





No Way to See It Coming

Overnight, we went from growth and stability to a full-blown crisis. Here's what we did next.

By Andrea King

Magazine publishing is hard. A PR crisis makes it harder. And when that crisis leads to the cancellation of core events and the departure of key senior management and half of your advertisers ... well, that goes beyond “difficult.”

I was named CEO of a Maine regional magazine publisher in November 2017, after serving as COO for a year-plus. A mere six months later, crisis hit.

As the CEO of State 23 Media (formerly Maine Media Collective), my role changed overnight — from managing the continued growth of a thriving company to suddenly controlling damage, holding together strained relationships, and buoying staff morale. At the same time, we needed to save the business. Most of my attention had to be focused on securing new owners for our magazines and related assets — the only option after receiving much negative press. And we did it. We sold the company’s assets in under five weeks to an investor group with deep experience in the media industry; its brilliant members include the former president of TIME and *Sports Illustrated* magazines. We then became State 23 Media.

We are a multimedia company that publishes two monthly magazines (*Maine* and *Maine Home+Design*) and eight annual guides, and produces 25+ live events per year. We are a much smaller company than before the crisis, when we also had a full-service marketing and branding business, a weekly radio show, the biggest food and wine festival in the state, and two art galleries.

In the middle of the crisis, someone said to me, “Think of this like launching a start-up. You’ve done that before — channel those skills, and you’ll be fine.” I am an entrepreneur. I studied entrepreneurship



during my MBA at London Business School. I had launched a successful start-up. But rebuilding and fixing a business that has gone through turmoil is more challenging than launching a new one because there’s no clean slate. You have to clean it.

In a post-crisis situation, your team is defeated, scared, and exhausted. They’re facing an uphill climb just to get back to where they were. On the flipside, however, my team and I believed in our strengths and position in the market. We all knew how good our culture, revenue, reader-engagement, product visibility, and market share could be if we could just get past this upheaval.

And there were silver linings — lessons learned and opportunities for positive change. In many ways, the dramatic transition was a blessing in disguise. With a full-year perspective on it, I see five opportunities that arose. And because we leveraged them, they have made us a stronger company.

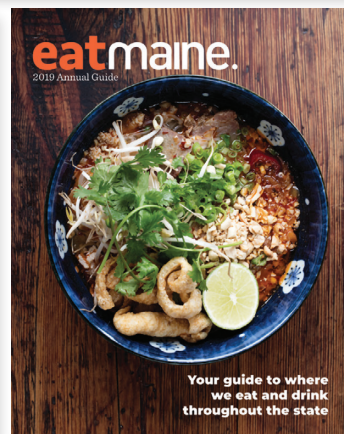
Opportunity 1: (Re)Identify the Core Mission and Brand

It’s inevitable. People will criticize you during and after a PR crisis. In the newspaper, on social media, in casual conversations. It’s frustrating. But it gives you the opportunity to ask, who are we, anyway? What’s true, and what’s false? What was our past, and what is our future? Most critically, who do we want to be as a brand going forward?

After our PR response was under control, we took our team offsite for an intensive session to talk about our mission. We discussed what makes us special in the marketplace. We agreed that our overall strength is being a connector and influencer in the community and for our advertisers, with a focus on elevating the state of Maine. We didn’t want to lose that.

We talked about how to ensure that this mission is embedded in everything we do. We articulated the central values for each of our assets, so we’d be able to assess opportunities against them. If a story doesn’t hit each of the values for that product, we won’t publish it. In *Maine* magazine, for example, a story needs to provide a deeper understanding of the state’s people or resources, and be uniquely Maine. For *Maine Home+Design*, stories need to highlight the work of the state’s architects, builders, interior designers, artists, and craftspeople, and promote great design across the state and in a variety of disciplines.

I knew we would need all of our financial strength to rebuild our core products, the two magazines, so we identified which ancillary products were critical to our brand and which weren’t. We kept the ones that best support and strengthen who we are and are profitable, such as our guides and monthly networking events. We cut the rest.



Andrea King, far left. Above, State 23 Media's two flagship publications. In addition to these titles, State 23 publishes a collection of eight annual guides, of which the titles at left are a sampling. Because these guides align with State 23's mission and are profitable, they survived a hard but necessary cut in the publisher's offerings.

To stay focused on our mission, we also had to learn how to say no. We are constantly approached with interesting new ideas, stories, and event sponsorships. Early on, when we were desperate to rebuild broken relationships, we said yes to every opportunity for collaboration. This was a mistake. Trying to please too many parties stretched our staff and reduced the resources we needed to rebuild our core products.

We learned that everyone on our team needed to be striving for the same objective and following the same roadmap to get there. We asked ourselves these questions as each opportunity arose:

- Does this fit with our brand DNA?
- What resources does it require?
- How fast will it create revenue?
- Does it support a key advertiser or influencer agenda?

We learned to assess every opportunity in these terms. It became much easier to identify and say no to things that didn't align with our goals. It's always important to stay true to your brand, but in a crisis situation, when time and financial resources are even more limited, it's critical. People are watching what you're doing — advertisers and



SPONSORED CONTENT

WHO RIDES IN THE TREK ACROSS MAINE...

1. BEN AND CHELSEA BARRINGER South Portland | Fourth year

What or who inspired you to ride in Trek Across Maine?
Ben's great-grandfather died of lung cancer. We all know someone that has been affected by some sort of cancer. The Trek not only supports a cause close to our hearts, but it's full of joy and camaraderie.

What was a memorable moment from a ride?
Every year brings so many belly laughs, it's hard to choose just one. But, two years ago we met an older gentleman named Jack. He had ridden the Trek every year and was still going strong into his eighties. His perspective on the Trek, and life in general, inspired us to live life to the fullest and savor every moment.

What would you tell someone who might be considering riding for the first time?
You will get to meet some of the most amazing like-minded people, and you'll make lifelong friends along the way. The Trek is an

adventure that always makes our annual highlight reel.
What are you most looking forward to on the ride in 2019?
We're excited to experience the new route, and happy that we still get to stop at Colby on the second day. Tent City is one of our favorite days with live music, lawn games, and beer, and the food is always a treat.

2. STEPHANIE MCKEEN, CAPTAIN OF MEL'S TREKKERS Caribou | Fifth year

What or who inspired you to ride in Trek Across Maine?
I had taken a few years off but when my dear friend, Melanie Stewart Ring, was diagnosed with stage-four colorectal cancer and had spots found in her lungs, I knew it was time to jump back in, rally the troops, and ride for Mel. My co-captain Brent Jepson, who is also from Caribou, has ridden the Trek for 13 years!

What was a memorable moment from a ride?
Last year was an epic ride with a team that just kept growing for days leading into the

Trek. The most memorable moment was having Mel arrive at Colby to see everyone come in from riding. It was great to see so many people from years past that had ridden with Mel show up and show their support at Team, Tent City.

What would you tell someone who might be considering riding for the first time?
The thing that I would say to new riders is, even if you feel inspired to go by yourself, do it. I went alone my first Trek and I didn't know a soul. I just felt inspired to ride. I ended up meeting some of my closest friends on that ride—including Mel.

What are you most looking forward to on the ride in 2019?
The thing I'm most excited about is that Mel has come out of this whole experience and is planning to ride this year. So I'm really excited that my friend who survived cancer is now able to get back into life. We've ridden hundreds of miles together, raised thousands of dollars, and had many laughs and experiences but, to see her ride her bike after all this just gives me goosebumps.

SPONSORED CONTENT

“YOUNG, OLD, BIG, OR SMALL, THIS IS A RIDE FOR EVERYONE.”



RIDE OR VOLUNTEER JUNE 14-16

3. MATT ST. CYR AND DAUGHTERS MAISY, 14, AND ROSIE, 12 Pownal | Matt's ninth year, Maisy's fifth year, Rosie's third year

What or who inspired you to ride in Trek Across Maine?
We really don't have any heart-wrenching story that dragged us out to do this. I did the Trek a handful of times in my 20's because it seemed like a fun thing to do for a great cause. Then I got really busy with raising little kids and took 15 years off. When Maisy was in the fourth grade, the idea to give it a whirl struck us on the way home from a ski trip. We borrowed a two-up tandem bike and away we went. Maisy and I did the Trek for two years, and on the third year, I stumbled across a tandem triplet on Craigslist and had to have it.

What was a memorable moment from a ride?
The first year with Maisy, arriving at University of Maine Farmington in the freezing cold rain, the field where we usually camp was flooded so we had to stay in the field house on the floor. That was fun, I think. The following year Maisy was not sure if she wanted to do the ride. I took the back seat as a

parent and gave her the license to decide for herself, even though I really wanted to do it again. For strategic measure, when we were on a ski trip to Sunday River and we arrived at the mountain, I drove to Southridge Lodge, parked the truck where the Trek's start corral is, shut off the engine, and waited a few long moments before asking if she had any thoughts about the Trek. She waited a few long moments and said she wanted to do the Trek with me again.

What would you tell someone who might be considering riding for the first time?
Do plenty of training, and ride often. Take a five-mile spin to get an ice cream, and some 20- or 30-mile rides if you choose. The physical work of pedaling all day is really quite easy. It's not a race, you've got all day. The rest stops are well stocked and plentiful. But, be sure your behind is enjoying the ride as well. Also shoot for the winner's circle with fund raising. Don't ask grandma for ten bucks out of her fixed-income checkbook. Go find a local business and make them feel good about a two-hundred or five-hundred dollar donation. Chances are pretty good they will hop right onto your cause and, before you know it, you get an extra bag of swag and a faster check in.



What are you most looking forward to on the ride in 2019?
I'm sure the new route will be fun. The girls keep getting bigger and stronger. I feel better at 45 than I did at 25, so physically, these rides are not so challenging. But we really enjoy seeing a lot of faces that we only see at the Trek. We stand out like a sore thumb because the bike is big and odd.

To register, or for more information about the Trek Across Maine, visit trekacrossmaine.org



SPONSORED CONTENT

TREK ACROSS MAINE CELEBRATES 35 YEARS WITH A NEW ROUTE AND MORE OPTIONS FOR RIDERS

TO SEE VIDEO FOOTAGE OF THE NEW ROUTE, VISIT TREKACROSSMAINE.ORG

REGISTER FOR THE JUNE 14-16 EVENT

ON FRIDAY, JUNE 14, nearly 2,000 cyclists will put their feet to the pedals for the 35th annual Trek Across Maine, a bike ride that combines a great time with a great cause, to raise funds for the American Lung Association (ALA). To mark the anniversary, this year's Trek features a new route, starting and finishing—on Father's Day, June 16—at Brunswick Landing in Brunswick. In between, it will travel through Augusta, Auburn, Bath, Belgrade, and Freeport, with overnight stops at Bates College in Lewiston, and Colby College in Waterville. Riders can choose the one, two, or three day option.

The largest fundraising event of its kind in the country for the ALA, the Trek has raised more than \$24 million over its 34-year history. Jeff Seyler, chief division officer for ALA's Eastern Division, has been with the organization for 24 of those years. "The ALA is grateful for the Trek because of the money it raises for our mission, which includes research for lung diseases such as emphysema and COPD, as well as education and clean air advocacy efforts," says Seyler. "And from a personal standpoint, I love that it's become such a community-centric, family-oriented event. It hits all the marks."

When the Trek began in 1985, organized bike rides were not as common as they are today, Seyler points out. "One of the cool things about the event is that it seems as if a large part of Maine's population has either been on the Trek themselves or knows someone who

rides in it," he says. "Seventy-seven percent of participants are returning riders. That speaks to the strong community support, which is what makes such impressive fundraising possible."

"The 2019 route of 180 miles was created after surveying participants and the Trek's leadership—draws new communities into the fold. "It gives us the opportunity to experience some new terrain and more of Maine, including multiple lakes," says Seyler. "And by bringing it to more populated locations on the coast, we hope it will attract new families with kids, and make it easier for them to participate." He also touts the single-day ride (about 60 miles) as a good option for first-time riders—especially families whose children are still in school—and reassures potential participants who might be daunted by the fundraising requirement. "We have

tools to help folks raise the money online; once they get started, they realize it's not so scary."

Seyler is especially thankful for the nearly 700 volunteers who pitch in to make the Trek possible each year. "We don't contract with an event management company; we're proud that that's grassroots and sweat equity," he says. "I think that makes the Trek Across Maine really strong because everybody involved takes pride and ownership of the event."

To register, or for more information about the Trek Across Maine, visit trekacrossmaine.org



In the process of rebuilding advertiser relationships and forging new ones, State 23 introduced new sponsored content options in its print magazines. The State 23 staff creates custom content for projects like these, with the American Lung Association (this page) and Hay Runner (right).

readers — and their future support hinges on whether you come out of this as a stronger version of your brand. Developing this kind of discipline has helped us do just that.

Opportunity 2: Improve the Culture

We know the core of any company is a team of people, so we had our company culture examined by a third-party. They conducted interviews with each individual on our staff to assess how he or she felt about our culture and to identify areas for improvement. The results were positive, with practical suggestions for improving internal communication systems. We shared this information with all external stakeholders who had questions or concerns about our culture or our ability to avoid future culture-based problems.

We also worked with an HR consultancy. Together, we assessed our HR policies and procedures, and got up-to-speed on the most current best practices. Ultimately, we implemented a more comprehensive HR policy and ensured all of our training is up to date. We also brought in an HR communication expert to teach our team positive communication techniques, which have enabled us to keep our dialogue open and honest.

ASK THE EXPERTS



WE KNOW THE HOME+DESIGN BUSINESS.

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ASK THE EXPERTS.**

Ask your questions this month to have Shannon Richards of Hay Runner answer them: asktheexperts@mainehomedesign.com



THIS MONTH'S EXPERT IS

Shannon Richards, Founder
HAY RUNNER

Project by Caleb Johnson Studio - Photography by Trent Bell

Q. Why is it important to have the right team in place before beginning the design phase?

A. Great question. A lot of planning for a project comes before you have hired a designer or a builder. The first step is evaluating your ideas (or intent) and priorities to establish whether or not you can actually achieve your goals—to see if your game plan is feasible. Next, find someone you trust to help educate you. Sometimes we need to look at a plan through the eyes of a designer to know if it's possible, and sometimes we need to look at it through the eyes of a plumber. Often, it's a little of both.

Q. What is the first question you ask a client?

A. "What is your name?" Just kidding... It really depends. If you're relocating "from away" and you need help determining where you want to live, the questions are very different than if you live in Maine and you need help planning a massive renovation, or if you want help designing and building your dream home while studying the market to prepare to sell your current home. I guess the first question will always be, "What inspired you to call us?"

Q. Is there one piece of advice you can give someone looking to build or purchase a home in Maine? Anything to watch out for?

A. Everything costs more than you want it to. Be conservative with your expectations and leave a 20-percent contingency in your plan. With that said, be completely honest with your team about your budget and your expectations so that everyone is on the same page. My best experiences have been with clients who trust the process, approach the project with clear boundaries, and value the creatives' and laborers' hard work, experience, and energy.



**HAY
RUNNER**

Lastly, we reviewed each employee's role in detail and provided more clarity on responsibilities and expectations. Roles change quickly in a small company, especially when staff members leave and those who remain take on new tasks. Our job profiles had become too fluid, and we were guilty of not redefining them as often as was necessary. As a result of this process, we created new systems, including quarterly, one-on-one check-ins, to keep better tabs on each role in the company. These also help our staff members see how important their jobs are in the overall operations of the company.

Opportunity 3: Clean the Slate

While you need to maintain confident optimism in a time of crisis, you can't obfuscate. To anyone. About anything. Accountability and transparency are key to maintaining your credibility. And coming out of crisis, credibility is your most critical asset. Advertisers have to believe in you and your product; investors must see that you are capable of change and growth; and your readers and other partners have to be able to trust and respect you. We learned that in order to maintain our credibility in the process of post-crisis relationship-building, we had to:

- Be humble and honest, and not sugarcoat. People can see right through it.
- Accept responsibility. No excuses.
- Offer to answer any and all questions. Nothing was off the table.

- Ask for feedback, insight, and help. Our allies wanted to help us.
- Listen, listen, listen. People need to vent, and we learned from what they had to say.

We took purposeful steps to communicate openly and honestly with the public and our readers. I wrote a Publisher's Note addressing the issues at hand, restating our mission and commitment, and outlining a vision for the future. After we sold the magazines to the new ownership group, we invited all stakeholders in the community — advertisers, partners, and freelancers — to a huge event that focused on the future. I made clear that we were recommitting ourselves to our mission to uplift the state and be a positive force for our community. The new owners spoke about why it was so important to save these iconic magazines and their belief in the power of local media to support community and help small businesses grow. The atmosphere at the end of the night wasn't fully celebratory, but it certainly moved the needle from skeptical and disappointed to positive and hopeful.

Our business is built on relationships, so the most important thing we did was hold one-on-one meetings with all stakeholders. I literally sat down with advertisers, partners, and other stakeholders and said, "You can ask me anything, and I will be honest with you." People appreciated that I took the time to validate their concerns, listen to their questions, and offer transparent, honest answers. It allowed us



State 23 staff (including Andrea King, bottom right) at the annual Shaping Maine event, which celebrates all Maine's past and present "50 Mainers."



to hit the restart button for today's relationships, which I'm happy to say are as strong or stronger than they were before.

Some advertisers have not come back. Of course, we'd like to say this isn't the case. But, once again, this has been an opportunity in disguise. We focused on replacing the lost accounts with new ones. We aggressively researched opportunities, traveled throughout the state to meet companies we hadn't worked with before, went to trade shows we hadn't attended in the past, and offered incentives. Our business had previously been strong and stable, so we had become passive about finding new clients. Now, driven by the need to shore up our financials, we upped our game. The result? We brought on 78 new advertising clients in the first quarter of 2019 — about three times the number we had in the same period in previous years.

Opportunity 4: Re-Engage Staff

Our workforce has decreased from 30 before the crisis to 17 today.

Some staff members left during the immediate aftermath, and we further reduced headcount in the effort to refocus on our core products. I don't blame anyone who left the company during the period of uncertainty — we all considered it. But the people who stayed are fully on board with our rebuilding effort. They believe deeply in our mission and are committed to do what it takes to achieve success going forward. Combine that with the shared experience of hardship, and what we have is a group with strong bonds, increased loyalty, improved collaboration, and excellent communication skills.

Despite everyone working additional hours and giving extra effort, we couldn't pay bonuses or give raises last year (and that may happen again this year) because we haven't fully recovered financially. So, we've had to find different ways to maintain morale.

For example, we used to have a monthly offsite meeting after uploading the magazine issues to discuss big-picture strategy, such as new product ideas or where we want to be in five years. We've now added an afternoon of fun to these events, with team-building games and bowling or boating. This gives us a change to de-stress and laugh together.

Partly socially engineered and partly financially required, we also moved to smaller offices with open floor space. This was an adjustment, but it has led to increased and improved collaboration. And we have incorporated flex-time schedule and work-from-home policies to accommodate different needs and work styles. It has

"It's always important to stay true to your brand, but in a crisis situation, when time and financial resources are even more limited, it's critical. People are watching what you're doing — advertisers and readers — and their future support hinges on whether you come out of this as a stronger version of your brand."

resulted in a more stable work environment, where team members are focused on growing our business.

Opportunity 5: Strengthen Advertiser Programs

Our revenue comes almost exclusively from advertisers, not subscriptions, so it's critical that we maintain positive, constructive relationships. And that we ensure our advertisers' investments produce positive results for them. In that spirit, we have always looked for ways to collaborate with sponsors and advertisers around content, long before native advertising and sponsored content became common in publishing.

This is tricky territory. To maintain credibility as a magazine, there has to be a divide between sales and editorial, but building that wall with iron is a poor business practice. We are a small team in a small state. We serve small companies. To ignore the benefits of collaborating with these businesses would be shortsighted.

Advertising in our magazines will not get you editorial coverage. But it will get you invited to our events; we'll follow you on social media; and we'll think of ways to help grow your business. For example, we'll introduce you to other businesses you should know, and we'll thoughtfully consider ways we can help you market your products and services, like suggesting upcoming trade shows, developing new ideas for your ads, or brainstorming sponsored content projects. With *Maine Home+Design*, deeper relationships with advertisers help our editorial team find story ideas, such as architect-designed homes to profile, that naturally align with our editorial vision and would otherwise be hard to discover.

During the one-on-one rebuilding conversations we had with advertisers, it became clear that many want to tell their stories in innovative ways. Certainly, a smart, well-designed ad can speak to a target audience, but some advertisers want us to help them tell a longer story or go deeper into an issue. With our more responsive approach in the post-crisis era, we have introduced attractive and clearly labeled sponsored content options for our clients in both print and online, ranging from Q&As with business owners to full features written by our special projects editor. These have been extremely well received by clients, adding revenue to the business and allowing us to offer yet more options to our clients.

Almost going under gave me the opportunity to get comfortable with risk. Knowing the worst outcome was that the magazines might fold and my team and I would be unemployed gave me a strange comfort. No one was sick. It wasn't the end of the world. We would all find other jobs. With that as the worst possible outcome, I felt comfortable taking bigger risks (still sensibly assessed), making bolder statements (that were "on brand"), and being radically candid (which was refreshingly welcomed). For example, in our annual 50 Mainers issue last year, we chose a striking portrait for the cover — a Passamaquoddy basket maker and drag performer who uses the gender-neutral pronoun "they." This is a cover we probably wouldn't have chosen in the past. We previously avoided supporting organizations that took too much of a stance, but we now happily sponsor them. This year, we created a quarterly speaker series to help business leaders in our community improve equality in the workplace with actionable tactics and to boldly, yet humbly, push for progress on diversity and equality for gender, race, immigrant status, and age. As a result of this series, we were able to rebuild one of our most important nonprofit relationships. They saw us in action, living up to our mission to elevate the state, and this spoke louder than any words we could have.

I'm proud of the work we did to rebuild this media company. And with reputation restored and sales growing, I'm now passing the reins on to our incredible and capable staff. I am leaving State 23 to move my family back to my hometown. Two individuals from our ownership team, Sandy Spaulding and Bruce Hallett, have stepped in as on-the-ground managing partners to continue the company's positive trajectory.

We are all in the story-telling business. Lisa Cron, author of "Wired for Story" says, "Story, as it turns out, was crucial to our evolution — more so than opposable thumbs. Opposable thumbs let us hang on; story told us what to hang on to." So I would say, own your story, even in crisis. We did — and we used it to motivate and inspire us to emerge from this challenge stronger than we were before it.

Andrea King, former publisher and CEO of State 23 Media, has happily relocated to her home turf in beautiful St. John's, Newfoundland. She was named by Folio: as a 2019 Top Women in Media honoree. This award recognizes trendsetters, entrepreneurs, change-makers, and industry innovators. Connect via king@pagesthemagazine.com.