



A guide to developing a lasting community presence

As journalists, we're trained to walk toward trouble; to be there when there's a crisis. But many communities develop distrust of journalists if they see them only when there are problems, or see their community covered only when it's struggling. Developing trust takes time, and a commitment to building a positive, lasting presence in communities. People will see you and your newsroom not just when things are bad, and as a result, begin to trust you more—helping your newsroom grow your audience, and cultivating two-way conversations that will yield rich insight and sourcing to inform your reporting for the foreseeable future.

Overarching principles for creating a lasting community presence:

1. **Make it reciprocal:** Give and give again before you ask for anything in return (*if you ask for anything in return*)
2. **Working for the community requires being of the community:** Make sure your staff reflects and can adequately serve the community
3. **Listen first:** Developing a presence requires that you actively listen as much (or more) than you share.
4. **Be specific:** Focus on a specific target audience or population that your newsroom would like to serve better—the more focused the better. As you build up your community muscles, and demonstrate impact and audience growth, you can expand your community approach to a broader swathe of your community

Five specific ways you can begin developing a lasting community presence:

1. Hold “put the notebook away” events

Invite a specific community to join your newsroom for a conversation about their hopes and challenges (people don't want to be defined only by their problems!); invite reporters to attend and actively participate, but to put away their reporter's notebook and focus on active listening.

Tips for successful events:

- a. Circulate signup sheets at the event for people to share their phone number / email so you can follow up afterwards, and start to build long-term engagement
 - b. Here's [a guide](#) to how KPCC plans and holds these kinds of events, and a [past ONA presentation](#) that also speaks to this.
- ### 2. Develop relationships with community organizations
- Many community organizations have developed trust and extensive local networks through their service to the community, and can quickly help your news organization

reach people who you historically may not have served—provided you are ready to listen to and serve those who show up to engage. Partnerships need to be thoughtfully pursued, to ensure the relationship is reciprocal instead of extractive.

Tips for successful partnerships:

- a. Ask people in the community about their experience with organization and its reputation within the community; some community organizations may do good work, but could have a complicated history

3. Set up office hours in the community

Building trust takes time and simply being there in the community. Work with journalists to set up weekly office hours in the community — at the library, local cafes, etc.

Tips for successful office hours:

- a. Make holding office hours a part of reporters' / producers' job description—busy journalists need to know that developing a community presence *is the work* and not some nice-to-do thing if they have extra time or are feeling especially motivated.
- b. Ask everyone you meet to share their phone number and / or email to sign up for ongoing engagement. Adding people to a textline is a great way to carry on the personal and conversational vibe of an in-person meetup

4. Create a text line

Texting is the most accessible and personal, lowest-barrier communications channel available to newsrooms. Communities that have historically not had a strong connection to your newsrooms specifically, and journalists more generally, likely won't feel welcomed in by your typical email newsletter. A more personal, conversational, and lightweight approach, however, will give them the opportunity to stay connected and share their voice in a friendly and low-key way, and over time, will provide your newsroom with a privileged perspective into the life of the community.

Tips for a successful textline

- a. Start small, with just a few people, so you can refine the cadence and tone and really listen to what people are texting back—and scale up as you feel more comfortable managing the conversation, and staffing up for the work appropriately.
- b. Start with a specific community and make sure the person or people running the text line feel comfortable conversing in a human, non-institutional way

5. Create a community ambassadors program

Developing a community presence can feel overwhelming at first—how many people is *enough*? What if we're *too* successful? How much time will this take?

One way to create a presence that has impact, builds trust, and helps your newsroom

better understand and cover the community, is to identify a group of people who can serve as ambassadors to the community. Some places already have neighborhood captains or block club leaders who can serve as connectors.

Tips for creating an ambassadors program

- a.** Map the existing information landscape. Where are the gaps in coverage? What are the informal networks you can leverage (e.g. social media, nonprofits)?
- b.** Be flexible with your volunteers. Many engaged residents are organizing in their communities already. Set realistic goals and deadlines that they can meet.
- c.** Find ways to encourage their interests and ways to support them. Some people might need more structure than others or would want room to explore their ideas. Be attentive to both.