

CBS News develops an app feature to alert audiences about live events and breaking news

CBS News is the news and information division of ViacomCBS. Headquartered in the CBS Broadcast Center in New York, CBS News has bureaus across the globe and produces influential, critically acclaimed programs providing original reporting, interviews, investigations, analysis, and breaking news 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

OPPORTUNITY

CBS News wanted to provide a way to keep viewers informed about breaking news, particularly on devices that do not natively offer any form of notification systems. The team saw an opportunity to develop a scalable interactive feature for the CBS News app that notifies audiences of breaking news or live event coverage. Called Live Alerts, the feature is a direct way to guide and expose a viewer to the many live channels offered across the ecosystem of ViacomCBS Digital.

APPROACH

CBS News developed a tool called Live Alerts, which was designed to increase video consumption, particularly of live video. It works by sending a notification to people who are using the CBS News over-the-top (OTT) app and, when clicked, brings them to the live coverage. In addition, the viewer can use the feature at any time to see what special coverage may be on.

Establishing a cross-functional project: Many different teams were involved in the project, including editorial, growth and engagement, design, product, engineering, and business intelligence. Over the course of the project, they met on a weekly basis.

Creating the technology: Each team helped define the vision, refine implementation, and track performance.

- *The project team* designed and wireframed the Live Alert tool, then built the CMS feature to populate feeds.
- *The video team* created a proof-of-concept app to ensure the user experience would work as expected on OTT and Smart TV platforms, and would be scalable across devices. The team faced challenges around platform limitations, including support for lower end (low processing and memory capacity) devices.
- *The data and insights and technology operations teams* defined tracking specifications, then the business intelligence team made sure the necessary data could be tracked to evaluate performance.
- *Finally, the engineering team* implemented the technical requirements, including design/UX, tracking, feed/API, and video technology. Through the development and QA process, they made adjustments and iterated as needed to ensure an optimal user experience.

Reviewing the technology: Live Alerts was demoed to business stakeholders and platform partners to ensure it would help drive CBS News and ViacomCBS Digital's user engagement and channel expansion goals, as well as greater platform best practices. Key producers were trained on how to use the tool, and workflows between digital and on-air teams were developed to help identify the events a producer would push to the Live Alert feature.

Tracking performance: Once Live Alerts was launched in the CBS News app, the business intelligence team created performance dashboards for distribution to all stakeholders. The project team evaluated the effectiveness of the alerts on a weekly basis. The team continues to evaluate the KPIs set at the project onset, and product optimizations are identified for short- and long-term improvements.

RESULTS

CBS News successfully designed and developed a feature for its CBS News app that alerts viewers to breaking news and live events. Live Alerts has helped drive traffic to the live channels programmed by ViacomCBS, and increase the time users spend watching video.

- **Improved collaboration** between digital and on-air editorial teams, and local and national teams.
- **Built CMS and API** to power Live Alerts and potential future innovations.
- **43% longer watch time** for viewers who interact with Live Alerts compared to the average OTT app viewer.

LEARNINGS

Start small and scale: Focusing on one editorial use case and one platform was helpful to the project team because it allowed them to align around a shared vision across stakeholders and various teams, while also accommodating for future use cases and content types. They initially envisioned three use cases; a major win was the realization that they were all versions of one core functionality that gives users choice. This allowed the team to think about the Minimum Viable Product (MVP) in such a way that it can be versioned more successfully in the long term, ensuring that this project creates something flexible and useful for a number of different editorial scenarios. By building one core functionality that allows a user to interact with something (a graphic) the team was able to open up a number of possibilities for future interaction that can be tailored to different kinds of stories and situations.

Prototype early and often: Iterating on the front end design was important, but CBS News better understood the experience and what made most sense to the user through developing a proof-of-concept prototype. Through the design process, the project team experienced scope creep as they tried to accommodate many features from different stakeholders. But they defined the MVP and identified the key elements for launch through prototyping.

Empower staff to take ownership: Editorial ownership of a completely new feature can be unclear. So, it is important that there is a dedicated, cross-functional team who have a holistic view of the strategic and content priorities from multiple departments and business units. Most likely, new workflows and channels of communication will need to be established. The key to success here is to know how to contextualize a novel technology for different internal stakeholders, both digital and non-digital (editorial and operational), in order to position it for shared success.

“ **This project is an example of multiple teams and disciplines collaborating well to innovate with an eye towards meeting business goals while providing value to the user.** ”