

# North American Street Newspaper Association (NASNA)

## Session #4

### Building Legitimacy

Presenters: Laura Thompson Osuri, NASNA, former director of Street Sense, Amelia Patterson, executive director, Denver Voice

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Amelia: Denver has a progressive plan to end homelessness. But it's a carrot and stick approach to dealing with homelessness. Downtown there's a business improvement district, an area where the pedestrian traffic is going to be for selling papers. They put outreach workers there but also police to enforce anti-panhandling laws. For the most part, they've gotten rid of a lot of the homeless downtown.

You can be kind of combative and declare your right to be there, but we decided we were too small to do that. We met with the police dept and members of the business community. We approached it like we're going to put our vendors on corners. They said you need a permit, but we don't – we're a nonprofit and we're a newspaper.

Question: What if your vendors are selling something else – do you need a permit?

Amelia: Typically yes. It depends on the city. There are vendor licenses and peddler licenses. A vendor is stationary, a peddler walks around. For most cities, there's a hefty cost.

Laura: The newspaper is First Amendment.

Michael: As long as they have a badge with their picture on it, there's not a lot of hassle.

Matt: The second reason they're protected is the nonprofit reason – soliciting donations? That's why papers say suggested donation \$1?

Amelia: [Yes.] We have undercover police officers that check to see if our vendors will give the paper for free when asked.

Michael: That's a violation of First Amendment.

Joe: Nonprofit status doesn't protect you in Chicago, but First Amendment rights do. Maybe we can work together to help ferret out local laws.

Bruce Gimbel: They get around First Amendment by enforcing a traffic law in our city.

Amelia: It's a huge research project researching how vagrancy laws were shot down. When we were getting our permit, a police officer said you're soliciting a donation for the paper, but it sounds like you're selling the paper. How can you win the argument?

Joe: Using NASNA as the facilitator, perhaps we should have a blog or forum to support each other in understanding our legal rights. Chicago does not have the problems you're talking about in Denver. We've beaten any back. If the Chicago Sun-Times can stand on the corner and sell a paper, so can we.

Amelia: So we "asked for permission" – that was our first strategy instead of declaring our rights. The downtown business community said they get a permit, so we got one. Then they wanted us to observe scheduled days. We said, no, we'll be there every day. Here's our vendor code of conduct, this is how we'll behave.

To renew our permit, we had a meeting at the police department. We'd had problems managing our vendor program. Our vendor coordinator comes into this hostile meeting and business representatives said we don't care about your vendors. Our vendor coordinator traded cell phones with the police and, when they saw how responsive we became when anything came up, the police switched and defended our vendors.

There's also an army of street sweepers and "ambassadors" downtown (paid for by the business community) who help manage our vendors. They call us when there are problems. They now have ownership in our vendor program.

Michael: Street sweepers and ambassadors manage your vendors?

Amelia: They'll call us if the vendors are doubled up or fighting.

Laura: It's important to make friends with the police and not fight them.

Michael: I have an issue with that. Each person that comes in to sign up where I work signs a code of conduct. We have supervisors that are in charge of what to do when a complaint is phoned in. We have relationships with community, including law enforcement and city council and mayor, but the thing is vendors need to be able to breathe. If you've got people calling in, that's not their business. You're giving someone else the power of control. I would never have some business tell me I've got two vendors selling on a corner. That's for a supervisor.

[an open debate ensues]

Laura: Let's bring it back in, please.

Arlene: Why give up that sense of control?

Amelia: Every time someone has a bad interaction with a vendor, it reflects badly on everyone.

Michael: That's why we have a supervisor. You have people making false complaints or accusations that are never true.

Eddie: We're due to launch in September with our paper. We're flying under the radar because we're hesitant to build bridges and form relationships with people a month from now that are going to say you suck.

What's the line between asking the police dept can we do this and a month from now saying what are you doing to our people or other homeless people?

Laura: You have to say, listen, this is our editorial policy and if you're kicking homeless people at night we're going to report it.

Amelia: The minute you go in swinging you take a lot of things off the table. It's worth a shot to build bridges, to say we came to the table in good faith and we have a good program to offer the community, a jobs program. The dirt's on your face for shutting us down.

Matt Shaw: I went on a ride-along with a homeless services worker with the county who had relationships with specific officers. I bet that's a good place to start.

Bruce Gimbel: We're building off of a reputation that we've created with our shelter programs. My thinking is that if you're starting a newspaper, why not build a relationship with an agency or coalition that has a good relationship in the community. Assuming you can get their support, then you have a louder voice on your side on the legal issues or with law enforcement.

It took 10 years for me to get all of the law enforcement and other community players on the side of our shelter. For the newspaper, I went to the chamber and police first.

Amelia: How did that go?

Bruce: It went positively [in terms of] researching the county code regarding vendors/solicitors and talking to police about the laws about where we can stand – throwing the questions out to let them answer rather than going out cold.

Amelia: A lot more people are going to support you than you expect.

Laura: For building legitimacy in the community, be really strategic in building your board of directors. Or you can create an advisory board with people from business or the mayor's office that give you legitimacy so these people can explain what your paper's about. On the masthead, people will see all these important names and that it's a legitimate thing.

Another thing is press coverage. That makes your paper legitimate. Street papers are about journalism. When I was with Street Sense, reporters would buy it and want to write a story on it. Use that leverage as much as possible. Send subscriptions to all the media outlets in your city. Our vendors started selling the paper outside media outlets.

One thing we also did at Street Sense was give out awards on homeless coverage to local media. Last year a columnist at the Post spoke at the awards event. He said the worst part of my day is when my editor comes over with a copy of Street Sense and says why isn't this in our paper?

Amelia: Make sure your journalism looks good and doesn't have typos. If it doesn't look good, then who cares?

We do a readership survey. Our readers are highly educated and quite wealthy. When we can communicate that back to the community in an annual report, that brings legitimacy to us as well. It shows influential people are reading us and supporting the program.

In Denver, the homeless population went up 44% and we calculated that we employed 15% of them.

Laura: Two years ago, we ran the annual report in the paper. That's a good way to communicate [legitimacy] to the public.

Joe: We've found both in the business world and in the community that it really helps to communicate how a vendor came in and benefitted from Streetwise and moved on. Backing that up with data has helped us transcend being glorified panhandlers to an employment program.

Amelia: You have to spend a lot of time doing that. We do intake surveys of vendors. We offer services to people they can't find anywhere else, such as felons who just can't get employment. We do longer orientations and weekly trainings now and vendors come back now.

Joe: Something we're testing out that may be controversial is that we're tailoring requirements of vendors based on the level at which they come in. For instance, you have to be showing up to our weekly meetings to have access to other services.

Amelia: That's a resources issue. We can call up and get somebody to the right services. We do employment verification for housing, employment and parole.

Deb: I was asked for a reference by someone looking for a job and at the time we had no way to track anyone.

Laura: It's hard because from what I understand they require knowing this person is at this office at these hours and you can't verify that. We can say they came at 10 to buy papers and again at 1.

Amelia: It depends on the parole officer. Sometimes it's not a good fit for the vendor. If they were busted for selling drugs on the corner and now they're on the same corner selling papers, that's the same environment.

We can say we can track how many papers they sell. You don't want to take on the responsibility.

Laura: On the newspaper side, obviously you want your vendors to look legitimate – badges or caps or aprons. They have to sell a product that looks legit, too. It needs to look legit.

The people starting out, just try to keep things simple and clean. Look at local papers that are more respected. You don't want 18 fonts for the type. Even if your stories are terrible and it looks good, it helps.

Two other points: Include advertising. It's a touchy subject for some. But even if you're not selling ads and you have nonprofits develop ads to put in the paper, it makes you look more legitimate.

Michael: What about coupons?

Laura: They're great because the advertiser can track them.

A Street Sense person: We've partnered with businesses to do "Dollars for Sense Days" where we get 10% of their proceeds that day.

Laura: Play up other street newspapers in your paper. Have ads for NASNA, INSP. Use copy from the Street News Service.

Bruce Gimbel: An attorney told us that, under our 501(c)3, selling ads could be considered a source of unrelated income that could be taxable.

Katie: It is not unrelated income for a newspaper to sell advertising. Nobody can tell you don't have the right to earn income. You don't need a license to sell an ad. Unrelated business income would be me selling pearl purses. Advertisement is part and parcel of a newspaper.

Street Sense person: Do you lose legitimacy in situations where vendors were fighting and how did you handle the damage control?

Amelia: We had a pizza joint. Two people – a couple – were running vendor services and they had a baby and a lot of responsibilities. They were going to this pizza place, they had a great relationship with the owner. But it turned into a hang-out place for the vendors where they'd drink PBRs.

Sure enough, someone left a needle in the bathroom. The business owner told me I want to have an open place but it's getting out of control – what do I do?

We acknowledged that the business owner liked the vendors, but we pulled them back from hanging out in that spot. The last thing we wanted was for the business owner to call the police.

Amelia: We had a rogue vendor who was on a mission to end Street Sense and was putting videos on YouTube about us [that we had to explain to our board].

Amelia: Your board is fiscally responsible for your organization. You need insurance for libel situations like that.

Have a contingency plan for who talks and speaks for your organization when an emergency comes up. It's important to think about that ahead of time so you contain the rumor mill.

When a vendor is done vending and they spend their money, they're adults and they can spend their money. That comes up a lot. Make a strong line about what you're responsible for and what you're not.

Matt Shaw: The Denver Voice doesn't seem like it would alienate anybody. What's the [editorial] line there?

Amelia: Denver's liberal, but it's very intentional for us that we are not biased.

For your 501c3, if you smell like you're doing political activities that will get you in trouble. Our objective is to be neutral and let the stories speak for themselves. We'll show you things but we're not going to tell you how to think about them.

Laura: I came to Street Sense with the idea of the objective observer, to try to present both sides. You don't call cop a pig, you just show that the cop is a pig.

Amelia: I used to be an activist, but you end up preaching to a core group that stops listening. People don't want to pick up a paper with the same sad-story content. You need diverse content.

Participant: We're asking all the mayoral candidates what they're doing on homelessness.

Moderators: That's what you should do; just don't endorse anyone.