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TAKING THE “-ED” OUT OF “BRANDED CONTENT”



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Anyone reading this column for the last year probably noticed that I dropped the "ed" in the term, "branded content." Why? Marketing language should reflect the evolving relationships between brand and content in the digital space.

For one, the word "branded" conjures up negative images of sizzling cow skin from a red-hot prod-- and we all know who benefits from that relationship. It also suggests one entity is owned by the other. Whereas, the best brand content creative in the new media space has evolved in a way that can equally benefit both brands and content creators, and responsibility and ownership can often be shared depending on the type of content.

In traditional media, brands often work downstream in the process of content creation and development. For television and film, integration often means passive product placement or the occasional brand plug. While sports and reality programming get somewhat more creative, the result is still often interruptive.

In the digital space, brand content no longer sits within a passive TV box or on a passive page -- it can activate content within a video, or it can sit beside the content as a brand utility and play an equally important role.

So, to take the "ed" out of your "branded" content experiences, here are several tips I've learned over the past year:

It's Sometimes Better to Rent Than to Buy

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The thing about owning any new piece of technology today is that you know something better is just about to come out. The same holds true for content. People's tastes and needs fluctuate and evolve faster than ever before. So why buy something you're going to want to trade-up in a year?

Today, brands have a lot more inexpensive options for developing content for their audience. So, why not partner up with the cool new kid on the block that is already making great content and help them make some more? Or even just license and aggregate existing content into one place for your audience?

Owning and creating original content may give you the most control over your message, but that doesn't mean anyone will want to hear it. Sometimes your money is better spent investing in content you know already works and people want to listen to.

The end goal is to create a diverse content strategy that ranges from original content to user-generated inspired content -- and everything in between.

If It Doesn't Fit, Leave It Out

Brand video content was traditionally limited to the space within the box; it had to sit within your TV set because there were no other options! Within the digital space you can be much more creative in how and where the brand plays both within and around that content; the whole page becomes your canvas for brand integration.

When thinking about how to marry the brand with content, keep the audience in mind and what works best for the kind of content with which you are aligning. It may make sense to not have the brand integrated directly into the video, but rather sit around the content as a utility to help drive participation.

Don't Just Product Place It, Product Click It

For the right content and audience, product placement can still be an effective marketing tactic. And in the digital space, product placement can work even harder for the brand by activating hot-linking, and by providing additional value for the user. Offering coupons, exclusive deals, and direct-to-site purchasing are small easy steps to take that can go a long way.

Don't Gate, Syndicate

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A colleague of mine once made me a t-shirt for Christmas with this slogan on it! Brands have a tendency to want to create barriers of entry before allowing users to participate in content, through either requiring them to register or only allowing for a sampling experience. Brands compete for their messages to be heard in today's world. If you want to earn someone's attention, the last thing you want to do once you get them to a site is create obstacles. Your real worry should be whether you can get them to come back again, and in order to do that you have to provide value first.

One exception to the rule is when you are working with an established credible content partner that already has a deeply engaged audience. Gating exclusive and highly coveted content can be effective if there is enough motivation to make it worth their while.

In addition to limiting gating, brand content should not only be easy to consume, but you should ensure you have a solid distribution strategy so the content exists where your audience exists, and that it can be consumed where and how they want it.

Let Other People Speak for You

When developing a brand content strategy, finding content creators and talent who can incorporate your brand's message and value into their content is one of the most powerful ways to get people to listen. Seek out relevant talent that already has an audience and that knows how to talk to that audience. Then ask them to shape the brand integration either through non-interruptive storytelling, or at the very least, as a custom pre-roll that they own and make relevant to their audience.

In the end it's about earning an audience's trust and attention. Once you have their ear, then you can start to be more pointed and strategic around what you want to tell them.