COLORADO MEDIA PROJECT

the MEMBERSHIP PUZZLE PROJECT

HEARKEN

COLORADO MEDIA PROJECT GUIDE:

How to Design and Launch a Collaborative Membership Offering

News organizations, of all publishing formats and business models, are looking to diversify revenue to push toward long-term sustainability. Collaborating and partnering with like-minded organizations can expand opportunities for audience-driven support.

The following guide is based on an experiment led by Colorado Media Project — with support from Membership Puzzle Project and consulting from Hearken — to test how news organizations can identify organizations and institutions that they 1) share target audiences with and 2) can work together with to develop a shared service or product that benefits both organizations' bottom lines, as well as the public they're collectively seeking to serve.

Rather than develop a new service or offering that is based on a transactional relationship between your organization and your audience, we encourage you to focus your efforts on a new service or offering that builds opportunities for community connection, collaboration and contribution.

DESIGN THE NEW POTENTIAL COLLABORATIVE SERVICE OR OFFERING

Designing new services or offerings that help address your audience's needs doesn't have to be a laborious process. By bringing together a small group of individuals with varying areas of expertise or working in different roles or departments in your organization, you can quickly develop ideas for new solutions to push your organization forward.

Once you've assembled your internal team, you can spend as little as 20-minutes, or as much as a couple of hours, to work through the Lean Canvas framework, a one-page business plan template often used by startups and lean businesses to quickly design new offerings.

1. Identify your customer segments (including those you're already reaching and groups you'd like to see audience growth).

2. List out your audience's top challenges. What feedback have you already collected from your audience to explain their pain points? (Note: If you do not have any documented feedback from your audience or have not conducted any audience interviews, you can develop an interview template based on this example from the project.) Are there any existing alternatives to those challenges? What are the organizations or institutions providing those alternatives? They could become your collaborative partner as you look to create an even stronger solution.

3. Brainstorm a solution that would address those challenges. Solutions should be crafted to serve audience needs as well as the needs of the organization. If you need multiple solutions to address the top challenges rather than developing one all-encompassing solution, you may need to work through the Lean Canvas framework multiple times and collectively decide which solution to address as an organization first.

4. How would you measure the success of the solution? What are the key metrics that would indicate your solution is having the effect you're hoping to achieve?

5. What is the unique value of your solution? How would you quickly describe it to your audience?

6. What channels exist to reach your audience? What will your outreach strategy look like to build momentum for the new solution?

7. What is the unfair advantage of your organization creating this new solution? What expertise are you bringing to the table?

8. What are the potential revenue streams for your solution?

9. What costs, including staff time and resources, will you need to cover to make your solution a success?

After you have developed at least one solution to your audience's expressed challenges, it is critical to test your assumptions with a small user group. There are several ways in which you can quickly collect feedback about your proposed solution(s):
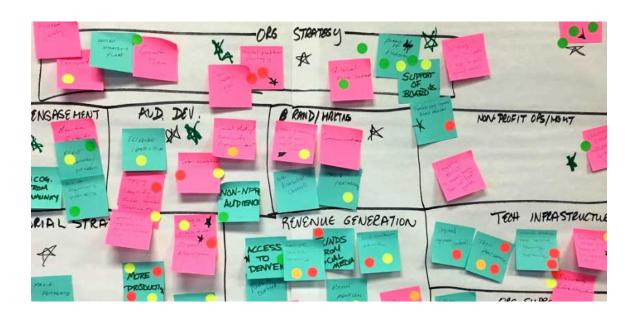
- Send a brief (5- to 10-minute) survey to a group of loyal customers or audience members

- Conduct listening sessions (over the phone, video call or in-person, if possible) with your early adopters or individuals who have provided you with candid feedback in the past

- Collect referrals for individuals who are members of your target audience but are not loyal audience members and collect feedback (via survey or short listening session) to test whether this new service or offerings would help convert them. If your proposed solution is the answer, collect insights to determine what alternative solution they're looking for.

RESOURCES

Lean Canvas   Community Listening Session Example

IDENTIFY POTENTIAL STRATEGIC COLLABORATORS, CONDUCT OUTREACH AND CLEARLY DEFINE THE PARTNERSHIP

Based on your proposed solution — which you've tested the enthusiasm for by reaching out a small segment of your audience — you can begin to revisit the list of organizations, institutions or individuals that are already working toward a similar solution from your Lean Canvas framework.

A simple way to identify the best collaborators would be to ask the question:

> *"Who is reaching my target audience and serving some of their expressed needs, and would benefit from my organization's unique value?"*

By coming together in the interest of benefiting your mutual target audiences, you will garner good will with the public you're serving while also benefit each organization's financial bottom line.

The closer the relationship you have with your potential collaborator, the easier it will be to get your partnership in place to conduct a beta test of your new collaborative service or offering.

One example: You're a geographically-focused news organization looking to partner with a local museum to set up a discounted monthly membership to both your news organization and the museum. Which museums that attract your target audience have already advertised or participated in sponsorship or underwriting with your organization, signaling that they see value in your organization's reach?

Questions that must be addressed as you define your new partnership:

- How will incoming revenue be shared? Is it simply split evenly? Is there a referral bonus based on the point of conversion? Can one organization retain a higher profit margin in exchange for an advertising or sponsorship trade?
- What are the staff resources needed from each organization to make the new collaborative service or offering successful?
- How will each organization be held accountable?
- What is the communication plan and reporting structure?

It is highly recommended that such a partnership is entered into under a clear Memorandum of Understanding or another type of agreement deemed appropriate, signed by both organizations in order to begin the beta test of the new offering.

RESOURCES

MOU Templates: Example I   Example II   Example III

PREPARING FOR A SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH: SETTING GOALS

Now that you've established your collaborative partner, work together to define your goals for the launch of your new service or offering. The more you're able to follow the SMARTIE goals framework — Strategic, Measurable, Ambitious, Realistic, Time-bound, Inclusive and Equitable — the better your project goals will be.

RESOURCE

The Management Center's SMARTIE Goals worksheet

PREPARING FOR A SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH: MAKING A PLAN, ESTABLISHING KEY ROLES AND DEFINING YOUR TEST GROUP

At this point in the process of launching a collaborative membership offering, there are key preparation questions to answer and critical roles to fill to ensure a successful launch.

First:

- Who are the people you need on board to make this collaborative offering successful? This list should include stakeholders from both participating organizations.

- What are the roadblocks that could prevent this from happening? (Make sure to consider everything from technical issues to lack of staff time.) What can you do to mitigate the risks?

Once you have a clear idea of the stakeholders needed to ensure a successful launch, assign the project team's MOCHA (Source: The Management Center):

MANAGER: Assigns responsibility and holds the owner accountable. Makes suggestions, asks hard questions, reviews progress, serves as a resource, and intervenes if the work is off-track.

OWNER: Has overall responsibility for the success or failure of the project. Ensures that all the work gets done (directly or with helpers) and that others are involved appropriately. There should typically only be one owner, but in the case of a collaborative offering between two organizations, consider having one owner per organization.

CONSULTED: They should be asked for input throughout at certain stages, or they need to be bought-in for the project to succeed. .

HELPER: Assists with or does some of the work.

APPROVER: Signs off on decisions before they're final. May be the manager, though they might be another stakeholder(s) outside of the project team.

What are the specific tasks that need to be done to launch your new collaborative service or offering? Work backwards from your project launch date.

Deadline	Task	Task Owner	Status (Complete, In Progress, etc.)
	LAUNCH		

Defining your test group

As this is a new collaborative service or offering, it is important to test it's success before launching it to both organizations' entire audiences. Rather, start with a small, clearly defined test group of both your current audience, churned or former audience (like a former member or subscriber), and prospective audience.

Return to your Lean Canvas framework to revisit your collaborative customer segments, and make sure that there are representatives of each customer segment in your test group to ensure a diversity of perspectives.

Set expectations with your test group that this is a new offering and that you're giving them discounted or free early access in exchange for honest and constructive feedback about the effectiveness of the offering.

You should also define the time parameters of the beta offering. When do you ideally want to launch to your wider audience? Make sure the beta test lasts for enough time to collect feedback from your user group, iterate your offering based on that feedback and test the refined offering with the same group before your public launch.

LAUNCH THE BETA TEST, ASSESS AND ITERATE

After following the task list and launching your beta offering with a small test user group, the next areas of focus should be to track Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) based on the SMARTIE goals you set, collect feedback from the user group, and develop a framework for iteration based on collected feedback and initial KPIs.

Tracking KPIs

Based on your SMARTIE goals, pull out the measurable metrics or KPIs that will help you define whether your new service offering is successful or not. Put those KPIs into a shared spreadsheet where you can collaboratively input metrics on a regular basis and share them with your project team.

RESOURCE

Example of a KPI Tracker

Collecting feedback

We recommend a variety of feedback loops with your test group to collect both quantitative and qualitative results.

From a quantitative perspective, you can deploy automated weekly surveys — for example, Customer Satisfaction (CSAT) and Net Promoter Score (NPS) surveys — to quickly measure the test group's enthusiasm for your new collaborative service or offering.

This will provide you with a quick gauge of who is dissatisfied, neutral and pleased with your new offering. You should also take the opportunity to ask quick follow-up questions to capture what aspect of the offering is causing them to feel that way and, as always, ask if they would be interested in providing you more in-depth qualitative feedback.

It is extremely helpful to conduct regular user interviews or more in-depth qualitative surveys with your test group to collect anecdotal feedback that gives the user the opportunity to provide a more detailed response to what's currently working and why; what should be improved and how; and what's missing and the possible solutions. These interviews or surveys can be as short as 10 to 15 minutes, or longer depending on the test group individual's capacity.

Identify patterns and iterate

As you capture feedback from your user group, look for patterns that demonstrate common user challenges or suggestions for improvement. You don't need a statistically significant portion of your user group to justify making a change — a handful of similar suggestions or criticisms is enough of a reason to iterate.

Set a timeline for how often you want to assess collected user feedback (weekly, biweekly, etc.). During the assessment process, identify common problem areas and develop a quick solution to help solve the challenge, hopefully taking user-generated solutions into consideration.

Once you go through the iterative process enough times, you should be in a position to launch a fully-tested new service or offering that has been enthusiastically vetted by your test group, now considered your early adopters and the service ambassadors who will help ensure the successful public launch by promoting the new offering within their networks and model the usage behaviors you're hoping to see.