

Module 2: Interview with Jacqué Palmer | Sr. Editorial Impact & Loyalty Manager at Vox Media

[00:00:09] **Jospeh Lichtermann** Hey everyone, I'm Joseph Lichterman. We are here in our second module of the newsletter course on how to launch a newsletter, and I'm here today with Jacqué Palmer, the senior content strategist of newsletters at Gannett. She is going to walk us through her experience launching a particular newsletter with one of Gannett's papers, and we're going to get right into it. So we're going to be talking today about a newsletter called Florida Time, which is a newsletter that Jacqué helped launch. So to start, I was hoping you might be able to give me a bit of background on the newsletter, and tell us about its origins and how you guys started thinking about it.

[00:00:47] **Jacqué Palmer** Yeah, so about two years ago, I started pitching this newsletter, Product First Strategy, to anyone in the newsroom who would listen to me. I was fairly new in media, I have a background in marketing and business and audience development, and everybody in the newsroom was like, oh, whatever it is you're talking about newsletters. It's just another distribution channel that's not giving us big numbers, and we just don't care about it. So Samantha Ragland was the first one to bite and she was like, "hmm, tell me more about this product newsletter-first strategy of yours?" And, I pitched this idea of Day Tripping to her, which would be written and produced by Julio Poletti, who was one of her writers at the time. And what he did with that newsletter was he went up and down the state of Florida taking day trips with his dog Chunky, and then he'd come back and he tell the newsletter audience, "OK, so I went to these beautiful springs up in North Florida, here's everything you need to know how much it's going to cost you." There was a lot of shade for Chunky, and Chunky had his own section in the newsletter where he would give you one paw if it was a really bad experience for him, or four paws. He would tell you there was plenty of space for him to use the bathroom, all kinds of interactive elements in the newsletter. Of course, once that hit it off, and they saw that there was an audience, and Julio was getting all of this promotion and all of this traffic to his newsletter, everyone in the newsroom was like, "I want a newsletter!" So that really changed the way that we started thinking about newsletters in the newsroom at the Palm Beach Post in West Palm Beach. So then two years in, we took our newsletter strategy and we started thinking about the state of Florida and how we were going to scale that out and think about it on a regional scale. Elliott Kleinberg, which was a veteran reporter, 25+ years at the Palm Beach Post and a Florida history buff, came to me and said, "Hey, I want my own newsletter about Florida history." And the data already showed us that our audience loves Florida history, nostalgic-based content. So we were like, absolutely, tell us what you need to make it happen for you. So that's the background story of how Florida Time kind of came to be.

[00:03:03] **Jospeh Lichtermann** That's so interesting. I'm curious, what type of data and what sort of insights were you looking at to make you realize, oh, there's an audience here who might be interested in it?

[00:03:13] **Jacqué Palmer** Yeah, so we pulled up Google Analytics and we were able to see that a lot of the search traffic, a lot of social traffic, a lot of first-time visits to the site were to his Florida history content. People were spending more time reading the stories and those stories tagged as sort of history, and then moving on to reading other stories as well. So we knew that this was a viable beat and a niche product that would sustain an audience's attention over a long period of time. And this was 1000+ articles that he had already written. So we had a lot of data-rich information to help us prove to leadership, "Hey, this is actually a really good idea for us to really just take an brand out and build out in the newsletter space."

[00:04:05] **Jospeh Lichtermann** Awesome. And so, once you took a look at the data and thought, OK, this is a good idea, that is something we should do as a newsletter, what were the next steps? Did you do any additional kind of research or testing or sort of, how did you start to build out the product?

[00:04:20] **Jacqué Palmer** OK, so the next step was, number one, you always got to go to their editor and make sure that their editor is on board and that they're going to allocate and allow for the reporters to really give us some of their time us meeting. I was on the audience and content team on the newsletter side, and Samantha Ragland was the director of content for the Florida audience. She looked more social and website. So, we were able to take that idea from him, but in conjunction with working with him, build out the the name, the branding, the marketing, the strategy. And then, they handed it over to me where I designed the actual email and talked about different sections and elements and interactivity and talked about, hmm should we really ask for questions from the audience? What does the UGC play here? Because newsletters is not this communication tool where you're just talking at your audience, it's very much this back-and-forth conversation. And that's the only way it's going to be successful for you, especially if you're doing like a pop-up style, niche-specific newsletter like a Florida Time. So, it was a lot of things, but the first thing that we did was that we needed to think about what's going to be called? Because the audience, the data is telling us that this audience is predominantly Boomer, white male, college educated, that currently likes to read the paper, the Palm Beach Post. So from there, we needed to make sure that it wasn't something that was too punny, but something that made sense and that would resonate with that audience. So then we thought about colors and branding, and we brought in the design team and the marketing team that we talked about logos and brought in color palette and ideas and old nostalgic photos, black and white photos and alligators and just all kind of Florida mosh-posh of things that we thought would really make sense in the Florida history sense. And then we said, designers, marketing, do your magic! And so they came back with a whole bunch of ideas for logos and wingbacks and all kinds of like little icons and things for the social elements and for the print ads. And that's when we really got excited because we were like, yay! You know, ideas or something actually solid that you could see as a brand and that we know that the audience is going to then buy into. And then from there, I took those elements and I coded them into the template. And then I just put together a couple of articles and a couple of sections, like a classified section, a reader rewind section, that we then kind of did a 2.0 iteration and turned into an audio podcast element. We had news from across the state, so all of that was in the template. Then we talked about workflow and production, lead gen campaigns. So it's a whole production, but it's so much fun. You just take it step-by-step, you know, look at the data. Pay attention to what the data is telling you and whether that is a good topic and use another idea. Take a look at everybody's workflow, take a look at the resources you have available to you, tap out and reach out into other teams to see if they can chip in and help you with certain elements, and then just go for it and launch it and see what happens.

[00:07:46] **Jospeh Lichtermann** Yeah, that makes a ton of sense and I'd love to dive into some of the specific steps because figuring out those logistics is so important, because you want to be able to, if you're going to start a newsletter, actually be able to publish and deal with cadence and sort of deliver to the reader, right? So you want to make sure that the workflow is there and it's actually something you're able to deliver on that value proposition. So, I'd be curious to hear more about what those conversations with editors were like and with the staff to figure out, OK, how is this something we can add to sort of our already existing workload and what that process has been like?

[00:08:23] Right. So that's a really good point. Before I get into that, you did say something about the unique value proposition, and that is something that's going to be crucial to how you keep reminding yourself how you're serving the audience via this platform, via this channel. So if you ever want to think, oh, hey, we should do this, OK, let's go back to our unique value proposition. Does it matter? Are we serving the audience within the constraints of workflow and production and resources? I just wanted to pinpoint that. But the conversations were, hey, we think that this is going to bring more page views, more conversions and subscriptions. This effort, which is not going to take a lot of time off of the reporter's plate, this is how and why, it'll only take them about an hour out of their week to write this brief introduction section, here are some examples of what that looks like from other newsletters that were pulling ideas from. And it would only take your reporter one hour of time and that one hour of time is going to turn into these X, Y, Z metrics. We're going to see open rate, we expect to see this amount of open rates, which turns into this amount of clicks, which turns into this amount of page views, which turns into these retention numbers, these conversion numbers and these subscription numbers at the end. This is the bottom line. And not that every newsletter plays a subscription play, because that's not always the case. And every newsletter play is not also a traffic play. Newsletters do really, really well at engaging your already loyal, subscriber-based audience. So those that are already paying for you. They do really well in helping you serve underserved communities and audiences that you're not really talking to in a more intimate way to build that trust in authority within those communities, so that down the line you might get them to convert. They also do really, really well at retention and loyalty, which can save you so much more down the road than you start that just come from nowhere and no product to support that new start. Did I answer your question?

[00:10:34] **Jospeh Lichtermann** Yeah, absolutely. So making that real business case for the newsletter, that this is going to serve our overall goals and it won't be a huge lift workwise.

[00:10:51] **Jacqué Palmer** Yeah, especially with reporters, because I know that they're being asked to do so many things and it's really hard to come to them and get them excited about a newsletter product when they're looking at it and you're training them on the system or whatever it may be and they're like, "No, no, no, no, no, if I have to learn one more thing, I'm not doing it." So if you can get that out of their way, and really provide additional support via a producer, an editor, and then hopefully somebody on the technical side like who can come in and take all those pieces and execute it for them, that would just make it a lot easier for them to do. Yeah, so just make their job easier, try to figure out production and workflow, really look around and say, "Hey, I can write this book, can you produce it for me and can you send it?" And you know, just have a team and a system set up, so that we're all successful and that we can all really hit our goals and and hit these metrics.

[00:11:54] **Jospeh Lichtermann** Yeah, I know, I think that's a really great point and also that it's not just writing the newsletter, but producing it takes time and sending it takes time. You want to be able to test it and see how it looks in the inbox before you send it out. So, yeah, there's work there as well.

[00:12:08] **Jacqué Palmer** Yeah, and content strategy and planning strategy, those are the things that people don't talk about. A newsletter is not just about writing the newsletter, you have to have a fully mapped out content calendar and strategy for what now? You're sending a newsletter for a year, have you even looked at the numbers in the past like three

months? Like what's happening? Our audience, are they tuned out? Are they tuned in? Are they sharing? Are we taking the time to look at the data and then talk about, OK, let's talk about the next three months that are coming up, what are the holidays that we're going to come upon? What is some evergreen content that we can tap into to take the load off of us having to write fresh content every week or every month? So, yeah, strategy is really important.

[00:12:56] **Jospeh Lichtermann** Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. One of the things you've talked about a bit is sort of success metrics, and not every newsletter needs to be sort of a subscription play, but did you approach this Florida Time newsletter as a subscription play? Was that the key metric you were working towards?

[00:13:13] **Jacqué Palmer** Yeah, we were hoping to really turn this into its own platform, and have a subscription model underneath. It was really our intention to show that with these newsletter-first products, these could be standalone verticals that could support the current subscription model that the newspapers have, or as their own external, like, you can subscribe for these and they're provided by your local paper, or as an added value benefit under your current subscription. And that's currently where they stand, but we are in talks again of Florida Time 2.0, what does that look like? Can we really launch a vertical platform, with it's on a subscription model? What kind of resources is that going to take and how do we make that work?

[00:14:07] **Jospeh Lichtermann** That's fascinating, but taking a step back, one of the other things I wanted to ask about, as you prepare to launch the newsletter, you need audience and you need readers to actually read the newsletter. I'm curious how you went about promoting the newsletter and starting to build that readership.

[00:14:25] **Jacqué Palmer** That is my favorite part. So if you don't, well, you're probably not going to have an audience to convert, so the first step and recommendation that I would make is to tap into your core audience currently. Through your legacy staple products like say, your morning headlines or your daily briefing or your news alert, most legacy media companies and local papers have that staple newsletter list, which is their largest. So I would recommend talking directly to them and inviting them over into this new newsletter product. Really getting them excited about it, and really pushing for that sign up from your core audience. Then from there, I would flesh out a full grassroots marketing plan. Where is this audience? Really develop a persona. Who am I talking to? I want you to give that person a name, I want you to pull a photo from a stock website. I want you to think about what kind of Netflix show this person watches and binges on. If that's even a thing they do, maybe they're not that kind of person. Maybe they love to go work out or hike or run, or maybe they're a social butterfly and they love to go have cocktails even in the middle of a pandemic. Maybe they just don't care. You really have to get into the shoes of who your audience is. Once you figure that out, then you will know where you can allocate your resources for lead gen. So if you know that they read The Ann Friedman weekly newsletter, check out her advertising and ad placement rates, and see if you could put a couple of ads within her newsletter. If they are coffee connoisseurs, and there isn't a coffee connoisseur kind of newsletter for your local city, why don't you go ahead and put up some fliers across all of the coffee shops in town with a text-to-sign-up functionality within that flier. You could put ads in your local paper as well, you can partner with other community organizations that have a newsletter list or that have community events where you can make sure that they're speaking and letting the attendees know that you have a newsletter and just giving them the information on how they can sign up. If they listen to certain podcasts, you can look and see what kind of advertising rates and offerings that

they have and put in some commercials in those podcasts. So really start thinking like a marketer, start thinking about, "Well, if this was me, where could you get my attention?" You know? Then start planning out how you're going to make that happen and reach out to your marketing team and see if they have a budget for something like this. Trust me, there's always budget somewhere. You just got to get the right person excited and put some really great ideas in front of them so that they can get behind it.

[00:17:20] **Jospeh Lichtermann** That's awesome. Those are great ideas. So with Florida Time, how did you approach it, and what strategy for this particular newsletter?

[00:17:28] **Jacqué Palmer** So for Florida Time, because it was an older Boomer audience, we did a lot of print ads, we did some quizzes on the website that was Florida history based, which got the nerds really involved and excited. We had some text-to-sign-up business cards and these really cool Florida history, nostalgic postcards that have the text-to-sign-up functionality in there that we mailed out. I believe Elliott had done, this was before COVID, Elliott had done a couple of town hall presentations and he gets hired for speaking engagements, and so we made sure that he had the text-to-sign-up information so that every time he went and spoke somewhere, he would let them know, "Hey, by the way, I have this really cool newsletter, all you have to do is text Florida Time to whatever the code was to sign up for the newsletter." And it would get those leads really straight to my inbox, and I would go ahead and import those leads into the Salesforce CRM. We also allocated budget to paid acquisition efforts via Facebook. If you're going to do that, what I do want to recommend is that you wait until you have a solid, engaged list of about 1,000 people who are opening and engaging with your list, so that you can then download that list and do a look-a-like audience in Facebook so that you're really getting your bang for your buck as far as who it is you're targeting. Because if you go into Facebook and just put your ads in front of anyone, that can really hurt your list if you're inputting people who are not matching your core, engaged audience base in to your list, because then they're going to start to unsubscribe. They'll get the newsletter and be like, "What is this, this is not for me." They'll really start to tank your metrics and you do not want that to happen, especially if you get advertising on board and they start selling sponsorships and packages to one within your newsletter, because then they want to make sure that our advertisers are getting what they're paying for in a healthy list and healthy open click rate. So those are some of the strategies that we use for Florida Time.

[00:19:44] **Jospeh Lichtermann** That's terrific. Yeah, very smart with the look-a-like audience as a way to make sure you're reaching the appropriate readership. You mentioned this in your email to me as we were preparing for this, that you're now 100 issues into the Florida Time newsletter. You've been at it for a while, and we'll get into future sessions with the course that it's not just about launching a newsletter, but also that you have to maintain and iterate, and so I'd be curious if there was feedback or data you saw from that initial launch in that early period that has helped you as the newsletters evolved.

[00:20:23] **Jacqué Palmer** OK, so in the early period, I don't actually depend too much on those metrics, and I'll tell you why, because your first couple of hundred of sign ups are going to be your really close, kind of niche audience. It's going to be people in the company, it's going to be a friend of friends. Those people are usually always going to open it and interact with your newsletter. You want to take a look at your last maybe four to six weeks of engagement. Whatever that list size is, that's kind of the data you want to look at moving forward when you're planning out your content, because that is your current audience right now, if you were to take a snapshot, that is currently engaging consistently

with your product. But overall, I will tell you that these audiences love nostalgic content. The data showed us that they love photo galleries of natural disasters and Hollywood starlets, and they love calling into the reader rewind call-in-line to talk about department stores that used to be and are no longer around and that they feel kind of sad about it. Or this one woman called in about the Orange Bowl parade, and I was like, "Oh, my God, I remember the Orange Bowl Parade!" Those are things that people want to talk about and share, and it's also what others want to listen to. So those were two really popular reader rewind episodes about the old department store and the Orange Bowl Parade. And then, we all love a good murder story, right? The data showed us that they really love the Lonely Hearts murder and the Judge Chillingworth murder that happened in Manalapan. So, yeah, those are the kind of stories that the data was showing us that they really enjoy. So we want to make sure that whenever we're planning out the calendar for the future, that we tap back into a throwback Thursday of hey, remember this issue? Or here is a roundup of the top 10 cold case murders in Florida that you may not know of, and really tap into what they already love, what they already have told us that they love, right? Another really crucial thing that the data was telling us, and not so much in open and click rates but in user feedback, is, it drives home a really good point. So a sort of history for this particular audience, any time we mention the KKK or racism, or, you know, lives of Black Americans in the past, it really hits a nerve for some readers. Now, we could have been like, "OK, this is a no-zone, we do not want to keep sending this kind of content because they are not responding well. But that is our job. If the UVP, the value proposition for this newsletter and the importance of this content is to make sure that we are correctly and accurately sharing Florida history in all its good and all its glamor, it's ugly and it's bad, then we have to make sure that we're talking about that too. Even if we get a couple of subscribers that are like, I don't want to read about that or why do keep you talking about this? But I think that's really important too, depending on your beat that you sometimes have to stand your ground and do the right thing.

[00:23:53] **Jospeh Lichtermann** Yeah, absolutely, that at the end of the day, you're still a journalist and you have to use your editorial discretion, regardless of what the data tells you. Well excellent, I think that answers all my questions. Is there anything else we should know or maybe anything I missed?

[00:24:12] **Jacqué Palmer** About starting and launching your own newsletter? Yeah, You know what? I would leave you with this. We all write about and we all think that the things that we're writing about are great, right? Because if we didn't, we wouldn't be writing about them. But, really think about the audience first. Think about who wants to read this and why and just start there. Really think about, "I'm writing about this, so who would want to read that?" And then look into doing the research for that audience and then building out your plan, and making your case for why you should start this newsletter.

[00:24:52] **Jospeh Lichtermann** Well, that's a great way to end it and great advice to leave us with. Well, Jacqué, thank you so much for making the time and for speaking with us. We really appreciate it, so thank you so much.

[00:25:06] **Jacqué Palmer** You're welcome.