

Audio Transcript
Episode 201 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with *Mike Blinder*

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E&P REPORTS VODCAST

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In this episode of E&P Reports, we chat with Judi Terzotis, the publisher of Georges Media Group, Louisiana's largest local news media company and owners of the New Orleans' Times-Picayune | NOLA.com about their expansion into the state's third largest metro area with the newly launched, digital-only Shreveport-Bossier City Advocate. Also appearing in the interview to explain more about why this new investment fits into their business model and how the news outlet will serve the community are Georges Media Group President Kevin Hall and the new Managing Editor of the Shreveport-Bossier Advocate Barbara Leader.



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0:00:03.8 Speaker 1: This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor and Publisher magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884, serving newspapers, broadcast, digital and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:19.5 Mike: And greetings once again by Blinder, Publisher, E&P magazine. As always, we urge those listening to us on a podcast platform to follow. Watching on YouTube, below me, there is a subscribe button. To the right is a bell. They say click them, smash them, hit them, whatever they say in today's world. Do something with them [chuckle] and when you do that, you'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of this weekly vodcast series, E&P Reports. I'm gonna take you back. I've taken you there before, to the great State of Louisiana. Now, Judi, am I saying that right? Louisiana? How do you say it down there?

0:00:53.3 Judi: Right on, Mike. Louisiana.

0:00:55.8 Mike: Judi Terzotis, who's been on this program before, she is a publisher of Georges Media Group, the largest local news publishing company in the State of Louisiana. They obviously have NOLA.com and the Times-Picayune which is the dominant media company in New Orleans. I think I'm saying that correctly. The Advocate, of course, that covers the greater Baton Rouge area. And today's major topic will be their expansion into Shreveport with a brand new news entity. We're also honored to have on this program today, Kevin Hall, President of Georges Media Group.

0:01:32.4 Kevin: Thank you. Thank you. I'm thrilled to be here, Mike. My first time.

0:01:35.9 Mike: Thrilled to have you. First time. Judi gets a special jacket now. I think it's her third appearance. Barbara Leader... [laughter] Barbara, you're the brand new Managing Editor of the Shreveport-Bossier City Advocate. Alright, we're here to talk about an expansion. And the reason this is a big story... And I want to just... Everybody is downsizing. Not everybody, but there's so much talk about downsizing. Let's cut back on news coverage, let's cut back on people, let's just go through the motions. Certain companies today see opportunity there. Judi, we're gonna talk about that 'cause you're all in, right? You've invested a lot of energy, effort, and of course, capital into bringing new news coverage into Shreveport. And that'll be our topic, right?

0:02:26.9 Barbara: Absolutely.

0:02:27.7 Mike: Yeah, alright, we'll get to that right after this message.

0:02:30.5 S1: This episode of E&P Reports is exclusively sponsored by BLOX Digital, formerly



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0:03:35.6 Mike: Alright, Judi, let's start with you first. You did really well. I mean, you guys pretty much have just won awards, done amazing things, got through COVID in the largest population center in Louisiana, down in New Orleans and... Why the heck are you looking to go beyond Baton Rouge and New Orleans now? Why Shreveport, why this expansion? There's already a paper of record there. Why are you looking into Shreveport now? What is your motivation to bring a whole new news entity there?

0:04:22.6 Judi: A lot of our success is really derived from our owner, who... We are privately held, and our owner really pushes our leadership team to grow the company. When he purchased The Advocate in 2013, his heart was, he wanted to make sure that local journalism thrives in the entire State of Louisiana. So, he quickly expanded into New Orleans to go head-to-head with the TP, and then also in Lafayette. And in 2019, we purchased from Advance, the Times-Picayune and NOLA.com and with that acquisition, really doubled the size of our company and we became, even in a bigger way, Louisiana's news organization. We had the greatest reach of any news organization in the state, by far. And what we have found, Mike, is through several of our reporting resources that are on our rule desk, our community rule desk, we were sending reporters up to Shreveport on bigger stories and kept hearing that really there's no local reporting of any size in that market. And so, Kevin, myself and Renee Sanchez, our Executive Editor said, "You know, there might be something here, it might be time to expand into Shreveport."

0:05:39.0 Judi: So we went on a three-month listening tour, and what we heard was almost jaw dropping, of instances of people, "Where do you get your news?" We would ask in a listening tour, and they would literally say to us, "Well, there's this guy on Facebook, [laughter] and he sometimes goes to City Council," and it just was not what that market... It's the third largest metro area in the state, and it just really wasn't getting the coverage it deserved. So that was the Genesis; a lot of listening, talking to the people in the community about what they wanted, and then we started to spin up our plans. But it was three months of being really diligent and getting in front of as many people as we could.

0:06:21.2 Mike: Alright, so you did your due diligence. You went into the market, you talked to city leaders, you talked to news makers, I'm sure you talked to average consumers to figure out their goals, needs and desires. Did you have any clout going in? Did they know who you were, Kevin? Georges Media Group now, when you said... Because you guys were small, and then now you're grown. When you came in there, did they say, "Thank God there's this news organization coming into our city?" Did you guys go in, Kevin, with a lot of juice, as they say? How did it feel?

0:06:54.8 Kevin: Yeah, so The Advocate brand, it really is a statewide brand, whereas the Times-



Picayune in New Orleans and NOLA.com is international. So, a lot of folks know The Advocate brand, particularly for our political coverage, for our LSU sports coverage. Those two types of content alone. And you've got a lot of LSU fans in the northwest part of the state, and alums. And certainly, people are interested in Louisiana politics. They're very interesting. That's for sure.

0:07:31.4 Mike: So let me just take Barbara now, Barbara Leader. Barbara, you just heard Judi say something. She did due diligence into that market and said, "Well, the community said these words." I'm quoting Judi now, but I'm paraphrasing; "We're getting our news coverage from Facebook." Let me remind you again, Barbara, good or bad, right or wrong, you type in 'newspaper Shreveport' into Google, what comes up is The Shreveport Times, and it does have a staff there, shows four or five people in the newsroom. How are you being accepted, Barbara? What's it like to go into a market with an existing, over a 100-year-old brand and start something fresh and new, digital only in Shreveport?

0:08:16.0 Barbara: I think the pre-work that was done, listening to her, talking to the community, finding out about what they wanted, which was absolutely local journalism, is what has allowed us to come into this community. And when I'm out in the community or when I'm talking to someone and introduce myself as the editor of the Shreveport-Bossier City Advocate, it's just, "Thank goodness you're here." They're starved for local journalism and we are here to provide it with a team of 10 local journalists who are gonna do journalism in a way that has not been done here in a long time. We're gonna do enterprise journalism, we're going to do the breaking news, but we're going to go deeper and do some solutions journalism as well. So with this team of reporters who are excited about the opportunity to get in on the ground floor of a company, like you said, that while others are cutting back, they're innovating and adding to the company. And to be a part of this start, the very beginning of this organization, and to spread across this community as everyone has asked for, is just... It's a great feeling. I don't know what better position we could be in than to come into a community, already having the community's support and building from there.

0:09:36.1 Mike: You have a physical...

0:09:37.6 Judi: One thing about...

0:09:38.9 Mike: Go ahead.

0:09:40.3 Judi: Expansion. I mean, and we've talked about this before. We've gone all in on fundraising grants for our journalist, and so as we were on our listening tour, we were very, very explicit saying, we want to bring a 10-person newsroom to Shreveport. If we did it on our own financials, we could probably afford two or three reporters. But if you come to the table as a contributor and you invest in local journalism, we feel like we can raise enough funds with your help, whether it's a donor level, it's a business leader size, it's somebody wealthy in the community, or it's a national foundation, we think we can fund 10. And we explained really our business model where advertising really has been on the decline, and for us to have a three-legged stool with subscription-based consumer revenue with advertising revenue, with the third stool leg on the stool has to be grant funded.

0:10:42.4 Judi: So we went in with a goal of raising \$1.5 million for three years. It would cover

three years. Now, I will tell you, it doesn't quite cover all 10 for three years. Our editor kept getting... He kept saying, "But we need one more here and one more here." [laughter] But we believe in the community and we believe in the mission. And so, we feel like that we can get to that 1.5. We're sitting almost at 500,000 right now. So we got the first year, along with the advertising that Kevin has been able to sell as well. So, we're off to a good start, but that fundraising piece is really critical. And part of our listening tour, we tested to see people, would they have the appetite to give, would they understand it? And really had to do a lot of education. But people were excited, they were proud that they could have a seat at the table and really contribute to shining a light on the great stories of their communities.

0:11:38.0 Mike: Alright, Judi, final question. Is your phone ringing off the hook? Are other publishers and owners around the country saying, "Okay, how'd you do it? You went into a market with an existing brand and you're going for it. You're making money. You're bringing in the funds." Are people calling you and asking for advice? Is this a model that others should start looking at to help not only grow their business, but help a community have better reporting?

0:12:06.6 Judi: I think yes. And the answer is yes. But we're not alone. I will give kudos to Charleston, South Carolina...

0:12:13.2 Mike: Right. Of course.

0:12:13.6 Judi: Who's also privately held, that is also on expansion. And also, the Star Tribune up in Minneapolis has also over the last few years, expanded. And our friends in Colorado Springs have gone into Denver. But I mean, we just came back from the Local Media Associations conference and we were on the panel talking about Shreveport...

0:12:35.6 Mike: Of course you were.

0:12:37.9 Judi: And so, yeah, it is, and it's... I think if anyone is interested, spend the time, launch a listening tour. It can't hurt to assess where is an opportunity. We're thinking about, what's our next move?

0:12:52.2 Mike: There you go.

0:12:54.6 Judi: And plotted out some other geographies. Will it be in '24? Maybe. Maybe it'll be in '25. But being a growth company, we just feel like there's a lot of opportunities, and the more that we can tell our story, that we want more local journalists on the ground, and that that is our goal, I think it plays well, whatever part of the country you're in. If you genuinely, genuinely want to be able to grow the number of local stories being told about a community and you're authentic, then people will be very interested in helping.

0:13:26.4 Mike: Barbara, do you know how lucky you are? Do you wake up in the morning, Barbara, sometimes and go, "Thank God I'm working for a company with a boss that just said those words?"

0:13:35.5 Barbara: I'm so excited. It's an opportunity that's once in a lifetime and I'm excited about



doing it and doing my job every day and working with the team that we put together so far and continue to build. So, yes, I wake up happy every morning.

0:13:49.5 Mike: You're not getting a phone call today saying you gotta slice three or four people. I mean, that's not in your future, is it, Barbara? You're actually hiring?

0:13:56.9 Barbara: No, I am hiring. I have three more people to hire. So, if anybody out there's interested in joining us, you're welcome.

0:14:05.1 Mike: And Kevin, you're in for the long haul, am I correct? Georges Media Group? And I'm not against... Not a communist, there's nothing wrong with profit, but you're in for this for the long haul, for growth, expansion. And do you see, Kevin, that... Do you see a rosy future? Can we survive?

0:14:24.1 Kevin: Oh, absolutely, Mike. And when you talk to our team, when you talk out in the community to hear the excitement, and again, it's just our belief is that we are a growth company. And I'll just echo that. And we don't think of it any other way. And so, we're not in retraction, we're all about growth. And you feel that when you meet with our team, whether it's our sales team or our journalists. We have high expectations and we like to meet those.

0:15:00.9 Mike: Well, there you go. Judi, keep up the good fight. Thank you so much for your valuable time. Kevin, president of Georges Media Group, thanks for just making us all feel good about growth again, and expansion. And Barbara, get to work. Get out, do that enterprise journalism, get those church suppers, just do the blocking and tackling. And I'm sure as you grow that audience... Clifton, we wish we had him on the program, but I'm sure Clifton will be able to leverage that audience more and more and help local businesses grow and prosper. Thanks, all of you, for your valuable time. We really appreciate it.

0:15:36.3 Judi: Thank you.

[music]