



Connecting Emerging News Consumers with the Star Tribune

A proposal by the Summer 2023 Star Tribune Intern Cohort

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If you have questions or want to discuss any of the following ideas further, contact Audience Intern Sydney Lewis at sydney.lewis@startribune.com or via Slack so she can get you in touch with the right interns!

Introduction

This proposal targets emerging news consumers (ENCs) — young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who do not habitually consume news. Our goal is to **create a pathway** for ENCs to become habitual Star Tribune readers.

Because there is considerable overlap between ENCs and Gen Z, we began this project by conducting research about Gen Z. Our **three key takeaways** were:

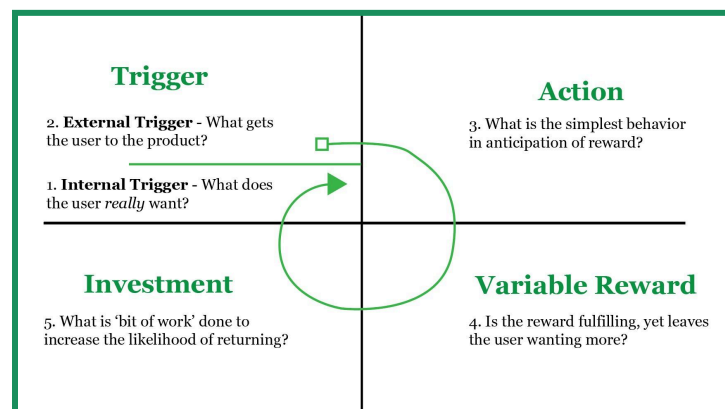
1. Gen Z is **more interested** in individual creators than institutions.
2. Gen Z **does not feel** represented in local news.
3. Gen Z is **willing to pay** for news, but needs to see value before investing.

We approached this project using **product thinking**, which is a deeply audience-centered methodology. The first question we asked ourselves was:

“What do ENCs need from the Star Tribune that we are not delivering?”

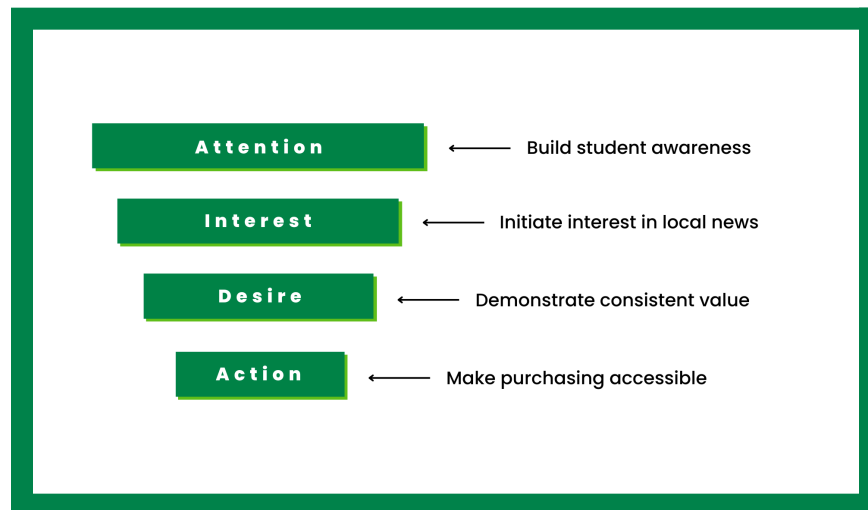
Our main goal is to **acquire** and **retain** ENCs as digital subscribers by **driving reader habit** with our digital products. We used the hooked model for driving habit as a starting point.

Figure 1: The Hooked Model



We used this model to determine how each strategy can turn reader engagement into habit. We then translated those ideas into an AIDA funnel, creating a pipeline that begins with **student awareness** and ends with **subscription retention**.

Figure 2: Our ideas, translated onto an AIDA funnel



We then set our objectives and key results (OKRs):

Objective: Brand the Star Tribune as a trusted, interesting, representative source of information for ENC

Key Result: Increase in organic social engagement and growth

Key Result: Increase in site traffic

Objective: Acquire digital subscriptions from ENC

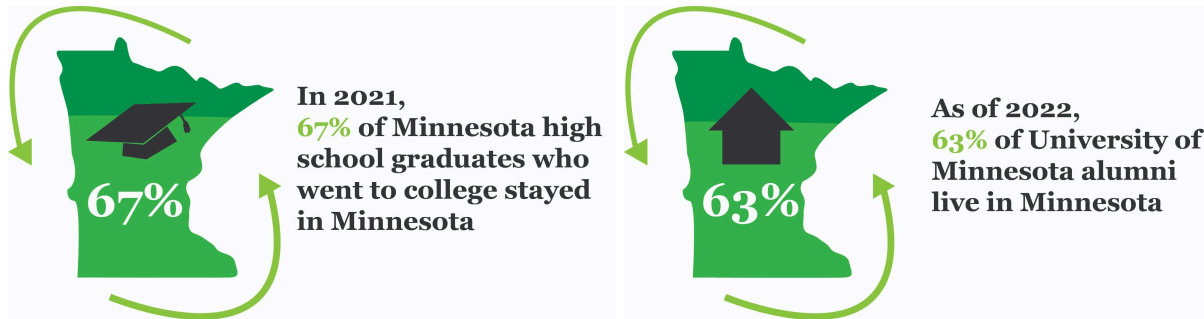
Key Result: Increase in digital subscriptions

Objective: Retain ENC as digital subscribers

Key Result: Month over month retention of ENC as digital subscribers

This document will lay out a **six-year engagement plan** for ENC aimed at achieving these OKRs. We're tailoring this engagement plan to the pipeline of people who go to high school and college in Minnesota and stay in Minnesota after they graduate.

Minnesota is unique in that, as of 2021, 67% of Minnesota high school graduates who went to college stayed in Minnesota to do so. In addition, 63% of University of Minnesota alumni live in Minnesota. The Star Tribune has a tremendous opportunity to engage with these audiences.

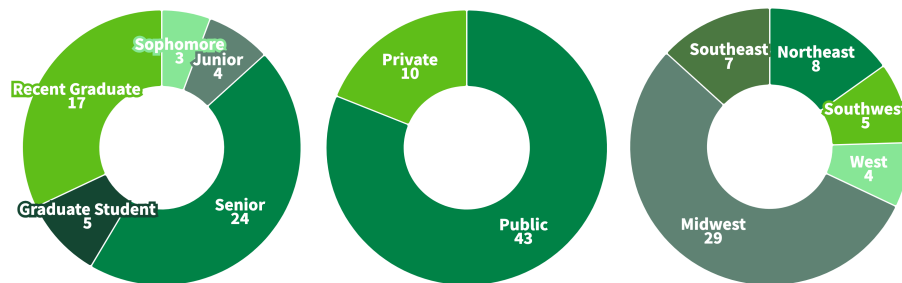


Part 1: Creating access points to the Star Tribune

It is vital the Star Tribune connects with ENC's early to become a routine part of their news habits. Before these consumers begin engaging with Star Tribune news products, they need **affordable and enticing avenues** to engage with the Star Tribune's brand.

We conducted an **informal survey** of 53 college students and recent graduates on their news consumption habits and willingness to pay for news. We received responses from individuals from **a mix of regions, grade levels and institution types**. Due to time constraints, we used a convenience sample — meaning this survey is not representative of all Minnesota ENC's and further research is needed. To see our full survey results, see the [Appendix](#).

Figure 3.1: Proportion of survey respondents by region, grade level and institution type.



Research shows ENC's are willing to pay for news — **under the right circumstances**. A [report from the American Press Institute](#) showed a majority of Gen Z and Millennials do pay for news, and are more likely to pay for new media formats like video and email newsletters.

Our respondents said they **see the value** in subscribing to local news, but are much more likely to purchase a digital subscription to a news outlet after graduating from college. And they **don't**

have a massive budget. The greatest proportion of respondents paid \$6-\$10 per month for subscription services.

Figure 3.2: Respondent willingness to pay for local news

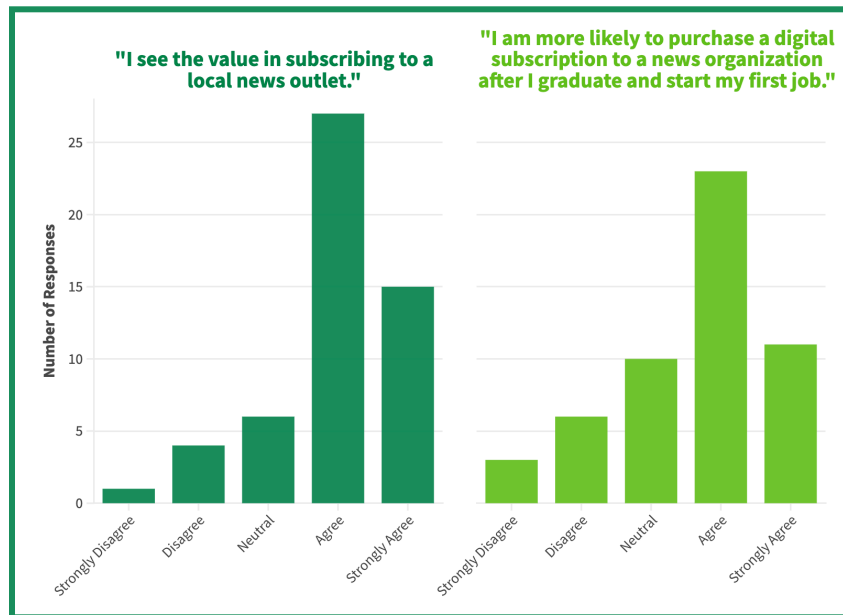
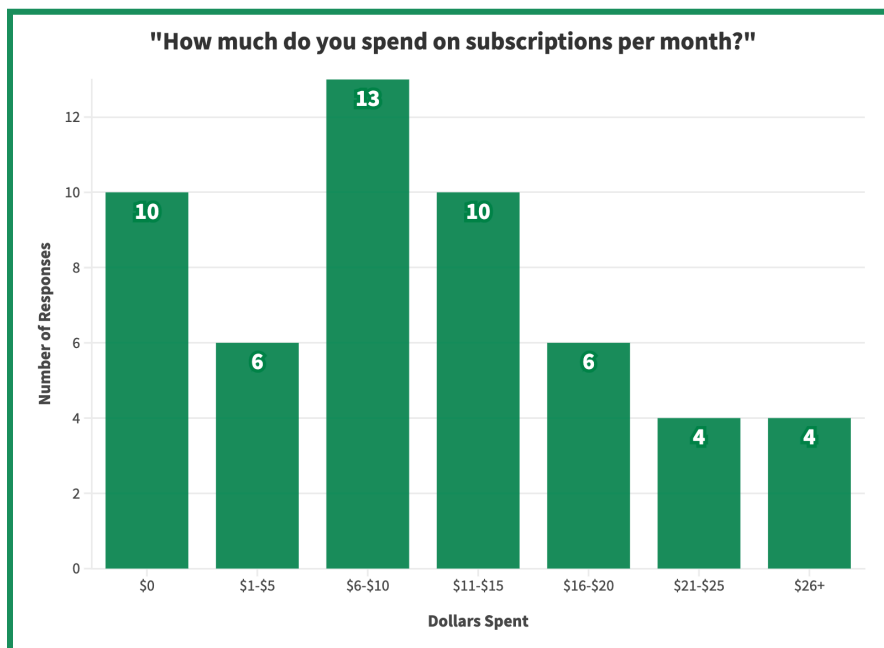


Figure 3.3: Respondent subscription spending per month



This section outlines **top-of-funnel strategies** the Star Tribune can use to expose ENC's to its brand. These strategies are centered around **free or discounted access** for students. The Star Tribune currently uses these strategies:

- [News in Education](#), which provides free subscriptions to **K-12 students**
- [Free one-year digital subscription](#) for **high school graduates**

We're proposing more:

- **News in Education expansion** to colleges and universities
- **Subscription tiers** for college students and young professionals.

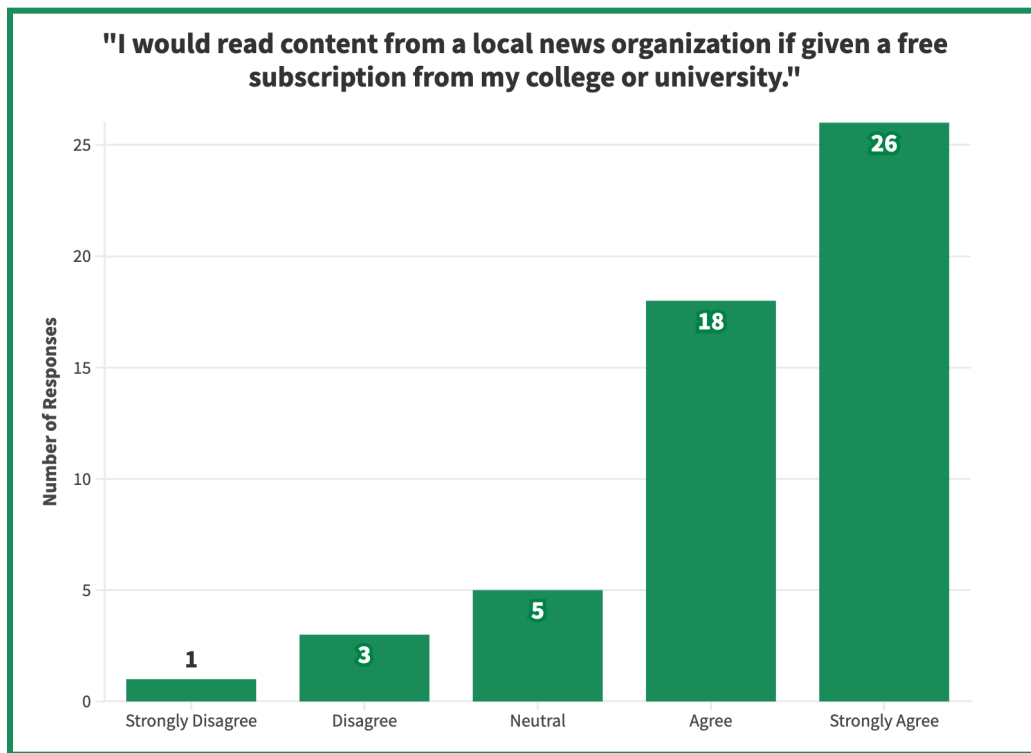
1. Selling Subscriptions to Higher Educational Institutions

The Star Tribune could sell subscription packages to college and university libraries to continue student access to our content.

While the Star Tribune provides Minnesota high school graduates with a free year-long digital subscription, these ENC's **may not be able to afford** a full digital subscription afterwards.

Expanding the existing News in Education program to sell digital subscription packages to Minnesota's roughly [200 colleges and universities](#) would grant students a free option to **continue engaging** with the Star Tribune in college while **still generating revenue** for the company. Survey respondents said they would be very likely to engage with this type of program.

Figure 3.4: Respondent willingness to use free Star Tribune access through their higher education institution



Many other news organizations are using a **similar approach** to connect with college readers. Both the [New York Times](#) and [Wall Street Journal](#) offer subscription programs for universities. Some local news organizations, like the [Dallas Morning News](#) and the [Boston Globe](#), have similar offerings.

Plus, some Minnesota universities **already pay** for programs to keep their students informed:

- UMN offers a free [Wall Street Journal](#) subscription to students.
- Carleton College in Northfield offers free [New York Times](#), [Wall Street Journal](#) and [Washington Post](#) subscriptions to students.

These institutions have demonstrated an interest in developing news-literate alumni, and could benefit from a program that grants their students access to **relevant state and local coverage**.

A key to the success of these programs is marketing. The Wall Street Journal offers [marketing materials](#) to universities who pay for its subscription service — the Star Tribune could do the same.

2. Tiered College Graduate Pricing

The Star Tribune could offer tiered subscription pricing for students and young professionals for students whose universities do not purchase a subscription package.

Following the expansion of the News in Education program, it is important the Star Tribune provides an opportunity for ENC's to **ease into paying** for a full digital subscription upon graduation.

Currently, the Star Tribune offers a [digital subscription for \\$129 per year](#). Alternatively, a subscriber can pay \$2 for the first four weeks and \$3.79 for the rest for a total of \$183.92 per year. Discounted subscriptions could provide a **more affordable introduction** to the Star Tribune's content.

Figure 4: cost of Star Tribune digital subscription vs. costs of discounted student plans

Org.	Strib	NYT	WaPo	WSJ	The Economist	LA Times
Offer	\$129/yr.	\$1/wk.	\$1/mo.	\$4/mo.	75% off first yr.	\$1/wk.

These subscriptions would be broken down into **two tiers**:

- The **student tier** would be available to anyone with a .edu email, including students and university staff.
- The **young professional tier** would be available for two years after graduation.

Figure 5: Potential pricing model for tiered subscriptions

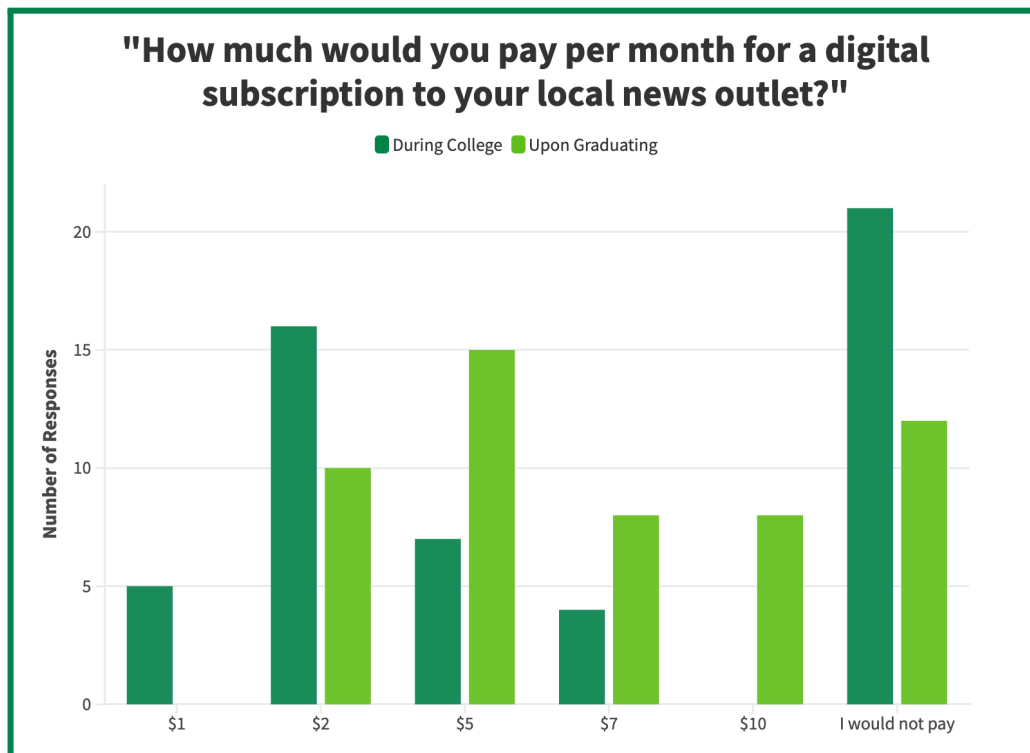
Student Pricing	Early Professional Pricing	Full Digital Subscription
\$4/month \$48/year	\$7/month \$84/year	\$129/year \$10.75/month

The second tier would be slightly more expensive than the first, and provide an opportunity for those who have developed news habits with the Star Tribune to **continue that relationship** at a manageable price point.

While survey respondents showed a desire to subscribe to local news outlets both during and after college, they said they were **more likely to be willing to pay** for one post-graduation.

While a plurality of survey respondents said they **would not pay** for a digital subscription while in college, over 60% of respondents said they **would pay \$5 or more** for a digital subscription after they graduated.

Figure 3.5: Respondent willingness to pay for local news during and after college



The student tier could involve a cheaper trial period like the Star Tribune's existing digital subscription option before moving to a monthly price point for the rest of the year. The early professional tier could then increase in price but remain cheaper than a normal subscription.

Part 2: Six-year engagement plan

The Star Tribune could offer digital products tailored to 16-, 18-, 20- and 22-year-olds to encourage habitual interaction with the Star Tribune

Now that ENC's have free or discounted access to the Star Tribune, we want to find ways to **engage with them long-term** by **consistently delivering** valuable and relevant content.

These products are intended for where ENC's are at **specific milestones** in their lives, but could be used by anyone at any age.

16-year-olds

An infographic with a green background. On the left, the text '16 year-olds' is displayed in large white and yellow font. To its right is a circular icon containing a stylized person's head. Below the icon, the text 'ACCESSES THE STAR TRIBUNE THROUGH THE NEWS IN EDUCATION PROGRAM' is written in white. On the right side of the infographic, a list of four bullet points is shown in white text.

16
year-olds

ACCESSES THE STAR TRIBUNE
THROUGH THE NEWS IN
EDUCATION PROGRAM

- High school sophomores or juniors
- Starting to think about their post-high school plans
- Mostly exposed to news incidentally, by stumbling upon it
- Developing crucial media literacy skills

Access Point

- News in Education program

Audience Profile

- High school sophomores or juniors
- Starting to think about their post-high school plans
- Mostly exposed to news incidentally, by stumbling upon it
- Developing crucial media literacy skills

Tailored Product

A short **series of videos** — think [Crash Course](#) — intended to be shown in high school classes related to media literacy and healthy news habits.

- They should be **simple** and **accessible** on YouTube — something teachers could pull up in class when they don't have a lesson plan, or something that could accompany a guest lecture by a Star Tribune journalist.
- They should contain a **call to action** at the end encouraging students to take advantage of the News in Education program.
- Topics could include:

- ◆ **Understanding the basics:** How is news created? Why is it important to stay informed?
- ◆ **Spotting misinformation:** What are the dangers of misinformation? How do you assess credibility? What are some red flags?
- ◆ **Creating a diverse news diet:** Why is it important to look at multiple sources? What are some of the key players in the Twin Cities news ecosystem?

Implementation

- **Determine** curriculum needs.
- **Create** video content.
- **Promote** video series to local high schools.
- **Offer** guest lectures.

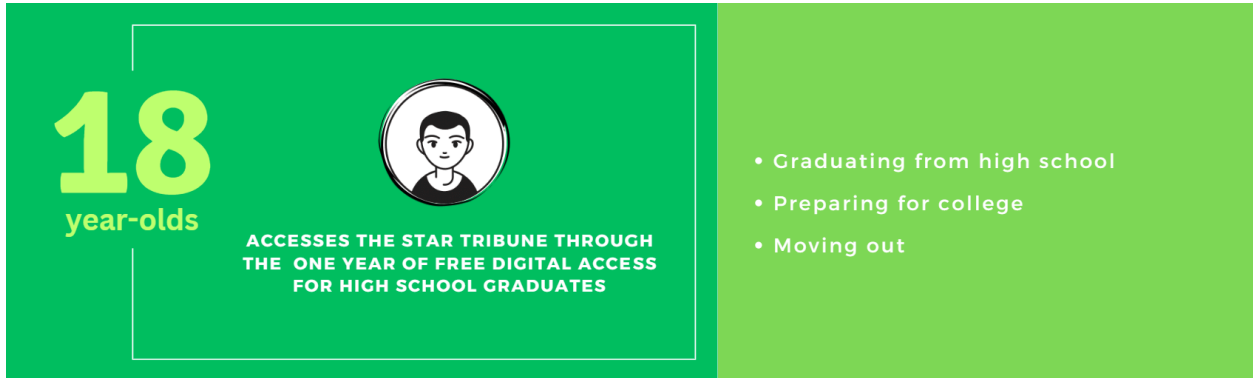
Stakeholders

- Audience team
- Education reporters
- News in Education owners

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

- Sessions from News in Education logins
- Number of schools enrolled in News in Education program

18-year-olds

A graphic with a green background. On the left, the number '18' is in large yellow font, with 'year-olds' in smaller yellow font below it. To the right of the number is a circular icon containing a stylized black and white illustration of a young man's face. Below the icon, the text 'ACCESSES THE STAR TRIBUNE THROUGH THE ONE YEAR OF FREE DIGITAL ACCESS FOR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES' is written in white, all-caps font. To the right of this graphic, on a lighter green background, are three bullet points: '• Graduating from high school', '• Preparing for college', and '• Moving out'.

Access Point

- One year of free digital access for high school graduates

Audience Profile

- Graduating from high school
- Preparing for college
- Becoming partially independent for the first time

Tailored Product

An eight-week pop-up newsletter course centered around preparing for the transition from high school to college.

- This would give students and parents a go-to resource for **college preparation**.
- It should be written by someone with a distinct and personable voice, so it resembles **advice from a peer**.
- Content could include:
 - ◆ **15 things** to do before you go to college
 - ◆ **Financial advice:** How to manage income, saving and spending

- Some content could be adapted from “[Money, Work, Know-How.](#)”
- It would provide **sponsorship** and **advertising opportunities** for brands who want to reach young consumers.
- It could be built with **evergreen content**, making it low-maintenance.
- A new audience would need this content each year, giving an **infinite upside** for traffic

Implementation

- **Find** a product owner to facilitate collaboration across departments.
- **Map** content needs.
- **Assign** stories.
- **Promote** signups leading up to graduation season.

Stakeholders

- Audience team
- Education, business, feature reporters
- Digital Product team
- Marketing
- Advertising

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

- Number of sign-ups year over year
- Percentage of users who open all eight emails
- Click rates and click-to-open rates for each email

20-year-olds



20
year-olds



ACCESSES THE STAR TRIBUNE
THROUGH FREE ACCESS
THROUGH THEIR INSTITUTION
OR DISCOUNTED ACCESS
THROUGH THE STUDENT PLAN
FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

- Working through a four-year degree or nearing the end of a two-year degree
- Taking classes, working, preparing for their careers and spending time with friends
- Looking for fun, affordable, relevant things to do, see and eat
 - Low on disposable income

Access Point

- Free access through their higher education institution
- Discounted access through a student-tier subscription.

Audience Profile

- Working through a four-year degree or nearing the end of a two-year degree
- Taking classes, working, preparing for their careers and spending time with friends
- Looking for fun, affordable, relevant things to do, see and eat
 - ◆ Low on disposable income

Tailored Product

The “Out on the Town” newsletter, a “Going Out”-style newsletter catered to a college-aged audience.

- Builds on the success and utility of the **“Going Out” newsletter**
- Harnesses the Star Tribune’s **knowledge of local happenings**
 - ◆ Plays to strengths of a local news source vs. national paper — this is the information you won’t get from WSJ

- Provides consistent, **year-round value**
- Allows for **content specificity**, increasing the likelihood college-aged students will find it relevant.
 - ◆ “Going Out” caters to all ages. In “Out on the Town,” kid-friendly events and events geared toward older crowds could be left out to highlight events relevant to 20-year-olds.
- It should be owned and curated by someone with the proven ability to speak to younger audiences to foster **relatability** and **trust**.
 - ◆ The curator should attend these events and create relevant social content
- It would be released via socials, a weekly push notification and a weekly email newsletter.

Implementation

- **Find** a product owner.
- **Familiarize** owner with how “Going Out” is produced.
- **Create** a prototype using “Going Out” as a model.
 - ◆ Ideally, the structure of the two newsletters would be similar.
- **Set up** relevant social accounts, push notification capacity, and weekly email newsletter.
- **Create** a marketing plan and publicize.
 - ◆ Use colleges and universities as a base for spreading the word.

Stakeholders

- Features reporters
- Audience team
- Marketing
- Advertising

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

- Number of newsletter signups
 - Engagement metrics on socials and the Star Tribune app
-

22-year-olds

An infographic with a green background. On the left, the number '22' is in large yellow font, with 'year-olds' in smaller yellow font below it. To the right of the number is a circular icon of a woman's face. Further right, there is a white-bordered box containing the text: 'ACCESSES THE STAR TRIBUNE THROUGH THROUGH THEIR INSTITUTION, DISCOUNTED ACCESS THROUGH A STUDENT-TIER SUBSCRIPTION OR DISCOUNTED ACCESS THROUGH A YOUNG PROFESSIONAL-TIER SUBSCRIPTION'. To the right of this box, there is a list of three bullet points: '• Graduating from college', '• Planning for a career', and '• Living independently'.

Access Point

- Free access through their higher education institution
- Discounted access through a student-tier subscription
- Discounted access through a young professional-tier subscription.

Audience Profile

- Graduating from college
- Planning for a career
- Living independently

Tailored Products

Product 1: A **digital career and lifestyle magazine** designed to provide young professionals with insights into employment trends and other things they should know if they plan to settle down in Minnesota.

- This could be a **discounted add-on** to an existing subscription or purchased as a standalone product.
- Content could include:
 - ◆ **Features** on local business owners or startups
 - ◆ **Information** on local companies that are hiring
 - ◆ **Advice** columns from contributing writers related to job-hunting
 - ◆ **Tips** for independent living
 - ◆ **Reviews** for local housing, shops and restaurants
- Published **every April** and **November**, before the spring and fall graduation seasons.

Implementation

- **Find** product owner
- **Determine** content needs
- **Assign** stories
 - ◆ **Recruit** locals to write niche columns related to their workplaces, neighborhoods, etc.
- **Market** to universities

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

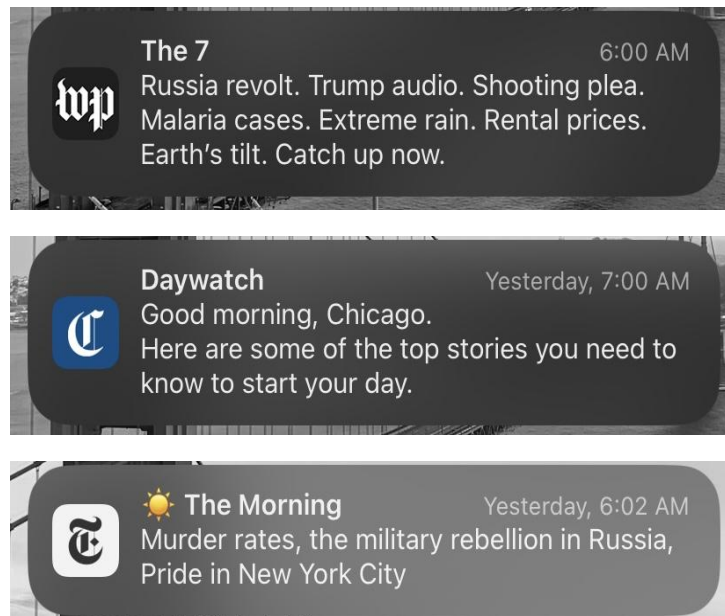
- Number of subscriptions
- Positive audience feedback gathered via survey

Product 2: A daily summary of **five stories you should know** for the day, released as a push notification and a newsletter. Long-term, this could also be expanded into a podcast.

- Encourages daily, **habitual engagement** with the Star Tribune.
- Transitions users from ENCs into **full-fledged news consumers**.
- Provides quick and **digestible access points** into deeper news content.

→ Modeled after other newsrooms' similar existing products:

- ◆ The Washington Post - [The 7](#)
- ◆ Chicago Tribune - [Daywatch](#)
- ◆ The New York Times - [The Morning](#)



Implementation

- Create push notification segment
- Build team to curate and write each day
- Promote the notification segment and app

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

- Number of newsletter signups
- Number of notification segment sign ups
- Notification click rate
- Newsletter open rate

Part 3: Elevating Star Tribune content

We've generated a few examples of how the Star Tribune can **cater content** to ENC's through increasing branding, optimizing visual experiences and prioritizing social media. These could allow the Star Tribune to **build trust** with ENC's while publishing a more **digitally innovative** product.

Humanizing the newsroom

In our initial research about Gen-Z, we found they are **more likely to pay for news from individual creators** than institutions. Because of this, one strategy to pique ENC's interest could be prioritizing building connections with staff. We have two suggestions that may help achieve this.

Frequently posting on “Behind the Star Tribune”

The “Behind the Star Tribune” social accounts are already set up on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and used to offer insight into the journalistic process. This is a **great way to connect** with the Star Tribune audience, and we think it could be expanded if we prioritize collaboration on it **across the newsroom** — so an undue burden doesn't fall on the already-busy audience team.

Potential implementation methods could include:

- **Creating** a Slack channel where reporters, editors and the audience team can coordinate ideas for behind-the-scenes content.
- **Hosting** “takeovers” by reporters when big stories go up where they take control of the social accounts temporarily.
 - ◆ These could be used to host “Ask Me Anythings” (AMAs)
- **Uploading** evergreen videos that showcase aspects of the journalistic process most people aren't familiar with. These could answer questions like:
 - ◆ How do you decide what to cover?

- ◆ What's the difference between Opinion and the newsroom?
- ◆ How much work goes into reporting one story?
- ◆ How do you decide what sources to use?
- ◆ How do you decide which stories allow comments?

Explaining how decisions get made will allow the newsroom to **foster trust** with readers by **increasing transparency**.

Standardizing reporter bios

There currently isn't much **standardization** of staff bios. [Liz Sawyer](#)'s, for example, is fleshed out with a headshot and a short description. Others, like [Alex Chhith](#), don't have a description or photo listed.

If we were to facilitate the addition of headshots and information to their bios, ENC's may be more inclined to feel as if they're receiving information from **another human being**. The Star Tribune could also consider looking beyond the traditional bio format to creating reporter mission statements, crafted around their beat memos. [Trusting News](#) recommends each reporter [write a mission statement](#) to show what the reporter's goals around their coverage are.

Emphasizing social video

ENCs **love short-form video** — TikTok is one of the [top online platforms](#) for people in this age group. While the Star Tribune already uses TikTok and other platforms, we have a few suggestions that may help us **adapt our video content** to better appeal to ENC's.

Creating explainer videos

Videos in which a creator **explains an issue to the camera** tend to perform well on TikTok and Instagram Reels. [Here is an example from the Baltimore Banner](#).

Journalists are in a unique position to create particularly compelling [explainer videos](#) given the amount of research and effort that goes into the reporting process. If a reporter wanted to **amplify a story** to a young audience, creating an explainer video would be one way to do it.

Modifying video editing style

Anecdotally, there seem to be certain **best practices** when it comes to creating successful short-form video content. Below are some examples.

Figure 6: Dos and don'ts of short-form video



Using photo slideshows

Our photographers create **incredible images** for our stories. Posting photo slideshows on TikTok and Instagram Reels could be a low-effort way to **supplement coverage** and provide a **preview of information** on social media without hours of editing.

Using trends as inspiration

Because ENC's are used to **following trends** on social media, the Star Tribune could connect with this audience by hopping on board when applicable. Photo/Video Intern Angelina Katsanis' [recent TikTok](#), for example, uses a [trending audio](#) to add some humor to interesting news content.

Updating website design

As a CMS overhaul looms, now is the perfect time to begin thinking about some tweaks the Star Tribune could make to its online presentation to make stories more **visually engaging**. Below are some of our suggestions.

Prioritize digital design training

In order to take advantage of what a CMS has to offer, it is important reporters have the tools they need to make a story visually engaging. If reporters and editors were empowered to make simple visual presentations, the digital design team would have more time to focus on more complex digital presentations.

We recommend that basic **digital design training is prioritized** as a part of the new CMS onboarding.

Emphasize related articles

We would also like to emphasize the importance of linking related stories to articles. Including related hyperlinks encourages readers to **remain on the site** by suggesting content that is relevant to them, and parallels the content algorithms Gen Z is accustomed to.

Address visual journalism bugs

The Star Tribune website could be better optimized to support visual journalism. Here are a **few bugs** on the site:

- **Missing** photography tab on mobile
- **Buried** photography tab on desktop
- **Inaccessible** photo galleries on mobile
- **Hidden** content due to advertisements

→ **Finicky** photo gallery buttons

While a good user experience is paramount for any generation of news readers, ENC's in particular value a good **mobile user experience**. More than two-thirds of people under 35 access news using their smartphones, and nearly half of Gen Z news users' first contact with the news is through a smartphone. Further, younger generations **do not spend time** on media that doesn't display well on a smartphone.

The Star Tribune should consult visual leaders to improve the presentation of visual content on mobile and in the app. ENC's remember their user experience with digital products, and will be **less likely to return** to a site or app they know **isn't optimized for them**.

Other ideas

Below are a few more suggestions that could make the Star Tribune more appealing to ENC's.

Micro-subscriptions

ENC's are accustomed to **hyper-tailored content**, from Spotify's algorithmic playlist generation to TikTok's "For You" page. The Star Tribune could accommodate this by offering **micro-subscription packages** that would be cheaper than a full subscription and only include news content from beats a subscriber was interested in.

Younger news consumers appreciate **relevance** and **specificity**. A 2022 YouTube trends report from 2022 found **65% of Gen Z** say "content that's personally relevant to them is more important than the content that lots of other people talk about."

Expanding hiring opportunities for young staff

Expanding hiring opportunities for younger staff at the Star Tribune could ensure fresh perspectives are more frequently involved in our news coverage. Here are **three ways** this could be accomplished:

→ Hiring a seasonal **trending intern** to help with the NOW and Trending desks.

→ Further utilizing **Report for America**. This organization [puts young journalists into local newsrooms](#) to report on under-covered issues and communities.

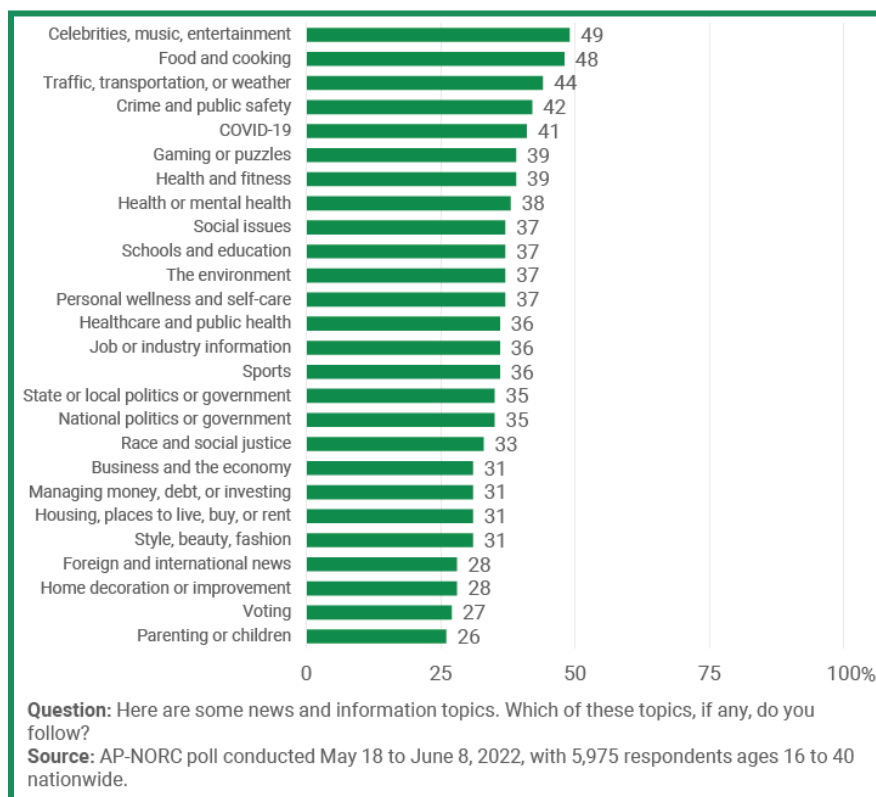
◆ The Star Tribune would only have to pay for 25% of the reporter's salary, and they could stay for up to three years.

→ Partnering with universities and other organizations for **more fellowships and internships** like the [Dow Jones News Fund Internship Program](#).

Prioritizing content important to ENCs

Ensuring we are adequately covering topics **ENCs find particularly interesting** could increase our chances of acquiring and retaining them as subscribers.

Figure 7: Most followed news topic areas by news readers 16-40



Conclusion

In this document, we laid out plans to:

- **Increase** free or discounted touchpoints to draw readers in to the Star Tribune
- **Engage** with young audiences at each life stage using habit-building news products
- **Optimize** the young reader experience by prioritizing visual presentations and building trust

We **thank you** for taking the time to hear our ideas, and encourage you to **reach out** if something caught your eye or you have any questions about our proposal. Email Audience Intern Sydney Lewis at sydney.lewis@startribune.com with your thoughts and she will connect you with the right team members!

Interns Noor Adwan, Noah Furtado, Nicole Gutierrez, Gannon Hanevold, Emily Hood, Auds Jenkins, Angelina Katsanis, Sydney Lewis, Hannah Pinski, Grace Xue and Grace Yarrow contributed to this report.

Appendix

