

Catching the COVID-19 Bounce

Some back-of-the-napkin advice and resources for understanding and retaining the exceptional cohort of pandemic-driven audiences, building off of a brief presentation at API's April 30 summit on engagement, listening, and sustainability in the wake of COVID-19.

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The record influx of readers during the COVID-19 pandemic form an exceptional cohort that came to news organizations in a very particular moment to meet a particular need. They may behave differently. We're still learning what that may look like.

Right now you have less time and more financial pressure, but also more audience and more impact. Focusing is non-negotiable.

To keep at least some of these pandemic-motivated readers beyond this emergency moment, news organizations need to understand what makes these readers different and think about how to adapt their typical routines for those differences.

Building relationships with them starts now, and keeping an eye on them over the coming weeks is critical. Tuning yourself to measure how the relationship and their behavior is evolving will involve a focused "cohort analysis."

Here, we'll share a few pieces of advice for doing that.

Think about what makes these readers different from your typical readers

These readers came to your organization in an emergency moment, likely motivated by the service journalism (aka "news you can use") that you're likely doing at a higher percentage right now and the fear and uncertainty surrounding their daily lives.

In other words, they've come for the content, not an affinity with your organizational mission.

They also might have a shorter journey from awareness to loyal reader to financial supporter, which means they might have missed some key information about you normally delivered in the orientation/onboarding process. They might sign up and/or support you before knowing key things such as your perspective on the community, or how you're funded.

These insights are just a starting point for understanding how this group is different. Data analysis and audience research will add nuance and additional understanding.

Adapt your orientation and onboarding process

Once you've considered all the things these new and suddenly loyal readers *don't* know about you, consider what quick signals you can offer that give them the context they need in this moment.

Your typical onboarding process might not resonate with this cohort, which is likely feeling at best harried and at worst panicked. Consider telling your origin story later, and instead focus on using your welcome email and onboarding process to explain how you're serving them at this moment and how they can help you do that (including asking for financial support).

Additional resources

- [Writing a welcome email](#) (The Byline)
- [Do these four things right now to show you're trustworthy](#) (Trusting News)
- [Roundup: Respectful and useful membership and donation appeals during COVID-19](#) (The Byline)

Build a plan for your mid-funnel

This cohort represents a huge opportunity for new loyal readers and supporters – *if* you focus your limited time and energy.

Because you're bringing in new readers pretty effortlessly right now, focus on your mid-funnel. If you want to ask for support, you have to have a relationship with them.

And relationship building requires being able to reach people without paying a platform for the privilege. That makes this tip a pretty simple one: as you provide a service, never miss an opportunity to collect an email address and/or phone number. Once you have it, use it to reach them directly to help them.

Focusing on the midfunnel means implementing tests to understand how the coverage you're doing translates into audience behavior. Your goal in assessing your approach is to understand whether what you're doing is working, and if it's not, being able to locate where the relationship is breaking and address it.

This way of thinking makes sure resources are making an impact for your audiences, communities, and your team. It is a careful balance between not missing opportunities to ask for support, and making sure that those who can't afford to pay feel equally valued.

Additional resources

- [Funnel occasional users to habitual and paying audiences](#) (Better News)
- [Designing engagement for trust](#) (Better News)
- [How newsrooms can begin making data-informed decisions](#) (Membership Puzzle Project)
- [A coronavirus newsletter plugin and playbook](#) (Newspack)

- [How nonprofit newsrooms can build loyalty and sustainability during the current crisis](#) (Public Media Mergers Project)
- [Help your audience navigate the news](#) (Trusting News)

Focus your efforts

Some segmentation will help you focus your onboarding and retention efforts on those who need it most – your coronavirus newcomers. You can slice and dice your audience in many ways.

If you have brought these new readers on through an email newsletter, one of the simplest ways to study these readers is to create a segment using their signup date. While it's an imperfect method, it's likely that most people who signed up from mid-March came to you for your coronavirus coverage.

If you have a coronavirus pop-up newsletter, you can cross-reference that list with your general newsletter list, and create a segment for those who aren't on the general list. [Poynter has additional advice on audience segmentation.](#) Once you have these segments, you can interrogate the similarities and differences between these two groups.

Here are some things you might “ask” the data:

- The length of time they were engaged (i.e. reading more than 1x/week, signed up for a free newsletter, etc.) before becoming a subscriber/member/donor
- How much of the onboarding series they finished
- Whether they engaged in other ways since joining, such as asking questions to guide your coverage

Additional resources

- [14 steps to use collaborations to create better journalism and boost revenue](#) (Poynter)
- [Segmentation: Use it to build the loyalty that converts your audience to paying readers](#) (The Byline)

Keep a close eye on this segment as your community emerges from the emergency moment

Keep a careful eye on the engagement levels of this cohort, and take note when they begin to wane, whether that is a decline in questions coming in, newsletter open rates, text message responses, or other interactions.

What's your plan for re-engaging them and showing your utility anew?

A couple things you might consider:

- **Complete their onboarding process.** They probably skipped a few orientation steps, either because you temporarily paused them or because they were too busy. Now is a good time to tell them what you do in non-emergency moments, how you do it, and how they can contribute.
- **Survey them.** Maybe one of those onboarding emails includes a survey, asking them how they ended up with you, how you've done at serving their needs during the pandemic, and what needs they expect to have in the coming months.
- **Show them how to work with you.** The service journalism shouldn't end just because the emergency moment feels like it's ending. Show these new readers how they can come to you with their questions year-round.

And if you launched a new product for this exceptional news moment, such as a coronavirus newsletter, come up with a plan for discontinuing it and/or bringing its followers to your other products.

Don't wait too long to bring them into your broader community and show them what you're about. Determine at what point you'll begin phasing the newsletter out, such as a particular consistent open rate, and come up with a plan for doing that gradually. You might also begin asking them to join your general list long before the phasing out.

When EdNC decided to fold one of its weekly newsletters because it had outlasted its purpose, they announced the discontinuation in four consecutive emails, each time inviting readers to sign up for their daily newsletter. At the end, they notified those individuals that they would be merged on to their main list, but gave them a clear opportunity to opt out.

Additional resources

- [Hack our user research materials \(including a bank of survey questions\)](#) (Membership Puzzle Project)

Communicating impact and benefits to you

Funders use financial support from audiences as a measuring stick to assess your level of community traction and resonance. It's imperfect, but it's becoming more common. Asking for and receiving the support of members of this cohort is a big opportunity to tick that box.

It's critical to document qualitative details about how you're serving community needs right now, while it's still fresh. Write the story of your coronavirus response. That is both grant writing gold and early user research for shaping your "new normal" editorial and engagement work.

Relevant details to note include:

- Specific feedback and engagement from audiences you previously found difficult to reach;
- Social sharing or public praise by past critics;

- Private notes about how coverage helped people stay safe, sane, or navigate complex systems;
- Growth in specific audiences that are usually left out because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, generation or geography (h/t The Maynard Institute's Fault Lines framework);
- Beats re-built around community needs highlighted by the pandemic;
- Insights into ways your team worked differently during the state of emergency that led to better service.

Additional resources:

- [How COVID-19 is reshaping grantmaking and what news organizations should know](#) (American Press Institute)
- [Best practices series for fault lines and COVID-19](#) (Maynard Institute for Journalism Education)

Put service journalism at the center of your work going forward

It's easier to understand community needs in an emergency moment. But the service journalism you are doing doesn't have to – and shouldn't – end as we emerge from a state of emergency.

Coronavirus widened your funnel, and it doesn't have to go back to its pre-COVID size. Study what prompted the strongest responses from readers, and think about how those needs might show up in the recovery months ahead, or reemerge if we have another wave of cases in the future.

Additionally, a sense of community has become an acute need during social distancing, and will remain so during the long recovery process. How can your organization provide that? How can you be a community connector at a time when communities are fractured by social distancing and economic hardship?

What does it look like when we commit to doing service and building community beyond emergency moments?

Additional resources

- [Here's how 15+ member-driven organizations are adapting membership appeals, events, and more for coronavirus](#) (Membership Puzzle Project)

Start working toward “early wins”

Thinking about a fully-formed future is likely too much right now, but quickly achieving some small wins for serving this cohort can help you learn how your mid funnel works and boost morale.

A handy way to face that uncertainty without analysis paralysis or existential overwhelm is to constrain your time horizon to a week, two at most.

Apply ideas from Agile to structure your thinking:

- What can you test in the next two weeks to improve a particular part of your work, whether by using segmentation, surveys, or other tactics we reference here?
- How will you know your effort is going in the right direction?
- What will you need to learn to get this done?
- What tactics can you adapt from your work before the pandemic, from your peers?

Additional resources:

- [A brief history of product management, and an intro to Agile](#) (Better News)
- [Focus on performance](#) (Better News)
- [Leading Change: Why Transformations Fail](#), see Error #6 (Harvard Business Review)