

## **Bylines = Brands**

### **How to Leverage Your Editorial Team for Higher Sales**

*By Mike Goldman, Editorial Director, Boy Scouts of America/Scouting Magazine*

A publisher's greatest asset is not content. It's the people who create that content. And a wise publisher can leverage that asset to create higher sales opportunities across the organization.

Editors and writers have become important cogs in the advertising-sales machine. It's not just about selling pages anymore; it's about selling talent. An editorial team that creates credible and curated content is more valuable than any web banners, pre-roll video or full-page ads could ever be.

We have entered the age of custom content. We have entered the age in which bylines equal brands.

#### **It's Not A Sellout**

Don't read this as a plan for editors and writers to sell out. Editorial integrity remains a must. A publication's second greatest asset — just behind its talented people — is the credibility and authenticity of those people and of the publication itself. Custom content must meet strict editorial guidelines to ensure the readers' trust that a staff and title has painstakingly built is not compromised.

These guidelines make delivering an ideal customer experience in print or online the paramount goal, and they prevent the marketing or sales teams taking control of a publication's brand, tone and message.

- Every opportunity must be evaluated against the publisher's mission, brand message and guidelines (particularly, the digital brand standards, as those are the standards most often infringed upon in today's publishing environment).
- Every opportunity should be considered based on its ability to enhance a customer's experience.
- Every opportunity must be considered based on its potential to drive revenue for the publisher.

Another way to look at these guidelines: Would you consider running the content if you were not being paid to do so? If the answer is no, move on. Your editorial mission might be compromised otherwise.

Studies have shown that today's consumers don't appreciate brands that explicitly sell to them; they prefer brands that share and promote new, robust and relevant content. This results in greater success and creates higher levels of engagement. When a magazine's bylined writers speak, consumers listen. The same is not always true with the work of typical advertising copywriters.

Take the example of *Scouting* magazine and its offshoot blog, *Bryan on Scouting*: The blog has become a trusted, go-to source of information for the Boy Scouts of America and its members. When the writers of *Bryan* created custom content based on the three guidelines above, it was a win-win for the organization and the advertisers. The blog got

great traction and readership with its post on a new tool for Scout parents; the marketer of the tool realized a respectable time-on-page statistic of 3.5 minutes for the brief post, smashing its metrics for traditional web ads. That's real brand exposure, which leads to real brand engagement.

### **A True Content Brand**

In a whitepaper from "The Content Marketing Playbook for 2015," Ryan Skinner and his colleagues at Forrester Research suggest that publishers must move from "random acts of content marketing to a true content brand."

Here are four steps for success, paraphrased from Skinner and team:

1. Create content that customers will like and seek out. A publisher's expertise with content can help drive marketing success.
2. Leverage branding to extend customers' interest in individual pieces of content into an ongoing relationship that encapsulates shared interests, values or expectations.
3. Manage relationships using data gained from audiences. Marketers must monitor and fine-tune each interaction along the customer journey to ensure their publishing partners are aware of what is working (and what is not).
4. Strive to achieve a clear and measurable return on investment. Custom content must focus on steadily creating more value for the business while also driving traffic and engagement with the publisher.

These steps are where a publisher's staff comes in. No one knows a publication — and its readers — better than those who create it. Writers and editors can define success in each step of the process.

### **Keep Tabs on the Sell (and Seller)**

To maintain utmost editorial credibility, a publisher needs control over content throughout the process. Becoming a mere shill undermines a writer's work, but resisting advertiser input undermines the entire campaign and the sales team's work.

The key is balance. Maintain this balance with a simple workflow of checks and balances:

Step 1: Advertiser and sales team discuss goals of the campaign. (Any solution seller lives by this step: Research your client's needs, then over-deliver on a solution.)

Step 2: Sales and editorial teams discuss if and how the campaign fits with the publication's mission.

Step 3: If teams agree the campaign fits, initial assets and copy points come directly from advertiser (to ensure its messages are being transmitted accurately).

Step 4: Editorial team crafts advertiser copy points into custom content with the publication's tone and voice.

Step 5: Advertiser approves final copy. It can correct facts but not overall editorial tone.

Crafting and successfully executing a custom-content strategy is not an overnight project. Every journalist strives for the distinct separation of editorial and advertising. This strategy does blur those lines, but by following the practical steps outlined here, it does not do so at the expense of integrity.

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