

The Answerizer Insights & Concept Test Findings

The Coloradoan, Fort Collins, CO

11g

Key Takeaways

The Answerizer was a hit.

The Answerizer prototype scored highly with users due to its hyperlocal focus and credible, personalized answers.

Fort Collins is the right starting place.

Fort Collins is an ideal environment to develop a service like The Answerizer due to its intermediate size, strong local pride and innovative news team.

A truly innovative opportunity for Gannett.

The Answerizer is a promising foray into a fresh, untapped business model for Gannett news media that speaks the language of millennials and Gen Y.

We can exploit the gaps in Google's domination.

It is important for The Answerizer to clearly distinguish itself from Google, which has defined how people find information on the web and how they expect it to work. The Answerizer beats Google on local answers, not local search.

Operational testing should come next.

The Coloradoan should further incubate The Answerizer by running a small trial with a minimum viable product and limited user set. The goals of the next phase are to understand more about in-life operations, test alternative revenue models and identify considerations for wider rollout.

Introduction

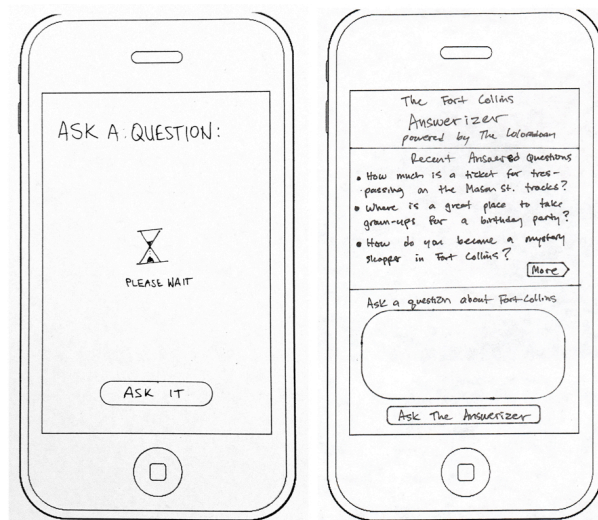
The Answerizer is a proposed service that provides detailed, personalized answers to questions posted by consumers about anything regarding Fort Collins. Conceived by the executive editor of The Coloradoan and his team, it addresses the vast amount of published news content not consumed, yet still relevant to their intended audience. The staff of The Coloradoan has deep, detailed knowledge of everything happening in Fort Collins and may reach their audience more effectively through a “pull” model instead of the traditional “push” of news reporting - and with surprisingly little shift in their workload. The Answerizer offers the potential of transitioning the Coloradoan from a solely product-based business to a product and service-based business which fits the needs of a younger audience and gives people in Fort Collins a new way to engage with local news media.

11G worked with the team at The Coloradoan to bring a consumer-first mindset to the process of testing the Answerizer concept. The goal was to determine if there was a need and a desire for this kind of service, and if so what form it should take, before costly product development began. Through a week of focused effort, critical insights were gleaned to support successful incubation of the service.

Interviews and Prototype Testing

To test the Answerizer concept, the combined team of 11G and Coloradoan staff met with nine residents of Fort Collins, recruited for their extreme and diverse viewpoints on questions and answers. They were interviewed about the types of questions that occurred to them throughout the day and what makes for a satisfying answer. During the interview, they were asked to submit a question about Fort Collins using a prototype of The Answerizer.

The prototype test was structured as a “Wizard of Oz Prototype” where the interviewee’s question was sent to a member of The Coloradoan who replied with a personalized acknowledgment, researched the answer, and provided a response along with an additional follow-up if requested. Answers were provided within 5-20 minutes of the initial question during the course of the interview. Based on the learnings from the first round of testing, an updated paper prototype was made and tested in the same manner two days later.



Version 1 (left) and version 2 (right) of the prototype’s first screen. Version 1 simply asked for a question. Version 2 was updated to indicate the local focus, Coloradoan sub-branding and samples of previous questions to head off preconceptions of a Google-style web search.

Insights

Consumers' reliance on search engines creates the expectation that any new information service must function the same way.

Google and other search engines has trained people to formulate their queries using keywords instead of natural language. People expect a machine to process their request and answer with a list of unpredictable content that needs reading and reviewing. People talk about "gaming the system" and "using their Google kung fu" to work around the keyword search system to the answers to their real question, which they know would not be answered as they would naturally ask it.

While users were delighted with The Answerizer's ability to respond to a natural language question, their expectations that it would operate the same as a search engine is potentially a challenge for The Answerizer to overcome.

A human-feeling tone and personality comes as a delight to consumers weary of automated responses.

The current gold standard of a technologically-mediated answer service is Apple's Siri, which still feels like an awkward, cobbled-together response from a clever machine, but a machine nonetheless. The response The Answerizer provided was appreciated for feeling like a well-informed human was answering the consumer personally. The human response was a delight and became a key benefit when the participant realized their initial question did not get to the heart of their query and needed to re-state it or ask a more specific follow-up question.

Consumers respond to humanity with humanity.

Delivering a more colloquial and personalized message than the canned politeness of automated responses in phone menus and auto-reply emails was appreciated. While simulating The Answerizer, the team responded with "We've learned X but we're still waiting on Y, we'll get back to you" or even "You've stumped us. We're going to have to take some time to research this". The participants appreciated the transparency of honest replies that indicated the service was dedicated to finding them a good answer.

A credible, well-researched answer to a challenging question is worth the wait.

Consumers have rising expectations of instant service. A search engine is expected to instantly point the user in the right direction to find their answer, provided the original query was well-formulated according to the search engine's rules. Consumers relax their expectations of instantaneous speed when the answer exceeds their expectations.

Such is the case when participants posed specific, natural-language questions on local issues that search engines would do poorly with. A five to twenty minute wait was deemed acceptable after participants received a well-researched, in-depth, on-target answer. Some even said they'd wait 24 hours for a response of similar quality and depth.

Consumers want to know there's an expert on the other end.

In a world of underwhelming crowd-sourced answers (think Yahoo Answers and online forums), and the multitude of opinions stated as facts on social media there's a comfort in knowing you are consulting an authoritative source. In the second prototype, the mention on the home screen that The Answerizer was "powered by The Coloradoan" gave it considerable local credibility. So did the provided example questions and the thorough answers that accompanied them.

Search results provide direction but not answers.

When consumers turn to an information source with a question in mind, the burden is usually upon them to find the answer themselves, perhaps from a selection of search results or within the content of an article. As their go-to resource for answering questions, nearly every respondent mentioned Google, which does a great job of pointing people in the right direction nine times out of ten, but does not directly provide an answer. Consumers are impressed when they are delivered an answer instead of a choice of possible answers.

Answering more local questions sits lightly on the newsroom.

Not only is answering local questions in the wheelhouse of the newsroom, it's the same, already existing conversation and back-and-forth that happens every day to solve stories and create features. There's no new function to bring on board, it's just a natural extension of what already is happening.

Furthermore, the subjects of answer becomes a powerful feedback loop to news stories. What people are curious about is what is also likely to be newsworthy so there is significant value for the news operation in having a channel where people feel rewarded and comfortable to engage on topical matters.

The Answerizer sidesteps legacy perceptions of reporters and media.

Newspapers have the perception (fairly earned or not) of a medium that talks at you, characterized as "telling you what's important", and limited to traditional boundaries (news, weather, traffic, sports). The shift to a dialog instead of one-size-fits-all content, and no limiting preconceptions around the type of information available, results in a very different perception of The Answerizer. People described it as "a smart friend who knows everything" or "a helpful assistant that finds out what you need to know".

A new take on hyperlocal.

While many attempts to develop hyperlocal products have looked to social media or crowdsourcing to create something unique and useful, this is an alternative approach that may solve the same problem. Rather than asking people to commit their time and energy to supplying reviews and information, this explores an alternative equation emphasizing the skill and expertise of Coloradoan staff to generate a hyperlocal platform.

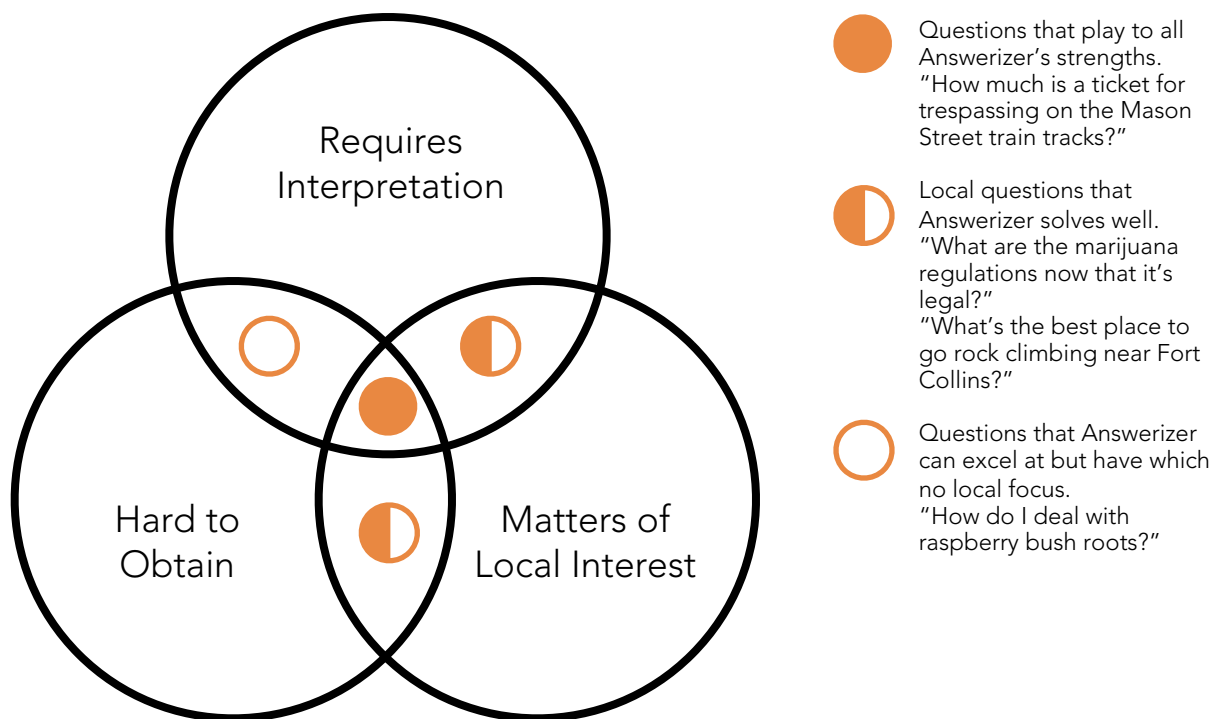
Product and Protocol Insights

Through the course of testing, details of specific attributes of The Answerizer product design crystallized:

- Answerizing protocol for reporters to follow when responding to a question.
- Style guide for reporters to appropriately frame and characterize their written Answerizer responses.
- Product features for expectation management, responding to specific contrasts from search engines, such as illustrating past questions and typical responses from The Answerizer.

The Answerizer vs. GOOGLE

By running a live test where participants could raise genuine questions and answers could be provided by existing Coloradoan staff or articles, it was possible to accurately research the best types of questions for The Answerizer. Google search results for the same questions were used as a comparison to The Answerizer's response and gave a strong indication of which were easier or harder with Google. Google is highly effective and provides instant gratification on certain types of unsubtle, readily accessible information. However, for questions that need human interpretation to answer effectively and answers that by their nature do not reside in simple form on the internet, The Answerizer strongly outperforms Google.



While services like Google or Yelp effortlessly produce an instant answer to a query such as "Where can I get tacos near my current location?", The Answerizer can surpass them on these types of subjects and situations:

Requires Interpretation

Google places the burden on the user of sifting and interpreting an answer out of the pile of results it returns, whereas a reporter with research and writing skills and unique access to experts and resources, can quickly and effectively pare relevant information down to a succinct response. Also, a literal answer to the question was not the best

answer but one which the reporter intuited was the best response to the spirit of the question.

Hard to Obtain

While Google offers incredible access to information resources on the web, some things are simply not stored online in a machine-accessible format. Information may be subtle, unindexed or stored offline, perhaps even in people's heads. News organization members are connected to the owners of this information by virtue of their daily work.

Matters of Local Interest

Google's local information is strong in very specific areas like mapping and local business data but falls down in local news and community information. In contrast the on-the-ground local knowledge of a property like the Coloradoan is unsurpassed due to their archival content and institutional knowledge of the community.

The Recipe for a Satisfying Answer

The best received answers in the test had the following attributes:

- Concise and succinct, but long enough to cover the important points.
- Tailored to the specific question in content and tone.
- Includes hyperlinks and references for jumping off or deeper reading.
- Credits contributors and experts to convey credibility.
- Exceeds expectations by offering a "Cherry On Top", a small additional piece of information anticipating the consumer's needs.

Matters for Further Testing

When exploring a new product idea, it's important to thoughtfully list the biggest, most fundamental questions and begin experimenting in an effort to answer them. This process is repeated as the idea is tweaked, refined, pivoted or possibly abandoned. After two successful tests of paper prototypes, the team saw both a need and a desire for this type of service among the people we interviewed. Now it's time to focus on new questions:

Will people use this "in the wild"? How much will they use it?

The prototypes were tested in a highly artificial environment. Now it is important to see how often consumers would use such a service as they go about their day. Can The Answerizer find its niche or will people continue to use the established competitors? Will usage be a trickle or a flood? Will we see different types of questions? This can be tested with a stripped-down "minimum viable product" with a small group using already-available technology. This should be something cobbled together in a month and tested for a couple of weeks. Such a test will allow us to see what sorts of questions people would send on their own, and what usage patterns emerge.

How can this service be operationalized?

It will be important to tally up the amount of effort it takes to answer each question. If the question concerned something not previously asked, Answerizer staff will need to consider whether it is worth the additional time investment to research. Some answers may also serve as a basis for an article for the paper/website (during our testing, two of the questions posed by our interviewees ended up inspiring subsequent articles in The Coloradoan a few days later). As the newsroom team grapples with answering the questions as they arrive, it will become clearer what considerations will be important to operationalize such a service on a larger scale.

What are potential revenue models?

While there are a couple of obvious revenue models on the table already, alternative revenue options should be explored. The Gannett Innovation Process offers tools to explore the eight revenue model types that companies use to make money. In a context where consumers expect "free" products and services, it will be important for the team to brainstorm against each type and identify ways to test radically different models.

What is the opportunity for other markets?

Once Fort Collins has answered the questions above, the potential for The Answerizer to extend to other markets should be clearer. Incubating this nascent product in the right environment will be critical to The Answerizer developing into a fully-fledged

product and business. Attributes of the Fort Collins market and the Coloradoan itself indicate it has the qualities to further incubate The Answerizer while also seeking to understand how critical they are for a broader rollout:

City Size: Fort Collins is not so big that it is saturated with media outlets and bloggers in the same way a larger metropolis is, but not so small that there's not enough interest from citizens about local subjects.

Hometown Pride: Fort Collins has a pleasant, neighborly, small-town feel and its citizens are proud to call it home. It stands to reason that this interest can be correlated with curiosity about what the town has to offer.

Innovative Staff: The Coloradoan boasts a newsroom with an experimental mindset and a digitally savvy editor who's willing to take risks on new ideas.

Community Relationship: The Coloradoan is considered a valued member of the Fort Collins landscape and enjoys positive community sentiment.

Next Steps

The Coloradoan should run a small test with a minimum viable product over a month. This involves gathering a test user group and developing a bare bones product to bring together a platform representative of The Answerizer's core features. This is not a complex product build out but rather using off the shelf, non-development required tools.

The Answerizer should consider entry to the Innovation Grants program, where it would be a good fit for the hyperlocal category of submissions this current round. An entry would not guarantee further funding or inclusion in the next round of grants.

11G will remain directly engaged with The Coloradoan through product development and launch. The goal will be to continue the rapid-iteration, low-cost approach to incubating it with a consumer focus.