

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Roadmap for Local News Sustainability

Hundreds of surveys, hundreds of hours, hundreds of datapoints. One comprehensive look into the state of local news businesses.



From 2022 to 2024, the **LION Sustainability Audit and Funding program** provided hundreds of newsrooms across the United States and Canada with hands-on support. This report, ***A Roadmap for Local News Sustainability***, features an overview of insights gathered from 357 Sustainability Audits, nearly 4,000 hours of expert coaching, 450 funding requests, 98 follow-up reports, and feedback from program participants.

The goal of the Audit program was to help independent news organizations move the needle on sustainability. Here's how we know it was effective:

- Seventy-seven percent of 98 organizations that provided follow-up data showed significant, measurable progress in developing their infrastructure, adopting best financial processes, and/or improving and documenting the impact of their journalism.
- Median revenue for these organizations grew by 60 percent year over year during their participation in the program.
- Ninety-three percent of Audit participants agreed that the process has had or will have a positive impact on their overall sustainability.

Key report takeaways

The local news problem is a small business problem

Local news organizations are businesses grounded in their community impact, a reality that makes their business operations and financial processes as important as their journalism. If the business is unsustainable, the community will lose its news source. The greatest weakness among organizations was a lack of systems and practices designed to manage business operations that support staff and leadership through legal, human resources, and management processes.

An organization is never too small to think big

Early-stage or small organizations still have plenty they can do to lay a foundation for growth. Seventy-three percent of organizations that entered the program early in their development had achieved measurable progress a year later. Defining your market, your impact, and your financial goals and then developing processes for tracking all three creates an environment for informed decision-making.

Read the recipe, prep the ingredients, then start cooking

The shift from an organization run primarily by its founding team to one with wider staff is a key pivot point in an organization's development. The more infrastructure an organization has prior to making this shift, the more success they see. The way to get started? A prioritized strategic checklist.

December 2024 marked the program's **transition** from a hands-on program for LION members to a self-serve assessment, allowing every LION member who wants a Sustainability Audit the opportunity to take one. The **self-serve assessment is available** on demand to all LION members and for a fee to non-members. Thank you to the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and Google News Initiative for funding this program and to all to contributed to this work. We couldn't have done it without the coaches, newsrooms, staff, and partners who collaborated to bring this program to life.

Row in the same direction

Open lines of collaboration between editorial, product, and revenue teams with shared definitions of success make an organization agile enough to weather a storm or latch onto new opportunities. The median revenue for organizations that started defining, tracking, or strategically using journalistic impact data increased by 145 percent.

Chart a path, even if it's only the next couple of steps

Having a plan for where an organization is going allows for efficient resource management, strategic alignment, and sets the stage for growth. The median revenue for organizations that developed a one- or three-year plan between Audits increased by 137 percent.

Revenue activities are key indicators of sustainability

Having dedicated staff to generate revenue was transformational to an organization's chances of sustainability. Organizations with revenue-generation staff had median revenue 700 percent higher than those without. In early-stage organizations, having the founder/leader dedicating a significant amount of time to revenue efforts creates the foundation for this caliber of success. Additionally, the shift that we see from developing to stable organizations correlates with the milestone of having three or more established revenue streams.



Read the full report at lionpublishers.com/sustainability-audit-report/.

If you're interested in learning more about the data in this report, please email LION's Director of Data and Evaluation, Chloe Kizer, at chloekizer@lionpublishers.com. If you're interested in learning more about the Sustainability Audit, please email LION's Associate Director of Data and Evaluation, Andrew Rockway, at andrewrockway@lionpublishers.com.