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Hyperlocal sports coverage with an anti-Patch approach

AKRON, Ohio (January 17, 2012) – In 2008, Angie Charles looked through the sports section of her local paper for news of her sons’ high school teams. Her newspaper, even in flush times, covered only a few high school games each day. And that meant minimal coverage for the teams her sons played on.

Today, as newspaper staffs and page counts shrink, daily high school sports coverage in print is at an all-time low. At the same time, Internet readership is on the rise, creating an opportunity for motivated entrepreneurs, underemployed journalists and even traditional media to fill the gap of high school sports news coverage with dedicated websites.

Charles, who manages a 16-year-old web design and search engine optimization firm, found a way to fill the hole when she was approached by freelance sports writer Jeff Brewer for assistance in developing a high school sports portal for 46 high schools in three Northeast Ohio counties. Brewer, a former college sports information director, freelance sports writer, youth coach and high school referee, had become frustrated with the lack of high school sports coverage and felt strongly that there was a market for a good high school sports site.

The two joined forces, along with a local programmer and investor, to launch Sports Reporting Technologies LLC, which developed a multi-media website content management system for high school sports news. The company launched a pilot site – SportsInk.com – to cover high schools in Ohio’s Summit, Medina and Portage counties. The company is now beginning efforts to license its SportSiteWare™ technology nationally.

“Having launched our hyperlocal high school sports site, we’ve watched with interest the development of Patch to see how it would impact us,” Charles said. “In the process, we found that our model actually resolves one of the key business dilemmas in which Patch has become mired. By creating a site that



leverages the relationships of individual communities, we've developed a revenue model that has a good opportunity for success."

The company's pilot site SportsInk.com (www.sportsink.com) collectively covers 46 high schools that reside in three contiguous counties. But, the real relationship is the sport conferences that the schools play in.

"We knew that local high school sports fans have as much interest in how their competitors are doing as they do their own school because playoff appearances are oftentimes based on not only the team's record, but the record of their opponents," Charles said. "By leveraging this natural interest, we were able to develop a site that has the traffic numbers to spark advertiser interest and provide a wider base of potential advertisers."

The result is a pilot site that covers four sport conferences and a separate "ghost conference" to include local private schools.

In 2011, the site had 1.4 million page views and more than 230,000 unique visitors.

"The feedback has been tremendous, from school administrators, coaches, parents, players and fans," Charles said. "Advertisers are blown away when they see the site. The robust content and multi-media presentation of the news, schedules, game results, stats, audio and video has made SportsInk.com the local go-to site for high school sports information.

"Early on we had concerns about whether Patch would interfere with our growth," she said. "But, we had nothing to worry about. We didn't see the kind of marketing and promotion locally that we thought would be necessary to grow a local website. And, within months of their launch in our area, their high school sports coverage became very spotty. Reading now about their financial situation reaffirms that you have to balance hyperlocal news coverage with a revenue stream that will support the site. Ours does."

Managing a multi-community site enables efficiencies on the editorial side. SportsInk.com employs just three full-time staffers and a handful of freelancers for 46 school communities in three counties. The site also employs one full-time sales manager.

"Our expenses are very un-Patch-like," Charles said. "Sports Reporting Technologies' SportSiteWare™ is uniquely designed to provide the content that



high school sports fans want and the tools to operate a successful online business,” she said. “We provide entrepreneurs and newspapers the full technology platform and marketing support to succeed.”

Covering high school sports isn’t about teenage ego, but about following the audience, and, naturally, the money.

In a 2008 Stanford-Poynter Project study, 70 percent of male and female participants reported reading online sports stories.

And, in fact, a recent Burst Media report indicated that websites are the preferred sports news source for men and women, across nearly all age groups; only those over 55 chose local TV news as their source for sports coverage.

The Internet, obviously, is even more ingrained into the lives of students ages 13-18. Figures, provided by a Pew Internet Project study and a Fuse Teen Advertising study, are staggering:

- 93% of teens use the Internet
- 83% of teens consider themselves to be a heavy or average user of the Internet
- 50-60% of teens post photos online
- 75% view videos online

As a site focused on local high school sports, SportsInk.com gives advertisers an opportunity to go where readers – their customers – are going.

Consider that 60% of advertisers surveyed by Forrester Research Inc., say they’ll shift their budget from traditional marketing to interactive marketing. While advertising budgets may drop overall, digital media will gain advertising dollars of even big-name advertisers. The noted research firm reports that interactive marketing will near \$55 billion and represent 21 percent of all marketing spend.

“In the race to capture willing readers and advertisers, licensing SportSiteWare™ gives entrepreneurs a head start,” Charles said. “Our high school sports reporting model can be adapted for any geographic region.”

For newspapers and radio stations struggling with the costs of developing engaging websites to present their existing content, SportSiteWare™ offers an affordable alternative to building out one’s own site and the flexibility to brand it to their own identity.



SportsInk.com is Sports Reporting Technologies' pilot website, covering 15 varsity high school sports at 46 high schools in four sport conferences in three counties in Ohio.

Sports Reporting Technologies, www.sports-reporting.net, is a group of professional journalists (Sports Reporting) and portal design experts (Technologies), working together to create a new, cost-efficient and effective platform to reach the underserved, yet lucrative, high school sports market.

SportSiteWare™ is a turnkey platform that enables online media companies to develop a local version of SportsInk.com for their market(s). It provides a fully functional advertising module for revenue generation, and powerful modules that manage content, user access and e-newsletter capabilities.

For more information contact Sports Reporting Technologies at 877-799-9994 ext. 2102 or e-mail buildasite@sports-reporting.net.