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INN Case Study: Rivard Report

How a Local News Organization Managed to Generate 3X More Earned Revenue than the Average Nonprofit Newsroom

By Emily Roseman for Blue Engine Collaborative

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The Rivard Report is a standout among nonprofit news organizations in local sponsorship, with a third of its overall revenue from business relationships.

Note: As of August 10, 2020, The Rivard Report is now known as San Antonio Report. [See here](#) for a message from founder Robert Rivard explaining the name change.

INTRODUCTION

In south central Texas sits San Antonio, the seventh most populous city in the United States, famous for its mile-long river walk lined with cafes, art and shops. In addition to its rich history (remember the Alamo?), San Antonio is one of the fastest growing cities in the country, with a population of about 1.5 million and the majority of residents (64%) being Hispanic or Latinx.



Right in the middle of this growing metropolis is The Rivard Report, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news site that reports on local government, arts and culture, education, and the environment, among other topics. The Rivard Report was founded eight years ago as a community blog by Robert “Bob” Rivard (a long-time journalist) and his wife Monika Maeckle (a publishing executive).

You might know about The Rivard Report from its decision in 2015 to reorganize as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Or you might know Rivard for its excellent journalism, engagement with the community, and stellar event series. But equally impressive: of its 18 full-time employees, a team of four has built a

significant foundation of “earned revenue” from event sponsorship, advertising and business membership. The nonprofit news movement has a few earned revenue standouts, particularly at statewide outlets like the [Texas Tribune](#) and [NJ Spotlight](#). But, overall, earned revenue success has been more elusive among lean, local and regional startups.

[The Institute for Nonprofit News](#) (INN) in its [2020 Index](#) reported that, on average, earned revenue makes up just 11% of total revenue — and that revenue was particularly vulnerable because of COVID-19. Last year, in INN’s [2019 Index](#) from 108 of its nonprofit newsroom members, revenue from earned sources made up on average 12% of those organizations’ total revenue. The report authors concluded that “earned revenue shows potential for greater growth, particularly in sponsorship and underwriting (i.e. advertising).”

The Rivard Report has completely bucked these averages. In this case study, we’ll focus on how Rivard leveraged sponsorships and advertising to grow its earned revenue stream from only a few sponsors in 2013 to more than a quarter of its revenue three years later. Combined with support from business membership, Rivard now draws about a third of its revenue from relationships with businesses.

ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

The Institute for Nonprofit News has launched a pilot program funded by [Google News Initiative](#) (GNI) that will enable a cohort of well-established nonprofit newsrooms to increase their earned revenue from sponsorships.

While many nonprofit news organizations launch with the support of foundations, most that have grown and thrived have developed diversified revenue streams to become self-sustaining. The latest findings from the [INN Index 2020: The State of Nonprofit News](#), published June 16, show that foundation grants still accounted for the largest single slice of all revenue across the field in 2019, but it remained at just under half (48%) for the second year in a row. For the first time in the three years the survey has been conducted, a slight majority of nonprofits (54%) said that foundation grants accounted for less than half of their annual revenue. Moreover, 41% of nonprofits draw on at least four different revenue streams, including donations from readers and fees from events.

As part of this GNI-funded program, INN newsrooms will have the opportunity to work with Blue Engine Collaborative, a new consortium of independent consultants and advisers with deep experience in driving audience and revenue at for-profits and nonprofits. In addition to sharing a customized playbook from Blue Engine with its entire network of 250 nonprofit news organizations,

INN will select six to 10 members that are currently pursuing sponsorship revenue and are ready to quickly implement the added expertise. These members will work directly with Blue Engine. Collaborative from September 2020 through March 2021, including up to 100 hours of one-on-one coaching.

Contributions to this report were made by Agnes Varnum, deputy director of the Texas Tribune's Revenue Lab; Steve Shalit, Business Development Director at NJ Spotlight; and Operations and Growth Consultant Chloe Kizer. Thank you to The Rivard Report team, particularly Jenna, Katy and Laura for all of their time and wisdom articulating their success.

For more information about INN and its programs, please contact: news@inn.org.

Here are the five things you should know about why The Rivard Report has been so successful at generating earned revenue:

1. It creates custom hybrid partnership packages based on client needs. The Rivard Report team works with each client to craft a tailored package that directly addresses their client's needs. This package could include a range of elements including "flat rate" advertising (as opposed to CPM-based advertising), event sponsorship, and business membership. This method of "consultative selling" is a sales process that prioritizes relationships and open dialogue to identify and provide solutions to a client's specific needs.
2. The team actively builds relationships with businesses. The Rivard Report team knows building and keeping relationships with businesses is vitally important. They actively monitor businesses in San Antonio and go out of their way to discover new leads (see the Prospecting or finding new leads section for more on this). The founder largely sets the tone and expectation for his team to create long-lasting relationships.
3. It has built a relatively large and loyal audience. With a base of 20,000 total email subscribers, 300,000 average monthly site visitors and a hefty following on social media platforms, The Rivard Report has several channels to monetize. We'll get more into each platform later, but know that each is centered around high-quality journalism and has an engaged following.
4. It invests in business talent and comprehensive workflows. Each of the team's five business development leads brings a unique skill set, and the team has established a clear workflow and process for coordinating their different offerings (advertising, events, business membership) while working with clients.
5. The team carefully maintains ethical boundaries between client and newsroom activities. In order to avoid any confusion with clients, The Rivard Report clearly articulates its ethical guidelines for advertising and sponsored content on the site.

Definitions

Before we dig in, let's take a moment to get clear on definitions and why this all matters for nonprofits in particular:

- We're focused on earned revenue. Earned revenue are funds a nonprofit organization earns by providing goods and services, like ticket sales and advertising. This contrasts with the funds received from philanthropic support and gifts.
- Importantly, nonprofit news organizations don't always classify their earned revenue similarly. Earned revenue for The Rivard Report includes advertising, sponsored content and event sponsorship. Typically, they group these services into "hybrid partnership packages" for clients.
- "Consultative selling" (sometimes called solutions selling) is the process of leveraging relationships and open communication to hone in on solutions to a client's needs. At The Rivard Report, the team does this through the custom, hybrid partnership packages that it creates for and with its clients.
- Within a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, the IRS differentiates income into two categories: business income and unrelated business income (UBI). UBI is taxable if it meets certain requirements; business income is not. For the income to count as business income, it must be in line with the nonprofit's mission and related to its tax-exempt status.
- The Rivard Report does not consider any of its advertising or event sponsorship efforts as unrelated business income and thus subject to tax. [See more here for how to walk this line.](#) The Rivard Report clarifies in its policies and with all clients that advertising and event sponsorship dollars go directly toward supporting the organization's mission to create and amplify quality journalism for San Antonio.

HISTORY OF EARNED REVENUE AT THE RIVARD REPORT

In 2013, The Rivard Report had only a few advertisers. In the following years, events were few and far between and production expenses outweighed sponsorship dollars more often than not.

Today there's a team of five people that has built robust relationships with local and national partners and industries. Led by co-founder and now Publisher and Editor Bob Rivard and Chief Operating Officer Jenna Mallette, the team is Development Director Katy Silva, Events & Audience Engagement Manager Laura Lopez, and Membership & Audience Engagement Manager Kassie Kelly.

In 2019, they brought in nearly \$700,000 from more than 200 relationships with businesses.

The early days in 2012 - 2014: launching as a for-profit

Shortly after its founding, Bob and Monika hired their first reporter (Iris Dimmick, who is now their longest-tenured employee). At this point, The Rivard Report was still a for-profit entity (or as Bob used to call it, a "no profit.")

In June 2012 local businesses started asking The Rivard Report if they accepted advertising. The team at the time said "sure." In an early example, H-E-B, a supermarket chain based in San Antonio, paid a fixed fee per month for logo placement on the site and in email newsletters. Thus H-E-B became one of the organization's initial clients.

In September 2013, The Rivard Report hired its second employee — an advertising director. For a while, their advertising director was the only member of The Rivard Report's business team. His charge was to attract new advertisers and increase the advertising commitments of existing Rivard clients.

In 2013, The Rivard Report brought in \$128,000 from relationships with 19 businesses.

A key shift in 2015 - 2016: going nonprofit and building a business team

2015 was a turning point for The Rivard Report — it was the year the newsroom became a 501(c)3 nonprofit.

Bob, along with a few of the newsroom's trusted advisors, had realized the financial situation wasn't sustainable. As he reflected in this Nieman piece: our annual revenue "was enough to pay my

advertising director, my photo editor, and my one reporter, but it wasn't enough to pay myself, and certainly it wasn't enough to go out and grow."

The Rivard Report [explained on its site](#) that becoming a nonprofit meant it could continue to accept advertising (as long as it aligned with the mission of community service), while also opening itself up to support from individual contributors and larger philanthropic sources.

Throughout 2016 The Rivard Report expanded its set of clients. For its advertising deals, the team continued to leverage custom packages for each client that included a mix of "flat rate" prices.

Rivard had put an important stake in the ground: The organization was not going to sell advertising based on reach, but rather as a means of showing support for its editorial mission. Aided by its new nonprofit status, The Rivard Report could lean into its mission-first way of doing business.

In 2016, the team also started a business membership program, which allowed local and national companies to support the newsroom's mission.

Tip: A central point of this case: CPM (or "cost per thousand") models are — generally speaking — not ideal advertising pricing structures for nonprofit newsrooms. In the rest of this case, we'll show how an alternative model — hybrid partnership packages — works for The Rivard Report.

But first, a quick note on the limitations of the CPM model for local and regional news orgs, from Steve Shalit, business development director at NJ Spotlight:

Locals tend not to have huge traffic, so when ad buyers (most commonly ad agencies focused on direct response and other data-oriented results) seek to purchase ads on a CPM-basis they will typically ask for rates so low that the revenue payoff for the publisher can be negligible.

CPMs tend to greatly undervalue the impact of an ad impression. For highly specialized sites that aggregate difficult to reach audiences (like local audiences whose quality is underscored by their engagement with quality news), sustained advertising can create powerful affinity and shifts in mindset among readers. Data-oriented CPM buys often incompletely account for this effect.

In short, CPM buys can leave lots - if not most - of the ad value unaccounted for.

To be clear on the terminology we're using in this case: some of The Rivard Report's "business members" are also "partners" (or entities that have signed onto a hybrid partnership package),

other business members choose to remain as only business members, and some partners are not business members. The distinction here is important and allows for The Rivard Report to meet the business community on their terms. In some cases, a local business wants to support and be associated with The Rivard Report and becomes a business member, but doesn't necessarily have a use for advertising. In other cases, the business sees a clear value in paying The Rivard Report in order to receive the value of eyeballs and attention from The Rivard Report's diverse and engaged audience, but may not necessarily want to become a business member.

Another major turning point for The Rivard Report was when Jenna joined the team in October 2016 as development director, the team's second business hire (today she's the chief operating officer). Shortly after Jenna started, the original advertising and marketing director left the team for another role. This move pushed Jenna to start immediately learning the nitty gritty details of how advertising works. She assessed the advertising portfolio and began sorting out their internal and external earned revenue processes.

In January 2017, Jenna hired Katy as advertising and marketing manager (today, she serves as development director) and transferred the advertising portfolio to Katy. Importantly, prior to joining The Rivard Report, Katy worked in advertising and marketing roles at various nonprofits in the San Antonio area, including the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts and the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center. Jenna and Katy worked for the next year to define and implement clear parameters and advertising policies, including setting goals for revenue from advertising.

Overhauling membership in all forms in 2017 and 2018

2017 and 2018 were tumultuous years for The Rivard Report's business team.

In spring 2017, The Rivard Report joined The News Revenue Hub. Jenna, Katy and the Hub worked together to build out and define their individual and business membership development processes.

At this point they decided to outline more clearly the benefits of becoming a business member. Previously, The Rivard Report's business memberships were entirely custom proposals, which offered clients flexibility but were becoming unwieldy and inefficient to manage. They decided to design clear baseline benefits for each business member, while continuing to leverage the ability to add on to the business membership package with custom, added benefits. See below for The Rivard Report's current business membership tiers and benefits.

BUSINESS & NONPROFIT MEMBERSHIP	Business Membership		Nonprofit Membership	
	Community Partner (\$250 - \$999)	LEADERSHIP CIRCLE (\$1,000+)	Community Partner (\$125 - \$499)	LEADERSHIP CIRCLE (\$500+)
• Recognition on business/nonprofit member page	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Free or discounted event admission for up to two guests	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Monthly member report	✓	✓	✓	✓
• Recognition as a Leadership Circle member on member and home pages		✓		✓
• Rotating logo display on weekly newsletter		✓		✓
• Leadership Circle event invitations for up to four guests		✓		✓

In 2018, they hired a membership coordinator who departed after only 90 days on the job. Jenna went on maternity leave. Katy wore many hats that year: continuing to run and build the advertising program while picking up membership duties, too.

The year took a turn for the better in the latter half, when The Rivard Report hired two new staff members: Laura, who currently leads events and event sponsorships as the events & audience engagement manager, and Kassie, now the membership & audience engagement manager.

Over the summer, with Jenna back from maternity leave and a team of three direct reports, The Rivard Report was ready to thrive. And indeed they did.

The hybrid partnership package takes off in 2019

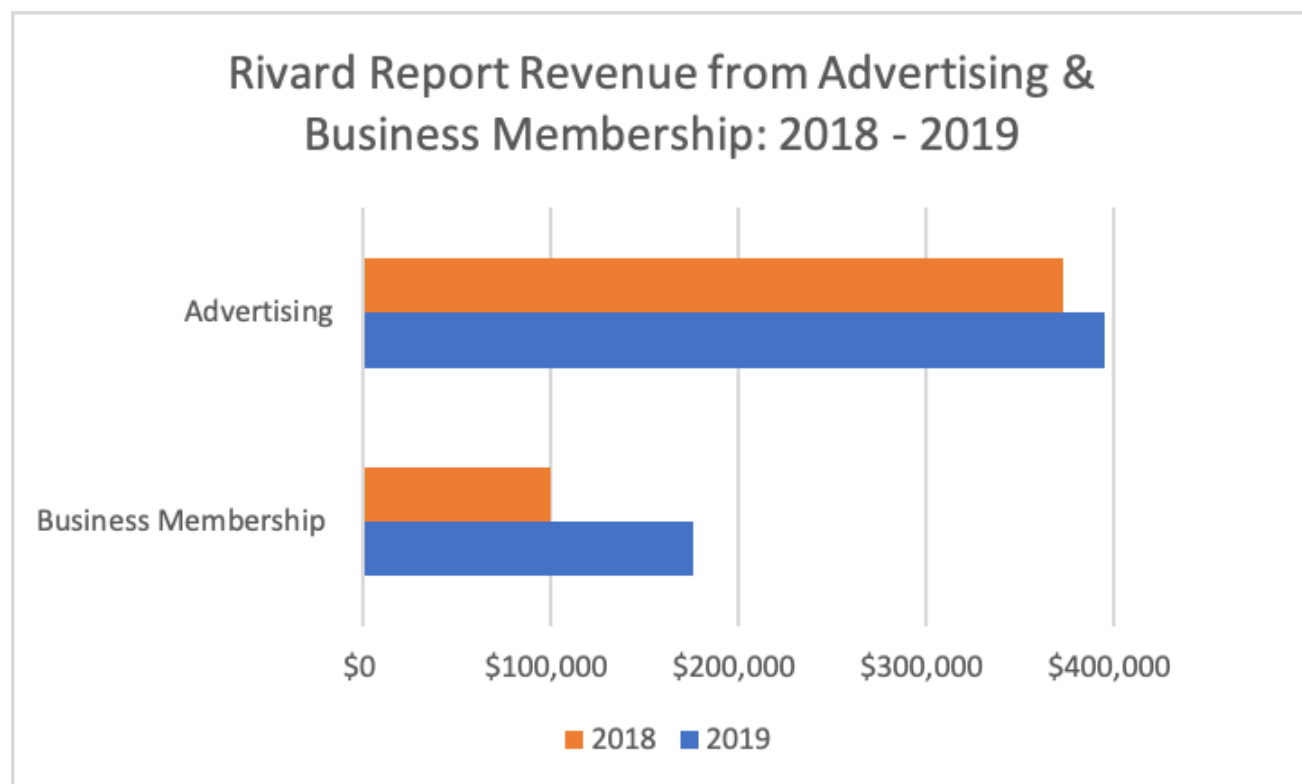
Revenue grew impressively for The Rivard Report in 2019.

Revenue from business membership jumped 76% in just a year — from \$99,574 in 2018 to \$175,501 in 2019. Revenue from advertising also grew from 2018 to 2019, with an additional \$22,164 in year-over-year revenue.

One reason for the revenue growth was the early success of their hybrid partnership package model

for selling ads and event sponsorship. This was the result of Rivard’s system of offering customized packages for each of their business clients. (As mentioned earlier in this case, these packages resulted from The Rivard Report’s consultative selling process with clients.)

Consultative selling works like this: the team works with business members and other clients to deeply understand the goals and underlying needs of their client’s campaign. Then, the team creates custom packages for the client that can include a mix of web advertising, newsletter ads, and event sponsorship.



TIP: The Rivard Report refers to these hybrid packages as “partnerships.”

The language here matters. It’s essentially saying to businesses: “we are here to help you and you are here to help us, and we will work together to figure out a solution that is great for both parties.” This collaborative language sets the tone for how the team treats local businesses from the start.

A hybrid partnership package can be comprised of:

- Advertising: This includes display ads on the site, newsletter ads (in daily and weekly newsletter), and ads on Facebook, Twitter and on podcasts. The Rivard Report sells organic posts on Facebook and Twitter, or they can offer to boost social media ads for the cost of the boost plus a 15% management fee. For the newsroom's seasonal podcasts, they offer voiceover ads recorded in-house (most often by Katy), or can insert a 15- or 30-second ad provided by the advertiser.
 - Sponsored Content: A business submits a story or piece of content to The Rivard Report and once approved by Rivard Report's editorial team, the content is posted on their site and tagged as "sponsored." [See here for Rivard Report's sponsored content page.](#) Sponsored content is considered a form of advertising at The Rivard Report.
- Event Sponsorship: A client financially supports an event and receives in exchange logo placement, prime seating, acknowledgement at the event, and other benefits. Note: across nonprofits generally, sponsorship can fall into either "contributions" or "advertising," which has tax implications because advertising is often deemed UBI and therefore taxable (for more on this, look into why the [distinction between why the sponsorship vs. advertising matters for nonprofits](#)).
- Business Membership: This is an opportunity for businesses to support The Rivard Report across two main tiers of support (either \$250-\$999 or above \$1,000), with different benefits in return. All business members receive recognition on the business page, free or discounted event admission for two guests, a monthly member report, and the newest benefit: a 15% discount on all ad units. The upper level of their business membership program — the Leadership Circle — also receives rotating logo displays on their weekly newsletter, among other perks. In total, The Rivard Report has 140 business and nonprofit members.

In the next sections, we'll dig deep into each of the components of the hybrid partnership package — from display advertising, to events and sponsored content. But first, an important note on workflow.

Workflow

Consultative selling to create a hybrid partnership package for a client can require a lot of team coordination.

In pre-COVID-times, Jenna, Katy, Laura and Kassie had morning stand-up meetings each day to review what they were each working on, the clients and businesses that were in contact with any of them, and updates on upcoming events.

For example, if Katy had a meeting with a prospective client who said, “We’ve heard a lot about your events, can you tell us about those sponsorship opportunities?” Katy would connect the client with Laura (the events and audience engagement manager), so they could learn more about the programming for upcoming events and understand their options. This ultimately means Katy and Laura often work together to create unique pitches and proposals for clients that intersect with both events and advertising.

TIP: Don’t assume your clients are aware of all of the potential opportunities and platforms your organization could offer them.

Listen to your client’s ultimate objectives and propose a mix of elements (advertising, event sponsorship, business membership) that could help them reach their objectives. Be sure to describe how each of the recommended elements meets a component of the client’s goals and also how the elements work in concert to deliver a cohesive effect (e.g. the ads reinforce messaging through frequency of exposure, the event sponsorship signals the client’s leadership at a time of heightened attention, and business membership maintains a consistent supplementary presence).

For business membership, Kassie (the membership and audience engagement manager) works closely with Katy. When a business member seems interested in engaging more of Rivard’s offerings — suggesting interest in a potential hybrid partnership package — Katy, Bob, and/or Jenna will get involved. Or for higher-profile businesses or higher potential dollar amounts, they will funnel relationships to Jenna so she can make sure they are properly developing a relationship with The Rivard Report’s leadership. Since COVID pushed everyone to work remotely, Slack is king for coordination, although the team still holds virtual huddles every morning at 9:30 a.m.

ADVERTISING

A major component of Rivard Report’s earned revenue is advertising. Advertising made up 19% of the enterprise’s overall revenue in 2019, the second largest revenue source behind foundations and grants — and it made up more than half of Rivard’s earned revenue.

Website

Leaderboard banner ad

1 week (7 days)	\$500
1 month (30 days)	\$2,000
3 months (90 days)	\$5,100 \$1700 per month
6 months (180 days)	\$9,600 \$1600 per month
12 months (360 days)	\$18,000 \$1,500 per month

Medium rectangle ad

1 week (7 days)	\$275
1 month (30 days)	\$600
3 months (90 days)	\$1,500 \$500 per month
6 months (180 days)	\$2,700 \$450 per month
12 months (360 days)	\$4,800 \$400 per month

Sponsored article

1 article	\$1,000
3 articles	\$2,550 \$850 per article
6 articles	\$4,800 \$800 per article
12 articles	\$9,000 \$750 per article

**All sponsored articles are shared in the daily eblast, facebook and twitter*

**If you would like a freelance reporter to write the article, there is a \$300 added fee per article*

Category page sponsorship

	\$1,000 per month
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**Gov & Politics, Arts & Culture, Environment, Where I Live, Bexar's Eye, In Memoriam*

Podcast sponsorship

15 seconds	\$250 per episode
30 seconds	\$500 per episode

Website Analytics



Average monthly views: 500,000

Average unique users: 250,000

Average leaderboard banner impressions: 50,000 per month

Average medium rectangle impressions: 30,000 per month

Average sponsored article impressions: 3,000 per article

Pricing

Here's a vitally important reminder of how The Rivard Report sells advertising: they do not sell under the CPM model, or "Cost per thousand." (CPM means the price of 1,000 ad impressions. So, with this model, if a publisher charges a \$2 CPM, an advertiser must pay \$2 for every 1,000 impressions of its ad, up to a predefined cap.) Instead, The Rivard Report charges for weekly or monthly stretches at a flat rate. There are a few reasons Rivard, and many other nonprofit news organizations, prefer this to CPM-based advertising:

- It's guaranteed and reliable income that isn't affected by how many people come to the site in any given time period.
- It makes news organizations less likely to be influenced (by clients directly or by "clickbait" tactics internally) if they are not focused on pageviews.

Charging a flat fee also lets them charge at the rate they set for the core value they've created, which is delivering a highly engaged community of well-informed people in San Antonio.

It sets the tone on how they prefer to work with businesses (if you want to support us, please care about our mission and be a part of our larger community.)

In addition to display advertising, Rivard also sells ad space in its daily or weekly newsletter (up to three ads per newsletter), organic posts on Facebook and Twitter or boosts on social media ads, voiceover ads on their podcasts, and sponsored content on the site.

As another example of flat-rate pricing, similarly to how they charge for display advertising, email advertising is sold in packages based on the timeframe the ad will be on the platform:

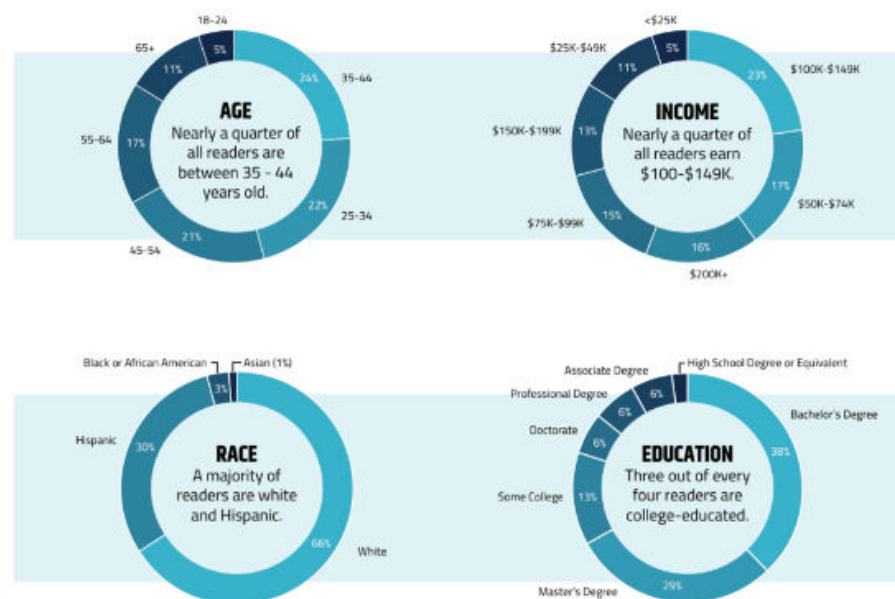
- Email ads in the daily newsletter (with 14,000 subscribers, an average open rate of 15% and average click-to-open rate of 6%) cost \$800 for 1 month or up to \$7,680 for a full year.
- Email ads in the weekly email (with 18,000 subscribers, an average open rate of 18% and click-to-open rate of 5%) cost \$400 for a month or up to \$3,300 for a full year.

TIP: An advertising package, particularly one with display advertising, should be for a month-long commitment or longer.

Any less, and it typically takes up more staff time and coordination than it's worth. The exception here is if you can use smaller commitments as ways to nudge your clients into long-term commitments with you or a commitment with other platforms added on.

READER DEMOGRAPHICS

Rivard Report readers are evenly distributed male-female, majority white and Hispanic, older, affluent, civically engaged, and educated. Below are diagrams that reflect reader demographics based upon data collected from a reader survey conducted in 2019 (1,106 responses) and user data collected from the *Rivard Report's* Google Analytics account to provide the most comprehensive snapshot of current reader demographics.



Working with clients

Katy's work with advertising breaks down into two camps: the first is her work retaining her existing set of clients, which makes up about 50 percent of Rivard clients. The second is sourcing new client ideas and pitching to new clients, which pre-COVID was primarily done in-person.

With new clients, Katy says a good portion will just reach out directly wanting to advertise — a testament to The Rivard

Report's reputation for quality journalism. Katy will ask to set up a call or coffee to hear more about their campaign and what they're seeking to accomplish. If it's a business they've never heard of, they'll do some research to make sure their company's mission aligns with The Rivard Report and try to understand how the new company found them (usually they are readers themselves or subscribe to their newsletters). After their initial phone call, Katy will make some suggestions about an ad package that would make sense, and will typically share their media kit that includes rate cards and reader demographics.

Ad agencies often know exactly what they want, whereas individual businesses will need a bit more

coaching on the platforms available to them. For individual businesses, Katy will put together a few different options for them and sometimes draft a personalized proposal that includes advertising and other platforms, like sponsorship for an upcoming event.

USE THIS DOC: [See here for a sample hybrid proposal](#) from The Rivard Report.

TIP: Know the difference between working with an ad agency and working independently with a business.

An exchange with an ad agency might be a bit more quick and transactional, whereas working with a local business should involve more time spent on educating the business on your mission, platform options, audience composition, and process. Agencies also tend to be more familiar and comfortable with CPM (or CPC, “cost per click”) transactional advertising rather than flat-rate models, so emphasizing your mission, overall reach, and brand value is critical.

A crucial point in making any sale is ensuring the client understands The Rivard Report’s mission. At this point in the process, Katy points to the importance of being keenly aware of what the newsroom is working on so she can fluently talk about Rivard’s work (see more below about ethical considerations)). Businesses and clients want to understand the bigger picture, so Katy will go into a meeting knowing the major stories and recent accomplishments of the editorial and audience engagement staff.

USE THIS DOC: See Appendix A for Rivard’s advertising proposal template, which contains helpful language on advertising policy and expectations.

Retaining existing clients

Retaining existing clients is an art form, and generally relies on keeping up a close relationship with clients, helping them interpret analytics reports, keeping them connected to your mission, and monitoring contract expiration dates.

Generally, about a month out from an existing client’s contract renewal date, Katy will send a message to her point of contact to let them know their current advertising contract is nearing expiration. Katy prefers to set up phone calls with clients at this point so she can reflect on the past few months and get a sense of her client’s marketing goals and budget for the upcoming year.

At this point Katy will also direct attention to the client's analytics reports (or if they haven't been asking for analytics reports, Katy will put one together and send it anyway at the end of the year). Sometimes, this is a reminder that the analytics report exists; other times, it's a reminder and review on what the report shows. Katy noted that most advertising clients ask for reports on impressions and clicks, and some agencies with sophisticated marketing departments will also ask for things like time spent per article or referral sources on sponsored articles.

In "almost all cases," Katy said she is able to renew their contract for the following year. Like any good salesperson, Katy will also explore ways she can upgrade a client's package for the following year by offering bulk discounts or additional in-kind social media posts. Across the board, The Rivard Report also implements a 5 percent rate increase each year.

USE THIS DOC: See here for Rivard Report's template Advertising Analytics Report

Prospecting or finding new leads

Being good at building out earned revenue streams also means continuously sourcing new ideas for advertisers and business partners. Katy has monthly goals for advertising revenue and if she notices she hasn't been invoicing at her usual rate she'll start actively sourcing new leads.

TIP: The Rivard Report team uses these tactics for sourcing new ideas for clients:

- Look at who advertises with peer organizations.
- Engage your leadership team in the process. Jenna or a member of the team will sometimes meet someone at a conference or meeting and pass on the lead to Katy.
- Reach out directly to ad agencies and ask if they have any clients that would like to target the demographics your enterprise serves. Katy recommends making this a phone call, so you can hear the agency thinking out loud.
- Attend any local American Marketing Association chapter lunches (go with your business cards in hand!).
- Look at your list of advertisers and ask your team: "who is someone, or a business that we interact with regularly in our lives, who isn't on this list?"
- Comb through any local business journals. In San Antonio, Jenna described a "book of lists" that outlines companies in different industries. The lists are ranked by size or revenue. As Jenna put it, "if we notice in our advertising, for example, 'Oh, we are missing architecture firms,' we'll go to the book of lists and look at architecture firms."

It can be difficult to know the right department to contact. With event sponsorship sometimes the sponsor's money comes from the marketing team, and other times the public relations or community outreach team. Occasionally for ads, they'll see the philanthropic arm of an organization place an ad with them.

Katy primarily uses Salesforce to track all prospects, although she also jots down thorough handwritten notes during her meetings with clients and will refer back to them often.

Executing the ad campaign and a note on technical literacy

Relationship building and getting the deal signed is one thing; executing the agreement is another. Your team needs the digital and technical literacy to process and manage ad units and to create a good user experience in the process.

For display advertising, Rivard Report uses Google Ad Manager to upload the ad, include a tracking link, and define the timeframe for how long the ad should remain on the site.

A familiarity with WordPress or the newsroom's CMS is also typically essential for ad placement. For example, for sponsored content, Katy creates a story in WordPress just as a journalist would, but then tags it as "sponsored."

Katy stresses that she must have a solid understanding of all the right platforms so the team can deliver and interpret analytics reports for their clients (Rivard Report uses MailChimp for email, Google Analytics and Parse.ly for website traffic, and Google Ad manager for ad performance).

TIP: Digital literacy is teachable.

Katy didn't know how to do any of the more technical pieces of advertising work prior to starting at The Rivard Report, including how to use Google Ad Manager. We recommend that anyone unfamiliar with these platforms watch a few video tutorials, like [this one on how to put ads on a WordPress site](#).

USE THIS DOC: There are a lot of moving pieces to track when uploading new ads and monitoring your available ad space. Katy has created a solution for that. See [here](#) for her template tracker of ads. [Template Advertising Schedule 2020](#)

SPONSORED CONTENT

The Rivard Report also offers sponsored content as a service: that is, a piece of content that a business or freelancer writes to be placed on Rivard’s site.

Sponsored content is typically published Monday through Friday and is capped at three articles per week in order to avoid oversaturation.

Social Media

Facebook, Twitter\$100 per platform

Social Media analytics



Facebook: 28,000 followers
Twitter: 21,000 followers

Other services

Graphic design.....\$100 per unique ad size

*2 complimentary rounds of revisions

Social boost.....ad cost + 15% management fee

Freelance reporter.....\$300
for sponsored article submission

It works like this: a client will submit a piece of content in the [submission form here](#), complete with a headline, article text, photos and requested publish date. All sponsored content receives editorial review prior to being published,

and the newsroom makes it clear in the [guidelines](#) linked on the website that they may refuse publication of any content “that undermines the integrity of its brand.” (Katy said this rarely happens.) Once posted, the content is tagged as “sponsored” on Rivard’s website.

Of course, they’ve run into a few ethical questions in this space, which has helped them further refine their sponsored content policy. For example, if something comes across as an “infomercial” or uses a very over-the-top tone that claims something like “we are the best!”, they will ask the client to change it. If the client needs help with writing in an appropriate tone or style, they’ll refer them to a freelancer at an additional cost. (Note, this freelancer does not provide any editorial coverage for The Rivard Report, and the team is hellbent on separating the two types of freelancers they use)

A note on ethics and working with editorial

This is a good time to dive into how to build relationships with businesses without compromising editorial integrity or crossing ethical lines. Early on, after Jenna started ramping up The Rivard Report’s relationships with advertisers and sponsors, questions would arise on where Rivard drew the line on accepting money from businesses, particularly around running an ad for an elected official or a campaign. For a long time, The Rivard Report didn’t accept campaign ads at all.

Today, the policy has evolved to accept campaign ads only if they promote their subjects (and not denigrate their opponents), and there is enough remaining ad inventory available that they can accommodate the opponent as well. Sometimes, the team will even reach out to the opponent to see if they want to buy the other open ad space. And ultimately, Jenna and her team still maintain the right to refuse any ad that doesn't fit with their standards.

The Rivard Report's political advertising policy

"The Rivard Report accepts affirmative advertising from candidates, campaigns and issues that is in sync with its mission of promoting civic engagement and civil, informed discourse. Such advertisements cannot be used to attack or fundraise; they must be clearly labeled as advertisements; and the person or group who paid for them must be clearly identified. Direct comparisons with other candidates and/or the unauthorized use of another person's likeness are not permitted. The Rivard Report reserves the right to refuse a campaign or issue advertisement for any reason."

A lot of this is resolved on a case-by-case basis. The Rivard Report has turned down advertising dollars from elected officials and campaigns that didn't fit their standards (and sometimes refer the advertiser to the editorial team to see if there are coverage options). Overall, however, keeping the sponsored content policy clear for all to see on their site has minimized the number of submissions they have to reject.

TIP: Here are some ways to best work through ethical concerns related to earned revenue and maintaining your editorial integrity:

- Always maintain the right to review and the right to refuse. The Rivard Report runs all sponsored content submissions through their editorial team before it publishes on the site. For all campaign-related advertising, Rivard insists on seeing any creative elements prior to accepting them to make sure they are in line with their policies. If the content or the graphic doesn't align with Rivard's policy and the client won't budge, the team will cancel their contract.
- Be fiercely clear about your policies. Rivard posts its policy on sponsored content on the site and reminds clients of this right at the outset. With Rivard's policy, this means: remind your clients explicitly that understanding their terms still does not mean their content will be approved by your editorial team.
- Like Rivard does with the Texas Tribune, look to another organization that you and your newsroom respects, and see how their advertising and sponsorship policy works.
- Be clear with your newsroom that they don't have to be worried about who is a sponsor and who isn't. Jenna has said that out of empathy for her own workload, some of her colleagues in editorial will say things like, "hey heads up, we're covering X client!" If it's a controversial story, Jenna's motto is: "I don't want to know!"
- Be okay if a sponsor or client cancels their contract because they were covered by your reporters. If they cancel because of this, they never truly supported your mission.

EVENT SPONSORSHIPS

Before COVID-19 disrupted the economy and live events in particular, event sponsorship was a major part of Rivard's earned income stream, earning 7 percent of all revenue in 2019. That was: \$160,760 net revenue in 2018 and \$136,083 in 2019.

For 2020, events revenue has taken a substantial hit even as the team has pivoted to virtual events. Despite this setback, The Rivard Report team continues to emphasize playing the "long game" with its event sponsors, working to cultivate lasting relationships that could pan out in the future.

Laura, the events and audience engagement manager, leads the charge across Rivard's suite of events. In 2019, they produced 18 events. Laura pointed to the particular power of events when trying to engage with a client in a deep, topical way. For example, if a business really cares about education coverage, Laura will tell them about an upcoming event with an education or schools focus. This

CONTACT INFO

Organization Name _____

Contact Person _____

Mailing Address _____

Email _____ Phone _____

Billing Contact _____

Email _____ Phone _____

To submit your registration as a 2019 CityFest sponsor, please email this completed form to Laura Lopez at: laura@rivardreport.com. Please include desired logo in EPS and JPG format. Registrations received by October 25, 2019 will be included in marketing materials indicated by sponsor level.

Please make checks payable to **The Rivard Report** and mail to:

The Rivard Report
126 Gonzales St. #100
San Antonio, Texas 78025

Thank you for your support!
www.cityfestsatx.org #sacifyfest

tactic works on both first-time relationships and existing clients, and is yet another example of consultative selling in practice.

The majority of event sponsors are independently secured, and a handful of them are grouped into a larger hybrid partnership package. When a potential sponsor

or business member is interested in event sponsorship, Laura will share an event sponsor guide that includes a summary of the specific event and the different levels of support The Rivard Report offers for the event. The guide comes with a sign-up page for the sponsor to complete when they are ready to commit to a giving level.

As with Rivard's other earned revenue streams, the terms of sale around an event are put into a hybrid partnership package.

Giving levels for event sponsors can range from \$25,000, which makes the sponsor a "presenting sponsor," to a free-of-charge "in-kind sponsor" that allows for logo recognition at the event and sponsored social media content in exchange for a donation of food, staging or other equipment to help support the event.

The top range of sponsorship, the \$25,000 "presenting sponsor" level, entitles the client to:

- an acknowledgement as a presenting sponsor on all event marketing materials and communications;
- inclusion of company branding; tables and seats at preferred tables;
- on-stage introductions with company representatives;
- VIP passes for 20 company guests;
- and, premium ad space in event programming, among other benefits.



An important note: the process of determining a client's level of support, and what makes sense for them, isn't a simple transaction. Laura works with each client to figure out the personalized package that is meaningful for them. For example, for exhibit tables, Laura wants to make sure the business fits with the content of the event. (They don't want a bank, for example, to set up shop with a bunch of swag if the event has no meaningful connection to the bank or to financial topics.)

TIP: Be clear with your clients why it matters that their event sponsorship level matches their business objectives.

Laura will tell clients, “you're probably not going to get the best engagement with this event's audience with an exhibit booth,” and instead directs them to other ways to support. This approach will lead to better client satisfaction, which helps with long-term retention and value.

USE THIS DOC: There are a lot of moving pieces to every event, especially with a wide array of stakeholders, sponsors and business members involved. Laura creates individual event playbooks for each event to track all major action items and record the results. [See here for a template of Laura's event playbook.](#)

One sensitive issue that Laura navigates is the request to put sponsors or clients on panels. The Rivard Report does not have a “pay to play” model or, in other words, a client can't give The Rivard Report any amount of money to guarantee a seat on the panel, although they have had someone on a panel that decided to become a sponsor of the event after the fact. The important thing here is that editorial works with Laura to design the programming and content of the event and individual panels, and sponsors don't have a say in the event's direction.

COVID impact on event revenue and the pivot to virtual

Like with many organizations, Rivard's events revenue has declined because of COVID-19, and Jenna predicts a larger hit for their earned revenue streams as a whole. In response, Rivard has been busy pivoting its previously scheduled in-person events to virtual ones, creating new ideas for virtual events, and trying to engage the community of sponsors and business members in the process.

As of mid-June, Rivard hadn't yet locked in any new sponsors for its virtual events (although most sponsors that had signed on for in-person events pre-COVID remained attached when the events turned virtual.) By late June, however, Laura said they had secured two new sponsorship deals for virtual events. As of July 1, they have hosted 12 virtual events — a total already rivaling the number of in-person events they held last year.

TIP: Reach out to your sponsors and clients and fully engage them in your process of converting to virtual events or launching new virtual events, keeping in mind the "long game" approach.

Ask them: how have their marketing budgets been affected? How have their objectives changed? Try to understand how you can continue to help them reach their intended audiences with a virtual event with a range of sponsorship or advertising options, such as a shoutout at the beginning of your event, logo recognition, or a visual on screen. Moreover, emphasize how virtual events offer a lot of opportunities that in-person events may not. For example, it's inherently easier to track attendee information and other analytics for virtual events, and a lot of virtual event producers are sharing attendee lists with sponsors. Virtual events can attract large audiences, especially in this social distancing era, and usually have high percentages of attendees-to-RSVPs.

There are a lot of ways to experiment cheaply with virtual events, so there is a healthy willingness for getting creative and trying new things. That may be attractive to particular businesses who have reputations for being "first movers."

The Rivard Report team has also been strategic when trying to tap new clients for virtual events and when engaging existing clients for their continued support: they'll reach out to the larger, national companies that might have more stable budgets right now or to clients who might have allocated funding to feature their COVID-related relief efforts.

There are many silver linings to virtual events, too, that are attractive to clients. For starters, there are new metrics that producers have never had before with in-person events, such as engagement rate or the extent to which participants were active during the program. And, virtual programming is more accessible to people who previously didn't have the time or capability to drive to in-person events.

As San Antonio and the rest of Texas continue to be a hot spot for COVID cases, Jenna put it plainly, "we are not going anywhere right now." So virtual events are here to stay, at least in the near future.

TIP: While working to convert existing and new relationships into virtual event sponsors, remember the “long game.”

See how your team can offer services now as a tactic to cultivate, and strengthen, relationships with businesses that will emerge with stronger budgets in the coming months and years. Consider offering free advertising, deeply discounted advertising or “buy one, get one free” types of offers, or deferred payment to ensure stronger relationships with your clients coming out of the economic downturn (and likely recession).

As a concluding thought, Laura shared this piece of advice for any publishers considering a virtual event strategy: just get started, and plan on getting better along the way. Often the biggest challenge people have is getting over the hesitation and worry of how things will go online. Remember that newsrooms have great content to provide their audiences for a conversational setting like an event. Create a plan, prepare and practice in advance, then go live.

CLOSING THOUGHTS: The Power of Building Relationships

Throughout this case, one theme should be clear. The Rivard Report is enormously successful with earned revenue because the team has invested in building meaningful relationships with businesses.

“Bob is like a San Antonio celebrity,” Jenna said. He’s lived in San Antonio for more than 30 years and was previously the editor of the San Antonio Express-News, the daily newspaper in San Antonio. He has an eye on the businesses supporting their work, and will frequently say to Jenna, “Well, how come this business isn’t a member?”

But Bob isn’t the only staffer with local business know-how. Jenna worked in business development previously for a marketing agency and had done a lot of networking in the San Antonio business community. Katy met a lot of marketing and business leaders during her time working at other nonprofits in San Antonio, and Laura also came to The Rivard Report from a development role in a San Antonio-based company.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, referrals are a key indicator the team uses to know whether and when they’re on the right track with their earned revenue streams. Jenna mentioned that they’ve reached the point now where individuals will often refer local companies to The Rivard Report and that some companies in town who have clients of their own will direct them to Rivard, too.

“You know you’ve developed really firm relationships with people, and that people think a lot about you, when people start referring them to you,” Jenna said. “That’s a good feeling.”

TIP: It’s important to be honest about the power of having built-in connections and relationships in the community you are working in, but that shouldn’t discourage folks and organizations who are newer to certain cities or areas, who are still in more of a phase of getting to know and to build their networks.

Here are a few tips on building and maintaining business relationships that are applicable to anyone, based on Rivard’s success:

- Approach relationships with individuals and companies as a long-term commitment. Take the time to educate them about your mission and why local journalism matters.
- Take the time to really understand your client’s objectives. If they say they only want display advertising, ask why, but ultimately just try to understand their end objective(s) and to match them with the right options (not your preconceived notions or goals).
- Always say thank you and show gratitude, no matter how large or small the contribution — from in kind donations of chairs, to larger multi-year financial commitments. Much like with individual members, business members and clients fall along a “funnel” of support. And all of it matters to your business. And with the right tactics, you can convert someone “down the funnel” if they feel taken care of on top of seeing your value. That may take time, but personal touches and treating people well are important building blocks for that conversion.
- When we’re on the other side of COVID, turn those phone calls into coffee meetings so you can see your client face-to-face. Those personal touches go a long way. In the meantime, use email/Slack/Zoom and anything else to still keep as personal, and consistent, a touch as possible.
- Referrals from individuals, ad agencies or companies are gold. As a matter of formalizing any sales process, finish the conversation with a client/potential client by asking: "Do you know or can you suggest any other organization that might have an interest in this kind of opportunity?"

APPENDIX

Advertising Proposal

PREPARED FOR:

PREPARED DATE

Month, Date, Year

ORGANIZATION NAME

Attn: Name

PREPARED BY:

Katy Silva

katy@rivardreport.com

Ad Unit	Quantity	Publish Date	Price
		Total	\$

Signature _____ Date _____

Billing

Name _____

Email _____

Address _____

Advertising Policy

The Rivard Report cannot guarantee ad impressions or clicks although we always strive to provide a realistic expectation of what an ad can expect to achieve. As a nonprofit online news source, we are committed to delivering credible journalism. Our content attracts readers who are highly engaged members of the community. We avoid sensationalism and clickbait material as a method of drawing readership, but rather we focus on thoughtful stories that tackle the city's problems and challenges as well as spotlight innovative solutions. Thank you for working with us; we appreciate your support!

Political Advertising Policy

The Rivard Report accepts affirmative advertising from candidates, campaigns and issues that is in sync with its mission of promoting civic engagement and civil, informed discourse. Such advertisements cannot be used to attack or fundraise; they must be clearly labeled as advertisements; and the person or group who paid for them must be clearly identified. Direct comparisons with other candidates and/or the unauthorized use of another person's likeness are not permitted. The Rivard Report reserves the right to refuse a campaign or issue advertisement for any reason.

Sponsored Content

Sponsor-generated content is content produced by an advertiser that lives on The Rivard Report and website is promoted alongside The Rivard Report's own editorial content. The content will be tagged as 'sponsored' anywhere it appears on the website. The Rivard Report's editorial department has no involvement in the creation of this content. The points of view expressed in sponsored content don't reflect those of The Rivard Report, and sponsors play no role in The Rivard Report's editorial decisions. The Rivard Report may refuse publication of any content that undermines the integrity of its brand. No political endorsements will be permitted. You can view our sponsored article guidelines [here](#).

Advertising Due Dates

All advertising content is due at least one week (seven days) prior to the publish date. If ad content is delivered late, the publish date may change. If The Rivard Report misses an ad publish date, the advertiser will be reimbursed with another ad of equal value. No monetary refunds will be issued. If the advertiser misses a scheduled publish date, The Rivard Report cannot guarantee another publish date. Ads can be rescheduled with 1 week (7 days) notice.