Building sustainable online audiences
Helping web media sites acquire and retain viewers
Digital Insight Report
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Building a successful online media property means building a sustainable and resilient audience. The dynamics of audience acquisition and engagement on the web are different from those in classic media channels and although they hinge on the delivery of great content that satisfies audience needs, marketers have to work hard to acquire the right audiences at the right price. Add to that the competitive landscape where every other site is only a click away and there are many challenges in getting the model right. In this report we collate smart tactics for getting audiences into and back to the content.

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Analyst's profile:
Danny Meadows-Klue has been a researcher and commentator in the digital networked industries since 1995. He managed the UK's first online newspaper - The Daily Telegraph – and has helped run web businesses ranging from social media and mass market portals to online stores, magazines, search and email services. He is the co-founder of the UK and European IABs, held their presidencies for four years, and has been lecturing on digital media and marketing for more than a decade.

"In digital publishing the relationship between audiences and ad revenue is absolute. Each page viewed clocks up more advertising views, and without effective marketing and distribution, sites can never unlock their real potential. Many web firms often focus so heavily on the content and product that the marketing is left as an after-thought, with piecemeal tactical activities that don't deliver a strategic shift in traffic. Marketing new sites often demands as much energy as the creation of the content itself and with web media competing with myriad sites for audience time, no marketing strategy means no critical mass."

Danny Klue

Introduction

Building traffic strategies that last

Getting a web media business to perform means developing a sustainable flow of quality traffic. The economics of audience volumes and advertising revenues are much more tightly linked in online media, and yet most publishers fail to put enough emphasis on the marketing of their web properties. In digital channels the relationship between the content and its marketing is also much tighter and this Digital Insight Report explores the three key elements in an online marketing plan for a web media business. They are inextricably linked and for the site to perform well, each needs its own dedicated focus:

- **Audience acquisition strategies**

- **Audience retention strategies**

- **Cross promotion strategies**

Since 2000, we have been talking about the digital networked society and the implications for firms as their sectors make the transition. Our Digital Insight Reports explore patterns within these changes and provide some simple navigation to successfully make the transition.

Speed read

- Use acquisition strategies to bring in different audiences deep into the content of the site

- Develop cross-promotional strategies to move audiences from one area of the site to another, building stickiness and visit duration

- Create additional strategies for retaining readers to online publications

- Explore social media as a way to enhance all three strategies

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Context

Why raising traffic should be raised on the agenda

Boosting the traffic to websites is a ceaseless challenge, and as many businesses become increasingly reliant on their web presence to acquire customers or deliver key research that helps customers buy, traffic acquisition is moving to the heart of the marketing agenda. Marketing of a web presence needs an increasing amount of attention and for media owner websites there are the additional challenges that stem from the tight relationship between internet traffic and advertising revenues (on every page there are ads the media owner only gets paid for when the page is viewed so the more views, the more ads, the more income).

For media and entertainment properties, great content that satisfies customer needs is at the heart of what drives sustainable traffic, but the content and services alone only go so far. Without marketing that aims to increase their discoverability, and activities to make the most of what has been created, the growth on sites can be sluggish. Content and marketing should go hand in hand in the development of an online business, and the approach developed by Digital's team has proven to be a successful way of helping firms structure their activities.

Building sustainable audiences to an online media property takes focus and effort, but smart publishers plan out a strategy for customer acquisition and retention. After all it's easy to buy ten thousand clicks from Google, but getting the right people, getting them to stay, and getting them to come back all takes skill and insight.

Applying the loyalty ladder

Applying classic sales promotion theory to online media can be a useful way of helping marketing teams structure their challenges. Breaking down the marketing challenge into strategies - acquire customers, retain customers and cross-sell them between different sections of the website - is a powerful framework for creating an effective online marketing plan.

Acquisition

Getting new viewers, boosting website traffic

Start with a strategy for strong audience acquisition mechanisms. Examine ways to make the content of a site discoverable by non-users and invest in content development to ensure that there is a tight match between the content created and the ways people might look for that content in search engines.

1. Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) remains the most effective long term tool for customer acquisition
2. Create body copy in the stories which is written with Google in mind: ditch some of the more flamboyant headlines and look for language that creates immediate clicks
3. Email newsletters are a great way of maintaining contact with occasional readers, but also to reach new readers by encouraging them to forward their news to a colleague
4. PR channels both offline and online can provide some of the most creative thinking about audience acquisition and there's a tight relationship between PR and some of the most outstanding thinking in viral marketing
5. The new generation of social media are proving powerful ways to raise awareness, although not necessarily delivering large volumes straight away
6. RSS feeds are a way of helping the more web savvy users stay in touch and monitor a site's content, but they are only one form of feeds, and with similar techniques available to supply content and headlines into FaceBook profiles and other channels, having the content in this form can prove extremely flexible

And then there are the range of tools and techniques of cross promotion in moving audiences between media channels. Here are a few quick tips:

1. Weave the web address into the masthead and logo
2. Give the website a clear positioning in the mind of the reader: "See updates, live, online at …"
3. Use house advertising to drive specific propositions; rather than generic messages about the website, link the location of the advert to a specific message such as something like this in the cricket section of a printed newspaper 'More cricket news and team archives online at…' or this in a directory of a business magazine "For more listings of leading suppliers, with web addresses and online reviews, visit…"
4. Take the URL into all merchandising so the publication echoes the website at every point
5. Check that web addresses are always present in online and offline advertising campaigns

Retention

Keeping your online audience

Retaining online audiences is something many media owners invest far too little time and attention in. Yet it is much cheaper to reacquire an existing customer than to acquire a completely new customer, so by building loyalty among existing readers the firm is well on the way to boosting the traffic and activity on the site.

Getting into bookmarks means customers will be reminded about the brand regularly, raising awareness as well as click rates.

A good model is to think of a sink with a tap pouring in new customers and a plug hole where existing traffic is draining out. Plug the hole just slightly and it has a dramatic effect on the audience volumes.

Examine ways to open up a relationship with existing users to help them reconnect with the content. Here are some of the most effective ways of quickly changing the engagement levels with existing users:

1. Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is a way of helping existing readers get reminded about the brand

2. Email newsletters are the most powerful way of maintaining contact with occasional readers: create newsletters that take elements of the website and package them into a format easy to send and click through from

3. RSS feeds are increasingly powerful in helping sophisticated readers find the right material and content

4. Encourage bookmarking, and social bookmark use such as Delicious – getting into bookmarks means customers will be reminded about the brand regularly, raising awareness as well as click rates

5. Syndicating content: look for good partners to syndicate headlines and simple feeds to ensure content is easily discoverable by audiences who know the brand

6. For mainstream consumer brands, desktop ticker devices like Skinkers can be a great way of staking a claim for the most precious real-estate on the web: getting into the customer's desktop or bookmarks is getting into the front of their minds on a regular basis

Cross promotion

Getting more clicks from existing viewers

Audience acquisition and audience retention strategies are two parts of the triangle of creating high sustainable audiences. A key area of focus is in making more from the audiences already on the site. The effective cross selling between different parts of the website can trigger a step-change in the audience numbers and the level of engagement. When publishers appreciate the direct relationship between the number of pages viewed and the number of advertising exposures, it's clear that there is a strong need to create more opportunities to click deeper, encouraging audiences to click between different areas of the site and to consume more pages. Here are some simple tips for making the most of what you have:

1. Navigational language

Think about whether your navigation is written through the eyes of a publisher or those of a viewer. Look for language that fits with the customers and the way they describe products and services. A simple example of this is the word 'classifieds' to describe the small-ads listings in newspapers and magazines. It's so deeply embedded in the industry jargon that we don't even see it, and yet customers are far more likely to be looking for 'flights', 'cars', 'homes' or 'jobs', so by switching the language around to match their needs it makes content more discoverable and creates greater opportunities for clicks.

2. Navigation structures

Apply the same process to the structure of the site itself. The example of 'classifieds' works well here too: why put all the content from such diverse areas into one section? Link the motoring adverts and listings from the motoring content pages and put property advertising in a dedicated property section. Many media groups have gone as far as creating dedicated sites for each of the classified 'pillars', but the model of having content cluster together around a clear human need is a proven way to help web publishers get more from their online resources.

3. Cross promote in smart places

There's often a natural relationship between the audiences in one part of a website and those in another. For example, publishers reading Digital's articles about web publishing strategy might also be interested in digital media sales, so that would be a logical place for this publisher to anchor some cross promotional activity. By learning about your audiences and the patterns and connections they share, publishers are best placed to get their cross promotion working much harder.

4. Cross linking with editorial

Hyperlinking within the text of an article is at the heart of online journalism. Back in the mid 90s when I helped run The Daily Telegraph's internet businesses in the UK, we had a team of sub-editors manually coding those sorts of links every night. It was an arduous process, but the value to the readers was immense, and built on the very heart of the hyperlinking discipline that predated the development of the web. This approach has a powerful way of boosting traffic because it presents the most relevant content just at the right moment to the right person.

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One approach is still to do this manually. It's a major challenge for many publishers, but requires no system development, and if the editorial team and content is small it can prove cost effective. Another hinges on categorising the stories with attributes (tags) that describe what they are about. Popularised by the blogging platforms, the latest generations of content management tools have tags at their heart and when used well these massively amplify the number of related links. But the web continues to evolve and the new generation of smart contextual search tools, such as British technology firm Grapeshot, are opening up even better ways to achieve this. They can figure out the relationships between different documents on the website and automatically connect relevant content together.

5. Getting internal search right

It's still staggering that many websites seem to forget to put search tools into their navigation. By making content across the site searchable and the services quickly discoverable by people already on the site, the potential for a reader to move from one section to another rapidly increases. Some publishers are overly keen on adding many fields for filtering within search, but remember that the more fields and search variables, the fewer results will appear.

6. Sitemaps are for readers and now for Google too

Sitemaps may not be the most exciting aspect of web publishing, but many sites still overlook them. Now that search engines have a way of recognising them and harnessing them to speed up the website indexing process, they have become useful tools for assisting discoverability for those who already know the brand.

Social media

Architecting an environment for participation

The role of audience interaction works powerfully across acquisition, retention and cross promotion. The way web publishing allows media sites to create the framework through which their users participate creates a model that invites a step-change in the volume of page views per person and the frequency of visits. By architecting an environment for participation, media brands create a model which can tie their audiences into the publication, drawing out opinion and comment from them, triggering them to invite their friends to watch or participate in the discussion, and creating content that unconnected viewers can benefit from.

For sites that successfully harness social media, the shift in audiences is dramatic. Amazon started to explore participation early on with the creation of reader reviews as a way to comment on the products being sold. By 2000, sites such as Epinions.com and the NBC Internet were building business models around participation and web platforms, and comments were starting to be woven into the fabric of magazines and newspaper websites. Over the next few years, brands such as CNET, Gamespot and ZDNET went further, developing complex models for architecting participation that structured the content of their contributors into a form that could be codified and structured more flexibly. All these services benefited from the truth that once people become engaged in the site and its content, there is a bond put in place that much greater engagement can grow from.

> Social media benefits all three sides of the traffic building triangle.

Because social media works to prolong the duration of the current visit, massively increase the probability of future visits, and motivate visitors to invite their friends to the same site, all three sides of the traffic building triangle benefit. By viewing social media through the lens of these goals, publishers can decide to change the way they present and package their content and services to help boost audiences and engagement.

Digital Insight Reports
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In times of huge economic and technical change, knowledge becomes a critical success factor. We created the Digital Insight Reports to bring you insights from a particular part of this fast changing industry. They are independent perspectives on key issues around business or marketing in the digital networked economy.

Best practice tips

Five buttons to consider for every page

Here are five great ways to increase stickiness on any page on any website. Put in place the tracking and watch how they boost audiences and the viral effect of content.

- 'Forward to a friend'
- 'Bookmark this page'
- 'Add a comment'
- 'Save to scrapbook'
- 'Show me other pages like this'

Exercise

Exercise for online publishers

Want to find out how balanced your audience growth strategy is? Try these simple steps:

Step 1.
Make a list of the techniques you currently use to acquire new audiences. Grade each of the approaches on a scale of 1 to 5 in terms of how confident you are that you get the best you could from this process.

Step 2.
Repeat this exercise when you think about audience retention and make a second list.

Step 3.
Repeat again for the cross promotional ideas discussed.

Reflection
Does anything strike you about these lists? Usually they will expose areas of weakness or fundamentally missed opportunities. It's often the case that a publisher's activity is skewed heavily in one direction. Using the 'tap and the sink' analogy, that might mean customers are gushing in through the tap, but with no plug in the sink, most are being lost quickly.

Step 4.
Now return to the lists and look at the areas you feel are extremely poor performers, the areas where you know the business is failing to get value from its investment. Focus on one of these from each section and work with colleagues on the action plan.

Digital's Social Media & Web 2.0 Academies

Marketing management training to help brands and publishers navigate digital tools and platforms to build new relationships with customers. Learn how to build sustainable audiences, stronger messaging, and great content for the fastest growing part of the web.

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"The workshops with Digital were fascinating; they really brought together all of our ideas, changing the way we think about our business"

Commissioning director, in-company Digital Training Academy programme

Who is it for?
Media owners, marketing teams, and anyone involved in architecting or participating in online communities.

What is it about?
Web 2.0 has washed over the industry like a tidal wave, but building the software is only the starting point. This Academy will explore the concepts behind Web 2.0 and explain how you can harness social networking, collective intelligence and user generated content in your marketing.

Our strategy and training programmes

→ Corporate and product strategy development

→ Business plan analysis and risk assessment

→ Executive digital management coaching

→ Digital skills and knowledge training

→ Customer acquisition strategies

→ Market research and analysis

If you have any questions about our approach to training, or the detailed content of the course then please email or call the team.

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