



CASE

HIIU LEHT

“**Adding Value:**
Developing and
Monetizing a Premium
Newsletter

STUDY

IN SHORT

Hiiu Leht, Estonia's only independent island newspaper, sought to reach younger readers and reconnect with the Hiiumaa diaspora. Through mentoring and design-thinking practices, it developed newsletters and explored video storytelling to expand its audience base, strengthen local participation, and modernize its engagement strategy.

ABOUT THE NEWS OUTLET

Hiiu Leht is the only independent newspaper serving Hiiu County, Estonia's second-smallest, which is located on the island of Hiiumaa. First published in 1997, the paper has played a central role in keeping the island's approximately 10,000 residents informed through its website and weekly print publication.



PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Hiiu Leht aimed to attract younger readers and reconnect with the Hiiumaa diaspora through digital tools — newsletters, videos, and user research — while building sustainable workflows for its small editorial team.



IMPLEMENTED SOLUTIONS

Using design thinking, Hiiu Leht launched a digital newsletter, refined its format based on user feedback, and experimented with video content. Mentoring supported workflow optimization, AI tool integration, and survey-based audience research.

WHY THIS PROJECT?

Hiiu Leht realized that while its print edition remained stable, digital subscriptions had plateaued. After experimenting with social media promotion, the team found that newsletters offered an opportunity to reconnect with readers who had drifted away. The project's purpose was to engage the next generation of Hiiumaa residents and diaspora members, using fresh digital channels to build stronger community ties. It also aimed to create new routines for producing and distributing content that would complement the weekly print edition.

HOW DID APPLYING DESIGN THINKING PRINCIPLES HELP?

Design thinking helped Hiiu Leht maintain a user-first mindset. Instead of assuming what readers wanted, the team relied on feedback gathered from early newsletter editions and surveys. This iterative approach guided adjustments to layout, tone, and frequency, ensuring the newsletter felt conversational and relevant. The mentoring process also introduced the team to tools that enhanced productivity — including AI-assisted editing — while keeping the content personal and authentic to local voices.

DID HIIU LEHT'S APPROACH CHANGE ENGAGEMENT WITH ITS AUDIENCE IN ANY WAY?

Yes. Creating Hiiu Leht's first reader survey marked a turning point in audience relations. Overwhelmingly positive response rates showed strong trust in the outlet. Beyond data collection, the survey became a form of dialogue — readers appreciated being asked for their input. The newsletter's open rate surpassed national averages, demonstrating genuine curiosity and renewed interest in local journalism. Hiiu Leht gained a clearer understanding of how different demographic groups consume news, paving the way for more tailored, inclusive communication in the future.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID HIIU LEHT ENCOUNTER AND HOW DID IT ADDRESS THEM?

The biggest challenge was limited capacity within a small team. Producing the newsletter required significant time, often overlapping with daily editorial duties. The team addressed this by prioritizing tasks, introducing shared planning calendars, and using automation tools to streamline production. Another challenge was managing expectations — realizing that meaningful growth takes time. By focusing on one product at a time, the team ensured steady, manageable progress instead of short-term spikes. These process lessons became as valuable as the newsletter itself.

HOW WAS HIIU LEHT'S PROJECT RECEIVED BY ITS AUDIENCE?

The newsletter received an enthusiastic reception, with high open rates and encouraging feedback from local readers. Many expressed appreciation for concise, community-focused updates that complemented the print edition. Although it's too early to track subscription growth, the initial engagement suggests a successful start. The project reintroduced Hiiu Leht as a dynamic, evolving publication capable of adapting to modern reader habits while preserving its small-town authenticity and trust.

WHAT INSIGHTS OR LESSONS DID HIIU LEHT GAIN FROM THIS PROJECT?

The project taught Hiiu Leht that innovation doesn't always require large budgets — it requires listening, testing, and adjusting. Survey design proved crucial in understanding community needs, while iterative publishing revealed what formats resonated most. The team learned to view newsletters not only as marketing tools but as independent editorial products with their own value and potential revenue paths. Managing expectations and focusing on one achievable goal at a time were essential to avoiding burnout and ensuring consistent progress.

WHAT DOES HIIU LEHT PLAN ON DOING NEXT?

Hiiu Leht plans to continue refining the newsletter and digital presence, guided by survey feedback and analytics. Future priorities include expanding video production, experimenting with short-form storytelling, and exploring monetization through sponsorships or premium newsletters. The team will assess whether the newsletter can evolve into a standalone product while maintaining its print publication as the island's main news source. Regular evaluation and feedback loops will help shape the outlet's long-term digital transformation strategy.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD HIIU LEHT GIVE TO OTHER JOURNALISTS OR ORGANISATIONS CONSIDERING A SIMILAR PATH?

Start small, stay flexible, and respect your team's limits. Test early, refine often, and don't aim to solve every challenge at once. Engage your readers from the beginning — surveys, pilot editions, and open communication build trust. Most importantly, embrace change as an opportunity to reconnect with your community. Hiiu Leht's experience shows that even small, local newsrooms can modernize effectively through curiosity, empathy, and incremental innovation.

HIJU LEHT VISUALS FROM THE PROJECT



Brainstorming with the Community



Press Passes and Pride