

Web sites aim to survive with hyperlocal focus

November 25 2009, By Bridget Carey

Finding a financially viable way to provide local news is a challenge large metropolitan newspapers are confronting. But a Coral Gables, Fla., Web site is among a few locally with faith it can succeed.

GablesHomePage.com launched in late October as a nonprofit online news and [information exchange](#) for Coral Gables. It's funded by a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation's Knight Community Information Challenge, which supports organizations that keep communities informed about local issues.

As the newspaper industry experiences declining ad revenue and coverage suffers because of staffing cutbacks, outfits such as GablesHomePage.com are trying to fill the void in hyperlocal reporting. Other South Florida sites taking a stab at this include YourPBC.org (also funded by the Knight Foundation, eNewsBoy.com and BrowardBulldog.org.

In many areas, these sites are just beginning to get off the ground. But other cities, like Seattle and New York, are a hotbed of hyperlocal coverage sites.

Research group Borrell Associates projects that by 2013, the local online ad market will generate \$15.5 billion -- mostly due to small business advertising migrating away from print newspapers and directories like the Yellow Pages.

Not every site has the same goal. Some are focused on investigative journalism; others are created to simply give a forum for community members to share information and discuss concerns.

Former journalists are often the ones dabbling in these new ventures. The GablesHomePage.com content editor is Matt Bokor, a former editor at the Associated Press and The Miami Herald. Other former Herald employees are on the advisory board, including former Herald publisher David Lawrence and former editor Barbara Gutierrez.

The powers behind GablesHomePage are hoping citizen journalists -- along with student journalists from the University of Miami -- can fill the hole of hyperlocal reporting.

BrowardBulldog.org is also getting help from student journalists but is not written by community members. The core content is written by experienced, professionally trained journalists.

Award-winning journalist Dan Christensen started the not-for-profit BrowardBulldog.org this year after being laid off from The Miami Herald.

Christensen said BrowardBulldog differs from sites like GablesHomePage, which tend to publish stories "people want to get out, as opposed to something people want to keep hidden."

He's still working on hiring a small staff. His mission is to build the site enough to be able to create a few jobs for South Florida journalists. He is modeling his venture on VoiceofSanDiego.org, an independent nonprofit news site partially funded by more than 1,000 membership donations.

"The hard part is the business side, and I'm not a businessman," said

Christensen, who is funding the endeavor himself.

The business model for these sites tends to be a hybrid of advertising, sponsorships and grants. GablesHomePage has about 450 registered users, and anyone can set up a profile and participate -- but there's no pay for community members who want to contribute. Writers are asked to use their real names and agree to a code of conduct when they sign up.

"People like me in the 50-and-older bracket need to be online more than just reading e-mails and looking at the hometown newspaper," Bokor said. "It's really important to go to the next step and be an active participant online, to post comments, to be engaged."

As The Miami Herald seeks a solution to cover core community news with fewer resources, it has made a few community partners that include GablesHomePage to manage some neighborhood pages on MiamiHerald.com.

"What we are trying to do is create a platform that will allow different kinds of news gatherers to cover neighborhoods, use tools we've developed, share content across those platforms, and also give them the means to make some money out of it," said Rick Hirsch, The Miami Herald's senior editor/multimedia.

What that means is GablesHomePage is managing The Miami Herald's Coral Gables news page and keeps the profit made from advertising they sell.

"They eat what they kill, basically," Hirsch said.

But when audience is focused on a concentrated area, advertising revenue declines significantly -- which is the biggest challenge these sites face.

The Washington Post, for example, shut down a staff-run hyperlocal news project, LoudounExtra.com, in August because it "was not a sustainable model," Kris Coratti, a spokeswoman for The Washington Post Co., told the New York Times in August.

Coratti declined to comment further for this report, but told the Times one of the reasons it was unsustainable was with "updating the large amount of special features and technologies" on the Web site.

The target advertisers in a hyperlocal site are small businesses that might not be able to afford a newspaper ad. And advertising online can be a tough sell for a mom-and-pop shop that doesn't understand how to create an ad for the Web.

"I think there are very few of these that could be called successful business ventures, but that's not to say they are doomed to failure," said Rick Edmonds, faculty member of The Poynter Institute, a journalism school and resource center in St. Petersburg, Fla. "People care about their neighborhood. ... I think, frankly, that's going to be the future of news."

The South Florida Media Group is approaching the ad dilemma another way with eNewsBoy.com, which uses community journalism mixed with content from media outlets such as Boca Raton News and Our Town News. The site covers Boca Raton, Coral Springs, Delray Beach and Parkland.

At eNewsBoy.com, an advertiser buys an ad online for \$19.95 a month, without speaking to a sales person.

"We came up with a model that doesn't take people," said Craig Swill, CEO of South Florida Media Group.

There is at least one pair of human eyes looking at a writer's stories to make sure they're not blatant advertisements or one-sided press releases. But the goal is that making advertising easy means more smaller shops will want to advertise _ without having to understand the online ad jargon used to track the value of an ad.

"No one is tackling the local merchant," Swill said. "A drycleaner doesn't understand click-throughs, CPMs -- they don't want to understand. They want people to walk in the door."

YourPBC.org doesn't focus on news but rather is a way for Palm Beach County residents to share information about social change and philanthropic causes. S. Slade Sundar, director of YourPBC.org, said Twitter has helped the site's traffic grow by spreading awareness.

"What we're not trying to do is become a news site," Sundar said. "We're looking to partner with newspapers in the future. We just want to break down issues in a simple way."

Sundar said he doesn't see the site as being ad driven, but issues can be sponsored with donations. The site is supported by a three-year grant from the Knight Foundation, which is carefully observing several sites to see what tactics work.

"A lot of it is experimentation," said Jose Zamora, a journalism program associate at Knight Foundation. "We don't really know what is going to work."

Zamora said the funds go to projects that have business models. The idea is that eventually YourPBC.org and GablesHomePage will become sustainable with local ad revenue -- but that's something Bokor doesn't think will happen for another three or four years.

GablesHomePage's long-term financing plans may include membership drives -- much like what public radio and television ask of their audience -- but Bokor stressed that was "very long term" thinking.

"If this kind of citizen journalism and hyperlocal interactive community is going to work any place, it's Coral Gables," Bokor said. "People are really involved and engaged in the community, and there's a whole lot of civic pride."

Even if it floats, Edmonds at Poynter said it probably won't be the lone savior the media industry desperately needs.

"The best of them seem to be making good progress to being sustainable," Edmonds said. "I just don't think there's any body of evidence that these things are going to be big money makers."

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