



## About Bridge

Bridge Michigan is a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that provides fact-driven journalism on Michigan's people, politics, and economy. Founded in 2006, Bridge is a publication of the Center for Michigan, which describes itself as a "think-and-do tank."

## Overview

Bridge Michigan was one of fifteen newsrooms to participate in the Google News Initiative Audience Lab. In March and April 2020, Bridge experienced record traffic—nearly 10 times their previous all-time monthly user record—and increased loyalty, including a record number of new members. This case study explores the factors behind Bridge's success, as explained by Bill Emkow, Bridge's growth strategist.

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## Lesson from GNI Audience Lab Member Bridge MI on growing loyal readers

**Bridge, a nonprofit news organization in Michigan grew traffic tenfold and multiplied donating readers by applying user experience and discoverability best practices.**

## The Project

In March 2020, Bridge attracted 3.75 million unique visitors followed by 3.4 million uniques in April. Those numbers were **10 times greater** than their previous all-time record for **monthly unique visitors**. While a large portion of this traffic is attributable to the massive news story on the ongoing coronavirus crisis, Bridge staff also utilized Google Trends, made smart discoverability decisions, and regularly tested new approaches recommended by the GNI Audience Lab to achieve success.

Bill Emkow, Bridge's growth strategist, attributes Bridge's success to four things: Investing in culture change, acting on trends early, regularly testing assumptions, and being consistent.

The screenshot displays three examples of user experience elements on the Bridge Michigan website:

- Example of a call to donate, present on every page:** A header bar with the Bridge logo, the text "Michigan's nonpartisan, nonprofit news source", and a blue button that says "If you care about Michigan, please support our work. DONATE TODAY". Below this is a blue banner for "Michigan Health Watch" with the headline "Coronavirus Tracker: Dream Cruise canceled; new cases rise by 236".
- Example of a call to subscribe to newsletters for new users:** A blue box with the headline "Get Michigan nonprofit news in your inbox" and the text "How is the coronavirus impacting Michigan? Find out in our daily newsletter." It includes an email input field with the placeholder "Enter your email here..." and a blue "SUBSCRIBE" button. Below the button, it states "We do not sell or share your information with anyone."
- Example of a call to donate detailing reasons to support Bridge Michigan:** A white box with the headline "Journalism isn't free" and the text "We are a nonprofit news site that relies on donations from readers like you. Join the nearly 6,000 members who voluntarily support our work." It features a blue button that says "JOIN BRIDGE FOR AS LITTLE AS \$1" and a grey button that says "No, thank you".

## 1 Invest in culture change:

Emkow meets with Bridge editors daily, sends out a weekly metrics report, and is in constant contact with reporters on what stories might perform well.

“ Traditional newsrooms rely on seasoned professionals to decide what stories are important. The **combination of editorial judgment and using data as a guide** is how Bridge avoids complacency. Metrics can point to where readers are, but professional editors and reporters can lead readers where they didn't think of going. ”

## 2 Act on trends early:

Emkow monitors Google Trends for topics relevant to Bridge coverage. He pays attention to the questions readers search for and brainstorms ways to answer them.

“ In January, Bridge posted its first story on coronavirus preparation after seeing 'Michigan coronavirus' trending on Google. By February, that led to a continuously updated blog post with initiatives the state was taking to prepare for the arrival of the virus, which hit on March 10. By July, the post was still being updated daily and had generated **more than 6.3 million pageviews**. By comparison, Bridge's entire site generated 5.8 million pageviews in 2019. ”

## 3 Test assumptions:

Bridge experimented with approaches suggested by the GNI Audience Lab including changing the color of Call-to-Action buttons, determining whether words like “Coronavirus” or “COVID-19” performed better in headlines, and experimenting with newsletter header personalization.

“ Our [newsletter] **open rate skyrocketed from around 21% to around 29%**, even as we grew email subscribers this year. Because we were hit with such a massive wave of interest at once, we couldn't A/B test each variable. All initiatives were designed to create these outcomes and our overall outcomes show that they are working. ”

## 4 Be persistent:

All visitors see regular reminders that Bridge is nonprofit and nonpartisan, along with invitations to donate. As a result, Bridge was able to more than **quadruple their monthly recurring revenue** from donations, year over year.

“ The most important behaviors that signal a user's willingness to pay are consuming our content several times a month and engaging regularly with our newsletter. For anyone that fits that criteria and is a non-member, we need to strategize on how to compel that segment to pay, and become a sustaining member. **Finding the right message for a specific segment and repeating it is critical.** ”

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