

NYPA SPRING CONFERENCE / APRIL 2026

Zero-Party Data Playbook

Engagement loops that grow audience and revenue

Todd Handy

Founder & Chief Revenue Officer / Disruptive Impact



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Innovation Insights

LOCAL MEDIA PATHS TO
TRANSFORMATION

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Winning with zero- and first-party data

A practical playbook for local media companies

Written By Todd Handy

What you'll leave with today

01

The definition

A clear, usable definition of zero-party data and why it matters right now.

02

The menu

Five engagement loops you can run with a lean team, starting with one.

03

The operating system

A simple funnel, scoreboard, and weekly cadence to keep it moving.

*If you implement one loop and one opt-in in the next 30 days, you **will** see impact.*

Where are you struggling most right now?

- 01 Growing the audience
- 02 Keeping them engaged and loyal
- 03 Building the newsletter list
- 04 Proving ROI to advertisers
- 05 Retention and recurring revenue



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The feed is the homepage now.

Reach is rented.

Platforms decide who sees you and for how long.

Algorithms change the rules.

Your distribution strategy can change overnight, without a vote.

Trust is moving.

Utility and personalities often beat institutions on attention and intent.

You can't control reach. You can control relationships.

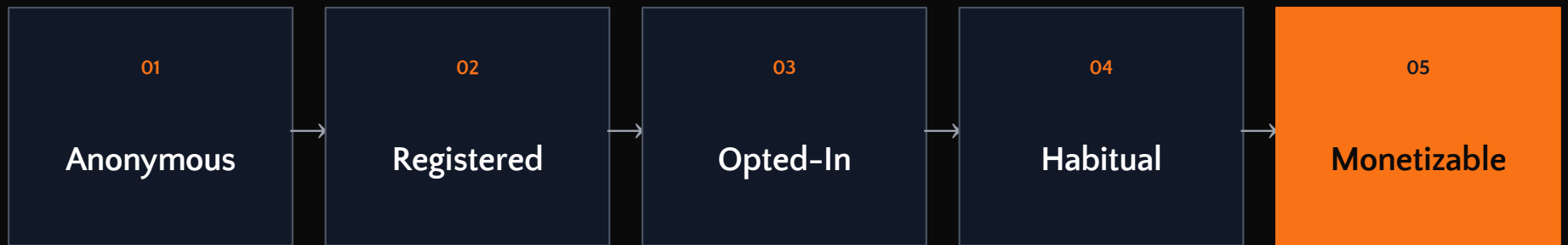
NOT CONTROLLABLE

- Platform distribution
- Algorithm volatility
- Attention fragmentation
- Third-party cookie loss

CONTROLLABLE

- + Opt-ins (email, SMS, registration)
- + Preferences and declared intent
- + Habit loops and cadence
- + Owned relationships and retention

Convert anonymous attention into known audience.



The bridge from left to right is value exchange.

Three kinds of audience data.

ZERO-PARTY

Declared

What they tell you on purpose.

Interests. Preferences. Intent.

Permission-based. Instantly useful.

FIRST-PARTY

Behavioral

What they do on your properties.

Opens. Clicks. Recency. Read depth.

Powerful when paired with zero-party.

THIRD-PARTY

Inferred

What others sell or guess about them.

Cookie profiles. External modeling.

Shrinking value. Rising risk.

GET THE VOCABULARY RIGHT

A real-life example



Zero-Party Data Playbook



No value, no data.

You earn preferences by delivering utility. Every single time.

"Breaking alerts for my county"

"High school sports in my town"

"Weekend things to do near me"

Five engagement loops. Pick one to start.

01

Preference
Center

Ask. Tag. Deliver.

02

Polls &
Ballots

A weekly voting rhythm.

03

Nominations

*The community markets
for you.*

04

Quizzes &
Surveys

*Play creates
participation.*

05

Service
Calendar

Utility creates habit.

We'll go deep on the three outlined. The other two are bonus plays.

Preference Center

The foundation. Everything else becomes more powerful with preferences.

ASK

"What do you want more of?"

3 to 7 short questions. Don't overreach.

TAG

Interests + location.

Map every declared signal to a segment.

DELIVER

Relevant newsletters and alerts.

Prove you listened within 72 hours.

Ask with intent. Not surveillance.

PREFERENCES

Topics	Schools, sports, local government, business, crime
Format	Email newsletter, SMS alerts, weekly digest
Frequency	Daily, two-times-weekly, weekly

INTENT (OPTIONAL)

- "I own or run a small business"
- "I'm a parent"
- "I'm hiring"
- "I care about local events"

Start with 2 segments, not 12. Every new segment needs an owner and a cadence.

WORKSHOP MOMENT

Pick one segment you could launch in the next 30 days.

What would your readers opt into that would actually help them?

County breaking alerts

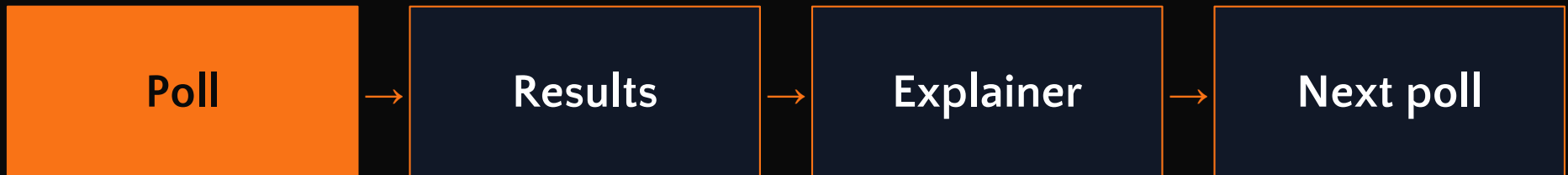
Friday Night Lights roundup

Weekend guide

School board digest

Polls & Ballots

A repeatable weekly engine. Locals love to vote on local things.



Capture the opt-in BEFORE the vote confirmation.

Publish results inside 24 hours. Every time.

Tie the follow-up story to what the results revealed.

Nominations

The community does the marketing. You get a list of known, interested locals.

Participation

Nomination and voting stages both capture opt-ins.

Recognition

Winners are shared by their families, their teams, their employers.

Sponsorable

Credible local sponsorships without damaging editorial trust.

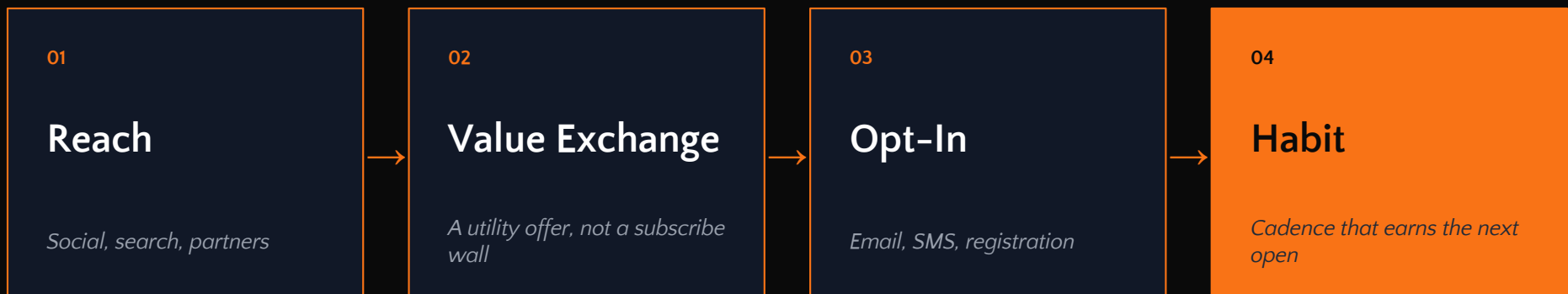
Coach of the Week

Local Heroes

Best of [Town]

Social → Owned funnel.

Acquire attention on platforms. Onboard it into channels you own.



Do not push "subscribe" first. Push opt-in first. Subscription comes after habit.

Start with 2 segments. Get them right.

Two great products beat twelve mediocre ones.

SEGMENT A

High School Sports

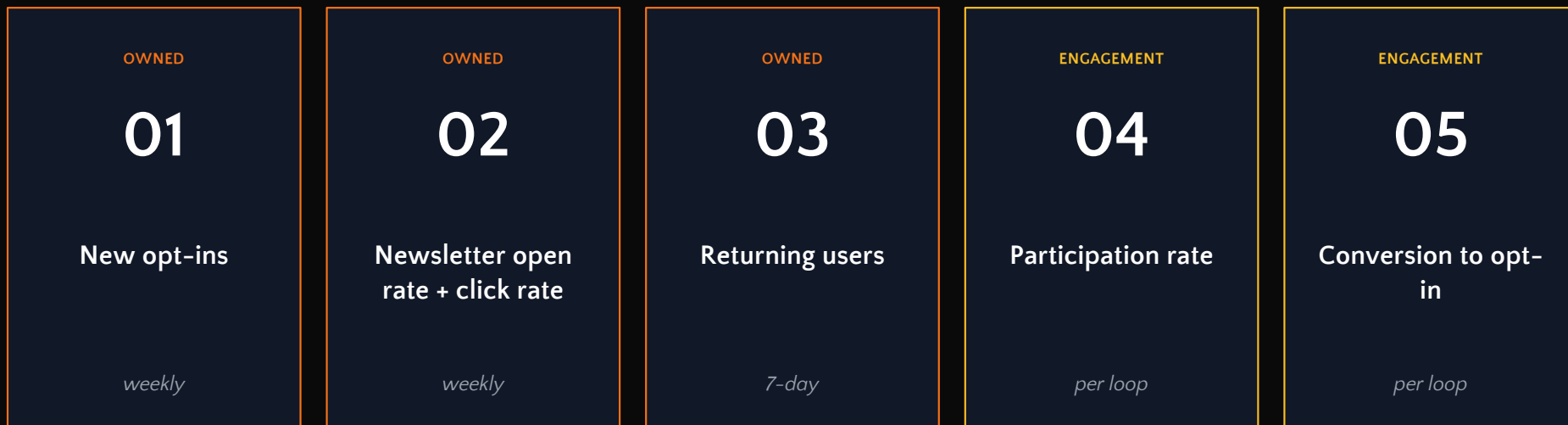
- Promise** Friday Night Lights, scoreboard, photos
- Cadence** Weekly Saturday AM + in-game alerts
- Owner** Sports editor
- Metric** Weekly open rate and returning readers

SEGMENT B

Weekend Guide

- Promise** Best things to do this weekend, local
- Cadence** Thursday 4pm
- Owner** Features lead
- Metric** CTR and event partner co-registrations

The only five metrics you need at first.



If you don't measure, you won't improve. If you measure too much, you won't ship.

The weekly operating rhythm.

Thirty minutes. Every Monday. No agenda creep.

01 What worked?

Name the win. Name the metric. Name the owner.

02 What didn't?

No blame. Just the fact pattern and the lesson.

03 What do we change next week?

One experiment. One owner. One success bar.

RULES

One experiment per week. / Keep-kill-improve log. / Every decision has an owner.

Do this, and you'll be ahead of many publishers.

WEEK 1

Pick and prep

- Pick one loop
- Attach one opt-in offer
- Choose one success metric

WEEK 2

Launch

- Ship the opt-in and the loop
- Promote on social and on-site
- Capture preferences from day one

WEEKS 3-4

Iterate

- Publish the output (results, winners, recap)
- Add one segment newsletter
- Review the scoreboard and make one change

YOUR TURN

Choose your one thing.

ONE LOOP

I will launch...

ONE OPT-IN

Attached to...

ONE METRIC

Tracked weekly by...

Three volunteers. Share yours out loud.

DISCUSSION

Questions, objections, and war stories.



Todd Handy / Disruptive Impact / todd@disruptiveimpact.co / [linkedin.com/in/toddjhandy](https://www.linkedin.com/in/toddjhandy)

DOWNLOAD

The Playbook

Engagement loops that grow audience and revenue. A 1-page operating system.

THE FIVE LOOPS

Pick two. Run them every week.

- 1 **Preference Center** Ask. Tag. Deliver. The foundation every other loop depends on.
- 2 **Polls & Ballots** A weekly voting rhythm. Locals love to vote on local things.
- 3 **Nominations** The community does the marketing. You get a list of known locals.
- 4 **Quizzes & Surveys** Play creates participation. Score plus segment in one flow.
- 5 **Service Calendar** Utility creates habit. Alerts tied to real-life rhythm.

STARTER KIT

Seven questions to launch a preference center.

- Which topics do you want more of? (schools, sports, local government, business, crime)
- Which format works best for you? (email newsletter, SMS alerts, weekly digest)
- How often should we show up? (daily, two-times-weekly, weekly)
- Which town or neighborhood do you care about most?
- Do you own or run a small business in our coverage area?
- Are you a parent, educator, or coach?
- What would make us indispensable to your week?

THE NON-NEGOTIABLE RULE

No value, no data.

You earn preferences by delivering utility. Every single time. Prove you listened within 72 hours.

VALUE EXCHANGE IDEAS

What to offer in return for each ask.

- **Preference Center** A cleaner, more relevant newsletter. Less volume, more signal.
- **Polls & Ballots** Results inside 24 hours. A follow-up story tied to what the vote revealed.
- **Nominations** Public recognition. Event invite. A shareable social moment for winners.
- **Quizzes & Surveys** Instant score. A tailored segment. A reason to come back.
- **Service Calendar** Useful alerts tied to real life. Show up when it matters, not when you want.

Todd Handy

Chief Revenue Officer, Disruptive Impact / todd@disruptiveimpact.co / linkedin.com/in/toddjhandy

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The Operating Rhythm

Measure what moves. Run the cadence. Ship in 30 days.

THE SCOREBOARD

Five metrics. Report weekly.

01 New opt-ins Weekly count, by loop and source	02 Open + click Newsletter health, weekly	03 Returning users 7-day return rate, owned properties	04 Participation Engagements per loop launch	05 Opt-in rate Loop engagements converted to opt-ins
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WEEKLY CADENCE

Thirty minutes. Every Monday.

- What worked?** Name the win. Name the metric. Name the owner.
- What didn't?** No blame. Just the fact pattern and the lesson.
- What changes?** One experiment. One owner. One success bar.
- Ground rules** One experiment per week. Keep-kill-improve log. Every decision has an owner.

YOUR FIRST 30 DAYS

Ship one loop. Prove it. Scale it.

WEEK 1 Pick one loop. Attach one opt-in offer. Choose one success metric.	WEEK 2 Ship the opt-in and the loop. Promote on social and on-site. Capture preferences from day one.	WEEK 3 Publish the output. Results, winners, recap. Keep the promise on time.	WEEK 4 Add one segment newsletter. Review the scoreboard. Make one change.
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BEFORE YOU LEAVE THE ROOM

Commit out loud.

One loop I'll launch: _____

One opt-in it's attached to: _____

One metric I'll track weekly: _____

Todd Handy

Chief Revenue Officer, Disruptive Impact / todd@disruptiveimpact.co / linkedin.com/in/toddjhandy

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