

25 content ideas that will increase revenue

BY PETER WAGNER | IOWA INFORMATION INC.

Why all the emphasis on selling ads on a newspaper's website? There are dozens of local firms and individuals already attempting to dominate the Internet in your community. They're creating a presence with a variety of websites, personal opinion blogs, blast emails and mobile messages.

But almost all lack the credibility, respect and ability to create the ready response your community newspaper offers. It takes continuous training, years of experience, a dedicated staff and an investment far beyond a laptop computer to produce a community newspaper. My Iowa publishing company just introduced a website -- nwestiowa.com -- this year. It's bringing in a few unique dollars each month but it's still our newspapers, the regional N'West Iowa REVIEW and the local Sheldon Mail-Sun that bring in 99 percent of our monthly revenue.

But doing that isn't easy. It takes serious selling, well-planned promotions and a commitment to local content that the community will be willing to pay good money to read.

Time, not the Internet, is our industry's problem.

There is a huge demand for our reader's time today. We must produce an interesting, exciting, well-designed and readable publication if we expect to remain the news and advertising leader in our established market.

Here are 25 special content sections and/or pages that have worked here:

[1] STAYCATIONS SECTIONS Money is tight. Gasoline is expensive. Respond with a series of sections suggesting interesting places and fun things to do in each of your surrounding counties. Include information about public parks, campgrounds, historic sites, annual festivals and unique places to eat and shop. Sell advertising to compatible businesses in each targeted area. Offer a reduced rate to businesses willing to contract to be in all the Staycation sections published that year. RV dealers make excellent prospects.

[2] ADOPTABLE PETS COLUMN Publish a weekly sponsored column featuring a photo and heartwarming story about one of the dogs or cats available for adoption at the local animal care facility. Sell an adjacent sponsorship to your local veterinary clinic.

[3] HEART AND SOUL SECTIONS Create an extended list of nearby communities or specific neighborhoods in your community. Have your photographers shoot various images of local residents at work and play. Print the results with a heartfelt essay on living in the area--written by a local resident. Feature lots of color images and dozens of ads from community businesses.

[4] ANNUAL CHAMBER REPORT Produce a tabloid "report to the people" just before your chamber's annual meeting. Include reports on the organization's progress and plans. Include interviews with the outgoing and incoming presidents, the executive director and selected board members. Sell display advertising to banks, hospitals, wellness centers, investment centers, insurance firms and committed retail businesses. We insert ours in the paper just before the annual meeting and provide the chamber copies to place at each table setting.

[5] BARBECUE COOK OFF Host an annual Barbecue Cook Off. Get local businesses to underwrite entry fees and provide prizes. Produce feature stories about the contestants the weeks leading up to the event and feature their recipes in a special report on the contest. Sell ads to run just before the actual cook off day, promoting special sales at local retailers and service centers.

[6] 20 UNDER 40 Publish a nomination form to create a list of 20 men and women under 40 years of age who best represent the future business leaders in your area. Publish stories about each individual's accomplishments, personal interests and plans and hopes for the future. Sell congratulatory and general purpose advertising to related businesses. Invite all the honorees and their nominators to a celebratory breakfast co-hosted and paid for by a regional bank.

[7] STATE OF THE COLLEGE If you have a two-year community college or local private four-year institution you can produce an informative annual State of the College edition. Your readers are interested in the future of the local college and many were students there. Include interviews with the president, department heads in emerging fields, sports department as well as others involved in the school's growth. Sell advertising to local and area businesses that do business with the school or whose leaders graduated from the college. Other sure prospects are the college, college foundation and any sports and band booster groups.

[8] **LOOKING BEYOND TOMORROW** Face it--we're all going to die eventually. The problem is most of us don't want to think about it or plan for it. This book size editorial product--published every three years -- features interviews with suggestions and information from funeral directors, financial planners, banks, long-term care facilities and hospice providers and retirement facilities. Advertising is solicited from the same businesses with the understanding the interviews will rotate among those in each specific field with each new edition to provide fair and balanced coverage. Don't forget to sell to health care stores and travel agencies.

[9] **WHAT NEXT?** Tired of doing another progress section? Consider replacing it with "What Next?" We do 10 or more such sections every year, reporting what community leaders, business owners and residents of communities or neighborhoods think need to be accomplished to continue to grow. Advertising support comes from all of the same traditional businesses that would purchase the progress section. But the new format creates renewed interest and greater profits.

[10] **NATIONAL FFA WEEK** This editorial approach can also be applied to National Nurses Week, Labor Day, St. Patrick's Day or any other time set aside to salute a profession, group or heritage. Rather than just print a page or two of pictures with sponsors for each picture, produce an entire section with stories about the sponsor, leaders, various activities, community service and individual as well as chapter accomplishments. Encourage advertisers to purchase larger ads promoting their products and services. But don't overlook the small-dollar advertiser. Dedicate space at the back of the section for a general congratulations page listing those who want to participate with a smaller investment.

[11] **BOOMERS** Baby boomers are reaching retirement age at a surprising clip. Publish a special section full of information about their growing numbers, retirement plans and problems, health issues, hobbies, hopes, realities and dreams. Sell accompanying ads to hospitals, new car dealers, financial institutions, travel bureaus, clothing stores, restaurants and health clubs.

[12] **A TO Z SECTIONS** Here is a new way to produce a Community Guide using all the letters of the alphabet. Determine key landmarks, organizations and events in your community that start with one of the letters. Each letter designation is accompanied by a photograph or other illustration and copy providing important details. Advertising support would come from the entire community, especially the advertisers normally found in a Welcome Book or Community Guide.

[13] **FIRE PREVENTION WEEK SECTION** Published annually during National Fire Prevention Week, this broadsheet section features a unique cover story about one of the volunteer fire departments or individual firefighters in your coverage area. The rest of the pages are all advertising built around photos of regional fire departments. Each of these salute ads is sponsored by 10 to 30 local businesses.

[14] **GARDENING TIPS** If you're lucky enough to have a local landscaper with an ability to write his ideas down on paper, consider a weekly gardening column. Offer to edit and polish the information if necessary and require the author to support his advertorial with an ad. You can do the same thing with a local pharmacist, auto repair specialist, investment consultant, banker, insurance agent, restaurant owner, etc.

[15] **WAR STORIES** This is an idea that can be used many different times of the year. We're all interested in Grandpa and Dad's war stories from World War II all the way to the current fighting in the Middle East. Use Veteran's Day, Pearl Harbor Day, Sept. 11 or any other day of historic remembrance to publish a collection of interviews with local veterans. Cover it all; life on the home front as well as the fighting overseas. This type of reporting is one of the things community newspapers do best. It is a sure winner when offered to local banks, hospitals, manufacturing companies and restaurants. Many will simply want to say thanks or salute all veterans in the area.

[16] **PAID OBITUARIES** I had a difficult time with this concept for years. But, funeral homes are charging their clients. Many local radio stations have been charging for obituaries or death notices for years. The obituary page is often the first read and best read page in the newspaper. By charging a fee and allowing the inclusion of information not normally part of a tightly formatted obituary, you are allowing the family to tell a more complete story that might otherwise be lost forever.

[17] **AG DIRECTORY** This is an annual December project at The N'West Iowa REVIEW. Printed with a heavy sheet-fed full-color cover, the core pages are printed book size on our web press. The Ag Directory is divided into more than a dozen sections featuring paid ads for livestock dealers, farm building suppliers, machinery dealers, financial and insurance services, fertilizer and chemical dealers, computer services, elevators and more. Each section is introduced with a one to two-page locally-produced article sharing new ideas on the featured subject and the first company to buy a full-page listing. When there is more than one business interested in the editorial feature, the second firm is promised first right to being the featured business the next year but must buy a process page ad both years. This directory format can also be applied to the auto industry, the construction business and the restaurant trade.

[18] KID'S FUN BOOK This tabloid is simple and effective if you subscribe to Metro Creative Graphics. Create an 8-, 12 or 16-page tabloid made up of the kid-friendly games, crossword puzzles and other hands-on things to do that can be found in each month's service. Print the activities on the top 70 percent of the page with a strip across the bottom. Sell one or two sponsorships on each page. We usually create the book sometime in the middle of December as our Holiday Gift to our readers. We've also had success printing an early summer edition to help parents fill those long vacation days.

[19] SPORTS HEROS Don't forget those marathoners, golfers, fishermen, hunters and exceptional high school sports stars in your community . Create a space with five ads on each edge and two more at the bottom of the center two columns. Use the remaining space to spotlight a local sports hero with a large photo and a feature-style article. Sell the adjacent spots on a contract to health clubs, sporting good dealers, restaurants and sports bars.

[20] HOMETOWN PEOPLE IN BUSINESS This one may feature editorial content but it is really all paid advertising. Sell quarter-, half and full-page positions to as many local family businesses as possible. Create bordered feature stories reporting on their history, services and plans. Include at least one large photo in all quarter-page layouts and use additional photos and sidebars to enhance the half and full-page advertorials. You will want to sell black and white locations to keep the project affordable. Also offer process color positions for larger companies willing to pay for it.

[21] CHRISTMAS CLOSE TO HOME SECTIONS Every community and area neighborhood wants the opportunity to tell its story. These sections can begin at Thanksgiving and continue each week until Christmas. Each edition should feature what one nearby community or neighborhood is doing to prepare for and celebrate the season. A few suggestions would include locally produced Christmas programs, themed town decorations and the man who has played Santa forever. Sell supportive ads to businesses dependent on customers living in that area and finish off the section with that market's Christmas greetings.

[22] BOWLING SCORES AND STORIES Bowling alleys and ardent bowlers often think they are the forgotten sport. Set aside one week each month to run top bowler scores and staff-written feature stories about team, league or alley champions. Sell ads at the bottom of the page to area bowling alleys and nearby restaurants and sports bars.

[23] SHELTON PUTS YOU FIRST Create two pages in process color. Design the first page to feature 30 1x5 ads. Lay out the second page -- the feature page-- to honor an additional participating business. Bill the ads so the individual amount for all 31, including the full page, is equal to your two-page process rate divided by 31. Point out to the buyer the low price for the multiple process color ad surrounded by associated local businesses. This is a good promotion for all small local businesses but will also interest professional companies interested in keeping themselves consistently in front of the public. For best results make sure the clients change their copy on a regular basis.

[24] NATIONAL 'WHATEVER' CARE MONTH We all receive canned copy for everything from National Cancer Month to National Safe Boating Week. The information can be turned into additional revenue simply by localizing it. Use the basic story ideas and contact local experts for their comments and credibility. Add in a few locally-created features and create a special themed section or specialty page. Sell support advertising to appropriate local businesses.

[25] EARTH DAY The "X" Generation is also known as the Green generation. Build a positive relationship by producing an annual Earth Day section. Include stories on energy efficient construction, community planting, efforts to reduce waste and trash along the highways and other plans and programs to protect the earth Obvious advertisers include contractor energy companies, earth moving contractors and equipment companies, are manufacturers, community colleges and financial institutions.

SUMMING UP In all these projects, the secret is keep ing the information local and interesting. No matter what, you need to be the local leader in reporting all the community news, high school and recreational sports and unique moments. You also can orchestrate added value by regularly including a special report or section with detailed information on a subject of value and importance to your reader. By doing so, you'll generate exceptional additional advertising in that issue. Remember, keeping your company "in the money" makes it possible to keep it in business.

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