THE LENFEST INSTITUTE

• News Philanthropy Network

Corporate Giving Workbook

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Background

In January 2023, I started a Sulzberger Fellowship at Columbia University School of Journalism to find solutions for our challenges to create robust, planned corporate support. The 19th is an independent nonprofit news organization covering the nexus of politics, policy and gender. We have a diversified revenue strategy that includes support from major donors and foundations, a membership program and corporate advertising and sponsorships. Since our launch we've seen the corporate engagement peak in 2021, then falter in the years after. Some of this can be attributed to an industry-wide slowdown of advertising. However The 19th has its own evergreen challenges that I believe will impact us in spite of market forces:

1. The market has come to value scaled opportunities to reach large audiences, which is often gained by creating transactional commodity content. As an audience-centered nonprofit, we haven't competed that way at scale.
2. Our sponsors want to highlight their companies' values and work, as well as their leadership through customized content or other storytelling opportunities, which take huge investment on the business-side and a scaled audience.

The Sulzberger Fellowship uses Design Thinking to solve challenges and create reduced-risk products and approaches. It is:

- Human-centered: We created products by solving a user need, which means we understood their needs and then garnered feedback from them throughout the process
- Prototype-driven: Once we had our research and user guidance, we created a series of prototypes that we constantly adapted and changed to be sure that our users found they served their needs. We celebrated "failing fast" throughout the process so that we learned about what resonated with our users and reduced our risk of failure after our product was launched.
- A structured, creative process: There's a process that we followed that included times to flair with new ideas and brainstorm, as well as times to focus on whittling down to a prototype. This allowed for the ability to start the process from a more open place (without a destination in mind), the generation of more ideas and the feedback and engagement of our current and potential sponsors.

Ultimately, I conducted 27 interviews to understand our challenges and create opportunities that The 19th – with its differentiated mission, coverage and audiences – can alone deliver and monetize.

I'm still working through a prototype of the opportunity as of January 2024. However, I thought I could provide you with a guide to my approach in uncovering opportunities and testing potential products.

Background

About Johanna Derlega

Johanna spent over 20 years growing and leading Beltway media companies—including as SVP at National Journal and publisher at The Hill—through advertising, events, content and new product development. In 2018 she started a media consultancy focused on revenue strategy, but couldn't pass up the opportunity to join The 19th, a nonprofit news startup in 2020 as the founding chief revenue officer. During her tenure there, Johanna completed the Executive Coaching Program at American University in 2022 and the Sulzberger Executive Leadership Program at Columbia University in 2023. In January 2024, she launched Beech Strategies, a company focused on revenue strategy consulting, building healthy internal teams for sustainable growth and leadership coaching.

Johanna lives in Washington, DC with her two teenage kids, two dogs and chef husband.

About The 19th

The 19th's goal is to empower women and LGBTQ+ people — particularly those from underrepresented communities — with the information, resources and tools they need to be equal participants in our democracy.

The 19th is a nonprofit newsroom supported by a mix of membership, philanthropy and corporate underwriting. Our goal is long-term sustainability to support a lasting future for news and information at the intersection of gender, politics and policy.

Step 1: Project pre-planning

When planning your corporate revenue product, you want to establish your team, your goals and your timeline. This first step is the most important as you can explore the why and how of your project.

Goal for Step 1: Before you start this project, establish that you have what you need to do this work. Can you answer the following questions:

- Do you have a problem that you want to solve?
- Is spending the time worth it?
- Do you have a team to help you investigate/execute?
- Do you have support from above?

If you answer no to any of these questions, you'll want to revisit whether you want to move forward.

Here's some space to help you work through some of these questions and flesh out your approach a bit.

Identify your team:

Who is on your team? They'll join you as you gather information and brainstorm. List them out here:

Team Member	Why are they joining?

Identify your challenge:

What challenges are you trying to solve? Why are you the best team to take this on?

Make the time:

Can you carve out the time? How? What's your deadline?

Get buy-in:

Do you have buy-in from your leadership? If not, what work needs to be done?

Step 2: Plan and execute expert research

Find data and trends to help craft the focus of your project and the questions to ask your potential users

Goal for Step 2: At the end of this phase, you will have a better sense of the challenges and opportunities in the market, industry trends, where some are finding success, and some of the questions you'll want to ask current and potential users in the next phases.

Here's some space for you to flesh out your research:

1. Online research

Set aside 40 minutes with your team to do secondary research online. Keep it brief — you'll be amazed what you can find in a short time. Look for specific stats and trends. Some examples of areas to investigate:

- Where are sponsors investing money? Why?
- What are the latest advertising trends?
- What are the latest trends in corporate social responsibility?
- Are event offerings changing? How? Why?

Use the rest of this page and the next page to jot down notes or paste links:

2. Share what you've learned

After your research session, come together with your team and share what you learned. This portion of the process is rich with potential information. Jot down some key takeaways below — or use a white board to share with your team. (You might even find that you start thinking about the questions you want to ask your potential users and how you can serve them — feel free to write some of that down for later, but don't focus on that now!)

Stat/Trend	Source	Notes: Why is this relevant? How will we use it?

3. Talk to experts

Take 10 minutes to brainstorm experts that you know that you'd like to talk to and make appointments or just pick up the phone to speak with them.

Here are some examples of some potential interviewees for corporate giving strategies:

- Communications experts
- Marketing researchers
- Executives at ad agencies or PR firms
- Corporate social responsibility executives
- Other media organizations (the ones most likely to share will not be competitors) that have successfully launched corporate revenue programs
- Additional experts:

Here are some examples of questions to ask the experts, but you should adjust as needed to suit your project: :

- Where are advertisers/sponsors/corporations spending their money? Why?
- What are some of the most effective ways that advertisers/sponsors/corporations are spending their money?
- How difficult is it to execute?
- How do you prove success?
- How expensive are these programs to launch and execute (# of people, data, events, etc)?
- Additional questions:

All interviews should be conducted with the whole team present so that all the information is given equal consideration and treatment.

3. Capture insights

Each person should share their top three insights from expert interviews and statistics or findings from their online research.

Use the space below to jot down your top insights.

Finding	Source	Notes: Why is this relevant? How will we use it?

4. Identify key takeaways

Once the team has identified the key findings, synthesize your group's top three takeaways that will help inform your work moving forward. Use the space below to note your three key takeaways.

Step 3: Plan for user research

Now, it's time to talk to your potential users — leaders at businesses and corporations who might be interested in supporting your journalism.

Goal for step 3: At the end of this phase, you will have an action plan to get the best information from your users and potential users. Keep in mind that at this phase, be as broad as possible. Don't define too tightly as this is an opportunity to get as much information and insight as possible. Be open-minded

1. Identify your research interviews

Choose who you want to speak to for user interviews. You should prioritize current and potential users/sponsors/donors"

Interviewee 1: ____________________________

Interviewee 2: ____________________________

Interviewee 3: ____________________________

Interviewee 4: ____________________________

Interviewee 5: ____________________________

2. Plan your research questions

Here are a few sample questions you can use with your interviewees. A key with user research interviews is to keep them broad and follow the conversation where it leads — much like a journalist interviewing a source.

- Sample question #1: What is your biggest communication challenge in your job?
- Sample question #2: What organizations have provided you with the best solutions?
- Sample question #3: With which news organizations do you spend the most? Why?
- Sample question #4: What are your favorite sponsorships? Why?

Step 4: User interviews

User interviews will help you identify the needs of your user and where that becomes an opportunity. Here you don't want to get tactical. Instead, find stories, feelings and beliefs. If you feel comfortable recording the conversation, you might be able to listen later for additional insight. Ask about what other companies or nonprofits serve their needs, what creates an emotional connection and then get a photo (on the internet if necessary) so that you can put a face to the insights you're getting. Remember, this is human-centered: you want to create a connection with your users and eventually when you build a product, you want them to have a deeper connection with your brand and products too.

Goal for Step 4: At the end of this phase, you want to have assembled actionable user or potential user information of their needs in a way that showcases feelings and beliefs so that you can illustrate an actual user case (details coming later).

Here are some key tips to keep in mind for your user interviews:

1. Seek stories, feelings, and beliefs. Ask questions like: "How do you feel about that?" "What about it feels like it's serving your needs?"
2. Do at least three interviews, all together as a group and rotate the interviewer
3. Take notes, including quotes
4. Capture quotes and notes (You'll use these to create groupings of similar ideas and assign priorities later)

Use the following pages to jot down notes and your key takeaways:

User Interview 1: ________________________________

User Interview 2: ________________________________

User Interview 3: ______________________________

User Interview 4: ______________________________

Step 5: Understand and define

This is a moment to take all the research and information and start sorting it for action, as well as create point of view statements.

Goal for **Step 5**: Organize your data into the form of dynamic point of view statements that dig deeply into user needs and how those needs impact them.

We'll walk through the three-step process and then provide space on the subsequent pages for you to try it yourself.

For this example, we've interviewed Svetlana, a restaurant owner in her community.

1. Group themes of stories/interests.

Capture key narratives from your interviewee's story to understand their needs and interests:

Svetlana is a restaurant owner who is most excited about sharing her passion for her homeland Georgia, which is not known to her new community. She thrives on exposing people to the culture, history and people through food and wine. Maybe one day she could extend her restaurant business to food tours in Georgia with her patrons. For her, sharing this culture is what makes her want to wake up every morning.

2. Define user needs

From their story, understand their challenges and opportunities:

Svetlana is renting a restaurant space and she and her family cook the food. She needs customers! As a new business that opened during the pandemic she's struggling to get people into her restaurant.

3. Create point of view statements:

These statements illustrate the people you're serving, their needs, and how those needs impact them:

Svetlana, the owner of a local restaurant that opened during the pandemic and who cares deeply about introducing her adopted community to Georgian food, is struggling to entice new customers in a way that connects them to her passion for sharing this little-known region and its culture-rich customs, history and people.)

Turn to the next page to conduct this process for your own corporate giving project.

1. Group themes of stories/interests.

Capture key narratives from your interviewee's story to understand their needs and interests:

Theme 1:
Theme 2:
Theme 3:
Theme 4:

2. Define user needs

From their story, understand their challenges and opportunities:

Need 1:
Need 2:
Need 3:
Need 4:

3. Create point of view statements:

POV statement is: (Name), a (vivid description), who is (context/time/place), needs a way to (need), in a way that makes them feel (feeling/insight/meaning).

Each team member writes three point of view statements from the themes and needs and users you interviewed. Then as a team, pick three POVs as your main focus for the next step

POV 1:
POV 2:
POV 3:

Step 6: Brainstorm and select top ideas

The most important component to this step is the old adage: “there are no dumb ideas”. You want everyone to be generating lots and lots of ways to solve the user-need problems at the top of the funnel in order to narrow your choice to the smartest, most accessible ways to solve a problem through a product you can create.

Goal for Step 6: Generate lots of ideas to address the needs you identified in Step 5. At this point, you’re going to try and generate as many ideas as you can, but eventually you’ll want to narrow to a few of the best themes from which to build prototypes.

There are lots of ways to ideate, but here is one way:

1. Brainstorm

Gather your team in a room and plan for this four-part brainstorming strategy. You’ll want to block off at least an hour together:

a. Get a big white board and Ask “How Might We?” questions about the users, their needs, feelings and beliefs — i.e. “How might we help them do X” or “How might we help them feel better about Y”
b. Each member of the team takes turns as the note taker
c. Throw out ideas quickly – like popcorn
d. Come up with 100 solutions to the user POV problem (no bad ideas! Build on others’ ideas!)

2. Select

Using three different types of stickers, each member of your team will identify the ideas that answer these questions:

a. Which ideas are most exciting to me? Pick 3
b. Which ideas are most meaningful to user? Pick 3
c. Which ideas create the biggest opportunity for our organization? Pick 3

Review where everyone placed their stickers and identify any common themes around where the interest, meaning, and opportunities are clustered:

Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3

Step 7: Prototype

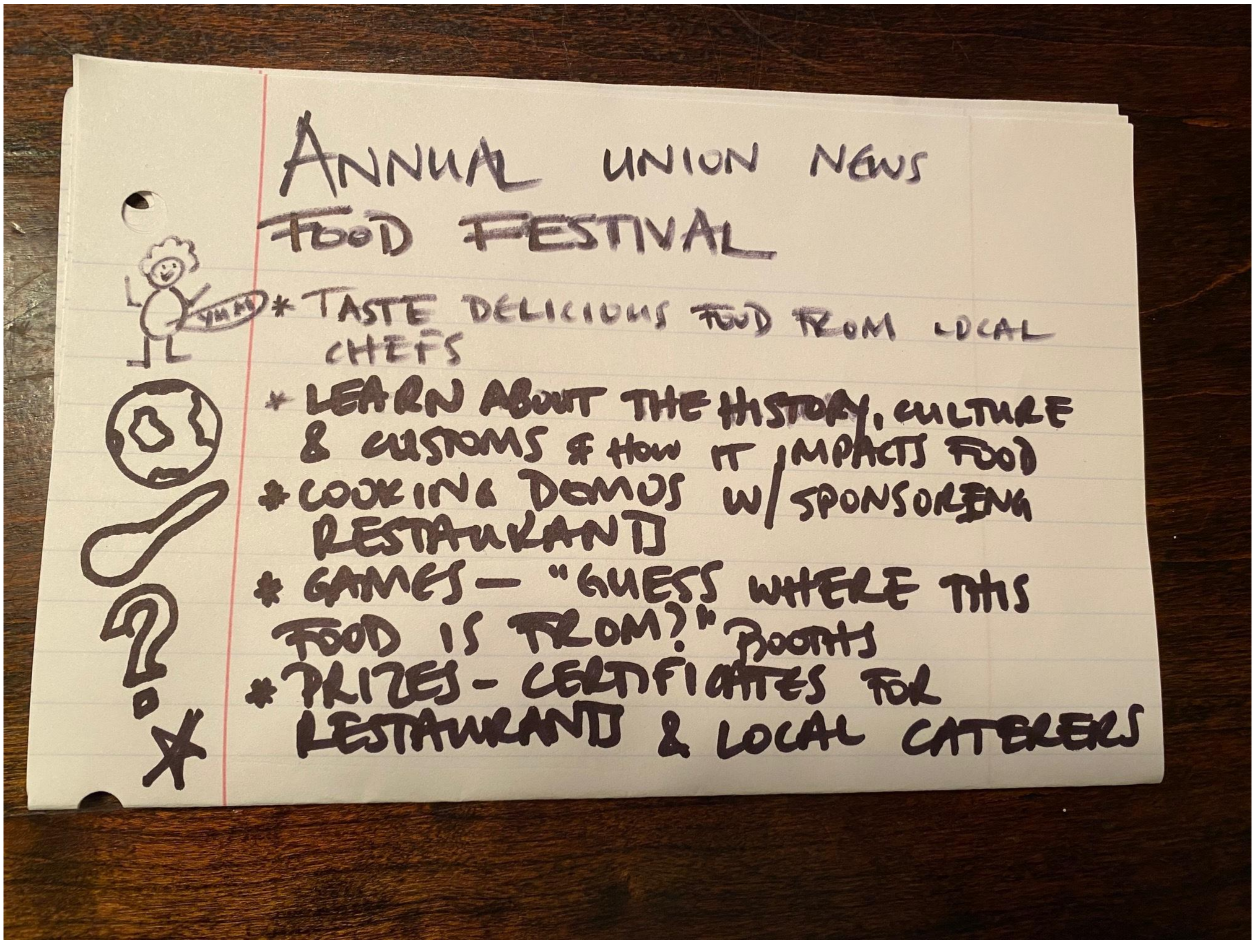
A prototype is a pre-product. It's a quick illustration with cursory information, which is a tangible version of a product to take to users to see if it would be a solution to their user need problem. It's visual enough to foster good feedback to refine your prototype into an end product.

Goal for Step 7: You'll have a much better idea if your prototype could be a product. You'll have feedback from users about how they feel and how they'd use your product.

1. Half-sheets

Create half-sheets with prototype ideas: headline, tagline, and a visual representation of your idea. Create one per theme from the selection stage of Step 6.

Here's an example:



Beginning on Page 27, there are a few blank pages you can use for half-sheeting. Just cut them in half! Steps 2 and 3 of the process are detailed on the next page.

2. Discuss

Each team member should present their half-sheets to the rest of the group. Discuss them all and collectively decide which are your top three.

Half-Sheet 1	Half-Sheet 2	Half-Sheet 3

3. Test with users

Take your top three ideas to your users. Here are some tips for how to present your ideas to them.

- Focus on the need when you're talking to them
- Let the users talk, limit your contribution
- Don't get attached to any of the ideas; let the users decide what serves them best
- Take notes

Half-Sheet Prototype

Half-Sheet Prototype

Half-Sheet Prototype

Half-Sheet Prototype

Step 8: Iterate

This is where you keep tweaking your prototype with user feedback until you have a product that serves your users' need(s).

You'll want to revisit earlier steps of this process to get new feedback, draft new POvs, and adapt your prototype

Goal for Step 8: You have a deep understanding of your user, their need and your product. And the ultimate goal, you have a product!

Here's how to approach it:

1. Keep tweaking and getting user feedback to iterate on your prototype
2. Write new POVs based on new feedback
3. Finalize the prototype based on feedback

Please feel free to utilize the POV template on Page 22 and the Half-Sheet Prototype template on Page 26 to help with these steps.

Step 9: Testing the sustainability of the product

Creating the product is a very important step but you need to be sure the organization can support the execution of the product. So answer these questions:

1. Is it desirable? Does your customer need this product?
2. Is it feasible? Can your organization support this product?
3. Is it viable? Will the product bring in revenue?

If you can answer these questions in the affirmative, then you've reduced the risk in launching it. If any of the answers are no, you'll want to continue iterating until you've reached a point where you have reduced the risk enough to make your product worthwhile.

Step 10: Measuring success

This is a living, breathing product that will need updates and tweaks. Measuring success will help you adapt the product as needed. **Continue to ask for feedback from your customers, always.** Here are some areas to measure:

1. Are you bringing in new, incremental revenue? What is that compared to your investment?
2. Are you bringing in new customers? Getting your current customers to spend more?
3. Is your audience engaging with this product? In what ways?
4. Are your customers recommending this product to others?
5. Is your organization able to execute this product without long-term impact to staff and resources?

Use the space below to plan and track your measures of success:

Conclusion and next steps

I hope this process has been fruitful for you. As I reflect on the benefits of the Sulzberger Fellowship, one of the biggest is that it created an opportunity to step away from my day-to-day in order to connect with my sponsors (and potential sponsors) in a new way. Garnering feedback, collaborating and brainstorming created energy and space for perspective and creativity. It's a slower approach than what we've become used to in the frenetic pace of media companies, but that pace allows for real opportunity in creating products that generate revenue around your customers' needs.

If you're stuck, here are a few resources to help you along the way:

A primer from Stanford's D. School, which created design thinking.

A Ted Talk on the basics of design thinking

A published paper on applying design thinking to journalism (subscription required) by Elaine Ramirez; Published in Medill Media Innovation & Content Strategy