

The Madera Tribune



Serving the heart of California since 1892

A digital resurrection — Spring 2026



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The Madera Tribune Case Study

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*No paper ever cut
its way back to
mattering. Strategy
built from courage
will... every time.*



The Madera Tribune Case Study

Rebuilding The Digital Home of a 134-Year-Old Newspaper

**Design Thinking,
Intentional Execution,
and Technology
that Fits**

Courage is a practice, not a gesture. It must run through every function of the paper (newsroom, books, governance, revenue) or the unfaced function fails the rest. Courage as an event fails in both directions: a brave launch with avoidant bookkeeping dies; brave journalism without a brave business build loses its stewards. The throughline is courage made procedural – routines that carry the decision through the months after the feeling fades.

The Paper

When a Request for a Website Price Became a Much Larger Question

Workingarts Marketing had recently completed a seven-year communications and publishing engagement with a local school district. As we considered where to direct our experience next, we began expanding our online marketing work with organizations throughout the Central Valley.

That was when Nancy Simpson, CFO and Publisher of The Madera Tribune, contacted us.

The Tribune is one of California's oldest continuously published local newspapers. Founded in 1892, it has documented generations of life in Madera County: elections, schools, businesses, crimes, celebrations, losses, public notices, sports, weddings, obituaries, and the everyday events that collectively become a community's history.

Nancy asked us to study the newspaper's website and meet with her to discuss what we found.

During that first meeting, we talked for a long time. We discussed the Tribune's history, its changing readership, its internal processes, its relationship with advertisers, its role as a newspaper of record, and the challenges facing a small independent newspaper in a rapidly changing media environment.

Several times, we were asked for a price.

But a price for what?

We could estimate the cost of replacing pages. We could not responsibly estimate the cost of solving the newspaper's problems until we understood what those problems actually were. The website was only the visible surface of a much larger system.



The Problem

The Website Was Working Against the Newspaper

The Tribune's website had been built on Wix.

For a small promotional website, a hosted platform can provide speed and convenience. For a newspaper with thousands of articles, numerous editorial sections, advertising obligations, public-record responsibilities, and a continually expanding archive, the platform had become a serious limitation.

Readers could encounter intrusive advertisements that appeared unexpectedly in several places on the screen. Some were unrelated to the newspaper or the article being read. At times, advertising obstructed the Tribune's own masthead and content.

The reading experience was also inconsistent. Articles could appear incomplete or fragmented. Sections of the newspaper were not always represented by stable, individual web pages. Search was inadequate, and readers could not be confident that the results represented everything the Tribune had published.

For a newspaper, that uncertainty is especially damaging.

When someone searches for an obituary, election result, public notice, school achievement, court story, or account of a community event, an incomplete result is more than a technical inconvenience. It weakens the newspaper's ability to function as the community's permanent record.

Behind these visible problems was an even greater risk.

Wix uses a proprietary content-management structure and does not provide a conventional method for exporting an entire publication into another content-management system. The Tribune's articles, images, categories, and historical material could not simply be packaged and moved.

Years of published work were effectively trapped inside a rented platform.

What initially appeared to be a website redesign was becoming something much larger: the recovery of a digital archive, the reconstruction of a publishing system, and the creation of a platform capable of supporting the newspaper's future.

The Problem

We Could Not Redesign the Website Without Understanding the Work

A newspaper website is shaped by far more than its editors.

It touches advertising, circulation, customer service, community relations, legal notices, photography, production, billing, archives, and the daily work of publishing the print edition.

We therefore began with contextual inquiry.

Rather than asking employees only what they wanted the new website to look like, we asked them to show us how they worked.

We met with the people whose responsibilities could be improved—or hindered—by the new system. We observed how information entered the newspaper, how it was processed, how articles were published, how advertising was sold, how customers made requests, and where staff members had developed manual workarounds for limitations in the existing site.

The purpose was not merely to assemble a feature list. We wanted to identify:

- where work was being duplicated;
- where information became difficult to find;
- where the website created additional staff work;
- where readers and advertisers encountered friction;
- where institutional knowledge depended on one person; and
- where better technology could simplify, automate, or eliminate a recurring problem.

The employees were not simply future users of the website. They were the people who understood where the newspaper's systems succeeded, where they failed, and what a new platform would need to support.

The Problem

The Problem Was Not One Website

The discovery process changed the definition of the project.

The Tribune did need a new website. But replacing the visual design alone would have preserved many of the underlying problems.

The real challenge involved several connected systems:

- **Editorial presentation.** Articles needed to be readable, complete, searchable, and organized into dependable sections.
- **Archive preservation.** The newspaper's accumulated body of work needed to be recovered from a closed platform and placed within a system the Tribune could control.
- **Advertising.** Digital advertising needed to support the newspaper without overwhelming its journalism or damaging the reader experience.
- **Revenue development.** The website needed to create new opportunities for advertisers rather than merely reproduce print ads on a screen.
- **Internal workflow.** Staff needed tools that reduced repetitive work and made publishing easier to manage.
- **Community access.** Readers needed to find news, obituaries, legal notices, advertising information, subscription details, and newspaper locations without hunting through the site.
- **Future development.** The platform needed to support services and capabilities that had not yet been built.



This was not a cosmetic redesign.

It was an infrastructure project.

The Approach

From a Website Proposal to Several Possible Futures

Once we understood the scope of the challenge, we developed several levels of response.

At the most focused level, the Tribune could replace its existing website with a more dependable publishing platform, improve navigation, and establish a sound technical foundation.

A broader option included content reorganization, archive recovery, advertising improvements, reader services, analytics, search optimization, and staff workflow enhancements.

The most comprehensive option extended beyond the website into an integrated marketing and business-development program. It included digital advertising products, advertiser support, community campaigns, content strategy, analytics, promotional execution, and tools designed to help the Tribune build new sources of revenue and engagement.

Presenting tiers allowed the newspaper to see the difference between purchasing a replacement website and investing in a broader transformation.

It also made one principle clear: the technology should follow the Tribune's priorities. The Tribune should not have to reorganize itself around the limitations of its technology.

The Approach

Choosing Ground the Newspaper Could Control

We recommended rebuilding the site in WordPress on managed hosting.

The choice was not based on popularity alone. WordPress offered several capabilities that were essential to the Tribune's future:

- ownership and portability of its content;
- stable URLs for articles and editorial sections;
- a searchable publishing database;
- control over advertising placement;
- the ability to expand through custom development;
- integration with analytics and marketing systems;
- a large support ecosystem; and
- a practical path for future migration if the newspaper's needs changed again.

The distinction was fundamental. The Tribune would no longer be placing its history inside a closed system with no dependable exit path. Its articles, images, categories, authors, and records would exist within an architecture the newspaper could access, manage, back up, and move.

The new site would not simply look different.

The newspaper would own its ground.

The Approach

Recovering the Archive

Building the new platform was only part of the work.

The larger technical challenge was retrieving and reconstructing the Tribune's existing content.

Because Wix did not provide a complete export system for the publication, the migration could not be handled through a conventional transfer. Articles and media had to be recovered through a combination of available source material, database reconstruction, local files, and custom processing.

The scale was substantial.

The project ultimately involved more than 10,000 published posts and tens of thousands of associated files.

Each article also carried relationships that mattered:

- its headline;
- publication date;
- author;
- category;
- photographs;
- captions;
- internal links;
- section placement; and
- permanent web address.

Moving content without preserving those relationships would not have produced a usable newspaper archive. The work therefore required more than copying text. It required reconstructing the editorial record in a new system and checking that the resulting content remained understandable, searchable, and connected.

A newspaper archive is not a collection of old web pages. It is a structured body of community memory.

Rebuilding the Newspaper's Structure

The former site often treated categories and sections as temporary displays rather than dependable destinations.

The new architecture gave the newspaper real sections with stable web addresses.

News, sports, obituaries, opinion, community coverage, legal notices, advertising information, and other areas could now be organized around how readers actually look for information.

This improved more than navigation. A real section page can be:

- bookmarked by a reader;
- shared through email or social media;
- indexed by search engines;
- linked from another article;
- measured through analytics;
- promoted in a campaign; and
- maintained as part of a permanent publishing structure.

Search was also rebuilt as a core newspaper function rather than a secondary convenience. A reader looking for a person, business, school, public agency, event, or historical story needed confidence that the result was based on the newspaper's actual archive.

The objective was not to make the Tribune appear more modern. It was to make its reporting easier to find, follow, and trust.

Digging In

Designing Advertising that Supported the Journalism

Advertising is essential to a local newspaper's survival. It should not, however, prevent readers from reaching the journalism that gives the advertising value.

The old website allowed disruptive third-party advertisements to intrude upon the reader experience. The ads could compete with the newspaper's own identity, obscure content, and promote products with no meaningful connection to the local community.

The new system gave the Tribune greater control over:

- which advertisements appeared;
- where they appeared;
- how often they appeared;
- which pages or sections carried them; and
- how their performance could be measured.

This created an opportunity to rethink what digital advertising could offer a local business. Instead of selling only a static image placement, the newspaper could begin offering measurable access to a local audience. Campaigns could connect print advertising, digital placement, landing pages, social promotion, and reporting.

The website could become more than another expense. It could become part of the Tribune's revenue infrastructure.

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Digging In

Building for Readers, Advertisers, and Staff

During discovery, several needs emerged that could not be solved by page design alone.

Readers needed a better way to find where the printed newspaper was sold. Advertisers needed clearer information about available opportunities. Staff needed easier ways to publish and manage recurring content. Community members needed direct access to obituaries, notices, local resources, and contact information.

These needs led to the development of newspaper-specific tools and features, that most large newsrooms can afford and actually use. The Tribune was cash-strapped, and struggling. So, we played the long game, knowing that the tools and features we developed could benefit other struggling local newsrooms.

A Newsstand Location Map

Readers can locate nearby newspaper racks and retail locations rather than searching through a static list or calling the office. The map turns a frequent customer question—“Where can I buy the paper?”—into a direct, location-based service. On a mobile device, this map can also offer normal driving directions through the map interface. If someone arrives at the rack and it’s empty, they can use the tracker to find the closet rack to their current location.

Better Obituary and Community-Service Connections

The Obituary resource page can connect readers with relevant local services while maintaining the dignity and purpose of the section. This also creates a focused advertising environment for funeral homes, florists, memorial services, and related businesses. The self-serve submission form also presented a new opportunity to offer services to help mourners write a dignified obituary.

(see <https://maderatribune.com/how-do-i-submit-an-obituary/> →)



Legal-Notice Improvements

Legal notices are not ordinary posts. They are part of the newspaper’s public-record responsibility. A structured system can make notices easier to publish, search, retain, and expire according to their required schedules.

Digging In

The tool was built on HivePress's listing strength (a third-party plugin), aligned with CA state legislation --Legal-requirements of CA / AB 2095. That bill didn't pass the final vote, but it was instructive for a future point when it likely will. Full notice text must be searchable, free, and available for the run period on the paper's site, plus appear on the statewide repository (capublicnotice.com). The widget covers searchable/free/retained + "view as published." It does not replace the CNPA statewide submissions.

We built this knowing that small newsrooms fold every day now, and the likelihood that an alternative sanctioned method for publishing fictitious business names must be found in their absence is critical. Commerce grinds to a halt without the ability to file and publish these as the law dictates.



Controlled Advertiser Presentation

A managed advertiser carousel gives local businesses continued visibility without allowing advertisements to dominate the publication. Click measurement and reporting can help the Tribune demonstrate the value delivered to advertisers.

Print-Friendly Resources

Some readers still need forms, notices, guides, or reference materials on paper. Print controls allow them to produce clean copies without menus, ads, and unrelated page elements.

Each tool addressed a real operational or reader problem identified during discovery. Nothing was added simply because it was technologically possible.

Newsroom Masthead

The Newsroom Masthead widget shows a clickable masthead / staff box, the list of who runs the paper, that a non-coder can edit from the dashboard. Email addresses automatically become clickable mailto: links and phone numbers become tel: links. It can be placed as a sidebar Widget, a block, an Elementor element, or anywhere with a shortcode. It is paper-agnostic on purpose, so it travels to other papers in the network, and it ships seeded with the Tribune's own masthead as the starting content.

Preparing the Newspaper for a Broader Community

Madera's community is multilingual, multigenerational, and increasingly likely to encounter the newspaper first through a phone rather than a printed front page.

The new platform was built to support broader access, including translation, mobile reading, clearer presentation, and future bilingual publishing.

This matters for ordinary news, but it becomes especially important during emergencies.

Wildfires, extreme heat, floods, road closures, school alerts, and public-health notices do not become less urgent because a resident receives information in another language.

A local newspaper already has something emergency systems often struggle to build: familiarity.

Readers know its name. They recognize its role. They understand that it reports on their town.

A dependable, accessible, multilingual local-news platform is therefore not only a publishing asset. It can become part of the community's communication infrastructure.



The website needed to be prepared for that responsibility, even where the Tribune's full bilingual strategy would continue to develop after launch.

The Cutover

Moving Without Silencing the Newspaper

Newspapers do not pause while their systems are rebuilt.

The Tribune still had editions to produce, articles to publish, advertisers to serve, and readers expecting access to the news.

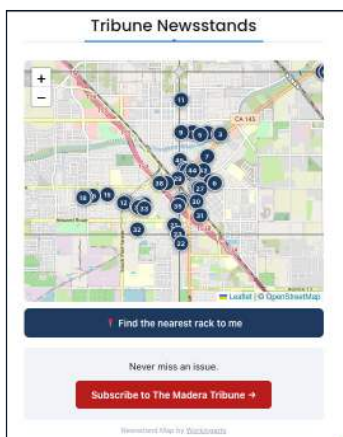
The migration therefore had to occur while the newspaper continued operating.

A development environment was used to build, test, organize, and revise the new site without disrupting the existing publication. Content recovery and site construction proceeded in parallel with the Tribune's normal work.

The final cutover took place on July 3, 2026, immediately before the Fourth of July.

The technical switch itself was completed in approximately an hour, although the project leading to that moment had required months of research, recovery, design, development, testing, and coordination.

The short cutover was not evidence that the project was simple. It was evidence that the preparation had been thorough.



The Outcome

The First Test Came from a Reader

The most meaningful early response did not come from a technical audit or internal presentation.

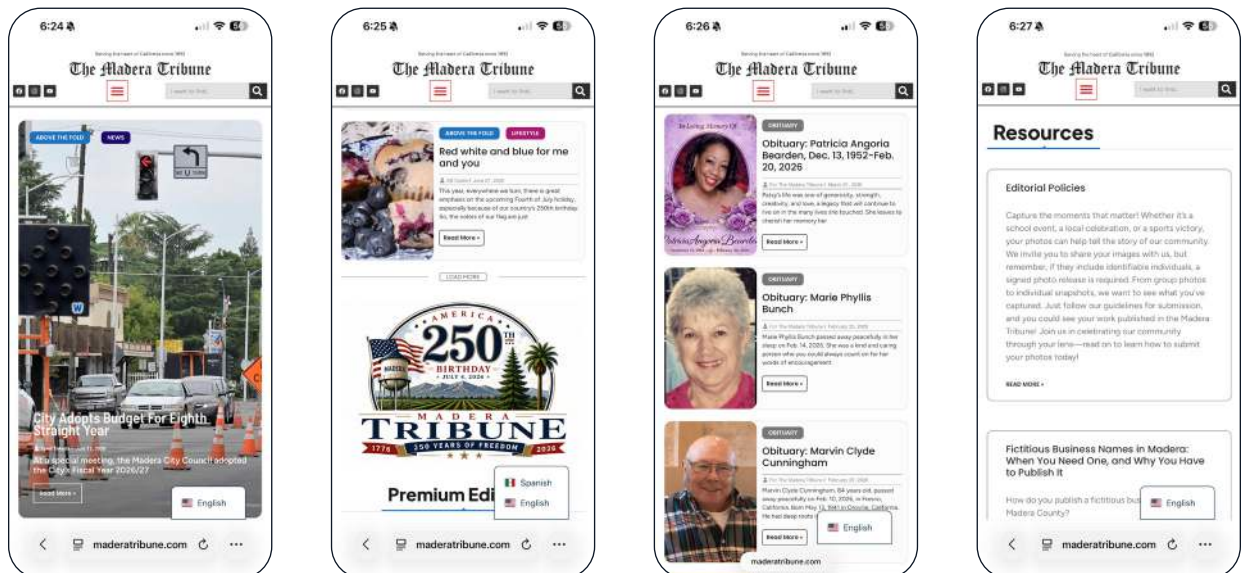
It came from a Madera reader visiting family in Germany.

Within hours of the launch, she sent a message describing the new website as easy to navigate and clear to read.

Her response captured something larger than usability.

A local newspaper's community is not limited by city boundaries. Former residents, traveling families, military personnel, students, and people with deep ties to Madera may live anywhere.

***The printed newspaper serves a place.
The digital newspaper serves everyone
who still belongs to that place.***



The Outcome

What Changed

The new website gave the Tribune a foundation it did not previously have.

Articles now exist within an open, manageable publishing system. Editorial sections have stable destinations. Search now runs entirely on the newspaper's own publishing database. Results come from the Tribune's actual archive — complete, current, and under the newspaper's control — rather than depending on an outside search engine's crawl, which may be partial, outdated, or broken without the newspaper ever knowing. Advertising is controlled by the newspaper rather than imposed upon it. The archive is no longer dependent upon a proprietary platform with no practical export path.

The site can support new reader services, advertiser products, analytics, translation, public notices, community directories, and custom newspaper tools.

Top 5 Enhancements

1. **The archive belongs to the Tribune.** All archived and current stories can now be accessed, backed up, exported, and moved. The newspaper's history is an asset it holds, not a hostage on a rented platform.
2. **Search is fully local.** Every query is answered from the newspaper's own database — not from an external crawl that silently misses stories. When a reader searches for an obituary or a public notice, the answer is complete.
3. **Advertising answers to the newspaper.** The Tribune decides which ads appear, where, and how often. Ads no longer obscure the masthead or compete with the journalism.
4. **Advertising can now be proven.** Placement, impressions, clicks, and campaign results are measurable — giving local advertisers evidence of value instead of assurances.
5. **The staff works less to publish more.** From a dashboard-editable masthead to structured recurring content, the platform removes manual workarounds instead of creating them.

The project also changed how future questions could be answered.

Before the migration, many new ideas began with the platform's restrictions. After the migration, the discussion could begin with the Tribune's goals.

That may be the most consequential outcome of the entire project.

The Outcome

What We Learned

The Tribune initially asked us to evaluate a website.

The work ultimately required us to understand a newspaper.

We had to learn how its people worked, how its history had been preserved, how its advertisers perceived value, how its readers found information, and where technology had quietly become an obstacle.

The project reinforced several principles that now guide our work with local publications.

Discovery Must Come Before Pricing

A responsible proposal cannot be based solely on the number of pages requested. Scope depends on content, workflows, integrations, risks, organizational readiness, and the consequences of failure.

Migration Is Not the Same as Reconstruction

Moving content is only useful when its structure, relationships, meaning, and future usability are preserved.

A Newspaper Website Is Operational Infrastructure

It supports journalism, advertising, public records, customer service, community access, archiving, and emergency communication. Treating it as a digital brochure understates its role.

Ownership Matters

A publication should be able to access, preserve, back up, and relocate its own archive.

Technology Should Reduce Friction

The best feature is often not the most visible one. It may be the process that eliminates repeated staff work, prevents an error, answers a common reader question, or gives an advertiser credible evidence.

Local Newspapers Need Systems Built Around Their Reality

Small newspapers cannot simply imitate national media companies. Their resources, audiences, obligations, and relationships are different. Their tools should reflect that.

The Outcome

More Than a New Website

The finished site represents a visible transformation, but the most important work occurred beneath the surface.

The Tribune moved from a closed platform to an extensible publishing system. Its archive was recovered and reorganized. Its sections became stable and searchable. Its advertising became more deliberate. Its staff gained a foundation for improving workflows. Its readers gained clearer access to the newspaper and its record.

- **The Tribune gained the ability to build what comes next.**
- **The project began with a request for a website price.**
- **It ended with a newspaper standing on digital ground it could control.**

Every Community
Deserves Its Newspaper.

Every Newspaper
Deserves A Platform It Owns.

LET'S BRING YOURS HOME.



Facing this with your own
paper? Follow the Tribune's
arc as it unfolds



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