**In two or three sentences, describe your organization’s purpose and audience.**

The Banyan Project’s Engagement/Conversion Digital Tool-Set has two intertwined and synergistic purposes: 1) energizing response to news that online sites present through the Largo CMS and channelling this energy into civic engagement, thus meeting the sites’ need for greater engagement with civically interested audiences, and 2) converting a subset of these audiences into loyal members whose continuing donations create a new and continuing revenue stream to help ensure the sites’ sustainability.

The synergy flows from an understanding that 1) the end product of journalism is not the news so much as it is the civic engagement that news nourishes; 2) civically interested readers will perceive value when sites that nourish them with news also offer them easy-to-use tools for engaging with other readers about topics of shared civic interest; 3) readers who value this engagement are prospects to be converted into paying site members, and 4) readers who make the commitment inherent in membership are likelier to engage in the site’s civic conversations.

Banyan, which is pioneering reader-owned co-op news sites at the community level, is committed to using the Engagement/Conversion Digital Tool-Set in its affiliated sites -- and to repeated iteration to build on its sites’ reader experiences as well as reader experiences from all Largo sites that adopt the new open-source tool-set.

**Describe in detail the business experiment for which you are requesting funds. How does it fit**

Funds are sought for development of the Tool-Set outlined above as an open-source Largo-compatible WordPress plug-in.
with your sustainability plans? Explain the need for this project, and how you expect it to increase revenue and/or audience engagement.

The Tool-Set will boost Largo-based sites toward sustainability two ways, by enriching reader engagement and by creating a new revenue stream from engaged readers who the Tool-Set converts into donating members. This should strengthen not only Banyan-affiliated co-op news sites but also INN members that add the tools to their Largo sites and any other nonprofit Largo-users that adopt them.

At this point there is no tool-set that aims expressly at helping news sites achieve these important ends. Banyan's ready-to-develop set thus represents a needed breakthrough for nonprofit and co-op news sites.

The tool-set will plug in to the Largo CMS; an API will port member- and reader-related data to and from databases in NationBuilder, CivicCRM or other CRM software; Banyan uses NationBuilder.

The set divides into two basic categories: 1) Reader Engagement Tools and 2) Membership Cultivation Tools. The Reader Engagement subset has two components, Engagement Forums and Editorial Collaboration. Membership tools will include automated record keeping and reporting that will save the site's staff much labor. The Reader Engagement Tools and the Membership Cultivation Tools can be activated independently.

ENGAGEMENT FORUMS

The most fundamental yet innovative component of the tool-set is the Engagement Forums: It converts comments from a toxic turnoff to a constructive and value-enhancing engagement magnet.

The Forums will offer inviting ways for readers to engage with other readers and will organize their comments by topic rather than story by story. This way the conversation will expand and deepen as coverage of the topic unfolds over time. When Forums reach peak effectiveness, their easy-to-use tools will help readers organize themselves to achieve constructive community change.

The tools are designed to promote a constructive tone, creating the kind of safe space where even the reticent can learn to be comfortable posting. Light curation can enhance the Forums but the tools work fine without a curator.

Either editors or readers can start a new Forum at any time. Some will thrive and others will falter, depending on the potency of the chosen topic. There may be more than one forum on a topic -- liberals, for example, may work together in one Forum while conservatives work together on the same topic in another, thus saving energy the two groups would otherwise waste arguing with people of opposing views.

The tools will include:

• A Forum-page display system with a simple algorithm that selects comments for display based on recency and the number of responses each has attracted. Curators may search out relevant social media postings and meld them with the comments. Curators will be able to give special display to any comment. And readers will be able to click to see more, or all, comments.

• A system that measures and grades readers' activity.

• A posting tool that, when readers click "submit," pops up a window suggesting that they reread what they've written to make sure that it fits the site's standards for comments -- which the popup will include.

• A flagging system for content that readers see as violating site standards (curators and/or editors will the judge).

• A system to track traffic in each Forum so editors can easily monitor what's engaging their readers. The system will also alert a site's editor when activity in a Forum spikes, which may signal significant story possibilities. And editors may read the comments in search of story angles.
A question-of-the-week feature that sites can deploy to drive traffic to new Forums or to revitalize Forums whose activity has waned.

The digital tools that animate Engagement Forums will be arrayed to keep engaged readers moving along a continuum from sharing, to engagement, to collaboration, to organizing, to action, with the goal of helping them achieve measurable community change:

Sharing – Forums provide the foundation that meld readers’ comments with relevant tweets and posts from other social media, enhanced by the display system's algorithm that determines the prominence of comments.

Engagement – A threaded discussion format in Forums will encourage people to engage in conversation with those who share as well as with the entire Forum. Participants can use another tool to invite others to join the conversation, thus broadening and enriching engagement.

Collaboration – Forums will offer a tool to set up collaboration spaces where a subset of the readership can come together to develop ideas for action.

Organization – Tools in the collaboration spaces will offer ways to draw more people to their group’s ideas, including presentation of action ideas to the entire forum for feedback.

Action: Another collaboration-space tool will make it easy for organizing groups to arrange a meet-up.

In addition to the Forum itself, the Forum page template will include:

• A prominent Do You Want to Know More About This Topic? button that, when clicked, will pop up a form that asks for the question the reader would most like to have answered. For sites that elect to curate Forums, the form will also ask up to three curator-selected questions that can each be answered with a single click, including whether the reader has expertise about the topic and would agree to an interview.

• A link to The Basics, a concise background article, kept up to date by the curator, that can catch readers up if they’re new to the topic. This is optional for sites that employ curators.

• Links to all stories the site has published on the topic as well as to other relevant sources.

• A copy of the site’s commenting standards and easy directions for using the flagging tool, which will be linked from every item displayed on the page.

Also, a dynamic widget will be offered for story page templates that is designed to attract readers to related Forum Pages, showing a recent comment and a recent reader question.

Other story page tools will include:

• The Do You Want to Know More About This Topic? button described above.

• A copy of the site’s commenting standards and easy directions for using the flagging tool.

EDITORIAL COLLABORATION

Sites that employ the Engagement/Conversion Digital Tool-Set will gain tools that empower their editors and curators to continually reach out to readers and members to encourage editorial collaboration.

A tool will be provided for editors to post a Question of the Week to generate responses that will seed a new Engagement Forum or create fresh activity in one that has lost vitality. Every day the Forum tools will encourage readers to raise topic-related questions -- and will display the questions to inspire other readers to offer answers.
These simple Editorial Collaboration tools will be offered for story pages:

- A one-click tool that asks readers whether they found the story helpful.
- A form to submit tips, ideas and corrections directly to the editor.
- Easy ways to upload photos, video, audio, and documents.
- Invitations to engage in crowdsourced reporting projects when they're active.

MEMBERSHIP CULTIVATION

This automated system will deploy tools that invite readers to membership, iterate invitations and renew memberships.

Each site will be able to set its own approaches to membership and use its own wording for member messages. To accommodate this, the tools will offer several on-off options.

Each site will also be able to set its own prices and membership levels. The tools will accommodate sustaining memberships (monthly payments that continue till canceled) as well as annual renewing memberships. Through the databases the tools will track membership payments (but each site will need to arrange independently for credit-card processing).

The default membership approach works this way:

- The first time readers click to offer a comment or do anything other than read the next story, the system will pop up a window welcoming them to the community and asking for an email address, which will be required before they can post or complete whatever other action they're pursuing. Once they enter their email addresses the system will send them an explanatory email that makes them members, offering the options of paying to become regular members on the spot or to sign up for a 90-day provisional membership. This initial email will require a full name and address; once that's furnished, the new members can engage all they want, using their real names (except in rare cases with the editor's permission).

- Provisional members will be sent automated emails 30 days after signing up, inviting a reply to a question about how their experience is going and offering them a chance to become a paying member. A similar email will be sent at the 60-day mark, another 88 days out, and a final reminder on Day 90. If they don't pay by Day9, their access to Forums and editorial collaboration will end.

- The tools will email automated renewal notices to paying members 60 days, 30 days and two days before expiration, and on expiration day: members who don't renew will lose Forum and Collaboration access.

- The tools will periodically send emails to all expired members that ask them to re-up.

- When a member's comment is flagged and the editor agrees that it violates the site's commenting standards, the editor will suspend the offender from posting for a week; a second violation will result in a month's suspension; a third means membership cancellation. The underlying idea is that rigorous defense of the site's standards helps ensure the trustworthiness that's so crucial to keeping people comfortable engaging in the Forums.

The databases will track member activity data from the Reader Engagement Tools. This data will determine members’ volunteer rankings. Sites may wish to invite high-ranking members to be curators or undertake other significant non-staff news responsibilities a la Wikipedia. Analysis of this data will also lead to iteration in search of more and more constructive reader engagement.
Using an online journalism platform to transform reader response into civic engagement, and then into site membership, presents several challenges that we’ve responded to in the Forum tool design.

The foremost challenge is to get a critical mass of people engaged with the news site and with its Forums even though a site’s community may have fewer than 10,000 Internet households. We have taken these design steps:

• Forums accrete comments and responses on a topic day by day until a critical mass of readers has joined the conversation and people can start collaborating and organizing for constructive change. This would be impossible if comments were appended to stories, each story and its comments fading into history even as coverage of the topic moves forward.

• Curators incorporating social media postings into Forums broadens engagement and draws new ideas and new people into the site. Social media posters may be invited to join the conversation.

• Forum algorithms are designed to make content display accessible and engagement inviting.

• Page templates include widgets that expose readers to questions that other readers have asked – tempting them to offer answers.

Principally an audience-driven project that we hope to monetize right away

Is this a new project? New project. We have not done this before.

Who will help carry out the project? Describe the key staff and capabilities. If you plan to use outside partners, consultants, or vendors, tell us why you chose them (or how you will select them). Will you need to hire additional fulltime or part-time help to complete your proposed project?

Two people -- Tom Stites and Tom Adkins -- will be directly in charge of creating the Tool-Set described above, and they have an extraordinary volunteer brain trust to call on.

Stites, the Banyan Project’s founder and president, is the Project’s only full-time employee and he’s working pro bono at present. Tom is a seasoned editor and entrepreneur with a passion for strengthening journalism and democracy. He shaped the Banyan business model, and the Forum and Membership concepts, as a fellow of the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard. As an editor he has supervised reporting that has won an array of major journalism awards including the Pulitzer Prize; as an entrepreneur he has been the founding publisher of two print magazines and three Web publications in addition to Banyan. He also chairs the board of the nonprofit Banyan Project Inc. Full resume: http://banyanproject.coop/images/uploads/banyan/_tom-stites-resume.pdf

Adkins is principal of Open Organize, the vendor Banyan has selected to develop the tool-set. Open Organize has a proven record serving nonprofits that use their sites to engage people in civic activity. “I love working with clients who are trying to organize their way to a better world,” Tom says. His work as an organizer in a variety of settings is what drew him into Web development in 2007.

In addition, Banyan draws from the wisdom and skills of a 27-member advisory board (http://BanyanProject.coop offers a full list with links to bios). Six of the advisors join Stites on Banyan’s corporate board, including two who bring direct expertise to the Forum project:

Angus Durocher: Veteran of more than a dozen Web startups, Angus was lead developer of YouTube from its inception until he took his leave in 2010. He is now overseeing development of digital verticals for The Boston Globe.

Dan Gillmor: Founding director of the Knight Center for Digital Media Entrepreneurship at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism at Arizona State University, Dan has long been a respected tech journalist. He writes a
How will you measure progress? Please be specific and concrete about the metrics you will use? Suggestion: Keep the number of suggested metrics limited and make sure that they are actually measuring the results of the proposed business experiment.

The most important reader engagement metrics will be 1) growth in users of Reader Engagement Tools, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of a site’s repeat readers, and 2) growth in the percentage of users of Reader Engagement Tools at higher frequently levels. In the case of existing Largo sites that decide to deploy the engagement tools, it will be important to first establish a solid baseline measurement of reader engagement against which data from the new tools can be compared. (Banyan is committed to training existing Largo sites in use of the tools but only if they agree to share their data in a form that's useful to Banyan and INN.)

The most important early conversion metrics will be growth in paying memberships, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of a site’s repeat readers. A year out, the retention rate will be a crucial metric.

Using those metrics, how will you know you have succeeded in meeting the objectives for the business experiment. Please be as specific as possible.

1. Six months after an established Largo site activates the Engagement tools, its overall reader engagement metrics will have at least doubled as against the site's baseline.

2. Six months after an established Largo site launches a membership campaign using the Conversion tools, at least 10 percent its repeat users of engagement tools will have become donating members. This is about the average percentage among NPR listeners.

How will INN be able to validate the metrics and how the project did using those metrics?

Banyan will happily share all metrics from its affiliated sites with INN in a format that Banyan and INN agree on.

As mentioned above, Banyan will offer training to any existing Largo site that incorporates the Reader Engagement Tools as long as the sites agree to share their baseline and ongoing data in the same format; without training, the chances of the site's success will diminish.

The more sites that supply data, the more we will learn and the more effective our iteration will be.

What do you hope to learn from this project, and how do you hope to apply what you've learned over the long term?

We hope to learn how best to continually strengthen online news sites’ sustainability by

1) building reader engagement through Forums and Editorial Collaboration tools, and

2) building a base of donating members through the Conversion tools, creating a new revenue stream.

Based on learnings from sites running the Tool-Set it develops, the Banyan Project is committed to repeated iteration in pursuit of ever-greater reader engagement and membership revenue. Banyan's commitment is assured because the Tool-Set is crucial to its new cooperative business model -- Banyan-affiliated sites' success hinges on the Tool-Set's success.

Further, we hope that the Tool-Set will help solidify the overall sustainability of community journalism through INN-member sites and other nonprofit efforts that use Largo.

Why are you the right organization and team to do this project?

The Engagement/Conversion Digital Tool-Set grows organically out of the Banyan Project’s pioneering business model for community journalism, which is based on cooperative ownership.

All co-ops are owned by their members, so building membership is crucial to the Banyan model. In it, each site will be owned by hundreds of local readers, akin to the way shoppers own food co-ops and depositors own credit unions. Clearly, Banyan needs a strong mechanism for building and retaining membership. Hence the Member Cultivation tools.

Further, all co-ops are governed on a one-member/one-vote basis. The
How is this project similar/different than other projects you've researched ahead of this proposal? What can you learn that is different from what others have already tried?

Why is this project timely? Why is now a good time to undertake this project?

Upload your project budget

Optional: if you wish, you may provide additional material about your project, including screenshots, plans, marketing material, or estimates from vendors who will help you carry out your project. If you have more than one file, please package them as a single .ZIP file before uploading.

INNovation-Fund-BanyanBudget-3.xlsx

Status of the Banyan Project.docx