</td>
<td>$1,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsorships</td>
<td>$3,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bar</td>
<td>$300.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>$4,300.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| NET                             | **$1,150.00** |
SAMPLE BUDGET: 1–3 DAY IDEAS FESTIVAL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expenses</th>
<th>Big Budget</th>
<th>Small Budget</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speaker fees/travel</td>
<td>$27,000</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing/promotions</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity creation/graphic design</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue rental fees</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furniture/props</td>
<td>$3,500</td>
<td>$500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decorations/signage</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AV/staging/lighting/labor/wifi</td>
<td>$35,000</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations contractor</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimedia production</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onsite staffing/lodging</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security/badge checking</td>
<td>$6,000</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration materials/equipment</td>
<td>$4,000</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and beverage</td>
<td>$24,000</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bags/giveaways/program materials</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>$214,500</td>
<td>$67,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Revenue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revenue</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sponsorships</td>
<td>$200,000</td>
<td>$65,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main event tickets</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side events (party, reception, etc.)</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibitors</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>$300,000</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NET

| NET                                  | $85,500    | $33,000      |
Appendix Two:
News Events Reading List


• “The Best Strategies for Generating Revenue through Events” — American Press Institute. Available at: https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/strategy-studies/events-revenue/single-page/.


• NewsRev Working Group: Events. Available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1LzBRcUywszDJhLmv5kNhFMtv3ApX9gNP21spUQ9JS/edit?heading=h.35lro19a7gt3


News Events Examples

Corporate/Industry Events
- “Disrupt” events by TechCrunch: https://techcrunch.com/event-type/disrupt/
- Re/code’s major news-making tech-sector events: https://events.recode.net/

Ideas Festivals
- The Atlantic’s Aspen Ideas Festival: http://www.aspenideas.org/
- The New Yorker Festival: http://festival.newyorker.com/

Political Events
- NJ Spotlight Roundtables: http://www.njspotlight.com/roundtables/
- The Texas Tribune TribLive events: https://www.texastribune.org/events/

Social Events
- Technical.ly Philly’s networking meetups and job fairs: http://www.meetup.com/Technically-Philly/events/155803082/
- POLITICO Pro’s trivia nights: http://www.politicopro.com/events/2013/12/politico-pro-trivia-night-178767
- Brooklyn Based’s pub crawl: http://brooklynbased.com/blog/category/events/immersions/

Lifestyle Expos

Cultural Events
- WBEZ’s chef battles: https://www.wbez.org/shows/wbez-news/off-air-events-chef-battle-royale/23b46361-13b9-4b4a-a4e8-afd4c1415c9d


**Galas and Awards**

• *MinnPost*’s political roast MinnRoast: [https://www.minnpost.com/inside-minnpost/2016/03/minnroast-2016](https://www.minnpost.com/inside-minnpost/2016/03/minnroast-2016)


**Education and Training Workshops**

• *Brooklyn Based* classes: [http://brooklynbased.com/blog/category/activities/classes-culture/](http://brooklynbased.com/blog/category/activities/classes-culture/)

• *Brick City Live* classes: [http://www.brickcitylive.com/](http://www.brickcitylive.com/)

**Listening and Community Events**


• *Chalkbeat* reader listening sessions: [http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2013/12/17/what-were-doing-to-listen-more-closely-and-feature-new-voices/#.V__fXpMrK9Z](http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2013/12/17/what-were-doing-to-listen-more-closely-and-feature-new-voices/#.V__fXpMrK9Z)
ENDNOTES


4 Ibid.


6 Batsell.

7 Doctor.


9 Ibid.


13 Doctor.

14 Ellis.

15 Doctor.


17 Batsell; See also Doctor; See also Kennedy; See also Ellis.