

How to Introduce Engagement Efforts to Your Newsroom

What it actually takes for your newsroom to listen to your audience (aka the public)

By Jennifer Brandel, co-founder of Hearken

If you're looking for quick technology fixes to "growth hack" your audience and blow up your engagement metrics, we'll save you time: this is not for you. If instead you're looking to create culture change that sticks in your newsroom and to improve your process in ways that lead to legitimate audience growth and more relevant content, welcome.

It's no surprise that journalism struggles to create positive, two-way relationships with audiences, because until recently, it hasn't been required to be good at it. But times have changed. These days, not listening to and responding to your audience means your newsroom risks irrelevance, which leads to drops in audience, trust, content consumption, and revenue. In the worst case scenario, irrelevance means having to turn the lights off. A lot of newsrooms are having to turn their lights off.

We're not going to sugarcoat this: Getting into the healthy habits that build meaningful relationships with

audiences is as hard as building healthy habits in other areas of life. There's no magic pill, no quick fix, no shortcut, no game-changing widget or app. It takes intention, practice, experimentation, buy-in, incentive structures, consistency, and — most of all — time.

We know this because we've done the work of building meaningful relationships with audiences ourselves, and have been working with more than 100 newsrooms worldwide to do the work, too.

Not every newsroom has what it takes. The good news: it doesn't require a big staff or deep pockets. Hearken works with outlets as small as 2 full-timers, and they're doing incredible audience-first work. Having what it takes means creating the right conditions for audience engagement work to take root, grow and thrive.

The following guide outlines the major elements that contribute to a newsroom's readiness for and success with engagement.

INSIDE: 4 EXERCISES AND 10 STEPS TO HELP YOU GET YOUR NEWSROOM MOVING

Step 1: Define engagement



“Audience engagement” is a focus of many newsroom efforts, yet most newsrooms lack consensus about what those two magic words actually mean. Start there.

Hash out a working definition with your colleagues.

It’s OK if different departments in the company define engagement differently. Reporters might care about the quality of responses and interactions with the public. Managers might focus on traffic and other hard metrics. Marketing teams might need to look at it engagement as

it relates to converting the public into paying subscribers.

This step of creating a definition is extra hard because you expect there is an industry standard. Alas, there is not. Maybe there will be someday. But you can’t wait until someday.

It’s up to each newsroom to craft the definitions that lead to the outcomes they value. (It can also be helpful to talk to folks in other newsrooms to see what definitions they came up with - for inspiration, not to copy.)



GROUP EXERCISE:

DEFINING ENGAGEMENT WITHIN YOUR NEWSROOM | ESTIMATED TIME: 1 HOUR

Part one: Uncover what your newsroom’s implicit definition of engagement is

Ask people to independently write down:

When was a time you successfully “engaged your audience?”

What did you do?

How did you know it worked?

Who considered the effort successful, and why?

Part two: Uncover what individuals actually think real engagement means or looks like

Ask people to independently write down:

How do you personally define engagement?

(You can give the prompts: “engagement is when ...” or the alternate: “...does NOT count as engagement.”)

Part three: Discuss and come to consensus

Explore question 1 with the group and find the themes.

Explore question 2 with the group and find the themes.

(You might be surprised to see a gap between the two. The organization may be rewarding and encouraging behaviors that individuals don’t believe in or think should matter.)

Tease out those differences and try to come to consensus on how you want to define engagement collectively.

When you have a working definition, check it against this question:

What it would mean to our mission and to our journalism if we encouraged and rewarded this type of engagement?

If that answer is ugly (like if it would lead to clickbait), then there’s more work to do on refining a definition. Adjust it until your definition of successful engagement aligns with the role you believe journalism needs to play in a democratic society.

Step 2: Find the right staff



Within the job title “journalist” fall a lot of archetypes. Some people focus on keeping the powerful in check, some always wanted to be writers or on the radio

or TV, some just love to learn, and others are in it for the community service aspect. Not everyone is going to have the optimal disposition, outlook or passion for working closely with the public. That’s OK! It takes all kinds of people to make newsrooms work.

Knowing this, just be sure to assign the task of collaborating with the public to someone for which engagement feels like an exciting opportunity, rather than to someone who sees it as a chore. It won’t work well if you do the latter: and it could lead you to falsely believe the problem is with the audience and not the

staffer. In fact, many people in your audience want to engage, and so do many people in your newsroom. Find the right combination and incredible things will happen.

Don’t expect or require consensus to get started

Writer Samuel Johnson wrote: “Nothing will ever be attempted if all possible objections must first be overcome.”

Amen. There will be skeptics. There will be naysayers (to your face, on Slack, or in their heads). There will be people who fear change, or people whose jobs depend on maintaining the status quo. This is normal. Look for the **yaysayers** — those with a sparkle in their eye. Find and protect space for them to try new things and learn without the pressure of folded arms and disapproving glances.

SEE EXERCISES ON NEXT PAGE ABOUT GETTING BUY-IN FROM COWORKERS AND BOSSES



Step 3: Start small

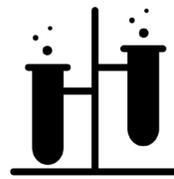


You don’t need to plan a year-long series, start a new desk, write a grant or create a grand plan. Make your early efforts manageable and go for a quick win, to help build momentum.

The danger in embarking on a huge project before experimentation is that if it’s too complex and takes too long to show promise, people will start to doubt, or drift away and find themselves back doing the same old things.

In fact, calling what you’re doing an “experiment” or a “test” can be helpful language not only to assuage the naysayers, but also to get staff in the mindset of learning. Emphasizing the experimentation aspect can help them get comfortable with the fact it might not go according to plan, and that there is room to iterate and try something different the next time. That being said, regardless of the size and scope of your efforts, make a commitment (both to your audience and to yourselves) that you can keep.

Step 4: Hypothesize



Whether your engagement ideas are grand or humble, always create a hypothesis to test. If your idea works, what could happen? If it doesn’t, how will you know for sure?

It’s much harder to spot success or a breakthrough if you don’t know what you’re looking for.

Consider which measures, quantitative and qualitative, would let you know your engagement efforts are worthwhile. Think not just about how the public responds, but also how the newsroom staff responds. Might this work generate positive energy, creativity and boost morale? Could it make reporters feel more connected to the public and more fulfilled in their work (and less likely to leave)? If so - that’s worth noting, and worth sharing with management if it comes to pass. More on that later ...

INDIVIDUAL EXERCISE: GETTING BUY-IN FROM STAFF TO DO ENGAGEMENT WORK

If you're leading a team and looking to do more engagement work, we recommend starting with the people first — not the project, beat or topic.

What to look for in staff

- They show more excitement than hesitation about connecting with the public
- They have an experimental “let's just try this” mentality
- They are part of the editorial decision-making meetings (If there's no path for bringing public input to the place where decisions happen, why bother asking for it?)
- They are a respected staff person (If the newsroom messenger who is listening to the public is someone staff does not take seriously, then the public won't be taken seriously)

Now's the time to brainstorm. Jot down name(s) of a person or a few people who fit the description above:

How to ask them:

We recommend doing this one on one, as springing a new project or assignment on them in the midst of a meeting can be the bad kind of surprise. You could float an email or Slack with the idea, or our favorite: a walk and talk to get a coffee and hear their reactions in real time. It's harder to read emotions when they're written, so witnessing their physical reaction can be helpful. If they express more hesitation or caveats than excitement, consider finding another person to pioneer the work and invite this person in when the success has been demonstrated. Not everyone is an “early adopter” and it's best to not force it.

How to support them:

Schedule regular times to check-in and see how things are going, and if any adjustments are needed in their workload to be able to give the engagement work their best efforts. You don't want a project to fail out of benign neglect, and then have it be filed under: “we tried that and it didn't work” when really it could have worked had there been enough room given to properly test the idea. Inevitably you'll run into skeptics in the group who voice dissent or subtly undermine the efforts. Reinforce to the doubters that engagement work is vitally important, and your shop will never learn how to do it well if you don't do a lot of experiments.

INDIVIDUAL EXERCISE: GETTING BUY-IN FROM MANAGEMENT TO DO ENGAGEMENT WORK

If you're the engagement pioneer trying to get buy-in from a boss, you may have a tough path, depending on their viewpoint and disposition.

What to look for in management

- They do not fundamentally believe the audience are idiots and assholes ([resource for dealing with that if you need it!](#))
- They are willing to try new things
- They are willing to look at activities that aren't working well and stop doing them
- They will help staff prioritize engagement work

How to ask them:

If whomever you report to doesn't tick the checklist above, but someone else in your shop does, start there. Keep it casual. Ask them for a coffee or a walk to get their opinion on your idea. Listen to what they say when you bring forward your hopes and dreams. Are they excited? Do they see the potential? If so - ask them how you might be able to convince your direct supervisor to give it a go. See if they'd be willing to be an ally for you, even to bring the idea up first to your boss, if that's appropriate given their position. Ask them what they know about what your supervisor cares about, to see if you can align your goals.

Regardless if you have an ally who can help get buy-in, you'll want to think about what your supervisor needs to accomplish to keep their boss or board happy. What are their metrics for success? What have they said yes to before, and why? There's a chance your goals and their goals have little overlap, but you may find that you can frame your idea in line with their worldview.

When you're ready to have a meeting with them, come prepared. If your organization has a mission statement,

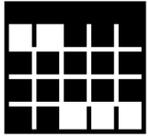
think about how you can tie your project into the stated, agreed upon goals of the organization. Also think through the questions they're most likely to ask, and have answers formulated. If they're the type of person who appreciates a sharp agenda, come with a handout and your proposal printed out. Let them know you welcome their feedback and changes to the plan so they can have a sense of ownership — that this project is happening with them, not to them.

If they're not game, put on your reporter hat and ask a lot of questions. Does their "no" mean "not now, but ask me again when ..." (we have a new budget, etc.)? Or does it mean they fundamentally don't like or see the value of the idea? See if they'd be willing to do a short-term experiment to test something even if they don't like it. And if they're still not game, you can ask them "if I'm passionate about engagement work, and there's no opportunity for me to do that here, what would you recommend?" This may enable them go from being defensive to being helpful and seeing that not allowing you to do this work could carry the risk of you leaving. (And as difficult as it can be, getting the answer to this question can reveal that this particular newsroom is not the right fit for you to do this work.)

How to keep them happy:

Communicate often. Let them know what you're learning, and especially what success you're having. If they love data, provide data. If they are moved by stories, share the anecdotes that will demonstrate that this work matters. In short: give them fodder to brag about to their boss. And it never hurts to tell them how much you appreciate their giving you the opportunity to try something new. Being a manager is harder than it looks, and they'll feel good knowing you recognize the risk they are taking by letting you steer off the pre-ordained path.

Step 5: Put it on the calendar



When you've got a plan and hypothesis down, schedule the work.

It's so easy to let new projects get crushed in the daily grind if there's not protected time on the calendar. And as we established at the top of this guide, doing things as we've always done them is not a recipe for journalism's survival. So it's imperative that you and any bosses involved agree that this work is a priority.

If you have a multi-step process or are trying to get in a rhythm of working with the public, make it part of your workflow. Maybe you make an audience call-out on Mondays, you review submissions on Wednesdays, and publish on Thursdays.

Whatever it is, get it on the books and don't push it off.

Adjust the calendar and pacing as needed.



Step 6: Embrace a culture of experimentation



This can be a bit like telling someone afraid of flying "just try to relax" during takeoff. Easier said than done. But as much as you can, remind yourself and others involved in this work that you're in uncharted territory, and with that comes a lot of trial and error.

Don't expect that huge swaths of the audience will do everything you ask of them the first time. If they're not used to being invited to participate, and they don't have proof that you listen, it will take time to prove to them that your newsroom cares and to cultivate the kind of relationships and behaviors you're ultimately looking for.

Think about it: would you be surprised if you invited audience participation with one Facebook post and didn't get a single response? What about if you highlighted the opportunity in your newsletter, on your airwaves, scheduled multiple social media posts and made it easy to find on your website and still get little response?

If you get little response to little outreach, don't be surprised. But if you get little response to deep outreach, then the opportunity you crafted for your audience needs tweaking. You may have asked for too much, or for something too specific. It's not them, it's you. And it's OK. Just tweak and try, try again.



Step 7: Go to where *they* are



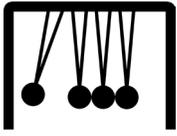
Whenever you're looking for feedback and interaction, consider who you're most looking to connect with. The "who" can be sliced and diced by any number of demographics (E.g., age, gender, income, neighborhood, etc.) or psychographics (E.g., attitudes, aspirations).

If your outreach strategies look the same for reaching 20-something women who love rap music as it is for men in their 60s who enjoy backgammon, you

haven't thought very hard about it. To figure out how to reach the people you're targeting, list the channels you have available to you (E.g. newsletters, Facebook groups, podcasts, community partnerships, etc.). Then, think about the channels the people you're looking to reach are the most likely to be using (E.g., message boards, particular apps, specific cafes in town, etc.).

Depending on your goals for the engagement (more is not always better!), decide which outreach methods would be the most likely to bear fruit, and get out there.

Step 8: Be visible, repetitive, consistent



The best way to show your audience you're truly listening is to prove it. Show up. Put those opportunities front and center on your site, front pages, airwaves, etc. Teach them how to participate. Give them examples of the kind of participation you're looking for so they know how to respond (E.g., if you're looking for good questions about a topic, post some good questions as example and explain why those are "good" in your eyes). And when you think you've told them enough, tell them again. Not everyone who wants to engage was paying attention the

first (or second) time. Tell them about the opportunity in many places. Not everyone who watches your show will see all of it, or go to your site, or read the newsletter, etc.

Being consistent is key for developing any habit: Imagine if a cafe was open for a couple of hours every week, but you never knew which hours or days. You probably wouldn't think to go there often, because you wouldn't know if it would be open. Think about your engagement in this same way. You want visitors to know your door is always open, and make that door easy to find (or to Google).

Step 9: Schedule time to reflect



Once a month, put time on the calendar to discuss the engagement efforts with whoever is involved and whoever makes the decision about continuing this work.

Ask yourself how the efforts matched your hypothesis. You may find there was a positive or interesting outcome you weren't necessarily intending, but that may be worth trying to replicate. If something didn't work, dig into why not. Can it be traced to the newsroom, the audience,

the technology, the expectations? If you weren't able to execute the work to its fullest, who or what kept it from being a priority?

Reflecting on a regular basis is the best way to learn and iterate on your next efforts, strengthening your strategy and execution with every endeavor.

**SEE GROUP EXERCISE ON NEXT PAGE
ABOUT RUNNING A STRATEGIC DEBRIEF**

Step 10: Share your success



Engagement work is a new frontier. You're a pioneer, mapping the direction the news industry must travel to survive the plague of bad habits and broken systems. If you don't share what you're learning, what's up ahead, and where the gold in them there hills is hidden, it imperils the cause.

You may not be comfortable tooting your own horn, or it may not be the culture of your newsroom to write an all-staff memo about something rad. If you're a staffer, ask your manager the best way to pass along what you've

learned and accomplished on to others. If you're a manager, ask your staff doing engagement work to share what they're learning on some consistent basis. Share those successes around and up the chain.

If newsroom management and bosses don't know how important engagement work is, understandably, they'll never prioritize it, then the audience won't be heard, so their perspectives won't be considered, and stories that reflect their perspectives won't get reported, and then, well ... you know what happens. It's not good.

GROUP EXERCISE:
STRATEGIC DEBRIEF | ESTIMATED TIME: 30 MINUTES TO 1 HOUR

Part one: Schedule a meeting and invite people to it

Include all the folks who had something to do with designing and/or executing the initiative so that you're not operating with a deficit of perspectives.

Part two: Have each attendee write down their reflections

Invite attendees to write their responses to each of the questions in the table below (feel free to recreate it in a shared document!). Have them put their initials next to each comment they make, and also let them know they can +1 each other's comments. But keep the room quiet until the typing dies down and it seems everyone has had a chance to write their responses to each question.

OPTIONAL: You can ask attendees to do this reflection and writing in the table ahead of the meeting.

(Tech tip: We've found creating a Google Doc with a table that everyone can edit has been an easy way to do this. Note: use a Doc and not a Google Sheet because the cells in Sheets are only editable by one person at a time.)

What were the goals of this initiative? Did we achieve them?	What worked well + why I believe it did:
Did anything unexpected happen, positive, negative or neutral?	What did not work so well + why I believe it didn't:
How might we improve upon this if we tried it again?	Ultimately, what about this is worth trying again and in what context?
Who should we share what we learned with? Who else can apply these lessons to their own work?	

Part three: Discuss and come to consensus

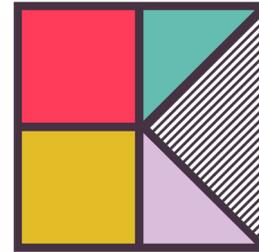
Spend your time together reviewing feedback and teasing out what you learned on each of these points. The goal is to get everyone on the same page, and to create a shared vocabulary and understanding for how to continue improving on these ideas and their execution. It's guaranteed that in this process you'll be surprised by what you learn from one another, and will grow your ability to do increasingly sophisticated engagement work.

Need help?

Could your newsroom use help with this stuff? Put Hearken on speed dial, or speed email:

info@wearehearken.com.

Helping newsrooms engage the public in meaningful, actionable, productive ways is our specialty and our passion. And yes, we have a tech toolset to support audience engagement, but more importantly we have the people to help your people start thinking and working differently.



HEARKEN

Additional resources

[Innovation at Work: Helping New Ideas Succeed](#), Poynter News University

[What We Mean When We Talk About Engagement](#), Hearken

[Media Engagement Strategy Deck](#), Dot Connector Studio

[Culture Change Is Hard](#), Hearken

[Define Your Strategy](#), The Coral Project

[Online Engagement Meets Old-School. Face-To-Face Outreach](#), Tow Center for Digital Journalism

[Guide to Crowdsourcing](#), Tow Center for Digital Journalism

[12 Ways Journalists Can Effectively Work with Communities](#), jesikah maria ross, ivoh

Checklist: How to Introduce Engagement Efforts to Your Newsroom

BEFORE YOU START AN ENGAGEMENT PROJECT:

- Date: _____ Define engagement (see group exercise)
- Date: _____ Find the right staff (see individual exercise)
- Date: _____ Get buy-in from key stakeholders (see individual exercise)

“Nothing will ever be attempted if all possible objections must first be overcome.”

—Samuel Johnson

GETTING STARTED:

- Date: _____ Outline a short project with a testable hypothesis
- Date: _____ Get it on the calendar
- Date: _____ Engage with people where they are
- Date: _____ Engage with them again: be consistent and repetitive

“To think too long about a thing often becomes its undoing.”

—Eva Young

AFTER AN ENGAGEMENT PROJECT:

- Date: _____ Schedule time to reflect on your hypothesis (see group exercise)
- Date: _____ Document what you learned and share your success
- Date: _____ Repeat!

“System innovations almost always involve rejecting the standard metrics as a first step in making a difference.”

—Seth Godin