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JANUARY 2026

Consumer Trends That Will Shape Community Publications in 2026



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COMING NEXT MONTH

The February issue of Publish will be looking into how ACP member benefits can help build your business and your staff.

Are You Facing A Gray Tsunami?

Are many of your production people retiring or hoping to retire soon?

Are you keeping folks on staff who are having trouble keeping-up or are designing pages and ads that look like thirty years ago? Are your in-house people expensive relative to the work volume? Having challenges finding, hiring and training younger replacements? Even worse – are you stuck doing this work yourself?

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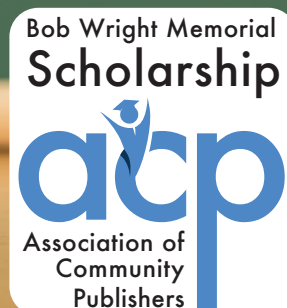
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ARE YOU LISTENING?



BY JOYCE FRERICKS

Happy 2026! I absolutely love being with my family and friends during the holidays, and I hope all of you were able to spend time with yours too. My favorite part is just plain listening.

When I was younger, I remember thinking about my mom and oldest sister after holidays. They were so quiet. Rarely did they say anything. They didn't take part in games, cards, etc. They just listened. When they did talk, it was normally questions of others. At the time, I honestly thought that was kind of sad, but now, I understand. They didn't need to be part of the chaos. They just enjoyed listening.

There is no better way to learn about someone you love than to just listen to them. Think about it; when you really care about someone, you listen to them.

Listening is the No. 1 communication skill we need when working with our advertisers. Our advertisers need to know we care about them before we sell to them. How often do we go into a business and ask them to advertise in our product before we even know anything about them? We tell them all about our publications but forget to ask about them first.

I encourage our sales people and all of you who are in sales to research before you communicate with your customers — new and old. You may find out something new about a customer you have had for many years. Then, when you visit with them next time, continue that research with a few in-person questions. This will hopefully help your customer to know you really do care.

Some tips for those conversations:

— Ask open-ended questions. Don't ask yes or no questions.

— Make it a conversation. Don't interrogate. Try "Tell me about your last year."

— Be very careful about giving advice. I have had a few customers call me and ask for new reps. It wasn't because the rep didn't know enough; it was because they thought they new everything. One of them said, "Don't ever send that (insert name) in here again. He thinks he can run my business better than I can."

“ Think about it; when you really care about someone, you listen to them. Listening is the No. 1 communication skill we need when working with our advertisers.

One more story: I have a business partner who is one of our top sales reps. One time she told me that people share way too much personal

information with her and she didn't know why. Then, I heard her talking to someone a few months later and understood. She listens. She doesn't just pretend she's listening, she really listens. Then, she asks them questions about what they are talking about and listens again. They feel like they can trust her, and she understands their business and needs because she listens.

Remember, every talkative person can be a great sales rep if they learn to listen, listen and listen some more. ■

2026 BEST OF THE BEST AWARDS



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ENTRY DEADLINE - FEBRUARY 6, 2026

CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE



BY CASSEY RECORE

Happy New Year! As we ring in a new year, many of us reflect on what we've accomplished, the challenges we've overcome, and the people who helped make it all possible. The start of a new year naturally invites celebration of fresh beginnings, renewed energy, and the work that carries our industry forward. And there's no better moment to lean into that spirit of appreciation than with the Association of Community Publishers' Best of the Best awards.

This annual competition gives us a perfect reason to pause and celebrate the remarkable talent within our organizations — designers, advertisers, sales teams, editors, publishers, and everyone in between whose creativity and dedication drive community publishing at its best.

Every year, the Best of the Best contest shines a spotlight on the people and ideas that elevate community publications across the country. The 2026 competition will be filled with outstanding creativity, meaningful storytelling, and innovative approaches that highlight the very best our industry has to offer. It's a moment to recognize the teams and individuals who pour

their talent, time, and passion into shaping community-focused content. This contest is built to honor brilliance and encourage ongoing innovation.

But what makes the Best of the Best truly special isn't just the awards or the titles — it's the celebration that happens around them. Across the ACP membership, many publishers transform the presentation of winners into celebrations. Some bring their entire staff together for a viewing party; others surprise their winning designers, writers, or sales reps with treats or small gifts. A few even share the experience with advertisers, turning the moment into a meaningful reminder of how collaboration drives success.

For some, these celebrations have grown into something of a tradition. Members often share photos of decorated lobbies, award ceremonies, and proud teams holding up their awards in their own publications. It's more than excitement — it's culture. It's team pride. And it's a recognition that every award represents countless hours of effort and a deep commitment to serving communities with quality content and creative excellence.

And the truth is, you don't need an awards ceremony to celebrate your people. The Best of the Best awards simply highlight what should already be common practice in every organization: taking time to appreciate the hard work, creativity, and resilience that keeps your publication thriving. Whether it's recognizing a sales rep for landing a new client, spotlighting a designer's fresh layout, thanking a writer for meeting a tough deadline, or acknowledging an advertiser who has supported

you for years — every moment is an opportunity to lift someone up. Small celebrations, verbal praise, a team shoutout, a handwritten thank-you note, or a shared treat at the end of a big week can have a big impact. They remind your team that their contributions matter and help create an environment where people feel valued, energized, and connected.

When you build a culture of appreciation all year long, wins like the Best of the Best become even more meaningful, because they reinforce the recognition your people already feel every day.

As we look forward to the 2026 awards cycle, we're excited to continue honoring the people who make this industry exceptional. Whether your team goes all-out with decorations and festivities or celebrates quietly over coffee and conversation, we hope you take the time to recognize the dedication behind each entry.

Because in the end, the Best of the Best isn't just about winning... it's about celebrating the people who make our communities stronger, one great idea at a time. ■



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BY LOREN COLBURN

CLICK, SHIP, REGRET: A Cautionary Tale About Quality



I recently wrapped up a bathroom remodel in our home — or at least I hope it's wrapped up. It's been a long, drawn-out ordeal, but thankfully everything is finished just in time for the holidays. From the very beginning, the project timeline was derailed by the poor quality controls (or lack thereof) built into the online ordering systems of several suppliers.

We ordered the vanity from Wayfair because we had an unusual height restriction that none of our local suppliers could accommodate. And sure enough, "Wayfair, you've got just what I need!" seemed true — at first. We placed the order on May 3rd and the vanity with an engineered marble top arrived on May 21st. Everything looked fine... until we unpackaged it. At certain angles, the vanity top looked like someone had taken abrasive sandpaper to the glossy finish in multiple spots. Completely unacceptable.

After numerous phone calls, Wayfair agreed on June 4th to ship a replacement and promised further instructions on what to do with the 280-pound original unit now occupying one bay of my garage. When the replacement finally arrived on June 24th, we immediately unpacked it — only to find similar, though less severe, surface blemishes. More calls and discussions followed until, on July 14th, we reached a resolution: a substantial discount, a shipment of polishing compound from the manufacturer, and an agreement that

I would keep both vanities (even though I needed only one).

At least, after some polishing on my part, the project could continue.

Next came the light fixture over the vanity. Once again, none of the local stores had what we needed in stock, but their websites offered a much larger selection. So, we turned to the "convenience and selection" of the online world, this time via Home Depot. When the contractor opened the box, one of the four globes was shattered. After navigating the customer service process, the supplier agreed to send a replacement. It arrived intact — but in a slightly different color than the other three. That issue is still in the resolution mode!

To be fair, I did manage to find the GFI-protected outlet locally at Lowe's — available, in stock, and ready to take home. Almost too good to be true. And it was. The outlet was defective and wouldn't reset, so back to Lowe's I went. The difference? The issue was fixed the same day with a quick drive — not weeks of emails, calls, and shipments.

The point in all this: the quality built into today's system of massive online selection, offshore manufacturing, and ever-expanding e-commerce convenience is deeply flawed. We've convinced ourselves it's better than supporting "locally owned and operated," but my experience suggests otherwise.

HERE ARE SOME REAL TAKEAWAYS:

- All three products were manufactured outside the United States.
- The manufacturing and shipping quality controls were inadequate.
- The promise of "online convenience" was overshadowed by the time and frustration required to get each order corrected.

This should be a reminder to our industry as well: there is no substitute for quality. Not in the content we include in our publications. Not in the production quality of our finished products. Not in the delivery methods we choose to reach our readers. To maintain the high regard our readers and advertisers have for us, we must consistently maintain high standards.

According to CVC verification, of the 20,568 people surveyed across the circulation areas of 228 ACP member publications, 74.6% reported they regularly read or look through their ACP publication. Compare that to an average email open rate of 34.75% (MailOptIn) and a banner ad click-through rate of 2.69% for eCommerce ads (Shopify), community publications continue to outperform other popular advertising options. That advantage didn't happen by chance—it was earned over time by consistently meeting the needs of our readers and advertisers. Keep a close eye on your quality and lean into the fact that "Print's not dead... it's READ!" ■

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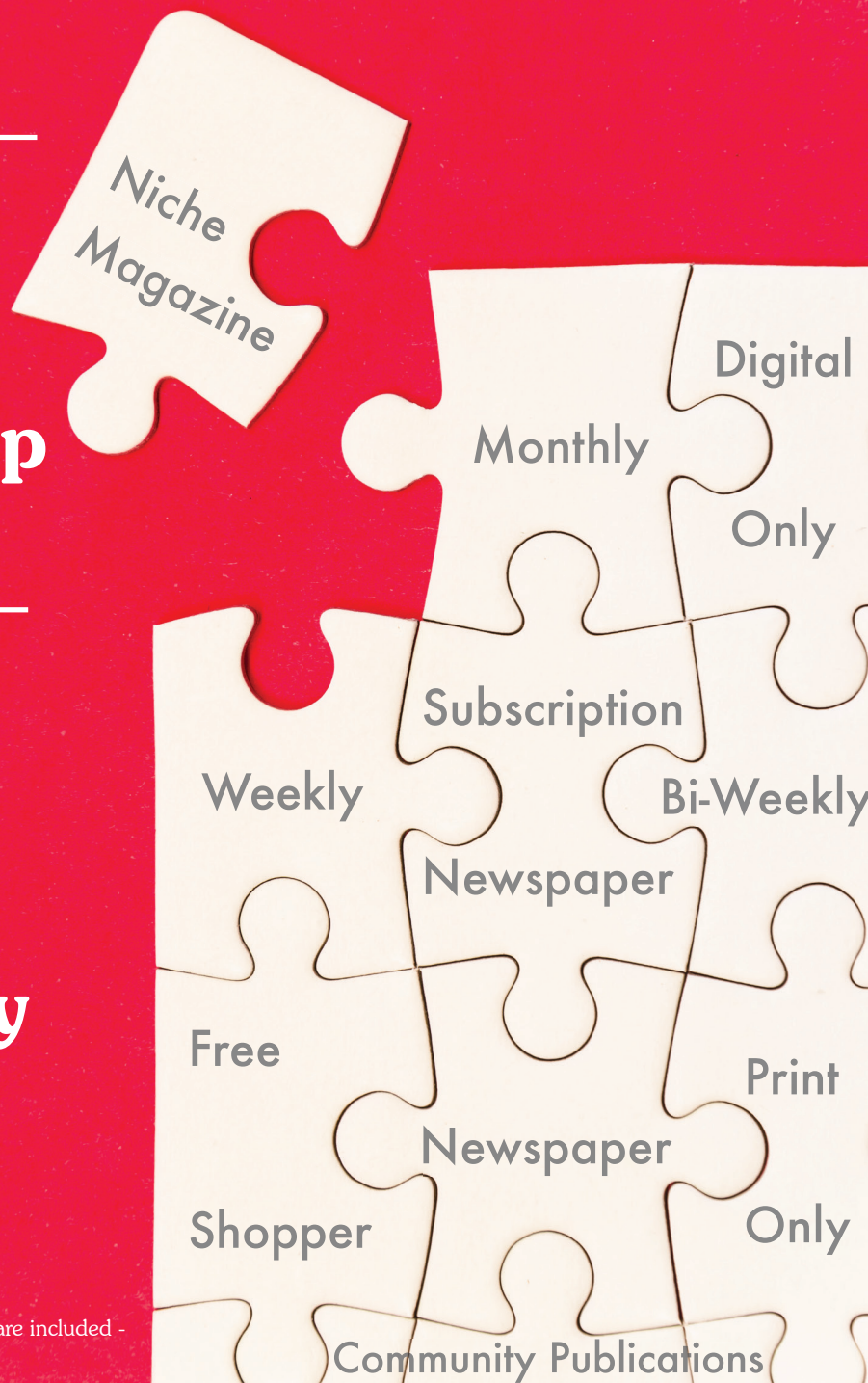
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CONSUMER TRENDS THAT WILL SHAPE COMMUNITY PUBLICATIONS IN 2026

As 2026 approaches, community publications are navigating one of the most dynamic shifts the local media industry has experienced in decades. Reader expectations, advertiser demands, and marketplace realities are all changing — often faster than small media organizations can adapt.

Yet these shifts also present tremendous opportunity. Community publications sit at the heart of local life, providing something no national platform can match: **trusted, place-based information and a direct connection to the people who live, work, and shop in the community.**

Understanding the emerging consumer trends that will define 2026 can help community publishers strengthen readership, deepen advertiser relationships, and evolve their business models for long-term sustainability.

1. VALUE-DRIVEN SPENDING WILL INFLUENCE ADVERTISING AND READER BEHAVIOR

Consumers are becoming far more intentional about where they spend their money. Rising costs have made readers more price-sensitive, but also more discerning; they want reliable, trustworthy information that helps them make informed decisions.

For community publications, this means:

- **Service journalism and practical information** will attract more engagement.
- Readers will value publications that highlight deals, savings, and local resources.

- Advertisers will gravitate toward media that offer transparency and measurable value.

Publications that clearly demonstrate their community impact and advertiser ROI will earn loyalty from both audiences.

2. HYPER-LOCAL IDENTITY BECOMES A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

In a digital world dominated by national and global platforms, consumers crave authenticity and local relevance more than ever. Community publications are uniquely positioned to deliver what big media cannot: **stories rooted in neighborhood identity, local culture, and community pride.**

In 2026, this trend will drive:

- Higher demand for local profiles, grassroots storytelling, and neighborhood reporting
- Strengthened relationships with small businesses that want access to hyper-local audiences
- Increased reader trust for publications that champion the voices and realities of their town

The more local the content, the stronger the connection.

3. EXPERIENTIAL ENGAGEMENT WILL REDEFINE READER INTERACTION

As local retail becomes more experiential, local media will need to create **real-world experiences** that bring their content to life. Publica-

tions are evolving into community conveners, creating touchpoints beyond the printed page.

Examples include:

- Hosting events, workshops, and forums
- Sponsoring community gatherings
- Running contests, photo submissions, or reader-driven content
- Partnering with local retailers for experiential promotions

These activities transform the publication into a **community platform**, deepening ties with readers and creating new advertising opportunities.

4. AI TOOLS WILL TRANSFORM EDITORIAL AND ADVERTISING OPERATIONS

AI is becoming essential for small publishers. In 2026, affordable tools will help community publications:

- Streamline layout, design, and production
- Personalize newsletters and digital content
- Analyze audience behavior
- Improve advertiser targeting
- Automate repetitive tasks so staff can focus on high-value editorial work

Readers will increasingly expect personalization online — and advertisers will expect smarter, more precise audience insights. Community publications that strategically use AI will strengthen both content and revenue performance.

CONSUMER TRENDS FEATURE

5. GROWING DEMAND FOR TRANSPARENT, ETHICAL MEDIA

As misinformation and AI-generated content proliferate, consumers will gravitate toward media they can trust. Community publications stand out because they are built on **relationships, accountability, and proximity** — the reporter might be the parent next to you at the school play or the neighbor you see at the coffee shop.

In 2026, trustworthiness will be a defining competitive advantage, and community publications can reinforce it through:

- Clear reporting practices
- Ethical standards in advertising
- Transparent correction policies
- Human-powered journalism supported (not replaced) by technology

Readers will reward publications that demonstrate integrity and transparency.

6. OMNICHANNEL CONSUMPTION WILL SHAPE CONTENT DELIVERY

Today's audiences no longer consume information in a single, predictable way. Instead, they navigate between print, mobile phones, social media, search engines, newsletters, community apps, and even voice assistants — often within the same day. By 2026, this fragmented consumption pattern will accelerate, making **omnichannel distribution not just a strategy but a necessity** for community publications.

Readers expect news and local information to meet them where they already are. The community newspaper that lands in the driveway each week remains valuable, but it is no longer the only touchpoint. This shift opens the door for publications to build a deeper, more diversified presence in the daily lives of their audiences.

For community publishers, embracing omnichannel engagement creates significant opportunities:

- **Reach residents who no longer rely on print alone**

Many younger and mid-career readers rarely engage with traditional print, even if they value local information. Digital channels — email newsletters, websites, apps, and social media feeds — allow publishers to reach segments of the community that would otherwise be lost. This diversifies readership and ensures the publication remains relevant to evolving demographics.

- **Tailor content formats to platform strengths.**

Each channel excels at different types of content.

- **Print** thrives with long-form stories, features, local profiles, and in-depth journalism.
- **Email newsletters** are ideal for curated updates, quick headlines, and direct calls to action.
- **Social media** works best for highly visual content, breaking news, short updates, and community engagement.
- **Web and mobile platforms** support deeper archives, searchable content, and multimedia storytelling.
- **Community apps** create real-time push notifications, event reminders, and interactive tools.

By matching content to each platform's natural strengths, publications can maximize engagement and deliver information in formats readers will actually consume.

- **Offer advertisers multi-touch, cross-platform campaigns.**

Advertisers increasingly expect reach across multiple channels. An omnichannel publication can offer packages that include print ads,

boosted social posts, newsletter placements, sponsored content, and website banners — all working together to reinforce a message.

This multi-touch approach significantly increases advertiser value by ensuring repeated exposure across the platforms residents check daily.

- **Increase real-time relevance with breaking news and live updates.**

Print cannot deliver immediate updates — but digital channels can. Community publishers who use their website, social feeds, or email alerts to deliver:

- weather advisories
- school cancellations
- emergency updates
- traffic alerts
- live community event coverage

All things that build tremendous trust and daily habits with readers. Real-time relevance strengthens the publication's role as a central information source and keeps audiences coming back between print editions.

PRINT REMAINS AN ANCHOR — BUT DIGITAL DELIVERY EXPANDS REACH

Print continues to offer something digital channels struggle to replicate: credibility, permanence, and immersion. It anchors the brand and reinforces the publication's identity in the community. But pairing print with smart digital delivery multiplies its impact.

The most successful community publications in 2026 will integrate print and digital into one cohesive ecosystem — meeting readers in the mailbox, in their inbox, on their phones, and across their preferred platforms. This not only expands reach and engagement but also opens the door to new revenue models, stronger advertiser relationships, and long-term audience growth.

7. LOCAL ADVERTISERS EXPECT MODERN, MEASURABLE MARKETING OPTIONS

Small businesses — especially local retailers — want advertising that is targeted, trackable, and tied to results. In 2026, publications will see rising demand for:

- Sponsored content or “advertorial” storytelling
- Newsletter ads with click-through metrics
- Social media cross-promotions
- Interactive digital placements
- Geo-targeted campaigns
- Community “shop local” collaborations

Community publications that evolve their advertising toolkit will not only serve small businesses better — they’ll create more sustainable revenue streams.

POSITIONING COMMUNITY PUBLICATIONS FOR SUCCESS IN 2026

The trends shaping 2026 make one thing abundantly clear: **local media is more essential than ever**. In an era dominated by national platforms, social media feeds, and algorithm-driven news, community publications provide something uniquely valuable — **trustworthy, relevant, and place-based information** that strengthens connections within neighborhoods and towns.

Community publishers that proactively embrace the changes outlined above can solidify their position as the heartbeat of local life, while simultaneously opening new avenues for growth, engagement, and revenue.

To thrive in 2026, community publications should focus on several key strategies:

1. DELIVER MEANINGFUL, HYPER-LOCAL CONTENT

Readers are drawn to information that feels personal and relevant to their lives. Covering local stories — such as school board decisions, neighborhood profiles, local business features, events, and human-interest stories — ensures the publication resonates deeply with its audience. Hyper-local content not only builds loyalty but also differentiates the publication from national or generic digital sources.

2. BLEND PRINT WITH DIGITAL AND EXPERIENTIAL ENGAGEMENT

While print remains a trusted anchor, modern readers expect content across multiple channels. By integrating print with email newsletters, social media, mobile apps, and interactive digital platforms, publishers can meet audiences wherever they are. Additionally, experiential engagement — such as live events, workshops, community forums, or pop-up features — reinforces the publication’s role as a **community hub**, creating touchpoints beyond the page.

3. USE TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE EFFICIENCY AND PERSONALIZATION

Technology can enhance both operational efficiency and audience engagement. Editorial and production workflows can be streamlined using content management systems, AI-assisted tools, and analytics platforms. Personalization — delivering the right stories to the right readers at the right time — can increase relevance and loyalty. Publishers that leverage technology wisely can improve both the reader experience and internal productivity,

freeing staff to focus on high-value journalism and community engagement.

4. BUILD STRONG, MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOCAL ADVERTISERS

Local businesses remain a vital revenue source. Community publications that understand their advertisers’ goals and can offer cross-platform, measurable, and creative advertising solutions will thrive. By providing tailored campaigns, sponsored content opportunities, and collaborative community initiatives, publishers can strengthen advertiser relationships while demonstrating tangible ROI.

5. REINFORCE TRUST THROUGH TRANSPARENT AND ETHICAL PRACTICES

In an age of misinformation and algorithm-driven content, credibility is a publication’s most valuable asset. Upholding ethical reporting standards, being transparent about advertising practices, and maintaining accountability to the community builds lasting trust. Readers who trust their local publication are more likely to remain loyal, engage with content, and support advertisers featured in the publication.

By combining these strategies, community publications can do more than survive — they can **become indispensable pillars of their communities**. In 2026, successful publishers will be those that deliver highly relevant content, embrace technology thoughtfully, engage audiences across multiple channels, support local businesses, and maintain the trust that only a true community-focused publication can earn.

In short, the publications that thrive will not just report on the community — they will **actively strengthen it**. ■

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THE FUTURE OF LOCAL RETAIL: 8 TRENDS THAT WILL SHAPE COMMUNITY SHOPPING IN 2026

BY OPEN AI

Local retail is entering a defining moment. While national chains and online giants continue to dominate the headlines, consumers are increasingly rediscovering the charm, character, and personal connection that only local businesses can offer. At the same time, technology is evolving at a pace that is fundamentally reshaping how customers browse, buy, and engage with retailers of all sizes.

For local store owners, this combination of rising consumer expectations and unprecedented technological opportunity creates both a challenge and an opening. The retailers who thrive in 2026 will be the ones who blend the soul of Main Street with the sophistication of modern retail.

This year's most influential trends show a marketplace where community meets innovation — and where small retailers can compete more effectively than ever before.

1. AI TOOLS LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD FOR LOCAL RETAILERS

A few years ago, artificial intelligence felt out of reach for most Main Street shops. Today, AI-powered tools are affordable, accessible, and surprisingly intuitive — even for small teams or solo owners.

In 2026, AI will quietly power much of the behind-the-scenes work that once required guesswork or hours of manual labor. Local retailers are using AI to:

- forecast demand and weather seasonal shifts
- automatically reorder top-selling items
- analyze sales trends in real time
- generate marketing content and social captions
- target promotions to loyal customers
- plan inventory based on historical data

This doesn't replace the human touch — it frees up the retailer to use it. Instead of wrestling with spreadsheets or marketing calendars, owners can focus on in-store service, community engagement, and merchandise curation — the areas where local retail shines brightest.

AI becomes the silent partner that helps small shops think big.

2. AGENTIC SHOPPING CHANGES HOW CUSTOMERS DISCOVER LOCAL BUSINESSES

As AI assistants become part of day-to-day life, consumers will increasingly start their shopping journeys by asking a digital agent for recommendations. Instead of typing “bookstore near me,” they may say:

“Find a local shop that carries this author and is open today.”

“Where's the nearest boutique that sells sustainable women's fashion?”

“Who has this product in stock locally right now?”

These digital “shopping concierges” rely heavily on accurate, structured online data. That means local retailers must pay closer attention to:

- up-to-date store hours
- current inventory listings
- clear product descriptions
- Google Business Profiles
- positive reviews
- local SEO
- strong social presence

If the AI doesn't see you, customers won't either.

The good news? Local retailers who stay digitally visible will enjoy new foot traffic from customers actively seeking to shop local — guided by their AI helpers.

3. PHYGITAL RETAIL MAKES THE LOCAL STORE EXPERIENCE EVEN MORE ESSENTIAL

The future of shopping doesn't live entirely online or entirely in-store — it lives in the hybrid space between the two. “Phygital” retail isn't about turning your boutique into a Silicon Valley showroom. It's about using digital tools to enhance the personal, sensory, community-driven experience local shops naturally provide.

CONSUMER RETAIL TRENDS

Across 2026, expect more local retailers to blend online convenience with in-store connection:

- Let customers browse inventory online before they visit
- Offer simple prepaid pickup or curbside options
- Use QR codes to share product stories or brand values
- Provide text message updates on new arrivals
- Accept online reservations for fittings or services
- Send digital receipts with personalized thank-yous

This blended approach respects how customers live today — they want to research online, shop locally, and enjoy an in-person experience that feels warm, human, and unique.

Local retailers who embrace this balance will win both convenience-seekers and loyal community shoppers.

4. IMMERSIVE VISUALS AND SOCIAL COMMERCE DRIVE LOCAL DISCOVERY

In 2026, customers often encounter a local store for the first time through a screen — not the front door. Social platforms have become the new neighborhood window displays.

Short videos, behind-the-scenes clips, staff spotlights, live shopping sessions, and unfiltered storytelling are powerful tools for local retailers. What used to require a marketing budget now takes only a phone camera, creativity, and authenticity.

Local retailers gain traction by:

- Posting try-ons or styling videos
- Showcasing new arrivals through live sales
- Sharing customer testimonials
- Highlighting local makers or artisans

- Using shoppable posts to drive direct purchases
- Giving a “day in the life” glimpse of the store

The more human the content, the stronger the engagement.

Younger shoppers, in particular, rely on social discovery — and they prefer to support businesses with heart, purpose, and personality. Local retailers are perfectly positioned to deliver that.

5. PRIVATE LABELS GIVE LOCAL RETAILERS SIGNATURE PRODUCTS

Private-label merchandise has traditionally been the domain of big retailers, but small shops are increasingly creating their own products — and customers love it.

From local roaster coffee blends and boutique-branded candles to custom apparel and house-made sauces, private-label goods:

- improve margins
- reinforce the shop’s identity
- create exclusivity
- make great gift items
- deepen customer loyalty

A signature product line can become part of a store’s story. When customers say, “I can only get this here,” it creates a powerful reason to return — and a stronger emotional connection to the brand.

In 2026, expect even more local retailers to collaborate with local artisans, manufacturers, or small-batch creators to build product lines that reflect their community and values.

6. FASTER FULFILLMENT BECOMES A LOCAL SUPERPOWER

Speed is no longer a luxury — it’s an expectation. But this gives local shops a surprising strategic

advantage. They are already closer to the customer, physically and culturally.

In 2026, more independent retailers will offer:

- same-day or next-day local delivery
- scheduled delivery windows
- curbside pickup within hours
- community delivery routes
- “order online, pick up in 20 minutes” services

Even a small radius of quick delivery can differentiate a local retailer from national competitors. Combined with personal touches — a handwritten note, gift wrapping, a local delivery carrier — it becomes a signature experience that Amazon simply can’t match.

7. IN-STORE AUTOMATION ENHANCES SERVICE WITHOUT REPLACING IT

Local retail thrives on human connection, but technology can remove the friction that distracts from that experience. Automation doesn’t replace personal service — it supports it.

Small retailers are adopting:

- mobile or tablet checkout
- digital loyalty programs
- automated stock alerts
- integrated POS systems
- smart shelving or inventory tracking
- self-checkout for quick grab-and-go purchases

Every minute saved scanning barcodes or reconciling inventory is a minute that can be used for conversation, styling help, product demos, or upselling — activities that generate value and loyalty.

CONSUMER RETAIL TRENDS

Automation reduces the workload.
Human interaction enhances the brand.

8. PERSONALIZATION AND LOCAL RETAIL MEDIA STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY BONDS

Local retailers have a natural advantage when it comes to personalization: they know their customers by name, by taste, and by story. Technology allows them to scale what they already do intuitively.

- In 2026, personalization for small retailers will include:
- targeted emails with curated products
- personalized texts about new arrivals
- segmented loyalty rewards
- follow-ups after purchases or events

- exclusive offers for VIP customers

At the same time, “local retail media” is growing — from digital signage inside stores to collaborative advertising between neighboring businesses. Shops are partnering with local publishers, influencers, and community organizations to promote products in ways that reflect local culture and values.

The future of local retail is not mass marketing — it’s meaningful, personalized communication.

THE ROAD AHEAD: INNOVATION WITH HEART

The biggest misconception about the future of retail is that technology will overshadow human connection. But in local retail, the opposite is happening. Technology is giving small retailers the tools to operate more efficiently, connect more

meaningfully, and compete more confidently.

What customers want most in 2026 is clear:

- convenience,
- authenticity,
- transparency,
- and a sense of belonging.

Local retailers are uniquely equipped to deliver all of these — and more.

By embracing new tools while staying rooted in community values, local shops can turn 2026 into a year not of disruption, but of renaissance.

Main Street isn’t going anywhere. It’s evolving — and the retailers who evolve with it will define the future of local commerce. ■

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ChatGPT-5 (Dec 8 version),
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A horizontal banner for the 'acp REVENUE \$UMMIT FLORIDA'. The background is yellow with palm tree silhouettes. The text 'acp' is in white, 'REVENUE \$UMMIT' is in green, and 'FLORIDA' is in large green letters. Below 'FLORIDA' is 'WESTGATE LAKES RESORT & SPA'. To the right, it says 'ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY PUBLISHERS' and 'FEBRUARY 26-27, 2026 + ORLANDO'. At the bottom, a row of logos includes 'january spring', 'CIRCULATION VERIFICATION COUNCIL', 'BROADSTREET REDEFINE STANDARD', '032 OUTSOURCING', and 'NEWSPAPERCRM tools to streamline media selling'.

ORLANDO LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

ACP's Leadership Summit is an annual event packed with sessions exclusive to ACP Members who are publishers and leaders in our industry. These events are held as a more intimate gathering limited to 50 leaders and 10 associate members. This format provides for a lot of open discussion mixed with great presentations from a variety of sources. The following is the list of sessions being presented in this year's Revenue Summit in Orlando – February 26-27:

AI — Practical Use Workshop —

Bring your laptop and join this hands-on training workshop focused on creating practical tools that directly drive revenue. Learn how to build customizable solutions for spec ad creation, proposals, and advertorials that streamline your sales process, reduce turnaround time, and help you close more deals. You'll leave with tools you can use immediately to respond faster to advertisers, present more professional offerings, and ultimately increase sales efficiency and revenue.

Opening Networking Activity —

Kick off the event by getting to know your fellow attendees in this lively icebreaker! Our updated twist on the classic BINGO game is designed to spark conversations, encourage interaction, and help you connect with new colleagues right from the start — all while having a little fun along the way.

Open Forum Roundtable —

Start the event with an open, thought-provoking discussion among peers. Bring your biggest questions, challenges, and successes to the table — whether it's something that's keeping you up at night or a new idea that's worked well. This collaborative conversation is designed to spark ideas and set the tone for deeper learning throughout the rest of the sessions.

Taking Advantage of Grant Programs —

There's a lot of grant funding avail-

able — are you tapping into it? Learn what programs exist, how to identify opportunities that fit your organization, and what it takes to secure and successfully use those funds. This session will help you turn available grant dollars into real impact.

How to Use AI to Grow Revenue —

Discover how AI can unlock new, scalable revenue streams through audio and video. This session will show you how to generate high-quality audio and video ads using AI and integrate programmatic for efficient production and distribution. Learn how to stream audio and video content to create a 24/7 branded radio-style channel for under \$100 per month, opening the door to new advertising products, sponsorships, and always-on revenue opportunities. Walk away with practical ideas you can implement quickly to expand your offerings, attract new advertisers, and grow recurring revenue.

How to Make a Media Kit that Sells in 2026 —

In this session you'll learn the key elements of creating a media kit that works, what to include, and how to structure it, plus real examples from successful publishers. We will walk through the seven easy "must-haves" every media kit or rate card needs, share templates you can use right away, and offer guidance on pricing and packaging so you can create a kit that actually helps you sell.

Alternative Revenue Streams: Thinking Beyond Traditional Sales —

What if your next revenue opportunity doesn't look like an ad at all? This open-ended session encourages you to think outside the box and explore new ways to generate income beyond traditional products. We'll discuss creative ideas for additional products and services you can offer advertisers and readers, spark fresh thinking, and share examples of

non-traditional revenue opportunities.

Real Solutions to Help You Bundle & Price — KISS —

Keep it simple for your advertisers with a program/package approach in 2026. We will lead you through a workshop on how to build category specific programs that speak to your advertiser's needs while keeping their choices as simple as "Good, Better, Best". When you put the right program in front of your client, you get to YES much quicker. Let's do that! More revenue, more yeses!

Save money using outsourcing —

This session will break down how modern outsourcing helps community publishers reduce costs, streamline production, and expand capacity without adding headcount. We'll cover what outsourcing is (and isn't), how publishers are using it today, and the specific functions that can be delegated offshore. Attendees will learn how to get started, what an effective outsourcing workflow looks like, and the real cost savings and revenue-impact opportunities available. Ultimately, the goal is to show publishers how outsourcing can strengthen margins, improve productivity, and free their teams to focus on high-value work that grows the business.

Idea Exchange: Revenue Growth & Cost Savings for Community Publications —

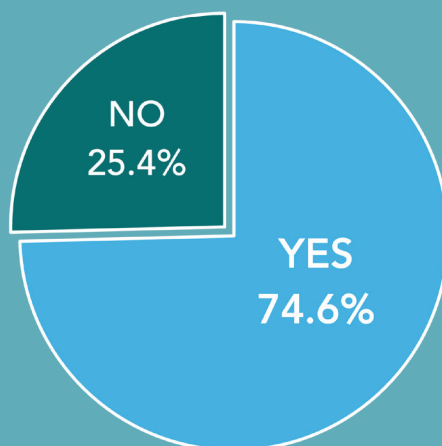
Join this collaborative idea exchange designed specifically for community publications looking to do more with less. This session will focus on sharing practical ideas to grow revenue, reduce expenses, and improve overall efficiency. From new sales opportunities and creative advertiser offerings to smart cost-saving strategies, participants will exchange real-world solutions that can be implemented quickly. Come prepared to share, listen, and leave with actionable ideas that can positively impact your bottom line.

Register now before it fills up!



WHO ARE WE?

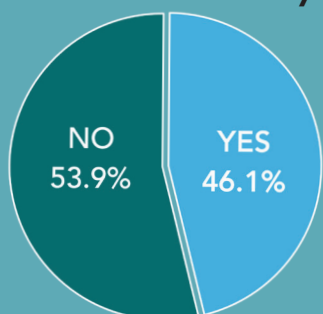
CVC asked 20,568 people if they regularly read or look through their local ACP member publication...



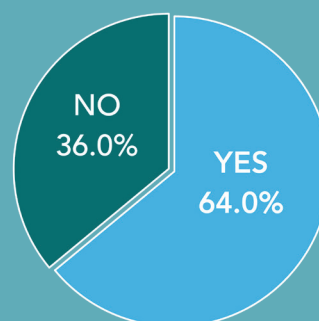
Breakdown based on the 228 member publications audited by CVC.

Let's put that in perspective...

US Population 18+ who watched Super Bowl 58 in February 2024



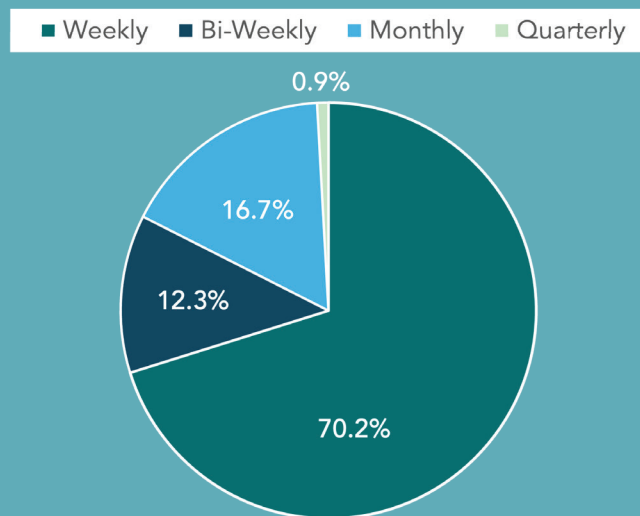
Percentage of voting-eligible adults who voted in 2024 Election



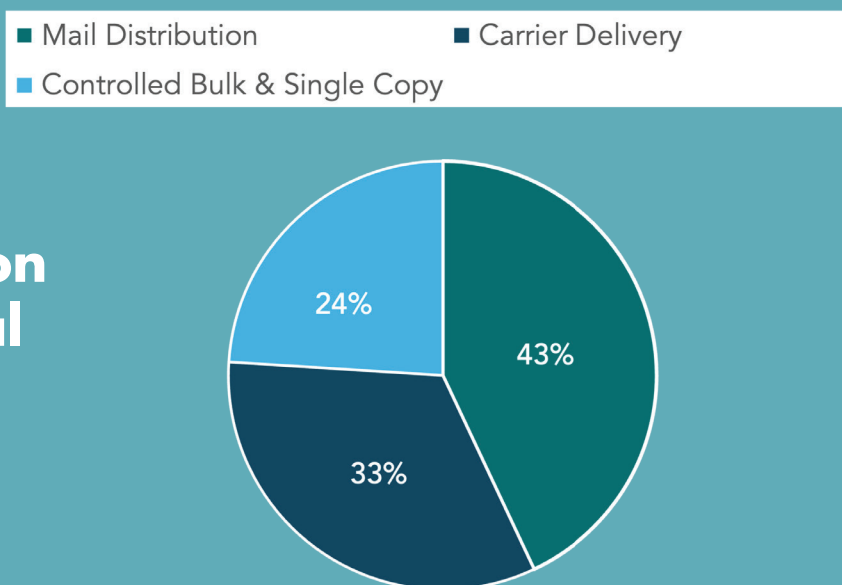
What publication type are typical ACP member publications?



What distribution frequency are typical ACP member publications?



What distribution type are typical ACP member publications?

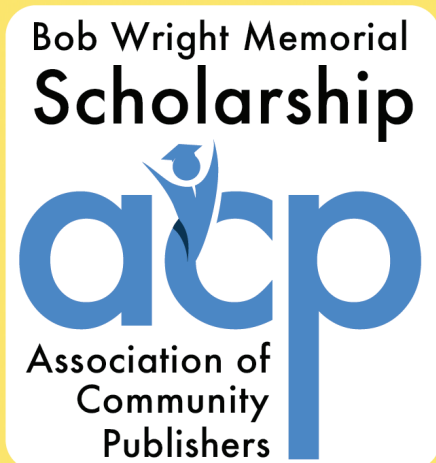


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- Application must be received by April 1, 2026

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NEGOTIATION AND THE SIZE OF THE PIE

BY JAMES A. BAKER — FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN, BAKER COMMUNICATIONS

Depending on the circumstances, negotiations can be direct or complex, adversarial or collaborative. In the modern business world, it is often desirable to conduct a collaborative, non-adversarial negotiation with a “win-win” outcome in order to build and preserve cordial relationships between business partners. However, you would not want to try for a “win-win” negotiation when haggling with a used car salesman. It is critical to be aware of what kind of negotiation you are going into and plan your strategy accordingly.

THE TWO TYPES OF NEGOTIATIONS

The primary distinction between negotiations is the desired outcome. There are basically two ways to approach negotiation: making sure that you win and they lose, or working toward a mutually beneficial and satisfactory solution. We will explore the differences between these two types of negotiation and how best to distinguish one from the other.

DIVIDING THE PIE

The type of negotiation with one winner and one loser has several names, including positional, distributive, or competitive negotiation; fixed-pie negotiation, and zero-sum game. In this type of negotiation, both parties start as adversaries and tend to remain that way throughout the process. Manipulative tactics are common. The parties are inflexibly positional, often ignoring the real issues and needs behind their positions.

This type of negotiation is sometimes called a “fixed-pie” negotiation because the outcome is often conceptualized as a pie, of which each party wants the biggest piece. Because the pie does not change size, the party who gets the biggest piece wins and the other loses — there is no chance

of a win-win outcome. It can also be termed a “distributive” negotiation because the pie is distributed between the parties, or a “zero-sum game” because any gain on one side results in a comparable loss on the other: total gains less total losses will equal zero.

Buying a used car is the classic example of a fixed-pie negotiation, which gives us some hints about what really distinguishes this type of negotiation.

One Issue and Two Positions:

In the used-car transaction, the only issue is price, and there are two positions: the buyer wants to pay as little as possible, and the salesman wants to get as much as he can.

Thus, in a fixed-pie negotiation, we see that there is one main issue, with no complex underlying interests, and there are no tradeoffs. Each side is only working to maximize their gain at the other's expense.

No Relationship: There is not likely to be an ongoing relationship between the buyer and the used car salesman. The negotiation is competitive and adversarial.

In a fixed-pie negotiation, neither party cares about the other party's level of satisfaction or whether they are happy with the outcome. This can lead to very aggressive negotiation, hard bargaining, and manipulative tactics.

GROWING THE PIE

A potential win-win negotiation is sometimes called principled, collaborative, or integrative negotiation. In this type of negotiation, both parties work towards developing or maintaining a long-term, cooperative relationship, in which both parties can gain mutual satisfaction. In this type of negotiation, the key is to “grow the pie” and find a mutually beneficial solution. As the parties have different needs, it is possible for both to get everything they need and accomplish a win-win.

A collaborative or win-win negotiation differs from the fixed-pie scenario.

Multiple Issues and Flexible

Positions: There are several issues to negotiate around, with underlying motivations and interests.

Tradeoffs, concessions and compromises are possible. Discussing multiple issues is key to finding out what each party really wants and working to increase the size of the pie.

Ongoing Relationship: The other party is someone with whom you want to maintain a good working relationship.

If the parties or their companies will be dealing with each other again in the future, a mutually satisfying outcome is beneficial. You don't rake a partner over the coals unless you want to lose their business!

WHICH TYPE OF NEGOTIATION IS IT?

There may be times when you will only be interested in getting a bigger slice of pie - if you don't have a relationship with the other party, it's a one-time deal, and there is only one issue at stake. In most business negotiations, however, you will have an ongoing relationship, a more complex situation, and you will need to work for a win-win. Make sure you know which type of negotiation you are getting into before you start! ■

Baker Communications offers leading edge time management and personal productivity solutions that will help you address the goals and achieve the outcomes addressed in this article. For more information about how your organization can achieve immediate and lasting behavior change that will help your team members consistently achieve their high value goals while eliminating time wasted on interruptions and distractions, go to: <https://www.bakercommunications.com/index.html>

INVESTING IN THE NEXT GENERATION OF COMMUNITY PUBLISHING LEADERS

The long-term strength of community publishing relies on more than strong content and trusted local relationships—it depends on cultivating the next generation of leaders who will guide our publications through continued change. The ACP Rising Stars program was developed to intentionally recognize, support, and elevate young professionals under the age of 36 who are already demonstrating leadership potential within the community publishing industry.

Each year, ACP selects up to seven Rising Stars from nominations submitted by member publications across the country. These individuals represent the emerging talent shaping the future of local media. They exemplify integrity, professionalism, and leadership in their roles,

while also making meaningful contributions to the communities their publications serve. Whether through innovation, audience engagement, advertising growth, or operational excellence, Rising Stars consistently go beyond expectations in advancing their organizations.

What sets these young professionals apart is not only how well they perform their jobs, but how intentionally they invest in their own growth and in the broader industry. Rising Stars demonstrate a clear commitment to continuous learning, collaboration, and industry involvement. Their participation in this national program reflects a desire to better understand the challenges and opportunities facing community publishers and to play an active role in shaping solutions.

Recipients are recognized publicly through a feature in Publish Magazine, ACP's official publication, and are honored during an awards presentation at the ACP Annual Conference and Trade Show. To ensure meaningful participation, Rising Stars receive complimentary conference registration, meal plans, access to specialized leadership and professional development sessions, and up to \$500 in travel reimbursement. These benefits are designed to remove barriers and allow participants to fully engage with peers, mentors, and industry leaders.

The Rising Stars program is intentionally structured as an ongoing leadership pipeline rather than a one-time award. Following their initial recognition, Rising Stars are invited to remain actively involved with ACP initiatives for up to two years. During this time, they contribute their ideas and expertise to association projects, participate in regularly scheduled conference calls, and collaborate with fellow Rising Stars from across the country. ACP believes these emerging leaders offer valuable perspectives—and the association is stronger by listening to and learning from them.

In return, participants gain advanced leadership development, expanded professional networks, and firsthand exposure to national-level collaboration within the community publishing industry. For member publishers, the Rising Stars program is both a recognition opportunity and a strategic investment—one that helps develop confident, well-connected leaders who are prepared to guide their publications and communities into the future. ■



The Rising Star group that attended the Mobile Conference in September — (l to r) John Draper, Shelby Palmer, Kara Ivison, Caitlin Neeland, Kaitlin Donnan, Evelyn Spence, Jacob Dukeman, Trevor Romero and Jayde Vogeler

A KEY QUESTION: WHAT'S NEXT?



BY JOHN FOUST
GREENSBORO, NC

Gregory talked to me about a lesson he learned in his early days of selling advertising. “In one of my first presentations, the prospect rejected my ideas for a new campaign. Back at the office, my ad manager must have noticed the stunned look on my face. When I told her what happened she didn’t want to know the gruesome details. She just asked, ‘Okay, so what’s next?’

“That turned out to be great advice. I sat there and gave myself a good talking-to. Nothing could change the fact that my sales presentation had fallen flat. But what I could change was my approach to that reality. Instead of giving up on that new business prospect, I dove back into my notes, reflected on our conversation during my presentation, and developed another campaign proposal. The new ideas were accepted, and I’m happy to say that company became a consistent advertiser.

“What I learned is that it’s important to look ahead,” Gregory said. “Think beyond what is happening right now and be ready to change directions.”

Gregory’s story reminds me of an old Bob Hope line in a movie I saw on TV: “All I’ve gotta do now is figure out what I’m gonna do now.” If we look beyond the double-talk of that gag, we’ll see some real truth. Our biggest challenge is often figuring out what to do next.

In fact, I believe one of the most

“What I learned is that it’s important to look ahead,” Gregory said. “Think beyond what is happening right now and be ready to change directions.”

important business questions we can ask is, “What’s next?” These two little words represent a deliberate focus on the future. This is especially true in a profession like marketing, which demands constant evaluation and adjustment. Considering the current situation as a new starting point, what’s the next step? If we expect to make any progress at all, there should always be another step.

Let’s say you make a big sale. I heartily recommend that you celebrate your success and share the glory with your teammates. But after the high fives at the goal line, it’s not a good idea to camp out for a long

time in the end zone. Things will not stay like that forever. The game goes on. There’s a next step.

What if consumers don’t respond to the current offer being made in an advertiser’s ads? Do you keep running the offer again and again, hoping that something will change on its own? Or do you analyze the plan and make some adjustments?

If you’re a manager who notices that morale in your department is sagging, what can you do to make things better? (Please don’t say, “team building activity.”) Do you hope the situation will go away “when the economy improves?” Or do you take the initiative with a little inter-department research to get to know your team as individuals? Let them help you determine the next step.

It’s not complicated. It’s simply a matter of evaluating the current situation and asking yourself, “What’s next?” Keep answering that question and you’re on your way. ■

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John Foust has conducted training programs for thousands of newspaper advertising professionals. Many ad departments are using his training videos to save time and get quick results from in-house training.

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ADVERTISING DESIGN TRENDS THAT WILL SHAPE 2026—AND WHAT THEY MEAN FOR COMMUNITY PUBLICATIONS

Advertising in 2026 will be defined by dynamic visuals, emotional authenticity, and technology that allows even small businesses to compete with sophisticated national brands. For community publications—whose strength comes from trusted relationships, local relevance, and personalized service—these trends present both an opportunity and a competitive advantage.

Below is a detailed look at the major design shifts ahead, followed by how community publishers can strategically apply them.

KEY ADVERTISING DESIGN TRENDS FOR 2026

1. MOTION-DRIVEN DESIGN BECOMES STANDARD (EVEN IN “STATIC” SPACES)

Subtle animation, scroll-triggered movement, and cinemagraph-style effects will dominate digital ads. Even print will borrow from motion principles by using layered composition, dynamic angles, and design cues that imply movement.

2. HYPER-PERSONALIZED VISUALS POWERED BY AI

AI-assisted design tools will allow advertisers to produce multiple versions of an ad tailored to specific neighborhoods, interests, seasons, or user behaviors—making community publishers uniquely positioned to offer targeted local relevance.

3. MIXED MEDIA: AR, 3D, AND LAYERED VISUAL DEPTH

Augmented reality (AR) ads, 3D illustrations, and multi-layer visuals will create an immersive style that feels modern and interactive. QR codes will evolve beyond simple links, triggering animations, product demos, and virtual try-ons.

4. BOLD MINIMALISM

Designs will strip away clutter while embracing powerful typography, oversized headlines, and bold color palettes. Simplicity with strong visual impact will outperform intricate layouts.

5. RADICAL AUTHENTICITY AND HUMAN-CENTERED STORYTELLING

Stock-photo perfection is out. Imperfection, real people, lived experiences, and genuine emotion will dominate. Hyper-local storytelling becomes a competitive edge for community publishers.

6. INCLUSIVE, ACCESSIBLE, AND “HUMAN-FIRST” DESIGN

More advertisers will prioritize inclusive imagery, ADA-friendly typography, and color contrast accessibility. This reflects cultural expectations and increases campaign performance across diverse audiences.

7. SUSTAINABILITY-INSPIRED VISUAL LANGUAGE

Eco-themes—natural textures, earthy colors, recycled paper aesthetics, and organic design elements—will be popular as consumers expect brands to show environmental responsibility.

8. RETRO-TECH FUSION

Old-school print aesthetics combined with digital-era precision (pixel art, vaporwave gradients, '90s tech motifs) will appeal to younger audiences nostalgic for pre-algorithm internet culture.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY PUBLICATIONS

To thrive in 2026, community publications must not only understand emerging design trends—they must **translate them into practical value** for local advertisers who may not have the budget, expertise, or time to implement them on their own. By doing so, publishers reinforce their role as strategic partners rather than just media vendors.

1. USE AI AND DATA TO DELIVER SMARTER, MORE PERSONALIZED LOCAL CAMPAIGNS

AI gives small businesses the power to run sophisticated campaigns once reserved for national brands. Community publications can leverage this by:

- Using AI tools to generate multiple ad variations quickly.
- Helping advertisers tailor messages to specific neighborhoods or audience segments.
- Offering “smart packages” where analytics guide creative improvements over time.

This positions the publication as a **local marketing consultant**, not just an ad placement service.

2. INTEGRATE MOTION, AR, AND LAYERED VISUALS INTO BOTH PRINT AND DIGITAL PRODUCTS

Publishers can elevate the local advertising experience by:

- Adding motion graphics to digital ad placements.
- Incorporating AR-enhanced print ads that reveal video tours, product demos, or special offers when scanned.
- Designing layouts with depth, dimension, and interactive elements that keep readers engaged.

These enhancements allow local advertisers to **stand out** in a crowded media environment—at a fraction of what a full agency would charge.

3. BALANCE MINIMALISM WITH BOLD IMPACT TO KEEP ADS CLEAR AND COMPELLING

Readers consume content quickly. Publishers can help advertisers succeed by:

- Encouraging clear messaging paired with strong, simple visuals.
- Using bold typography and decisive color choices to guide attention.
- Reducing clutter, especially in print ads where space is limited.

This ensures local ads remain readable, memorable, and aligned with modern design expectations.

4. CHAMPION AUTHENTICITY, INCLUSIVITY, AND LOCAL STORYTELLING

Community publications have a unique advantage: **they know the people, the neighborhoods, and the stories that make a community feel like home.**

Apply this strength by:

- Encouraging local advertisers to use real customers, employees, or familiar community landmarks in their ads.
- Reflecting the diversity of the community in imagery and messaging.

- Using editorial-style photography and human-centered storytelling to create emotional resonance.

When readers recognize themselves and their neighbors, ads feel more trustworthy—and more effective.

THE BIG PICTURE: WHY THIS MATTERS FOR LOCAL MEDIA

By embracing these trends thoughtfully, community publishers can:

- Deliver higher-value creative services
- Help small businesses stay modern and competitive
- Attract new advertisers seeking digital sophistication
- Strengthen reader engagement through more compelling visual content
- Deepen emotional and economic ties within the community

Ultimately, community publications that adopt these strategies reinforce their vital role as **trusted hubs for local news, culture, and commerce**—while positioning themselves as indispensable creative partners in a rapidly evolving advertising landscape. ■

Reference: OpenAI. (2025) ChatGPT-5 (Dec 4 version / Dec 11 version), <https://chatgpt.com/>



“The mission of ACP is to help members enhance their viability and strengthen the community publishing industry.”

Community Publications Business and Service Directory

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The "big, beautiful bill" is pretty awful, but the charitable tax deduction for non-itemizers is an opportunity. Accurate news and information matters, and diversifying revenue streams with tax deductible support can sustain critical community news resources for decades to come. ANF shares its nonprofit status with independent local media, performing oversight for grants and donations and saving the cost of creating and maintaining a 501(c)(3).



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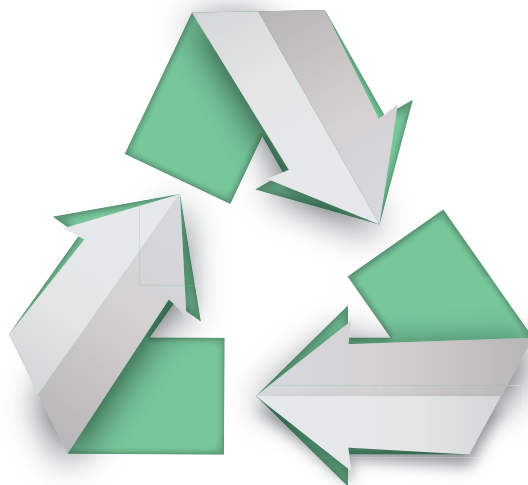
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Publish is a monthly magazine produced by the Association of Community Publishers.

The mission of *Publish* is to cover the people, companies and events that shape the community media industry - one issue at a time.

Publish

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