Virginia Association of Counties

# ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

## APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 1, 2016.** Please include this application form with electronic entry.

### PROGRAM INFORMATION

**County:** Fairfax

**Program Title:** Fairfax County Government NewsCenter

**Program Category:** 1

### CONTACT INFORMATION

**Name:** Sharon Bulova

**Title:** Chairman

**Department:** Fairfax County Board of Supervisors

**Complete Mailing Address:** 12000 Government Center Pkwy, Suite 530, Fairfax, VA 22035

**Telephone:** 703-324-2321 **Website:** http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/

**Email:** Emily.Tavino@fairfaxcounty.gov

### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

**Name:** Sharon Bulova

**Title:** Chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors

**Signature:** Sharon Bulova

# Fairfax County Government NewsCenter

## Overview

Fairfax County Government NewsCenter (www.fairfaxcounty.gov/news) was launched on August 24, 2015. It is a full-fledged news presence for the Fairfax community featuring relevant, timely and actionable articles focused on what Fairfax County residents would find interesting. It features a comprehensive digital presence, integrated social media strategy, branding, publication extension to other outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, Flipboard, Apple News and Google News, and unique features such as embedded social content, events, weather, traffic and a social media hub. With the decline of local journalism coverage and the increase in direct communication tools, it was imperative for Fairfax County to research, design, code and implement this new news platform solution in order to more effectively communicate in today's rapidly changing communications world.

Fairfax County Government NewsCenter represents a radical shift away from standard press releases from Fairfax County government (and specifically within the Office of Public Affairs). NewsCenter is a way to reach the target audience directly through an owned and self-controlled platform (unlike social media, which is not owned by the user). NewsCenter allows Fairfax County to use multimedia like a journalism website. In short, Fairfax County Government NewsCenter represents a move toward brand journalism for a local government.

## The Challenge and Solution

With new communication tools that make it easier to reach constituents directly, coupled with the decline in coverage of local journalists, Fairfax County embarked on a new way to share information through a journalism-like website called Fairfax County Government NewsCenter. For years, Fairfax County has built a strong social media program; the County has worked with journalists on stories and sometimes paid for advertisements. However, a true home base for a story-telling platform was missing from Fairfax County's mix of communication options. The County could share content on social media, pitch a journalist or buy an ad, but it did not have the appropriate tools to tell and package stories that are relevant, timely and actionable for the Fairfax community. By creating NewsCenter in 2015, the Office of Pubic Affairs (OPA) solved many of those issues and can now share information in easy-to-read, interactive ways with residents.

NewsCenter launched Aug. 24, 2015. From that date through May 17, 2016, NewsCenter yielded more than 613,000 page views, which would place it seventh among all fairfaxcounty.gov web pages in the same time period. In the previous four years of a prior online news presence, there were only 1.1 million page views, so the rate of page views in nine months for NewsCenter far eclipses the rate of page views over four years of a previous news hub.

| | **NewsCenter**<br>*(**9 months)* | **Previous News Presence**<br>*(**48 months)* |
|---|---|---|
| **Page views** | **613,000** | **1.1 million** |

Top NewsCenter articles include relevant, timely and actionable info the Fairfax community wants such as blizzard of 2016 information, significant land use approvals, health issues such as a measles outbreak and much more over the course of 200 articles thus far. NewsCenter has already earned early national recognition by winning a Bulldog Media gold digital award, along with multimillion dollar corporations such as Genetech, GE Healthcare and major PR firms.

**Innovation**

The Fairfax County Government NewsCenter is a *broad*, *responsive,* and *interactive* news source for County residents. The public can easily access NewsCenter directly from the Fairfax County homepage (http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/) and immediately see "Recent news," "News of Note," and news broken down by categories such as transportation, health, land use, and public safety. County events, traffic, and weather are also included on the NewsCenter homepage. The site consolidates news stories from all topics, and packages them in a highly organized, informative, and easy to read way. Residents no longer need to navigate through the entire County website to find news articles or current information on a particular topic; it's all in one place. With a population of 1.1 million residents within a region of 7 million people, the Fairfax County audience is wide and varied, so NewsCenter as a whole is targeted to everyone in the county at a macro level. However, at a micro level, each article NewsCenter publishes has a target or niche audience. Tysons. Animals. Police. Elections. Emergencies. Those topics have target audiences OPA works to identify and they partner with specific departments, community organizations or influential residents to help amplify a NewsCenter article. NewsCenter reports on a variety of topics while monitoring the pulse of the county through social media so staff knows what kind of issues to cover.

Fairfax County NewsCenter includes tools designed to help residents easily share information on their own social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. It only takes one click to share an article and users can view how many times an article has been shared by others. The site also includes a "Social Hub" tab, which lists every existing Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blog, and other social media page for individual County departments. Resident engagement is key.

**Staffing and Financing**

The idea for NewsCenter started with a simple notion: how does Fairfax County tell its stories more proactively on a comprehensive website the County owns that can serve as the hub of its communications efforts? How does the County fill in the gaps of local media coverage? The idea was researched and developed mostly by one staff member of Fairfax County OPA. After brainstorming and discussion with the Director of Public Affairs and other staff members, OPA created the site. They also built an internal editorial infrastructure including weekly editorial plans; 3x/week editorial meetings; an intranet workspace for ideas; assignments; and close coordination with and education of Public Information Officers/leadership in 40+ departments (including editorial guidelines).

The total cost of development and advertising for the NewsCenter page was $104,049. Cost breakdown and staffing details are below:

*(Pre-launch costs)* For calendar year 2015: $72,500. NewsCenter was primarily conceptualized, created, designed, coded, tested and researched by one public information officer for about half of that person's time all year ($45,000). IT department staff managed backend WordPress installations at a cost of $12,000. Another PIO was assigned before launch at a cost of about $10,000. Additional PIO and office support totals around $5,500.

There's little doubt that researching, testing, coding, and creating a holistic news website from scratch by a contractor or consulting firm would cost far more than $72,500. OPA's ability to produce such high-level work in-house with no major budgetary expenses (beyond staff hours) represents a cost-effective strategy. Their intended purpose – to serve as a news source for our community – is being achieved without a dedicated budget and only portions of two people's time.

*(Post-launch costs)* For calendar year 2016: $31,549. The Office of Public Affairs embarked on a modest advertising and branding campaign. $16,000 was allocated for logo design, message mapping, ad creation and promotional materials. The remaining funds were dedicated to paid advertising for online, radio and signage.

## Press Release and Brochure Summary

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|---|---|---|
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# NEWSCENTER CONTENT GUIDANCE FOR DEPARTMENTS

• **Fluid Process:** Our launch into brand journalism won't be without flaws, gaps, bumps and hiccups. We ask for your patience and openness as we try to perfect a new way to do business (though it will never be perfect).

• **Brevity:** Our residents are busy and distracted. In general, articles will be between 200 and 400 words unless it's an occasional longer feature article.

• **Audience, audience, audience:** To know. To do. To go. Those are three main categories on NewsCenter to help shape our audience-focused objectives.

• **Consistent Voice + Clarity:** We're aiming for one voice, so OPA will edit tone and voice of department content within NewsCenter. Our goal is to avoid jargon, wordiness and confusing language while adding in points of clarification. Our residents don't know our org chart or acronyms. We will use "we," "you" and conversational language.

• **Content Review Levels:** We envision three levels of content review for planned articles:

1.) **Routine information** published from existing content; no notification or review.

2.) **Courtesy notice** and/or seeking additional details when we package an existing news item; no review intended.

3.) **Full review** by agencies for sensitive or complex articles.

• **Package Content:** OPA will package content from multiple sources to build an article. For example, if VDOT produces a news release about pedestrian safety, then OPA will add in routine police pedestrian safety tips for a NewsCenter article. If there's a rash of pool drownings in the county, then OPA will package together content from fire, health and parks (because parks offer swimming classes).

• **Help:** Serve as eyes and ears for content ideas. Think like a resident and pitch ideas even outside your department lane. Small nooks and crannies of info could be a start. OPA will look at its story budget and see what can be pursued (this is separate from submitting to NewsWire). Contact Greg and Lisa with ideas.

• **Limited Resources:** We don't have the resources to cover everything on NewsCenter.

• **Images:** Images are required so we ask for your support either for an article image or general stock art of your department. Horizontal images are preferred.

• **Social Media:** NewsCenter is not the only tool to use – in fact, it may not be the best tool for some content. Instead, county social media accounts can help amplify relevant, timely and actionable information.

• **Amplify!** Share NewsCenter articles on your communication channels!

Fairfax County NewsCenter

# Top-Line Messaging

## Value Proposition

Fairfax County NewsCenter delivers news that matters to our community — empowering you TO KNOW. TO DO. TO GO.

## Brand Promise

*Our Community, Our News.*

### Fairfax County NewsCenter is a news source for the county's communities.

**TO KNOW.**

1. We bring you fresh, timely stories that you can't always find on the major local news networks.
2. You deserve to know what's happening in your community — we report on a variety of news to keep you informed.
3. We monitor the pulse of the county's communities to stay in touch with what's important to you.

### Fairfax County NewsCenter produces and shares news that you can use.

**TO DO.**

1. The NewsCenter goes beyond information to drive action.
2. From emergency updates to public health advisories to homework help, the NewsCenter covers a range of topics that appeal to your diverse information needs.

### Fairfax County NewsCenter is interactive and easily accessible.

**TO GO.**

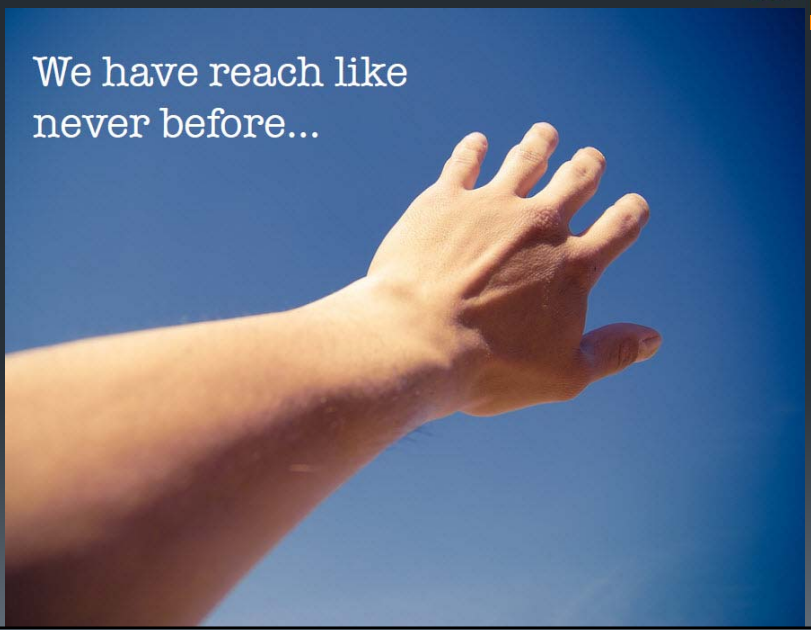
1. Our integrated social media hub keeps you connected with all of the county's official news.
2. We complement our traditional stories with podcasts, blogs, and video and audio clips to create an all-inclusive news experience that you can see, hear, and feel.

# Thinking and Publishing in New Ways

Fairfax County Government NewsCenter
Greg Licamele // October 2015

## Three Ignition Points

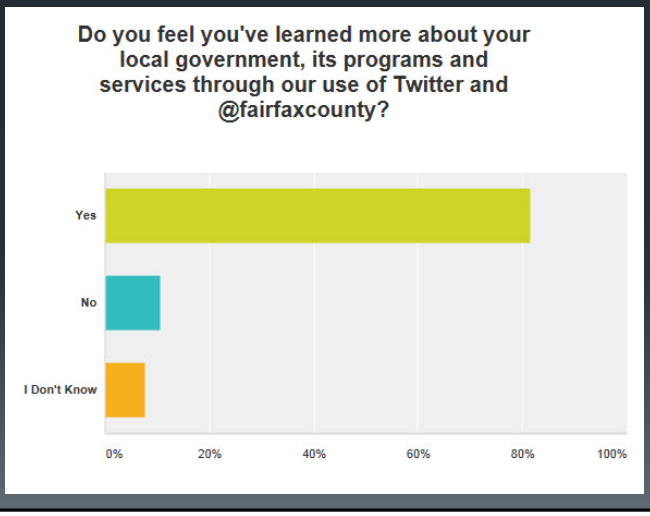
- Reach
- Audience
- Platforms




## Social Media Stats

- Twitter Impressions
  - FY 2014: 14,746,461
  - **FY 2015: 23,550,698**
- Facebook Reach
  - FY 2012: 2,088,753
  - FY 2013: 6,659,856
  - FY 2014: 11,603,306
  - **FY 2015: 28,313,758**

# Audience




# Local Audience

I like having information pushed to me and knowing what's going on locally.

I get important and interesting Twitter news right in my Twitter feed. I feel connected in a way that I would not through a newspaper.

I like seeing important news from the County this way as we don't subscribe to a local paper. I stay more informed than I might otherwise be.

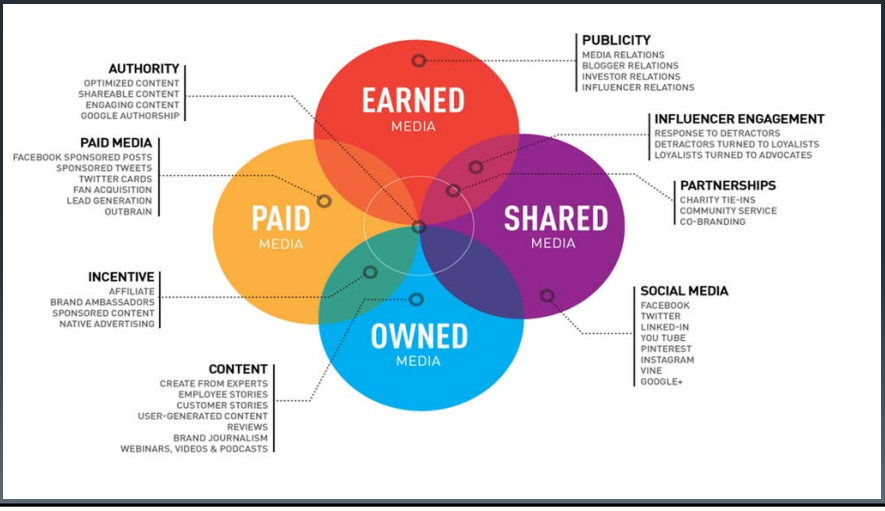
Just the information you provide that I wouldn't find anywhere else.

I'm feeling more connected to my local government, my voice matters more, and I'm learning about programs and news that affects me right now.

I wouldn't be likely to get this info any other way.

I like the breaking news and seeing news I may not see on the nightly news broadcast.

# Platforms – PESO Model




# Digging Deeper

- Two main influences…

# NY Times Innovation Report

# "Brand Journalism"

# Lessons from NY Times

"The hardest part for me has been the realization that you don't automatically get an audience," said Janine Gibson, editor-in-chief of The Guardian's website. "For someone with a print background, you're accustomed to the fact that if it makes the editor's cut — gets into the paper — you're going to find an audience. It's entirely the other way around as a digital journalist. The realization that you have to go find your audience — they're not going to just come and read it — has been transformative."

Readers are finding and engaging with our journalism in vastly different ways. More readers expect us to find them on Twitter and Facebook, and through email and phone alerts. But the newsroom pays less attention to these platforms, even though they offer our main, and sometimes only, channels

The need is urgent. Our home page has been our main tool for getting our journalism to readers, but its impact is waning. Only a third of our readers ever visit it. And those who do visit are spending less time: page views and minutes spent per reader dropped by double-digit percentages last year.

"At The New York Times, far too often for writers and editors the story is done when you hit publish," said Paul Berry, who helped found The Huffington Post. "At Huffington Post, the article begins its life when you hit publish."

# Lessons from NY Times

Even ProPublica, that bastion of old-school journalism values, goes to extraordinary lengths to give stories a boost. An editor meets with search, social and public relations specialists to develop a promotion strategy for every story. And reporters must submit five tweets along with each story they file.

Companies like Huffington Post and BuzzFeed have, in just a few years, eclipsed our traffic by building best practices for search and social into their workflow. For example, at The Huffington Post, a story cannot be published unless it has a photo, a search headline, a tweet and a Facebook

Erik Piepenburg, the web producer for theater, noted that visitors coming to us for the "Wicked" theater review can't easily find it because we reviewed it a long time ago. But that review is still relevant to the many readers who are considering buying tickets this week.

Sasha Koren, our social and community editor, said these collections forced a change in thinking about what's new. "Maybe it's, 'what's new to someone now,'" Koren said. "It's still timely, it's still relevant to this moment, it's not dated."

# NY Times Innovation Report

# "Brand Journalism"

# Lessons from Brand Journalism

**Brand Journalism:**

Discovering and creating news content on behalf of a brand.

- *Brand journalism focuses on your target audience's needs and interests instead of your brand's objectives.*
- *Brand journalism should not be highly branded. Save the heavy branding for your commercial or brochure.*
- *Brand journalism is telling your story without selling your brand. It pushes expertise over brand objectives through storytelling that is designed to give the audience the information they want.*

**1. Be a skilled storyteller**

The foundation of brand journalism is built on the principles of good storytelling. First and foremost, a brand journalist must be a strategic storyteller with a full understanding of how to write and create compelling stories for a target audience using a variety of multimedia tools such as video, photos, words, tweets, etc.

**2. Understand "news value" as applied to a brand**

A brand journalist seamlessly combines journalistic principles with elements of strategic communications. They understand when a story is right for brand journalism and also recognize when a topic is too commercial. A skilled brand journalist can often transform a company initiative into a compelling story that has real news value to the target audience.

**3. Know how to find stories**

A brand journalist understands the tenacity and relationship-building efforts associated with uncovering compelling story topics within a brand.

**4. Be strategic**

A brand journalist uses research, timeliness and a focused awareness of the world around them to suggest strategy for brand journalism content and campaigns.

**5. Report with integrity**

A brand journalist creates stories that are factual, well-researched, timely and compelling.

# Brand Journalism Example

## Mayo Clinic exec: 'Everything we do ... can become part of brand journalism'

Walk into the daily leads meeting for Mayo Clinic's communications team, and you'd think you were in the newsroom of a major daily or broadcast operation.

The Rochester, Minnesota, medical research organization brings together media relations, social media, public affairs, and internal communications teams to share upcoming news from Mayo Clinic, as well as trending news that the organization's experts can weigh in on.

The daily leads meeting—as well as departmental pitching meetings and communications strategy meetings—do much more than generate press releases and place medical experts in news stories.

"We coordinate news on the front end so that it can be delivered as completely possible," explains Ron Petrovich, manager of Mayo Clinic's Center for Social Media.

The end goal of this coordination, Petrovich says, is to deliver compelling brand journalism—that is, content that meets the needs of news organizations and their audiences while highlighting the Mayo Clinic brand.

# Brand Journalism Example

# Our Path

# NewsWire: Then and Now

September 2010

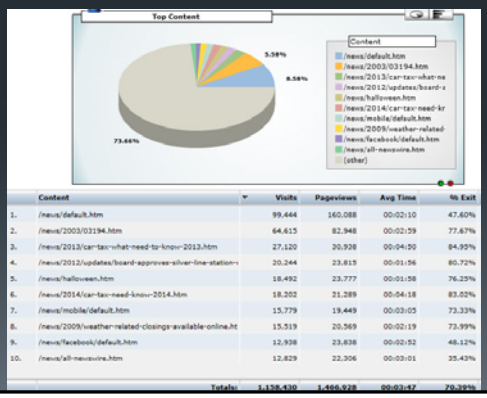
September 2015

# NewsWire Metrics

October 2010-October 2014

- # of visits to any page or file in .gov/news
  - 1,158,430 visits

Top 10 pages in 4 years:




| | Content | Visits | Pageviews | Avg Time | % Exit |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | /news/default.htm | 99,444 | 160,088 | 00:02:10 | 47.60% |
| 2. | /news/2003/03194.htm | 64,615 | 82,948 | 00:02:59 | 77.67% |
| 3. | /news/2013/car-tax-what-need-to-know-2013.htm | 27,120 | 30,928 | 00:04:50 | 84.95% |
| 4. | /news/2012/updates/board-approves-silver-line-station- | 20,244 | 23,815 | 00:01:56 | 80.72% |
| 5. | /news/halloween.htm | 18,492 | 23,777 | 00:01:58 | 76.25% |
| 6. | /news/2014/car-tax-need-know-2014.htm | 18,202 | 21,289 | 00:04:18 | 83.02% |
| 7. | /news/mobile/default.htm | 15,779 | 19,449 | 00:03:05 | 73.33% |
| 8. | /news/2009/weather-related-closings-available-online.ht | 15,519 | 20,569 | 00:02:19 | 73.99% |
| 9. | /news/facebook/default.htm | 12,938 | 23,838 | 00:02:52 | 48.12% |
| 10. | /news/all-newswire.htm | 12,829 | 22,306 | 00:03:01 | 35.43% |
| | Totals: | 1,158,430 | 1,466,928 | 00:03:47 | 70.32% |

# NewsCenter Vision

- To more aggressively but selectively package, promote and publish relevant, timely and actionable information for our community.

# 12 Supporting Philosophies

**Supporting Philosophies:**

#1: This is an audience-focused publication – not a place to talk *at* our community or amongst ourselves.

#2: We're publishers like everyone else today – we're doing brand journalism.

#3: Packaging, promoting and publishing require editorial oversight.

#4: The life of a news item begins when it's published. We generally publish and walk away now.

#5: We will vigorously share key information multiple times. Think, "what's new to someone now?"

#6: We must be selective in what we publish. We will say no. We will edit content.

#7: We must avoid creating noise and pixel pollution. Valuable content and clean design are keys.

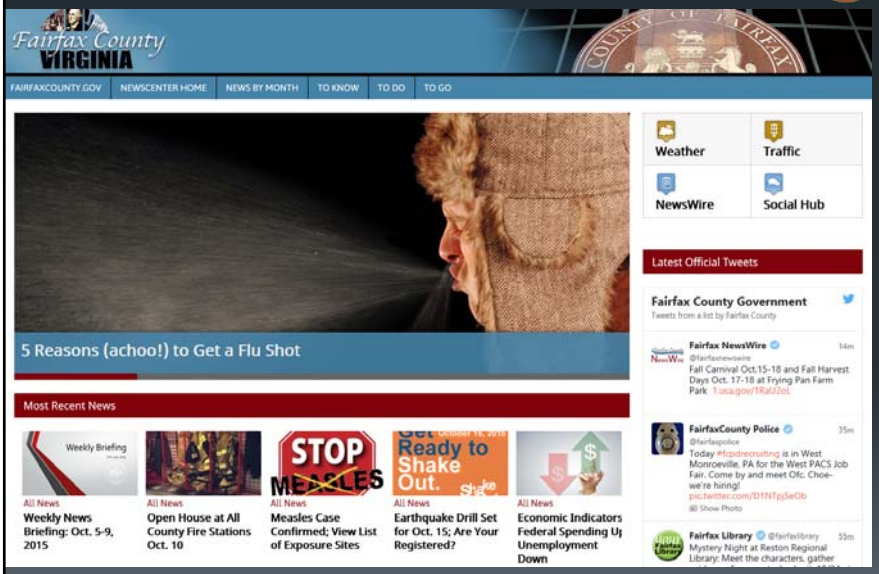
#8: We must nurture and understand our audience.

#9: We must listen/look for trends (call centers, social media, web traffic) and constantly monitor metrics.

#10: Recognize we live in a distracted, cluttered, mobile and visual world.

#11: We must be open to constant iteration, improvement and evolution.

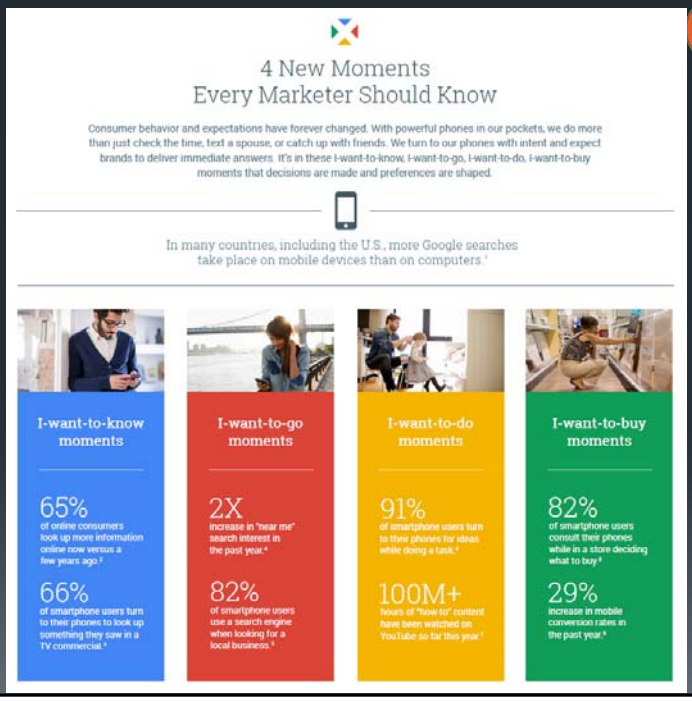
#12: We are one county and this is a countywide news platform. We are not interested in stovepipes.




www.fairfaxcounty.gov/news

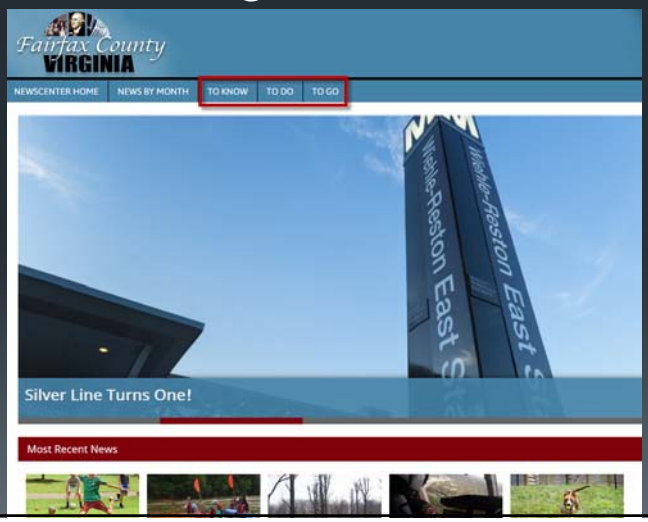
# Audience Focus

- We are heavily emphasizing audience-focused content.
  - How is something relevant, timely and/or actionable for our public?
  - No boilerplate.
  - No acronyms.
  - Think like a resident, not a government employee!




# Key Content Categories

- To Know
- To Do
- To Go



# What Have We Learned?

- NewsCenter launched (quietly!) on Aug. 24

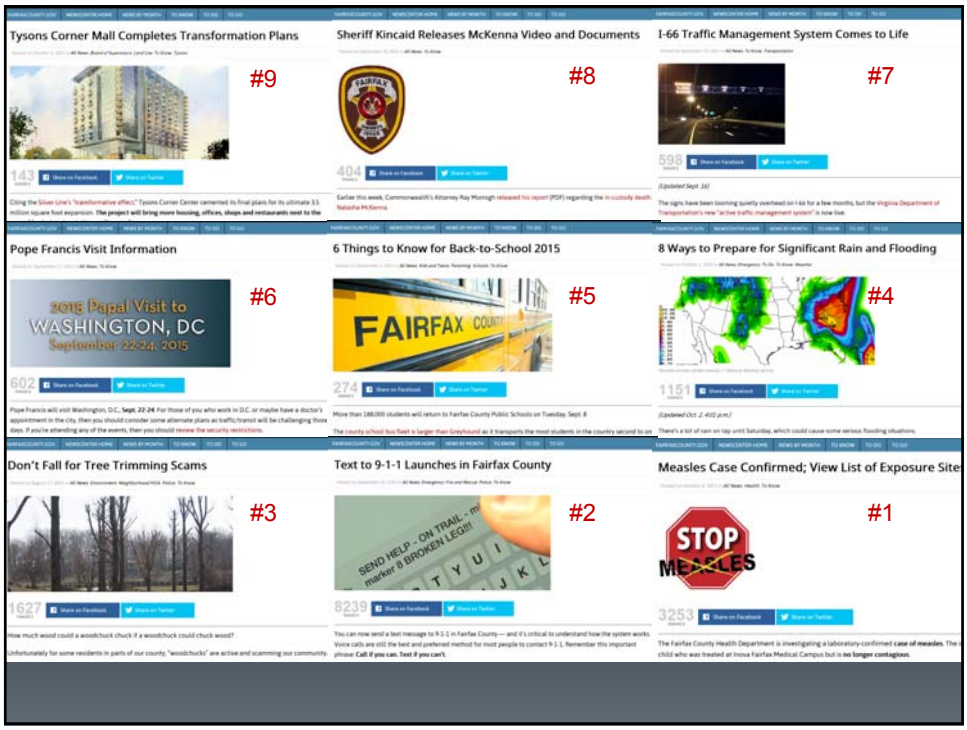
# Stats

| NewsWire (on .gov/news) | NewsCenter |
|---|---|
| 1,158,430 pageviews | 102,905 pageviews |
| 1,460 days | 51 days |

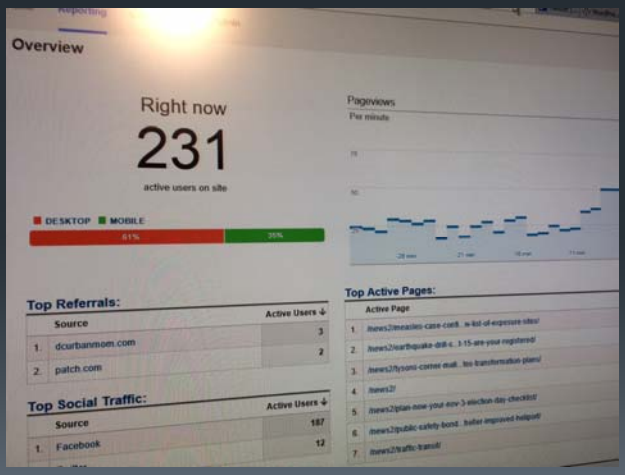
- **3% of NewsCenter pageviews to the homepage**

# Dual Goal…

- Hypothetically: Would love a macro audience to hang out on NewsCenter, browse around, make the site part of a news diet.
- Reality: Each article has its own micro audience based on people's interests, needs and preferences.
  - **76 published articles**
  - **The top 9 articles…**



# Real-Time Stats




# NewsCenter + Social Media

- **65%** of NewsCenter traffic from social media
  - **68%** Facebook
  - **30%** Twitter

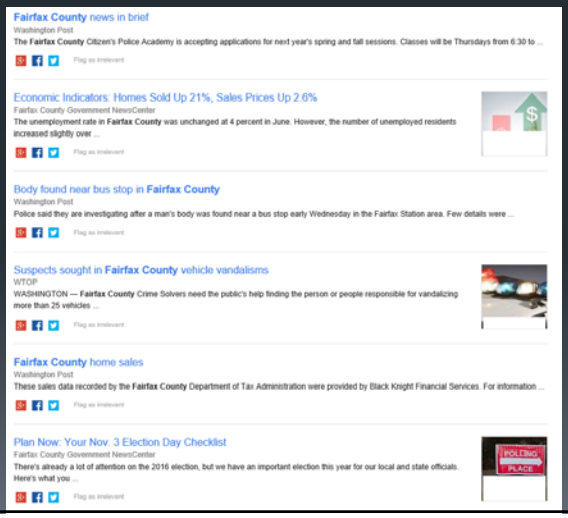
# Extending Reach

## Getting into Google News

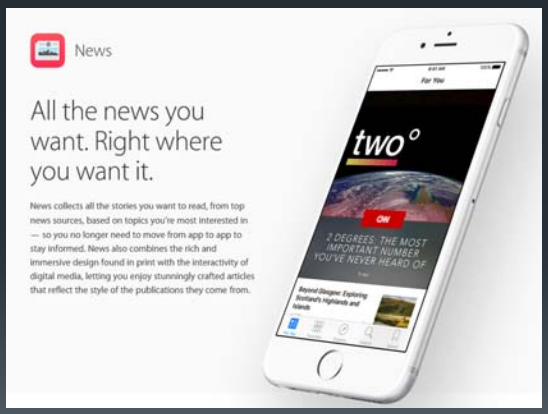
Google News aims to organize all the world's news and make it accessible to its users, while providing the best possible experience for those seeking useful and timely news information.

Our ability to meet these goals depends critically on the quality of the sites included in Google News. We therefore have certain guidelines in place to help us maintain fairness and consistency when determining which sites we include.

# Google News



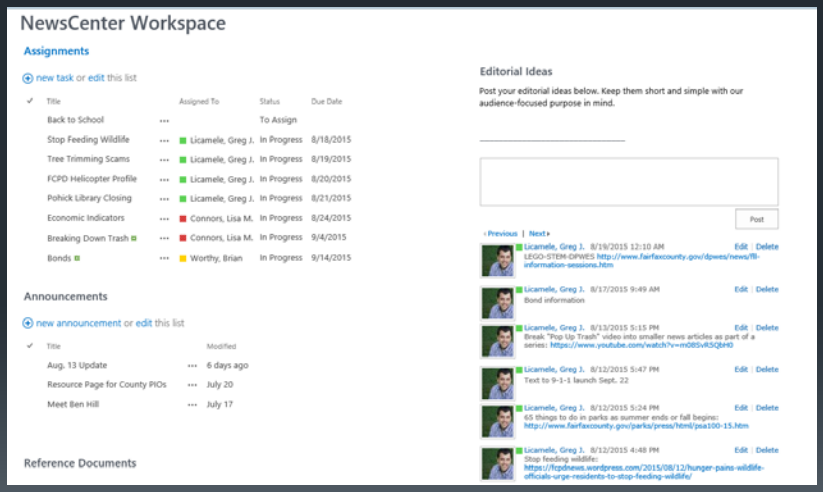
# Apple News

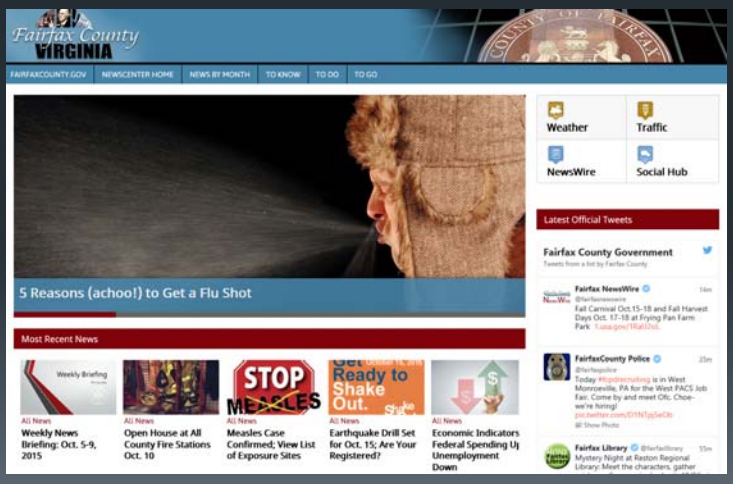



iCloud News Publisher | Fairfax County Government NewsCenter

# Flipboard

# Editorial Process




# Discussion & Thoughts