

PROFILE

MIKE DAVIDSON:

Creative director of the new news media

By Ed Kromer

Moments after a gunman opened fire at Virginia Tech on the morning of April 16, 2007, a web-based news site called Newsvine.com posted an account by a reader whose wife was locked down on campus. Twenty-two minutes later the Associated Press filed its first report.

It also ran on Newsvine.

An online forum featuring the best in both professional and citizen journalism, that's precisely what CEO Mike Davidson (BA 1997) envisioned when he founded Newsvine less than two years ago. "There is a camp that doesn't like mainstream media at all, and another camp that doesn't trust bloggers," he says. "We believe it's an unnecessary war. Every day great articles come from both. Why not create a place where they can live side-by-side and compete on their own merits?"

This entirely new kind of news site has found a loyal, participative, steadily building audience. And a powerful suitor in MSNBC, which purchased Newsvine last October.

A start in the business

In high school, Davidson wanted to be a sports agent to the stars. Once he realized he had better odds of becoming a superstar athlete than a superstar agent, he decided to go into graphic design. Self-taught, he cut his teeth as an intern in the Husky Athletics Department, blocking game-day ads for the *Daily*.

After graduation, he jumped into the online space with a firm called Digital Sherpas, rising to creative director by the time the company was consumed by SeasonTicket.com, an on-demand video highlight portal. In 2000, SeasonTicket's principals passed on a massive buyout offer that they

came to regret. "It was the perfect time to sell," Davidson recalls. "We knew from the start that we had to be a part of a major media organization to really fulfill our vision. The frustrating thing was that the people actually doing the work didn't have a say in the decision. Had we gone through with it, we probably all would have been retired at 23."

Instead, the company went out with a whimper, as many lesser dot-coms, in 2001. And Davidson packed his bags for ESPN.com, where he led a major redesign of the go-to sports network's online presence. But after five

years at ESPN, he became frustrated by the slow pace of innovation and adoption of the emerging principles of Web 2.0—a user-powered Internet where people not only read content but also respond, edit, even contribute their own stories. "We pitched a few ideas to Disney and ESPN," he recalls. "Response was good, but there was always something that prevented us from moving forward."

Exit strategy

Davidson and some colleagues began drawing up plans for this new hybrid site but incorporate elements from the blogosphere, encouraging readers to interact and promoting discussion that rises above the typical online polemic.



He began floating the concept on his popular Web design blog (his central role in ESPN.com's redesign and his invention of several Web technologies earned him up to 300,000 hits a month). And he began testing the concept on some of his best readers. They loved it.

"The moment we actually decided to break away from ESPN was the moment we could say to ourselves that even if it fails, it will have been a good thing to do. Once that became crystal clear, we had marching orders," Davidson says. "The idea of creating Newsvine was so fun and career-expanding and mind-expanding, and the potential to really change an industry from the bottom up so great that we couldn't not do it."

The new news thing

Newsvine went live in 2006 and was a hit from the start. Today, it has 150,000 registered users and more than 1.5 million unique visitors a month. Some read casually, some post comments, some "seed" (or link to) articles from mainstream news sites. And others contribute their own content. It adds up to a virtual community of people passionate about the news.

Beyond basic safeguards against libel, incivility, racism or other journalistic sins, Newsvine exerts no editorial control. An algorithm drives placement of articles based on topic and interest-generation.

"We're not a news agency," Davidson explains. "We are a news technology platform. We've made a point not to get involved in editorial decisions. We provide tools for people to interact with the news."

To encourage participation in this editorial meritocracy, Davidson instituted a sliding revenue-sharing model that diverts a portion of every ad sale to the author who attracts the eyeballs. To encourage accountability and discourage click-by ranting, Davidson developed levels of "Vineacity," a kind of merit badge system. And the community takes care of the rest, to the tune of a 15 percent participation rate, unheard of in the online news business.

Not surprisingly, that community has migrated toward politics in this presidential election year. But story topics are all over the map. Amateur journalists have posted reports from Afghanistan and an exclusive interview with AWOL comedian Dave Chappelle. One active retiree from Ohio documented his grass-roots run for US Congress on Newsvine. A soldier in Iraq reported almost daily (using a laptop computer donated by readers).

"Newsvine isn't likely to produce the seminal article on an event or topic. That will be *Newsweek* or the *New York Times*," Davidson says. "But we might

be first, and we might offer insights they may not have."

A wealthy parent

Newsvine also offered MSNBC insights and capabilities it did not have. If his Foster School education had already aided Davidson's jump from creative director to chief executive, it more than proved its worth when the powerful online news wing of Microsoft and NBC came calling.

"When we sold to MSNBC, we didn't use an investment banker," he says. "It was essentially me negotiating head-to-head with the Microsoft corporate development team, which has done this thousands of times. But the lessons I learned ten years ago really stuck with me. The outcome was very good for us."

At a fraction of MSNBC's size and concentrating on interaction around the news, Davidson's company makes an excellent addition. "They don't have anyone who's doing what we're doing and we don't have anyone who's doing what they're doing," he says. "So it was a perfect fit."

His charge is to keep growing Newsvine by word-of-mouth. And to develop innovative functionality that MSNBC can implement, like a discussion club for the Nightly News site that Newsvine built in just three weeks. "We are sort of an MSNBC Labs," Davidson says. "We're still Newsvine, but the other side of our business is being this testing ground for new features that MSNBC isn't even sure they want yet. It's nice for us and it's nice for them."

The experience has been more than nice for him. "There hasn't been a day that I haven't enjoyed working on Newsvine," Davidson says. "It's a site built in our own mold with no negative outside influence, no legacy systems to support, none of the old things that have held back old media in the past few years." ■

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