MICHIGAN RADIO STRATEGIC PLAN

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Background

In the fall of 2019, Michigan Radio set out to articulate refreshed vision, mission, and values statements, and to identify strategic initiatives necessary to sustain the organization's steady forward momentum.

Having recently won a Peabody award for its podcast *Believed*, an unflinching examination of the people, systems, and culture that enabled Larry Nassar's sexual abuse of hundreds of young women, Michigan Radio is poised as a leader in the news and information media space. However, the environment in which Michigan Radio operates is rapidly changing.

The majority of Michigan Radio listeners access the product as an out of home experience – for example, during their commute to and from work. The impending reality of autonomous vehicles, increased prevalence of telecommuting and the "gig economy," and expectations around integrated personal media devices make Michigan Radio's dependence on this delivery mechanism risky. How might Michigan Radio differentiate itself and remain relevant in a world of on-demand media?

Further, at the outset of the strategic planning process, 95% of the station's listeners identified as Caucasian, with a median age of 55+. These demographics represent a fraction of the general population, prompting the question of what programmatic innovations – and associated investments – may be necessary to appeal to a younger, more diverse listenership?

Finally, as a membership organization that depends on individual donors for 62% of the station's annual revenue, Michigan Radio is mindful of the imperative to evaluate the station's current mix of fundraising and revenue generation opportunities. What existing efforts might be uncovered and amplified, mirroring the success of the car donation program, which has experienced more than tenfold growth in recent years? What would it look like to cultivate major donors who are positioned to provide transformative gifts?

Process Overview

Between September 2019 and July 2020, in partnership with Kerry Sheldon and Anica Madeo from Bridgeport Consulting, Michigan Radio undertook an intensive staff engagement process designed to take stock of the station's strengths and opportunities; articulate clear and compelling statements of vision, mission, and values; and build a strong, shared sense of commitment to the path forward. A high-level timeline of the engagement process is described below.

Individual interviews with senior leadership

At the launch of the strategic planning process, Bridgeport conducted individual interviews with all seven members of the senior staff, the Digital Director, and one representative from the University of Michigan Office of the Vice President for Communications. Interviews were designed to elicit leadership perspectives on the existing assets and key challenges of the organization, as well as early thoughts on potential strategic directions.

The Core Team

In October 2019, Executive Director Steve Schram appointed a Strategic Planning Core Team consisting of ten staff members representing a diverse set of perspectives from throughout the organization. The make-up of the team included proportional representation of the full staff in terms of gender and role (Content & Distribution vs. Advancement & Business Operations) as well as consideration for years of service, ranging from 1 to 17. By design, the Core Team included no senior staff members to ensure a level power balance among members. The Core Team met monthly to define and guide the stakeholder engagement and benchmarking processes, review and refine materials under development, test and validate concepts for inclusion in the strategic plan, and generally plan and debrief the project as it unfolded.

Focus Groups

In early March 2020, Bridgeport Consulting conducted small group sessions open to all staff across the station. A total of 30 staff participated in 5 discussions designed to develop a strong, shared understanding of the strategic planning process and gather feedback on the draft vision, mission, and values statements. The sessions also gave staff members a chance to practice cross-department collaboration and idea sharing.

Combined Senior Leadership & Core Team

In April 2020, the Senior Leadership and Core Team held a combined meeting to build a shared understanding of the thematic outcomes from the small group conversations with staff, and to confirm the vision, mission, and values statements. The group agreed to form a subcommittee to work on development of strategic plan content in May and June (described below) before reconvening in July to finalize the plan and prepare for implementation.

Content Strategy Team

The Content Strategy Team, made up of 12 representatives from across the Senior Leadership and Core Team, met 4 times in May and June 2020 to draft and refine the strategic plan's central imperative, station-wide goals, and potential initiatives. This group was intentionally established to allow senior and non-senior staff members to collaborate on a jointly developed plan.

All-Staff Meeting

Finally, in early July 2020, Bridgeport Consulting facilitated an All-Staff Meeting via Zoom which engaged 47 members of the Michigan Radio staff. The meeting provided staff with an overview of the strategic planning process; confirmed approval of the vision, mission, and values statements; and generated feedback on the plan's key imperative, goals, and initiatives.

Process summary

Through the process, station staff grappled with the guiding questions named in the Background section above, while also navigating the confluence of two national crises: the sudden, devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with widespread civil rights activism in response to the police killing of George Floyd, an event that forced many to confront our country's deeply-rooted racial inequities.

The result is a plan that clearly articulates Michigan Radio's vision, mission, and values as well as the key imperative and strategic goals that will guide the station in pursuing that mission. The culmination of this work is reflected in what follows.

Vision, Mission, and Values Statements

Vision: An informed and engaged Michigan.

Mission: Uncovering the facts, sharing the stories, and creating the connections that give meaning to our complex world.

Values:

1. Earning trust. We report news and information with tireless dedication, and our programming is authentic, reliable, and relatable.
2. Acting independently. We operate with autonomy, answering only to our audiences, never to corporate interests.
3. Embracing diversity. We seek out and embrace varied perspectives and are committed to ensuring the station's staffing composition reflects the diverse communities we serve.
4. Operating ethically. We adhere to the highest standard of journalistic integrity, and conduct our internal operations with sound, transparent practices.
5. Pursuing fairness. We recognize the innate biases that influence each of us, and work to overcome these in service of responsible reporting.

Key Imperative: To Diversify and Grow Our Audiences

In order to secure our long-term sustainability, we must cultivate the next generation of audiences and supporters. Michigan Radio's programming and delivery platforms need to evolve in such a way that we build strong followership among younger and more diverse listeners and supporters, while continuing to serve our current base of loyal audiences. We recognize that in order to diversify and grow our audiences, we must do the same with the station's staffing composition.

Station-Wide Strategic Goals

1. *Uncover the facts:* Fortify our commitment to an informed public as one of the foundational elements of a thriving democracy.

   With the decline of local newspapers and shrinking newsrooms across the nation, reporting that holds powerful people and institutions accountable is at risk.[1] Michigan Radio combines thoughtful, timely explanatory journalism with skillful investigatory capability in order to make sure the public stays up to date with current events, has the context they need to make sense of what's happening, and can dig deeper into the major stories of our time. This journalistic depth and range is critically necessary for a healthy democracy - and requires resources and commitment to do well.

2. *Share the stories:* Enrich the human experience through long-form storytelling, in-depth interviews, and dialogue across disparate perspectives.

   Much of the daily news is delivered in sound bites and social media posts that have left many people hungry for in-depth storytelling.[2] This storytelling can take multiple formats, ranging from classic long-form journalism to one-on-one interviews and dialogue that models how to welcome and engage with differing perspectives, and the richness that can result from that exchange. Much of this content tends to be particularly well-suited to on-demand delivery platforms.

3. *Create the connections:* Build and strengthen our relationships with diverse communities so we can bring those stories and perspectives to life.

   Personal stories shape our beliefs and challenge our biases. In a time of intense polarization and ideological echo chambers, we will connect people with each other - and with the station - in creative and valued ways, whether in person, over the airwaves, or through our audiences' devices. We will also take an intentional approach to connecting our content across platforms, both to increase accessibility and to wring the most value out of the station's investment in content creation. In support of all the above, we will strengthen the cross-functional connections across the station so that Marketing, Corporate Support, Membership/Development, the

[1] "Local News is More Trusted than National News - But that Could Change"
[2] "3 Reasons Why Millennials Want Long Form Storytelling Over 'Snackable' Content"

Business group, and Programming are well-informed of each other's work and tightly aligned in terms of a collaborative approach to this plan's implementation.

Initiatives

The following strategic initiatives will guide the implementation of Michigan Radio's strategic plan. Each is supported by a set of detailed actions that is "owned" by the co-champions of each initiative. These actions (which reside in a separate, internal document) will be tracked and updated as the strategic plan's implementation unfolds in response to early successes, failures, and learnings that result.

1. Strengthen emerging content delivery platforms to reach a broader audience where and how they like to engage.

2. Sharpen the station's collaborative approach to Advancement to cultivate additional resources to support implementation of the strategic plan.

3. Align internal operations with our core values and in support of our strategic goals.

4. Fortify investigative journalism, targeting issues that are critical to state and national democracy.

5. Develop healthy, long-term relationships with marginalized communities in Michigan, paying particular attention to those in our prime listening areas, and beginning with the City of Detroit.