

The Sumter Item is a 10,000 circulation, 125-year-old, family-owned newspaper in rural South Carolina.

Like many other small-town newspapers, we couldn't innovate for the joy of innovation. Our innovation had to work for our survival, and it has.

How we did it: The People of Innovation

After a quick reorganization for which one owner described to our readers in a late September 2017 column as "Hold on for the ride. The kids are driving," we went to work, adding a full-scale sponsored video department, gathering and utilizing user and advertiser data, creating community events and rebuilding our print and digital products.

Our innovation hasn't just changed our staff and our business – it's leading the way in the transformation and growth of our community.

Community events, now promoted through print and video and across social platforms and sent to large, local email lists, are must-attend, and local businesses are flocking toward our building in downtown Sumter – a down-trodden area just a few years ago.

Our staff of about 25 today is lively and collaborative, even the most long-standing employees bringing new ideas to build our role as the cross-platform information hub of our region. Today, community leaders thank us daily and promote us to others as the go-to media entity of our area. We get standing ovations at school board meetings and on-the-record city council shoutouts.

We've slammed on the brakes of decline and are speeding toward a new horizon, and everyone around us knows it. We've built a path for innovation in smaller newspapers across America, and we think that matters.

By building momentum in our community, we've built our business.

How we did it: The Products of Innovation

Two years ago, the Sumter Item Readers' Choice Awards was a 17-year-old print product with about 27k in annual revenue and a few thousand annual votes.

Today, **Best of Sumter** is an annual celebration approaching a quarter-million dollars in direct annual revenue, several hundreds of thousands of votes and multiple events. It's on a wave of momentum that has spread not only through our media organization, but through our community as a whole. For the first time in 2019, we added an additional Best of Clarendon contest in a neighboring county.

"Best Of" as a singular product is no secret. It has happened around every media organization and community for decades. There are many different models. This is different.

[Our model](#) turns a product into a continuous stream of audience and revenue growth. We host a Nominee Expo and a Red Carpet Event. We publish lists promoting top categories throughout the year. We continuously distribute Best Of magazines to newcomers through real estate agents, bringing foot traffic through our local advertisers' doors.

Throughout the nomination and voting periods, we build enormous lists of prospects that turn into clients and indirect revenue throughout the year.

Best Of has saved journalists' jobs in our community. It's brought life into our local businesses. It's been a springboard to attracting newcomers and building pride within our citizens.

Built in an adjacent space (formally a Halloween shop) of our current building, The Sumter Item launched [Studio Sumter](#), the video wing of our media operation. Headlined by our sponsored daily news show, Sumter Today, we officially started five day per week video production in February 2018. Sumter Today is now [over 400 episodes](#) and a million video views, giving a new platform for story-telling in Sumter. In a county that was often riddled with bad news headlines including crimes and an incompetent school board, Sumter Today not only told the news in a different medium, it has contributed to the revitalization and growth of the community by sharing only positive news. News that wouldn't often make it into the newspaper, like summer art classes at the art gallery or a training session with the fire department. By instilling confidence back into a community, they're more likely to want to be a part of its growth.

Our video strategy extends far beyond locally sponsored news video, however. In the past two years, we've centralized the commercial video production work in our area to our Studio Sumter team. We now produce paid video series for the local [Industrial Association](#), [Economic Development Board](#), [Sumter School District](#), City of Sumter, as well as paid commercials for many of the prominent [businesses](#) and [events](#) in our area. We are also mid-production on a documentary featuring a local, world-renowned artist, with production sponsored by the city.

Profitable from Day 1 of production – we sold local sponsorships to Sumter Today prior to launch – we now own video of the key people, businesses and events in our area, giving even more archival and commercial value to our present and future as the media leader in our community.

“You live in Sumter. Your news should, too.”

That's the tagline of Studio Sumter and Sumter Today. With no local television stations within 30 miles of our community, we wanted to be that video storytelling platform, making The Sumter Item a more well-rounded media organization and utilizing the skillsets of our local journalists.

In August of 2019, The Sumter Item launched Overtime SC, (<https://overtimesc.com/>) a statewide high school football website dedicated to giving aspiring high school and college writers an opportunity to gain valuable writing experience by covering high school football.

The Item reached out to principals, athletic directors, teachers and football coaches as well as college administrators and professors to identify high school and college students interested in sports writing. Nineteen students signed up for the project as contributors and committed to covering their favorite high school team for the entire season.

Students were tasked with interviewing coaches and players for weekly game previews, and with interviewing coaches and players to write a recap of each home game their team played. Each week, they received detailed feedback from The Item sports staff to help them grow as writers.

The project, sponsored by local universities, also involved creating and maintaining a website to showcase the student's work, as well as social media accounts to share the work.

A few students shared their thoughts on the project towards the end of the season, saying "Thank you for the opportunity!...This was so fun and I love writing these stories for you guys," and "I got a job freelancing for the Greenville News, which I'll be doing more of after the football season is over... Thanks for giving me a shot because I wouldn't have been able to work with anyone else without working here."

The innovation not only gives aspiring sports writers a platform for building their craft, but it also better positions our coverage for future football seasons. It allows our staff's professional expertise to build our in-state network, ultimately creating a cross-platform, profitable content vertical that could be replicated inside newsrooms in any state.

From these products to podcasts, email newsletters, merchandise sales, metric-based subscription growth and more, today, our staff is built to create new products.

How we did it: The Numbers of Innovation

The innovation of our staff and products would be hollow without the metrics that impact overall growth and long-term sustainability.

In the past two years:

- Our total digital advertising revenue has grown by more than 400% and into a critical component of business.
- Our social media following has grown by more than 100%.
- The unique visitors to our website have increased by more than 100%.
- Our digital subscribers have increased by more than 50%, the vast majority of growth in the last six months.
- Our opt-in local email subscribers have grown from under 4,000 to more than 30,000.
- Events have been created and built to support a full-time salary.

We represent the thousands of small-town media organizations looking for answers without the resources to take large chances that fail to work. Our margins have grown significantly, our journalists' job are here to stay, and our community is growing as a result of our broadening, deeper coverage.

That's innovation to us.

Submitted by Vince Johnson, publisher, The Sumter Item