

The Philadelphia Inquirer's Brand Transformation



FALL 2026
CASE STUDY

THE LENFEST INSTITUTE

2026 | CELEBRATING 10 YEARS



In today's media landscape of overwhelming digital options for news and information, distinctive branding is not simply an exercise for news organizations. It's existential.

By Caroline Porter

How the “Unsubscribe/Subscribe” campaign modernized The Inquirer brand

Since 2016, The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, the nonprofit, non-operating owner of The Inquirer, has supported the news organization with grants that have been transformative to their business. The centerpiece of this support was a $2.75 million grant over four years to fund a branding campaign part of the Institute’s multi-year financial commitment to The Inquirer’s digital transformation,new reader acquisition, and deep ties to Philadelphia.

As Lisa Hughes, The Philadelphia Inquirer’s publisher and CEO, put it in a recent interview, “Field of Dreams is not a marketing strategy.” In other words, if you build it, that doesn’t mean they will come to your journalism.

Bringing extensive marketing chops with her, the veteran magazine executive came to the newspaper in 2020 and set about to turn the nearly 200-year-old institution into a modern media company.

As a well-known institution within the region, Hughes said that The Inquirer needed locals in Philadelphia to see the news organization for what it is today – a multi-platform local news source including Inquirer.com, e-editions, apps, newsletters, video, podcasts, and live events – versus the legacy archetype of a print newspaper with day-old information.

This meant a re-education of sorts, the kind that comes through a major branding campaign.

Over the course of about five years, the metropolitan newspaper transformed its marketing and refreshed its audience-engagement funnel, culminating in the launch of The Inquirer’s “Unsubscribe/Subscribe” brand campaign.

The seven-figure advertising campaign hit its goals, increasing awareness among target audiences and growing the digital subscriber base. The first step was to drive a growth in “familiarity” among locals. As Hughes put it, “Are they aware of the modern product and the range of content we deliver?” Through the branding campaign, familiarity with the brand jumped 10% since the campaign launch. Perceived brand quality grew by nearly 8%.

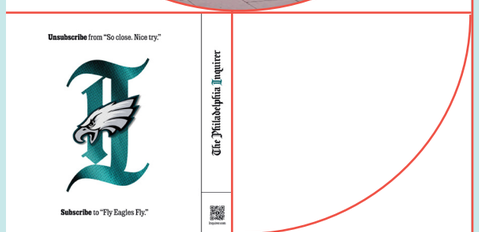
The branding initiative had six well-defined marketing objectives:

1. **Grow audience size by focusing on “the movable middle.”**
2. **Improve brand awareness of all product offerings.**
3. **Increase the likelihood that people will buy Inquirer products.**
4. **Increase the number of trial uses.**
5. **Drive subscriptions through developing habits among the audience.**
6. **Increase the number of younger readers.**











The Growth

As brand familiarity grew, The Inquirer focused on developing “consideration,” or the likelihood of recommending or purchasing an Inquirer product. “We saw ‘consideration’ start to move up, and that was huge,” said Hughes.

Since launch, the campaign has been directly responsible for 5.28 million visitors, 31,000 email sign-ups, and 3,700 subscriptions. During the campaign period, overall digital subscriptions to the Inquirer grew from 83,000 to 120,000, growth that Hughes credits in large part to stronger brand awareness and differentiation.

Survey research shows that the “Unsubscribe/Subscribe” campaign, which was closely tied to Philadelphia’s cultural persona, achieved notable growth in traits such as “fun,” “customer-centric,” “good value,” “trustworthy,” “confident,” “intelligent,” and “bold.”

Millennials, the campaign’s primary target audience, were more likely after the campaign to recommend The Inquirer. Recommendation ratings jumped from “negative” to “positive” – more than 70 percentage points.

The campaign also earned industry accolades: winning gold in the International News Media Association’s 2024 Global Media Awards and at the American Advertising Federation’s 2024 awards.

Pulling off a bold branding campaign requires significant, sustained investments as part of a marketing strategy and entails significant risk if not executed well. A look at the “Unsubscribe/Subscribe” campaign offers insights to transform perceptions of legacy news institutions into authentic, indispensable brands for the present and future.

This report identifies key lessons from The Inquirer’s success that may be of particular use to news leaders considering their approaches to long-held brand associations within their communities.

Jasmine Weathers contributed to the development of this case study.

LESSON 1

Stack your strategy with data

The brand transformation started with audience data.

Leaders and funders wanted to better understand the desires and needs of the community they serve, and in so doing, identify where The Inquirer fits best inside that puzzle.

"We understood that we needed to tell our story to our addressable market, so the first thing to do is answer the question, 'Who and how big is our addressable market?'" said Hughes.

The news organization hired The Harris Poll, a research and analytics firm, and identified millennials in the Philadelphia region as its sweet spot within the total addressable market (TAM). Among millennials, two cohorts especially stood out: "passionate spenders," the urban, highly educated locals with a particular interest in specific categories like food and sports; and "community lovers," the suburban locals who see journalism as a community value and often gravitate to arts and culture.

By starting with data-driven insights, Hughes and her team clarified their target audiences and market and discovered it to be both sizable and largely untapped. This provided confidence to invest in more branding work to reach those potential subscribers.

"The market research was mission critical," said Hughes, who added that the data research identified who would likely be a subscriber and who would not be in the market. "We said, 'Wow, this group is primed. We just need to tell our story.'"

This market segmentation also helped the organization create a shared understanding among stakeholders and board members regarding target demographics and brand attributes. According to The Inquirer's Chief Marketing Officer Darya Ushakova, "We were already speaking their language...audience, new visits, conversions, leads."

During this same period, with separate support from The Lenfest Institute, The Inquirer expanded its digital products, enhancing food and sports coverage, investing in content on social platforms, and improving interactive content. These choices mirrored the audience research that showed these were the areas of interest among the news organization's target market.

"You have to be ready with enough of a product offering to say, 'Come, look at us now,'" said Hughes. "That moment hit when we finished the market research with The Harris Poll. We were ready to write a tight RFP for agencies to pitch us, and then we were off to the races."

Building on its focused data and product strategies, the RFP became an essential tool to define the goals and parameters of a new branding campaign. "Wherever you are in a brand journey, you cannot undervalue the importance of a tight and good RFP," said Hughes.

Hughes said the RFP needs to answer the following questions:

What are you trying to solve for?

Are you clear on what you want from an agency?

What are the deliverables and timelines?



Photos of Philadelphia's vibrant, authentic culture that The Inquirer's brand campaign was designed to highlight. Photos by Philadelphia Inquirer Staff Photographers Alejandro A. Alvarez, Charles Fox, Tom Gralish, Jessica Griffin, Monica Herndon, Heather Khalifa, David Maialetti, and PA Youth Vote.

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LESSON 2

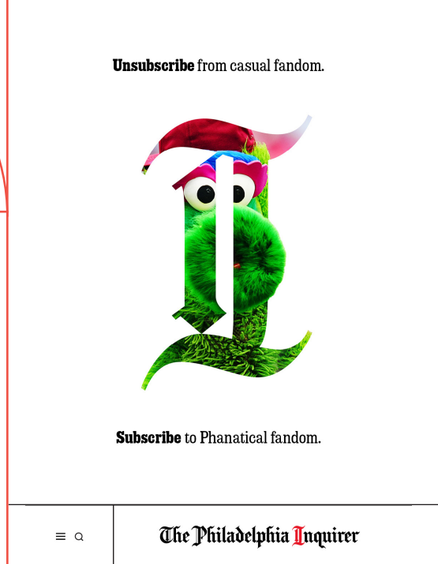
Find the "Irresistible Truth" and lean into authentic identity

After a bidding process, The Inquirer partnered with the creative agency Red Tettemer O'Connell + Partners (RTO+P) to launch the "Unsubscribe/Subscribe" branding campaign. Hughes described the selection this way: "They really get us. They are smart, they are enormously creative, they understand strategy and research."









The "Unsubscribe/Subscribe" campaign was born. It encouraged audiences to "unsubscribe" from outdated stereotypes of Philadelphia and "subscribe" to the authentic reality that The Inquirer can provide.

The group is a national agency with roots in Philadelphia. "We didn't pick them because they were a local agency, but it is also true that their deep understanding of Philly made all the difference," said Hughes, who underscored the power of a creative connection. "You have to be able to finish each other's sentences and be creative partners," she said.

Together they set out to find what RTO+P's co-founder, Steve Red calls the "Irresistible Truth," or the synthesis of human, cultural, and brand insights into a singular strategic premise. For The Inquirer, that truth was: "The Inquirer feeds your Philly bias."

This insight leveraged a common experience today for many: while audiences may turn to national outlets for global news, they crave their local news outlets, in this case The Inquirer, for local connection and information. The "Unsubscribe/Subscribe" branding campaign represented an invitation for Philadelphians to reconsider The Inquirer anew — inseparable from Philadelphia and with a distinctly Philly voice and vibe.

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"Unsubscribe/Subscribe" was rich in local references, from Jason Kelce's underdog mantra "No one likes us, we don't care," to culturally significant elements like "water ice" and the Octavius V. Catto statue.

The agency created subject-specific advertisements, aligned with the overarching brand strategy, to draw attention to news verticals such as food, transportation, and real estate.

They also managed to get all five major Philadelphia sports teams to participate in the branding campaign through the use of their marks and mascots, beloved Philly hallmarks.

The new branding was integrated across all of The Inquirer's coverage areas, especially sports and food, which The Inquirer sees as on-ramps for new readers. And by leveraging a distinctly "Philly-edgy" tone, the campaign adhered to the principle that if viewers did not resonate with a particular reference, it simply meant they were not the target audience.

"There are things [in the campaign] that are so Philly born and bred that [if] transplanted outside of Philadelphia, you wouldn't get them, you'd just be scratching your head," said Red. "So I think that that's part of the success of the campaign."

At the heart of the campaign was the visual ownership of The Inquirer's serif "I" icon. The "I" became a versatile portal into the city's essence, transforming into symbols like an Eagles-green balloon, a local pretzel, or a smartphone screen showcasing investigative journalism.



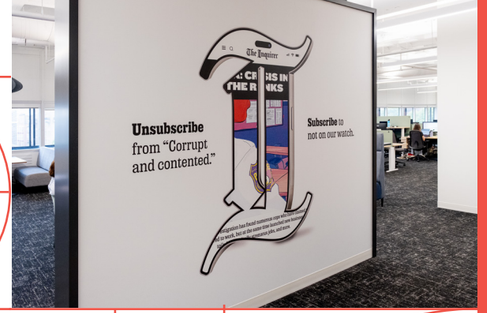






LESSON 3

Make it an org-wide strategy that evolves



Brand campaign graphics decorate the newsroom, such as below in this photo with Inquirer Editor Gabriel Escobar.

Brand Equity
Composite score of 4 metrics listed below

Momentum
Perceived brand movement/development

Consideration
Likelihood to purchase brand product(s)

Quality
Perceived quality of brand product(s)

Familiarity
Knowledge of brand and its product(s)



Breakthrough brand progress, like the "Unsubscribe/ Subscribe" campaign, requires upfront, steady investment in money, time, and internal buy-in. It starts with defining the brand purpose. For The Inquirer, defining the brand purpose came together quickly, within months. It was "Always Philly."



This data-driven approach underscored the campaign's role within the organization as a "strategic investment," much more than merely a "marketing expense."

While brand strategy can develop at different scales and budgets, campaign work universally requires steady financial support and commitment from leadership to prioritize and invest in the organization's brand and content promotion. The Lenfest Institute provided support to The Inquirer for this work through audience-growth grants, which helped accelerate the work. Additionally, The Inquirer continues to invest in its branding campaign as a core practice of its marketing function.

In addition to the financial commitment, Inquirer leadership made a point of weaving the campaign into the organization's internal culture. Hughes said installing the new marketing imagery and slogans around the office and lunchroom encouraged employees to embrace the branding campaign.

"One of the key takeaways that's very important is knowing how to tap into your internal talent and gain their buy-in, allowing it to become a rallying cry for everyone," said Hughes. "The pride people feel in having a great brand campaign ultimately stems from that initial work."



The Inquirer integrated the branding campaign with its product improvements as well. For a special promotion of its sports content, the news organization collaborated with Temple University students on one execution of the branding campaign for a recharged sports hub that included new story formats and a revised sports website.

The Inquirer team established clear key performance indicators (KPIs) aligned with the campaign objectives, which included: audience funnel metrics (i.e. awareness, familiarity, trial, usage, and recommendations) and brand equity metrics about how people perceived the brand (i.e. momentum, consideration, quality, and familiarity). See Sidebar.

This data-driven approach underscored the campaign's role within the organization as a "strategic investment," much more than merely a "marketing expense." By monitoring brand equity metrics on a quarterly basis, the team gave real-time evidence of the campaign's effectiveness. They also monitored daily the performance of the paid campaign. They then reported on their progress against the six primary goals during quarterly, company-wide meetings.

Finally, the brand campaign – building on its steady support from The Lenfest Institute, its research findings, and its own KPIs – transitioned through three stages of its own work, refining and adapting as it went.

Each phase had distinct media-placement strategies, goals, and timelines.

Phase One focused on the brand refresh and launch. With a strategic emphasis on broad awareness, this phase relied on brand placements on billboards and public transit stations across the region. It lasted from October 2023 through April 2024.

Phase Two drove engagement with the brand's target audience through more access points and products with the goal of driving consideration and trial, and moving the prospects deeper into the funnel. Here, The Inquirer relied on direct response digital spending in order to attract the target audience to the site where they could directly explore and experience The Inquirer's journalism. This phase's duration was nine months: April through December 2024.

Phase Three brought these two phases together to reach even more people through partnerships, influencer programs, and experiences. This phase is ongoing.

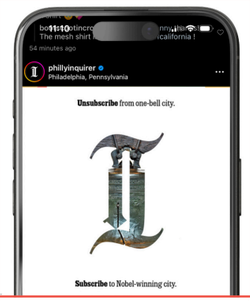
By the end of 2025, the five-year project generated sweeping results, scaling a refreshed spirit for The Inquirer's presence in the region, more engagement with its journalism, and new ways to increase revenue for the news organization.

"It's exceptionally hard to do a great brand campaign," said Hughes. "You know it when you see it. And this is a great one."

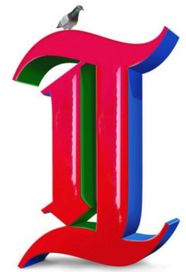


Bold Creative. Measurable Results.

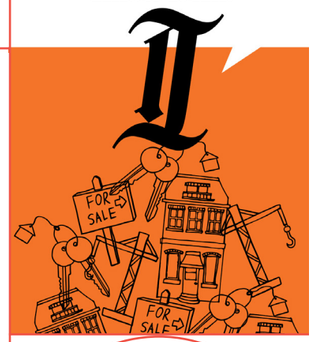
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Unsubscribe from "I ♡ NYC."



Subscribe to Philly love.

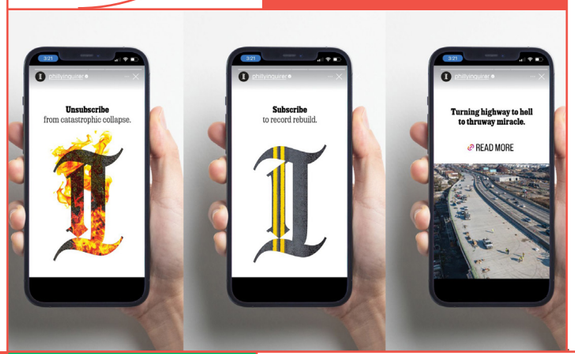


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Unsubscribe from "Weird accent."



Subscribe to "What accent?"

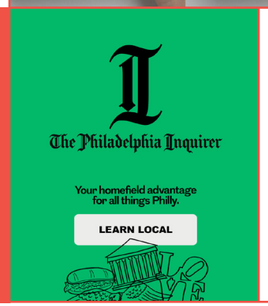


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Subscribe to "Make things happen."

The Philadelphia Inquirer

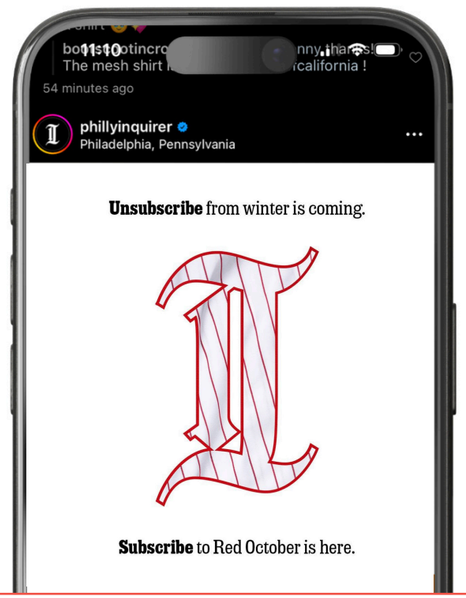
Unsubscribe from "Did you eat?"

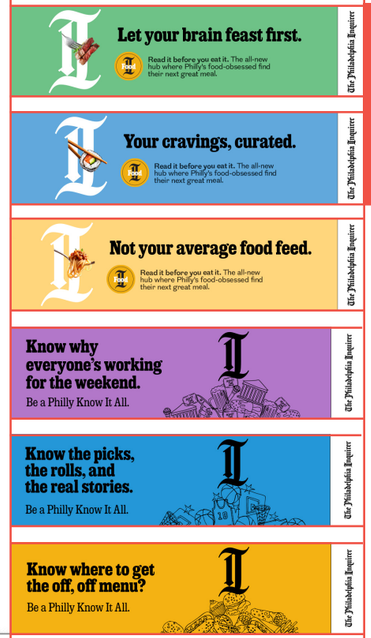


Subscribe to "Jeet?"

The Philadelphia Inquirer ALWAYS PHILLY

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Unsubscribe from chasing a ring.



Subscribe to landing a King.



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