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Prep sports scoring points

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If you build it, they will come.

That is the hope several companies are expressing as they attempt to extend community journalism into the wide world of sports.

Last month, CommunitySportsDesk, an offshoot of the Kenosha (Wis.) News, launched a hosted service that allows local youth and recreation sports leagues to post schedules, write game summaries, input stats and box scores and upload game and team pictures to a newspaper-branded Web site.

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The hosted version is the most recent iteration of CommunitySportsDesk, which the News (Monday-Friday, 24,552; Saturday, 24,215; Sunday, 27,149) rolled out last summer as an experiment to see how it could handle user-generated content flowing from the area's youth and recreation sports teams, according to Ken Dowdell, News publisher and vice president of United Communications Corp.

"Our in-house techs built that innovative model, based on discussions with league organizers and team officials," he said.

Reaction was positive, so the News hired additional software developers to pepper CommunitySportsDesk with additional features, including the ability for UCC to host the app, Dowdell said.

"It can be the 'something-different' tool that equips a traditional media company to get where they need to go with youth and recreational sports," he said about the software, adding that he felt confident the concept would work well in other "Kenoshas" around the country.

Automatic lede writing

In addition to rewriting code that enabled UCC to host the app, developers added features that allow the software to produce basic headlines and lead paragraphs automatically, based on the data input by team representatives.

"Rather than simply offering a channel for blogging, CommunitySportsDesk helps structure the collection, processing and flow of what can be massive amounts of data," said Dowdell.

"We've engineered options that can serve Pee Wee players who just need their achievements recognized to high school and adult leagues that like to collect complete stats," he said.

Dowdell said the company is prepared to support its users as they roll out the software.

"As a result of our real-life experiences, we're prepared to help other publishers with a community-focused, full advertising-supported business model, not merely software," said Dowdell.

Matthew Serpe, a CommunitySportsDesk business development specialist, said the service dovetails with the industry's adoption of hyper-local coverage.

"In a newspaper, (youth and rec sports) is an area getting the least amount of coverage. We are offering this application for youth and rec to cover themselves."

National effort

Dell Sports Inc., meantime, plans to roll out a national high-school sports service this fall, according to Terry Dell, president of the Charlotte, N.C., firm.

The service, Prep Sports Nation, allows participants to post and share pictures, upload video and blogs and share content among students, parents, athletes and local community members.

"How cool would it be to have pictures of you, uploaded on the Web site, by everyone in the audience?" Dell said. "It's a game of a thousand angles and it's easy for anyone who goes and watches the game to take pictures."

Dell said participating newspapers can download all the materials they need from the PSN site. Fans are reminded that a newspaper could use their photos or stories before they can post to PSN, Dell said.

Prep Sports Nation began beta testing the app last August and Dell said he's modified PSN to accommodate user requests.

Reverse publishing

"One suggestion was full reverse publishing on all user photos and profile material, which we had, but (the paper) wanted to take the entire profile and feature a particular a student," he said.

Papers can feature multiple student profiles and can also run fan profiles from multiple schools, he said.

PSN is engineered to manage rosters, schedules, and individual and team stats. Users will also be able to search for particular teams or individuals on other PSN sites and Dell said he's working on a delivery method to allow photos and other materials to be shared among newspapers.

The system includes a stamp or watermark that identifies where the photo originated and a transmission system that can route the photo to a newspaper that requests to publish it.

CommunitySportsDesk and PSN come as newspapers try to find ways to increase coverage of local sports even as their resources are trimmed. The Amarillo (Texas) Globe-News, for example, won a Digital Edge award for its prep sports site, Pigskin Review, which launched last year (see Newspapers & Technology, March 2008).

Editor's note: Hear our exclusive interview with CommunitySportsDesk on News&Tech Radio.

