The Big Issue Goes Online:

Creating a Vendor-Run Profiling Program

Abstract

Our team collaborated with *The Big Issue* South Africa, a street paper that advances the lives of the chronically poor by helping them become entrepreneurs. We worked to advance *The Big Issue's* new online marketplace. These are profile pages focused on the vendors of *The Big Issue* that allow them to sell online while sharing stories and pictures of their daily lives. Working closely with a group of "Vendors of the Month" as our co-researchers, we piloted a vendor-run profile program. We developed a mentoring and training program aimed at the development of online vendor profiles. Items created to assist in the website development include guides and worksheets that mentors and vendors can update together. We worked with vendor mentors who carried out the responsibility of working with other vendors to explain these worksheets, update its content, and gain valuable input from other vendors with great success.

This is an executive summary of a WPI Cape Town Project Centre project that is fully reported at wp.wpi.edu/capetown/projects/p2014/big-issue/

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The Big Issue South Africa

Big Issue: Hand Up, Not Handout

Unemployment is a critical issue in South Africa. The unemployment rate is currently 25.5 percent, meaning 13.4 million people are without jobs (Unicef, South Africa: Statistics, June 2014). Our sponsor, *The Big Issue* South Africa, offers an opportunity to those affected by this high unemployment rate. *The Big Issue* is a non-governmental, not-for-profit street paper. Street papers are newspapers or magazines that are published to be sold by homeless, unemployed, and/or socially marginalized individuals, called vendors. Street papers give vendors employment opportunities and a chance to take charge of their own lives and advance their careers. Vendors sell the magazine on their pitch, a particular spot around Cape Town that they apply for. The street paper model is self-help driven; vendors are essentially their own bosses and become micro-entrepreneurs responsible for their own success. *Big Issue* vendors buy the magazines at half the cover price then sell it at full price, keeping the difference plus any tips, providing them "a hand up, not a hand out." Although *The Big Issue* is doing what it can to help, vendors still face misconceptions from the public on a daily basis; some see vendors as beggars on the street. Meanwhile, many customers are moving from reading hard copy publications to digital. These two problems make it difficult for vendors to build a customer base. Customers have also been moving away from cash payments to online transactions. This problem has been partially addressed by a "Snapscan" enabled process that allows people to pay with smart phones.

Opportunity: A New Pitch in an Unlikely Place

With customers moving to digital media, *The Big Issue* plans to create an online marketplace where customers can purchase the magazine from a vendor of their choice. *The Big Issue* hopes that by moving sales online as well as continuing on the streets, the vendors will sell more and increase their revenue. The online marketplace will also help the vendors break misconceptions surrounding who they are, by giving vendors the opportunity to share pictures, stories, and other aspects of their lives with their customers.*The Big Issue's* goal was for our team to gather content for these online profiles from a group of vendors who had been recognized for outstanding sales and participation in *Big Issue* workshops over the past year. Beyond just posting content online, we saw a fantastic opportunity to do more with this project. Our goal became to create a sustainable content gathering program that would be facilitated by "mentor" vendors, not our WPI team or *The Big Issue* staff. This would give *The Big Issue* resources to use once the website platform was complete and also give vendors the opportunity to learn valuable leadership skills.

Creating a Vendor-Run Profile Program

The vendor-run profile program was established by working closely with vendors of *The Big Issue*. We imple-

mented the methodology of Shared Action Learning (SAL) throughout our project. SAL is the process used by the Cape Town Project Center (CTPC) that encourages community members, often called co-researchers, and WPI students to work together to solve a problem (Jiusto, Hersh, Taylor, 2010). Determining who our co-researchers would be was a vital first step to our project. In working with the co-researchers we drew upon our research on PhotoVoice and Participatory Video, methods which allowed the vendors to document life experiences and feelings more expressively than through simple text. PhotoVoice is the process of adding a voiceover to a picture that is meaningful to that person (Brunsden and Goatcher, 2007), while Participatory Video allows the participant to take control of the camera to record what inspires them (Lunch, 2006).

Forging an Effective Cross-Cultural Co-Researcher Group

When our sponsor introduced us to the group of vendors with whom we would work, we were eager to get to know them because the essence of the project was to share vendors' stories online. Building a trusting relationship among us all initially would support a truly participatory project. We spent our first meeting with the

vendors teaching them how to use cameras and encouraging them to teach each other. Some vendors picked up the cameras faster than others, and began interviewing each other and us. This helped when we conducted interviews with the vendors to learn who they were. The cameras became a staple of our project. We brought them to every meeting, left them on the table, and the vendors used them throughout the meetings. This served as a very useful icebreaking and connecting activity. Additional connecting activities included creating name tags with drawings so vendors could explain more about themselves; and doing a family sharing activity in which we shared photos and stories about our families with them. The vendors also invited us to visit their homes which allowed us to create a community with them, while beginning the process of sharing their personal lives for their online profiles.

Mentor Pilot Program

Working with a large vendor group made brainstorming activities difficult. A smaller group of co-researchers called "vendor mentors" was formed to help establish a sustainable vendor-run online profile development program. We brainstormed the best ways to engage with vendors and gain biographical information that would be uploaded onto their web-page. Our first step was having the vendors upload their own content on a makeshift blog. Due to their lack of experience with computers we found it would be better to create a program where the mentor's would first gather hand-written information and pictures from each vendor, to be uploaded later.

Steps to a Profiling System

We broke the profile into steps for better understanding. The first step was to obtain biographical information from each vendor. With the help of the mentors, we created worksheets the mentors and vendors could fill out. The second step was to obtain pictures from each vendor. We did activities that introduced the vendors to cameras including taking a field trip to the streets of the imme-

diate neighborhood. Third, we brought the pictures back and learned how to view them on the computer. We then practiced the idea of writing out captions for the photos (the mentors called it "photo analysis"). Finally, using the captions from the photo analysis activity, the vendors recorded voice overs, which would be used to create each vendors online profile.

Mentors Teach What They Learn

After going through all of the steps with the vendors, they had the opportunity to test out the activities we created with the larger group of vendors. The mentors lead the photo analysis activity and worked with the vendors to gain the biographical information that would be used on their web-pages.

Outcomes

The following section highlights the outcomes our team achieved through our two months working with *The Big Issue* Vendors.

Fostering Community among Vendors

Beyond the working relationship with us as co-researchers, the vendors bonded with one another. Some of the vendors knew each other outside of work, but we observed that many of the vendors had never met each other before. We learned that while vendors come into *The Big Issue* offices periodically to buy magazines or attend trainings there is not much of a community between them. Through the ice breakers they participated in, the vendors got to learn things about each other they never knew before. When we discussed where everyone's homes were, some vendors were shocked to learn that they were neighbors. These house visits provided the vendors with the opportunity to take pictures capturing the reality they face every day. In addition, there was a sense of community formed among the vendors. Fikiswa, one of the vendor mentors, mentioned "we came to see everyone's home to see if they were in a bad place. If they were, we wanted to know so that we could help them. We support each other." Our liaison, Trudy Vlok the managing director of *The Big Issue*, was amazed by how much the vendors had connected through this project. Before the activities, the vendors would say little to each other, but now they talk, laugh, and ask how each vendor's week has been, proving that a community space had been created between them.

Making the Vendor-run Profile Program Sustainable

The primary goal of this project was to ensure that the vendor run profile program would be effective and sustainable. To accomplish this goal we created the vendor mentor group to assist vendors in providing biographical information and visuals for *The Big Issue's* online marketplace. The 4 vendors selected – Themba, Xolani, Lavista, and Fikiswa – had all showed strong enthusiasm for the project, had attended all previous meetings, could help translate for the other vendors and had an approachable personality. Each one also had personal strengths to bring to the project. Xolani and Themba would be the "ambassador" spokesmen for the program, Lavista would connect with the younger vendors, and Fikiswa would be the "mama mentor" of the group. The mentors will continue to grow in these roles throughout the continuation of this program

Experimenting with New Technological Skills

The Big Issue's goal was for the vendors to be able to upload and update their profile pages on their own due to the large number of vendors at *The Big Issue* and the minimal *Big Issue* staff. We tested how well the vendors knew how to use computers and the internet to inform *The Big Issue* if this was possible. However

due to the large number of vendors, independent uploading proved to be unrealistic.

Blog Posts

Blog posts were created for our mentors and we taught them how to type out a post. This proved to be challenging due to the lack of experience the mentors had working with computers. Xolani, Themba, and Lavista struggled with figuring out how to move the mouse and click to select. They worked hard to type a few sentences about

Vendor Profiles

Home | Vendor Profiles as a Blog | Themba | Lavista | Xolani

Lavista

Hi My name is Lavista. I work in Green Market Square as a Big Issue Vendor. I have been working for the Big Issue for 7 years. I joined the Big Issue because a friend, Thando, who I was working with in Green Market Square told me about the Big Issue and told me that I would be good at selling it because of my personality. I was lost and frustrated the first time I started selling the Big Issue because people didn't know what it was. My friend told me that I must be strong and to not give up. He taught me how to best approach the customers and taught me about different magazines in the world like the Big Issue to help explain to customers how it works. In 2 weeks time, I was able to get over my frustration and it became easier to sell the Big Issue. I love my pitch because I get to meet a lot of new people and learn new languages that I can use to interact with people. Languages that I know include Xhosa, Afrikaans, English, German, Dutch, and a little bit of Italian. The Big Issue has helped me get through schooling and I have become a better person because of it. I am interested in eventually becoming a tour guide for tourists in Cape Town. I want to work my way from the bottom to the top. I am interested in saving up for a tour guide course and hope to eventually achieve my goal.

themselves and had an enjoyable time learning; however through this activity we realized that a lot more time would need to be spent for vendors to be able to update and upload their own content.

How-To Guides

To promote program sustainability, our team created how-to guides with the input of our vendor mentor group that the mentors and *Big Issue* staff could use to help with training of the vendors. The goal was for the vendors to eventually be responsible for bringing in and uploading their own photos and weekly updates of what has occurred in their lives most recently. We made several guides for how to use cameras, the internet, and how to use a computer keyboard.

Internet/Keyboard

We realized that it would be helpful to create a "how-to use a computer keyboard guide" and a simple "how-to use the internet guide". These guides were given to *The Big Issue* along with challenges they may run into when working with the vendors due to computer illiteracy. Although we would not be continuing using computers with the mentors, we felt that the keyboard and internet how-to's would be helpful for the technology team that will provide computer

trainings for the vendors in the future.

How to Use a Camera

The camera how-to went through all the steps of using a camera in order to take a picture; starting with taking the lens cap off and ending with pressing the "play" button to review the picture that had just been taken. The mentors grasped how to use the camera and were able to clearly teach it back to us by following the steps in the guide.

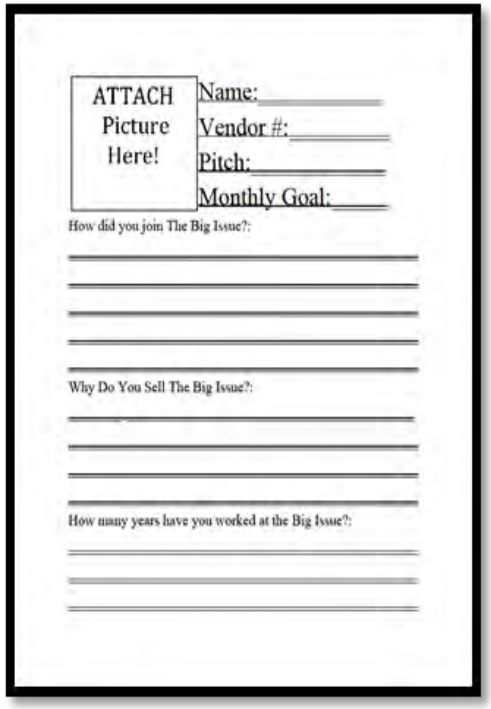
Taking a Different Approach: Worksheets

Due to the challenge the vendors had with typing and updating the blog posts, we decided to take away the aspect of the computer and bring it back to pen and paper. Worksheets were created with the input of the mentor group to provide the essential profile information that will go on the vendor webpages. All vendors will fill out these worksheets with the help of mentors to get their page running and begin understanding the idea of the online marketplace. The mentors had great success with filling in this worksheet with the other seven vendors, suggesting that this was a sustainable option.

Vendor Mentors Lead the Group

After the meetings with the mentors and receiving feedback on the training resources, it was time for the

mentors to take over and teach what they had learned to the bigger vendor group. Before we left we wanted to make sure that the mentors could take charge and work one on one with other vendors to gather biographical information for their online profiles and help them take pictures for their web-pages. Fikiswa and Xolani worked together on the worksheets while Lavista and Themba took charge of the camera activity, producing very successful results. All the vendors listened and respected the words of the mentors and cooperated with all the activities while also having a fun. As we watched the mentors own the project, we realized that this vendor run profile program has a lot of potential.


ATTACH Picture Here!

Name:_____

Vendor #:_____

Pitch:_____

Monthly Goal:_____

How did you join The Big Issue?:

Why Do You Sell The Big Issue?:

How many years have you worked at the Big Issue?:

The Big Issue: Vendor Edition!

As a farewell, we created "Vendor Magazines" for each vendor. These magazines included written biographies using the information obtained from the worksheets the mentors completed with the vendors. Along with the bios, photos they had taken throughout the project were incorporated. This was a great way to end as it showed the success of the worksheets and showcased all of the effort the vendors had put into the project.

Conclusion

Our project ended up having a much bigger impact on the *The Big Issue* than we could have ever anticipated. Trudy Vlok, the managing director, mentioned that she was skeptical of how this project would turn out because through her experience with vendors she knew how difficult it could be to implement new programs. Now she sees how much the vendors have blossomed by being involved in the development of *The Big Issue's* online marketplace. The information we gathered in interviews and meetings with the vendors allowed the pilot program to begin. This content was used by *The Big Issue* to create a promotional video that will advertise the program and the website platform. The website is going to be started with the vendors we completed this project with. *The Big Issue* is planning on adding new vendors each month, possibly one or two, who have achieved "Vendor of the Month" status. This gives vendors incentive to sell more newspapers and be a more integral part of *The Big Issue*.

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