

## SAVVY STATIONS ARE THINKING VERTICAL

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By Diana Marszalek

It's not enough for TV stations to have a Web site that's basically just a promotional tool. The really forward-thinking ones are developing others with hyper-local subjects like entertainment, weather and politics.

Around Raleigh, N.C., locals are checking out [GoLo.com](http://GoLo.com), a social (and somewhat rowdy) networking site that gives them a forum to do everything from commiserate about gas prices, to posting their favorite photos, to blogging about anything.

Philadelphians are heading for [digphilly.com](http://digphilly.com). Young and hip, the site is designed to be a party on the Web. Users join chat groups to dish about music, movie and sports; post photos of themselves out on the town; and get the lowdown on where to eat, drink and be merry.

And for those with a more serious bent, there are sites like [michiganpolitics.tv](http://michiganpolitics.tv) and [indianapolitics.tv](http://indianapolitics.tv), where the C-SPAN set can follow politics from the local level on up.

All the sites are products of local TV broadcasters.

They represent a growing trend among stations and station groups to break free of the news-and-information Web model and to experiment with locally oriented vertical sites with their own unique brands.



"It's a small, elite group that knows there are new brands to put out there and leverage," said Web researcher Gordon Borrell, who tracks advertising on the Web. Just how successful the broadcast verticals are is hard to measure, primarily because they are new.

But broadcasters who are experimenting with them are on the right track, Borrell says. "They have a big launch pad to do really interesting things. The ones that will be left behind are the ones who believe the Internet exists only as a promotional tool for their TV stations."

GoLo.com, a product of Capitol Broadcasting, owner of WRAL Raleigh, has nearly 7,000 registered members, even though it has yet to reach its first birthday, says WRAL.com General Manager John Clark. (Although named after Capitol's Raleigh TV station, WRAL.com operates independently.)

"GoLo.com grew out of WRAL.com [the station site]," Clark says. "So many of the site's viewers naturally went to GoLo to carry on community dialogue, post blogs and pictures. It was and still is a good fit.

"The Web is a market of niches, and you can already see a trend of sites catering to those niches," he said. "That trend will continue, and we'll continue looking at the opportunities that emerge."

GoLo.com follows on the path of another Capitol-owned niche site, [triangle411.com](http://triangle411.com), a local business directory launched several years ago.

LIN Television went the political route, launching such sites as michiganpolitics.tv and indianapolitics.tv in each of its 17 markets in January.

At LIN, other kinds of vertical sites, from entertainment to weather, also are in the works, says Web chief Robb Richter. In fact, the company's first entertainment-based Web site will likely launch later this year in Austin, Texas, he said.

"The goal is to build a web of Web sites with TV stations being in the middle," he said.

"We're not at the point where we can afford to abandon our traditional business or core Web site," he said. "How are you going to get traffic?"

Digphilly.com is a product of WCAU, the NBC O&O in Philadelphia. It has grown three-fold since its January launch, a company spokeswoman said.

Other broadcasters are also branching out into verticals.

Seattle-based Fisher Broadcasting is in midst of a companywide effort to boost its Web business, an endeavor that will come to fruition next month with the launch of bakersfieldone.com, a hyper-local site for that California market, says Fisher Interactive Network's Nancy Bruner.

Key to creating unique Web brands in each of Fisher's markets is getting users to supply much of the content, Bruner says.

Today, Fisher's TV stations currently generate 80 percent of the content for their Web sites, she says. Her goal is to reduce that to less than 30 percent by 2012.

A few station groups have targeted high schools students and their activities with vertical sites.

Last year, Hearst-Argyle Television launched [highschoolplayerbook.com](http://highschoolplayerbook.com) and Belo offered [hsgametime.com](http://hsgametime.com) in many of their markets. Both were intended as hubs for high school sports and their fans by meshing online and station-produced video with stats and electronic opportunities for expressing school spirit.

Thus far, neither seems to have gained much traction, although a Belo spokesman says the Belo sites in 18 markets have so far generated 19,000 registered users, 33 million page views and \$1.6 million in revenue.

A couple of Gannett stations are piggybacking on the efforts of their parent companies.

KUSA Denver is helping to fuel [Denver.metromix.com](http://Denver.metromix.com), the local manifestation of the Metromix.com entertainment sites that Gannett and Tribune jointly operate in 12 markets. The sites are billed as "Your one-stop local entertainment guide on where to go and what to do."

And, according to spokeswoman Tara Connell, WXIA Atlanta will be testing makethecharts.com, a site devoted to the local music scene where bands can upload their music. A beta version of

makethecharts.com had a tryout last year in Wilmington, Del., where Gannett has a newspaper, *The News Journal*.

Borrell says the broadcasters behind such projects have it right.

Not unlike radio companies did when first embracing television, broadcast companies willing to look beyond the limits of their own existing TV brands to create new entities for a new medium are the ones that will ultimately succeed, he says.

Time will sort out the winners and losers among the current crop of broadcaster-produced online verticals.

But they can't stop experimenting, Borrell says.

While the idea of minimizing expenditures by airing existing content on multiple platforms may sound appealing, doing so simply does not have big payoffs, he said.

"Convergence is a cost-saving dream," Borrell said. "But it has never really been realized."

The majority of broadcasters have already lost valuable time focusing on existing brands and assets, he says.

"There is some trepidation among the vast majority of television stations that the Internet is just this giant sink hole of opportunity and if they step into it too deeply they are just going to get mired in it. But if you really want to seize the opportunity you have to apply some separate resources to it."