

IDA Submission: Newsracks

For several years the 34th Street Partnership (34SP/ “the district”) had a seemingly intractable problem: the proliferation of many poorly-maintained, dirty, and often empty “stand-alone” newsboxes – single units vending a single publication - on their district’s sidewalks. The ugly newsboxes often blocked already crowded pedestrian walkways, and were potential security risks because of their opaque plastic sides and accessible interiors.

34SP addressed this problem by developing 34SP-branded “Newsracks,” each capable of holding multiple publications, which were first installed in 2005. They believed that, if provided an attractive alternative to the traditional standalone newsbox, publishers would forgo the less attractive option and instead place their publications in 34SP’s units.

The first generation of Newsracks was only a partial success. Though in total they accommodated more than 300 individual publications, many of which had previously been displayed in stand-alone boxes, more than 120 stand-alone newsboxes remained. This comprised approximately one-third of all publications on the district’s sidewalks.

To remove the remaining boxes, 34SP needed to accommodate the needs of the publishers and comply with NYC Department of Transportation requirements.

34SP embarked on a two-phased strategy. In Phase One, 34SP’s Capital team addressed and fixed recurring mechanical problems with the existing Newsracks. This phase included a rigorous maintenance and repair program as well as discussions with publishers to learn more about their needs and concerns. In Phase Two, the team used that knowledge to upgrade and/or replace the existing fleet of Newsracks to incentivize participation by more publishers while beautifying the streetscape.

While 34SP had previously contracted out the cleaning and maintenance of the Newsracks, as well as the effort to convince publishers to join the program, it took these functions in-house. By conducting these functions internally, 34SP believed it could save money while increasing the effectiveness of the program.

Phase One: Mechanical Upgrades and Improved Maintenance Process

34SP observed Newsracks to identify recurring problems in their design and management, and implemented solutions. They standardized and reducing the number of parts, enlarged the display window, improved access with bottom-hinged compartment doors, and replacing plastic panels with riot-resistant glass. They also worked to create more attractive branding logos that were UV-protected, graffiti-resistant, and could withstand thorough cleaning.

The next step was to develop a rigorous maintenance regimen that included weekly cleaning of each unit, a monthly inspection and deep-cleaning, and a quarterly wax and polish. Cleaners and inspectors were trained to report any damage, and to input all information onto a Newsrack Repair Log. 34SP leadership also developed a Maintenance Manual, written in three languages, and divided the district into zones, each of which was assigned dedicated personnel.

The final stage of Phase One was to analyze the data collected, investigate publication circulation models, and confer with publishers to better understand their needs. These conversations revealed several concerns from publishers. 34SP learned that their Newsracks were in locations undesirable to some publishers, were not sized appropriately for some of the publications; and had inadequate branding for the publications within. To successfully negotiate with publishers, and keep the Newsracks full, 34SP needed to address these concerns.

This first phase, which concluded in January 2014, was a considerable success. 34SP's in-house team performed more than 1,800 repairs, including to doors, hinges, and coin boxes. Valuable information was also collected to be utilized in Phase Two.

Phase Two: Modified Newsrack Program

The goal of Phase Two was to develop an improved Newsrack design. This entailed analyzing the information learned from conversations with publishers, observing readers' behavior, and applying that knowledge to create a better newsrack.

The team also invested in data and analysis. Separate, specialized maps of the 34th Street district were created to indicate the sidewalk locations of existing Newsracks, existing stand-alone newsboxes, and prospective Newsrack locations

Using this information, 34SP began developing a modified Newsrack system that could provide more box types to accommodate publishers' specific needs, and increase the capacity of each box. They also worked to create more durable logos and a storage system that streamlined the process of replenishing the Newsracks.

One issue faced early in the process was that the existing Newsracks were too large to fit in many of the sidewalk locations identified by publishers. In response, 34SP developed smaller multi-compartment Newsracks that met DOT regulations and were eligible to be placed in those locations.

To replace existing two-legged newsracks, the Capital team developed two interchangeable models. One was a Single Leg End Horizontal (SLEh) unit that has four or more compartments, the other was a Single Leg End Vertical (SLEv) model that has two compartments, with the option for storage. The team also made the design of these Newsracks flexible so they could be modified to match the size of any new publication joining the program.

To further accommodate publishers, the team designed newsboxes in publisher-branded colors. The flexibility of the Modified Newsracks, coupled with the custom colors, enabled 34SP to accommodate virtually any publication.

Modifying existing Newsracks also saved money. The cost to modify a Newsrack in 2016 was just over half of what it cost to pay a vendor to fabricate one in 2013.

The first 11 prototypes to be deployed were designed and constructed in-house. Throughout the process, 34SP was in constant communication with DOT, requesting permits, and pressing for the removal of non-compliant stand-alone newsboxes.

Success

By February 2016, the program had paid impressive dividends. The number of stand-alone newsboxes on the sidewalks had shrunk by nearly half, though 98 remained. Since the first prototypes were launched, 34SP has worked tirelessly to deploy more of the new-model Newsracks and to eliminate the remaining stand-alone newsboxes. As of March 2018, 75% of 34SP's Newsracks have been replaced, while the remaining 25% have been upgraded. Twenty-four new publications have also joined the program. The result: the number of stand-alone newsboxes has been reduced to nine, representing four holdout publishers. This is a 95% success rate toward 34SP's goal – the complete elimination of stand-alone newsboxes on 34th Street.

Currently, 34SP's Newsrack Program includes 41 Newsracks, each one either new or fully upgraded, with more locations pending. They have the capacity of 300 newsboxes and serve 55 publications.

Through regular inspections, 34SP ensures that each element of every Newsrack is clean and functional. Repairs are completed within two days after damage is discovered.

Beyond technical and design improvements, this program is innovative in its comprehensive scope. 34SP consulted extensively with publishers and replaced its old system almost completely with a system that combines flexibility with functionality.

This cooperative, systemized approach to a persistent problem has been a boon for 34SP. The district's sidewalks stand out from others in the city for their attractive Newsracks that serve both publishers and readers, as well as their blissful lack of stand-alone newsboxes.