GROW YOUR AUDIENCE

HOW TO ATTRACT, BUILD AND SUSTAIN DIGITAL TRAFFIC

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CONTENT SERVICE

COMMANDING AN AUDIENCE

Driving online traffic is one of the most difficult and persistent challenges faced by publishers, broadcasters and media companies. The digital ecosystem is constantly expanding, with more and more publishers competing for larger and larger audiences every day.

This growth dynamic creates an unprecedented potential upside. No matter what kinds of content publishers provide, an audience for it is almost certainly out there. The challenge: finding them in a sea of possibilities, attracting other like-minded people and building the audience steadily over time. Publishers that can demonstrate a reliable and growing audience will be able to monetize this traffic, creating additional resources that can be reinvested in audience development.

To reach this ultimate goal, publishers first need to find and then deploy the right tactics. This white paper covers many of the most popular approaches, so publishers can make informed choices, find what works, evaluate results accurately and develop a sustainable and enterprise-wide strategy for building and growing a digital audience.

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TARGETING SEARCH ENGINES

Search engine optimization (SEO) is one of the most well-known ways to help audiences around the world find their way to the content on a publisher's site. SEO involves tailoring a site's structure and content to ensure that the page is listed earlier and more frequently in search engine results.

Volume, relevance and quality

According to the global head of marketing and sales operations at a major media company, content volume is the top factor affecting SEO.

"The more content publishers produce, the easier it is to ensure high rankings," she said. "More content means search engines are crawling more of your pages. Adding volume is the number one thing any publisher can do to make sure they are driving as much traffic as possible to the site."

While volume is vital, the quality and relevance of content must remain high. Search engines are designed to detect shortcuts, such as duplicate content, when scraping pages. Sites that attempt to increase page volume with low-quality content will be penalized.

Relevance refers to the timeliness of a story, thus publishers can drive traffic by being the first to cover a story, update the story with new content more frequently—or both.

"Of course publishers want to be the first site to publish a story," the global head of marketing said. "But they can also optimize SEO by adding substantial new content to a story as it evolves. If the time stamp changes often and the additional content is meaningful, search engines will boost the story's ranking."

Publishers can also attain relevance by providing "long-tail" content or evergreen articles that are comprehensive enough and updated often enough to become a top result returned for a specific topic, category or search term.

Social sharing

While publishers will be hard-pressed to make content "go viral," content that generates more activity on social media will achieve better search engine results. Although the effect of social sharing on search algorithms is not completely known, social sharing does play an important role according to a social media editor at a large news organization.

"Shares, likes and retweets are very influential, although search engines do not publish specifics," she said. "That's why it's important for publishers to publish content that is both social media–friendly and includes embedded links to the original story or related content."

Embedded links not only improve search engine results, they help publishers convert fleeting social traffic into regular site visitors when stories, videos or other content are shared widely.

TARGETING
SEARCH ENGINES

Metadata and keywords

At an even more granular level, publishers can fine-tune the metadata of published content to improve SEO. Metadata is the data embedded in content that formally describes its structure and the nature of its content.

Implementing proper metadata is not complex as long as publishers follow best practices. Some of the basics are editing the five standard metatags in the <head> section of a page (title, type, description, image and URL) as well as keeping the tags short (70 characters for titles, 150 characters for descriptions). It is also a good idea to place keywords closer to the beginning of the tag. Publishers will want to avoid pages with duplicate metadata content, which can hamper rankings. For additional ideas, the site schema.org provides templates publishers can use to build pages in ways that improve search results with Bing, Google, Yahoo and others.

The real challenge with metadata is keeping it fresh, monitoring, reviewing and refining metadata regularly. When Google updates its search algorithm, for example, the company is changing what its search bots look for and what they deem relevant. Publishers need to react quickly to avoid the risk of hard-earned search rankings falling overnight.

As always, producing a steady stream of high-quality content is the top priority. Publishers that ensure that primary and section front pages feature appropriately tagged timely, relevant content will be better-positioned to adapt when search parameters change.

Appropriate tagging of content requires publishers to choose keywords that reflect how an audience searches for content. Keyword research can help in this regard. Publishers can use free research tools, such as Google Adwords Keyword Planner, Google Analytics and the Google autocomplete function, or choose to use paid tools.

"Getting a sense of the volume of searches for certain topics allows publishers to retrofit content metadata in order to drive traffic," the global head of marketing said. "If you know the demand for your content is out there, keyword research lets you make sure the audience can find it."

One new trend, the social media editor notes, is the concept of differentiating keywords for SEO from those used on social media.

"Social keywords are those terms that may appear in posts on social media, as well as those the audience is using to search for content on social media platforms," she said. "Conventional search engine keywords tend to be literal. Social keywords are more conversational. If a publisher is trying to reach multitasking moms with social media content, for example, the best keywords to use might be 'laundry' or 'carpool.' It's important to be aware of the nuances in each channel."

This is the point at which SEO blends into social media strategy, which is the second tactic publishers can use to attract more traffic.

CHANELING SOCIAL MEDIA

Not coincidentally, developing a robust social media strategy is critical for building and growing an online audience. While managing social media can be more involved than optimizing SEO, it can potentially pay bigger benefits. What publishers need to keep in mind is a simple three-part process.

1. Select the right network

Many publishers understand that each social network has its own "personality," which affects the type of audience it attracts. Facebook is driven by shared articles and videos. LinkedIn appeals to a more professional audience. If photos are a key offering, Instagram will be important. If video content is frequent, YouTube will be a natural fit. In general, publishers need to think about the type of content they want to share and align it with the strengths of these platforms (see illustration on the following page).
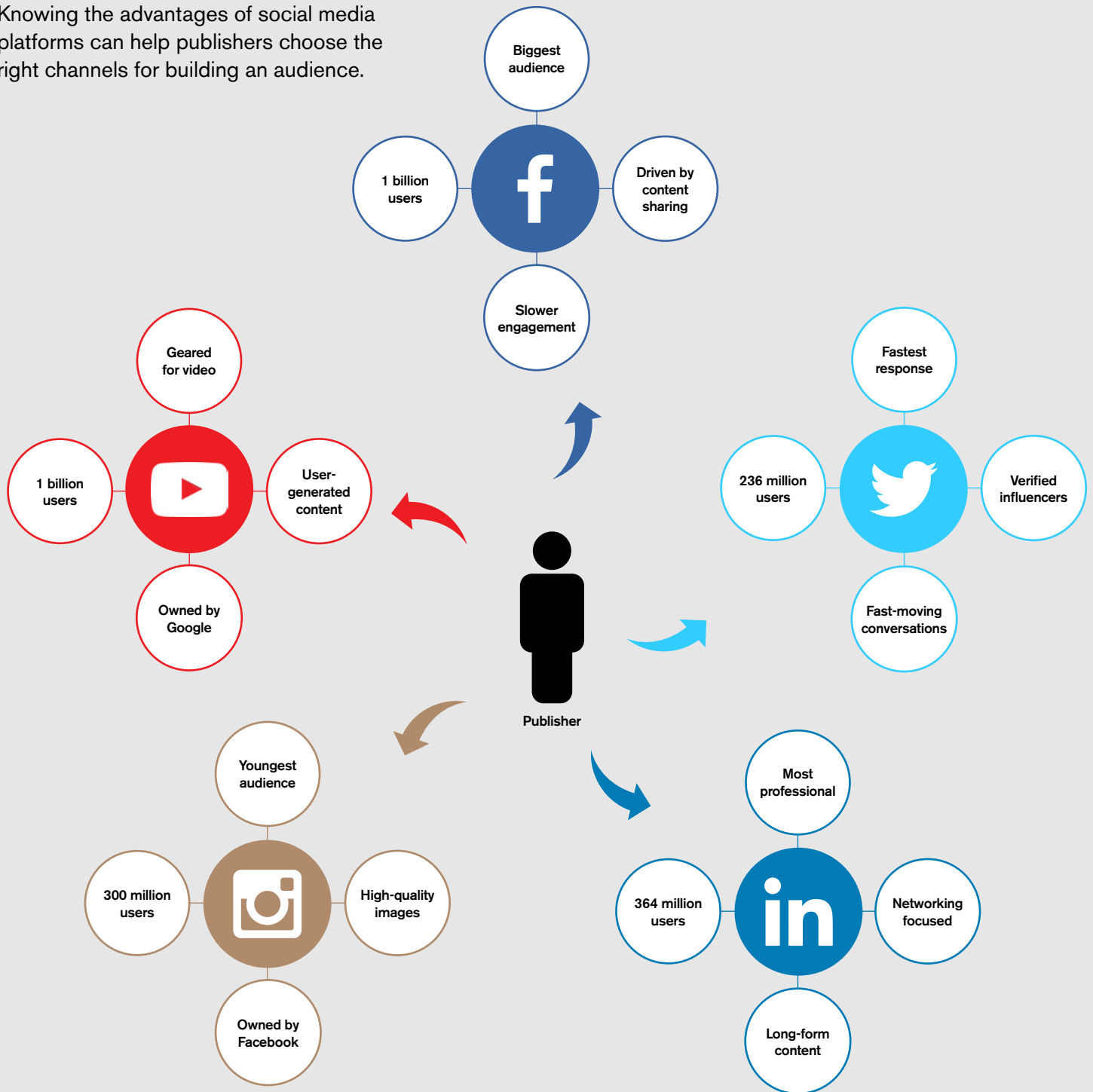
"It really depends on who the target audience is, the strengths of the publisher's content and identifying a social media network that fits both," the social media editor said. "It also depends on the publisher's goals. For example, the LinkedIn influencer program can help individuals develop large followings, which is ideal for building brand equity. But LinkedIn does not produce the same levels of referral traffic as other networks, which may not fit with a pure audience-development strategy."

Additional considerations include which networks are most popular in the local area or region (publishers can discover these using social media analytics) and how the target audience prefers to engage with content online. Again, analytics can help publishers determine whether a featured article will garner more views and shares if it is longer or shorter, includes video or not or is distributed at a certain time through one or more social media channels.

CHANNELING SOCIAL MEDIA:
HOW SOCIAL ARE YOU?

Knowing the advantages of social media platforms can help publishers choose the right channels for building an audience.

Biggest audience

1 billion users

Driven by content sharing

Slower engagement

Fastest response

236 million users

Verified influencers

Fast-moving conversations

Geared for video

1 billion users

User-generated content

Owned by Google

Publisher

Youngest audience

300 million users

High-quality images

Owned by Facebook

Most professional

364 million users

Networking focused

Long-form content

CHANNELING SOCIAL MEDIA

2. Build an audience

With a basic social media strategy in place, publishers can focus on building a core audience. The primary concern should be publishing as much high-quality content as possible, not building or promoting the publisher's brand. In a fractured media landscape, the average member of the audience cares more about what she is experiencing than where it originated online. In addition, "high-quality content" means more than a well-written story or well-produced video segment. It means content that is framed specifically for social media.

"Social media can't be an afterthought," the social media editor said. "It needs to be integrated into the publisher's strategy. It should be part of the pitch process for stories, so all stakeholders can weigh in about how a certain story should be promoted and how to amplify that promotion with other channels."

Visuals are essential for social media content. Pairing fresh content with a compelling photo or a perfect thumbnail image can make a significant difference in traffic.

"Last year, Twitter made tweets with photos appear automatically," she said. "As a result, every tweet with a photo gets three times the real estate of tweets without photos. And these tweets perform twice as well as those without a visual component. The same dynamic holds true on Facebook. Publishers need to select visuals as carefully as they do the content."

Beyond visuals, publishers need to think about the timing of scheduled social content. Most sites publish new content on the hour, making it easier for new content to get lost. Publishers may want to experiment with off-times, such as 8:07 instead of 8:00, in an effort to stand out.

Paid efforts can also produce valuable traffic gains. These include sponsored updates on LinkedIn, promoted tweets and Facebook ads. In fact, Facebook offers some of the most sophisticated options for paid traffic, giving smaller publishers the ability to target specific influencers or pay for a certain threshold of likes. While this is not a sustainable strategy, it can help publishers create a solid platform for increasing traffic organically.

Audience engagement is a critical component of audience building. Examples include rewards for social sharing, such as a contest or giveaway that requires readers to like or follow the publisher's brand to enter. Then publishers can use social media analytics, such as those from Simply Measured, Top Feed and Sysomos, to see which engagement tactics result in more social sharing.

> **It is important for publishers to understand the dynamics of engagement and how they vary by channel. More is not always better, the social media editor noted.**

"Fewer retweets by verified Twitter accounts are much more valuable than more retweets from those with fewer followers," she said. "All metrics matter, and the numbers will vary relative to the size of the publisher. But they should have a strong grasp of the difference between the total size of the audience, the rate of engagement and the rate of actual shares."

CHANNELING SOCIAL MEDIA

3. Feed the audience

With a core audience in place on social media, publishers need to continue to cultivate that audience with the content they want most.

One way is to establish a regular content "feeding schedule" and use that content to extend the concept of engagement to two-way "conversations." Publishers can produce social content that asks a question, solicits feedback or requests user-generated content (UGC), then include a simple call to action, such as "RT if you agree" or "share this with your friends" or "post a comment below."

"Two-way engagement gives the audience a strong sense of validation," the social media editor said.

"As long as the content matches the audience's expectations for tone, and the publisher is responsive to what audiences provide, these techniques can result in a wider-reaching conversation that can draw in new audience members."

Developing exclusive content for social media is another way to feed the audience. Instead of repurposing existing content for social channels, publishers can develop unique stories or videos that are the exclusive domain of the social audience. To be effective, publishers have to build up enough staff to maintain a 24/7 presence. Alternatively, publishers can use services such as HootSuite or WhoSay to schedule posts in advance and use analytics to discover when social content performs best with the target audience.

> **As long as the content matches the audience's expectations for tone, and the publisher is responsive to what audiences provide, these techniques can result in a wider-reaching conversation that can draw in new audience members.**

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PARTNERSHIPS AND PAID EFFORTS

Building an audience is not something every publisher has to do independently. Collaborating with partners, both in no-cost and paid relationships, offers a way for publishers to broaden their reach and leverage the influence of others for mutual benefit.

Partnerships

Partnerships are a simple, straightforward way for publishers to drive traffic without the cost of paid strategies. In a content partnership, one publisher offers its content to another in return for traffic back to its site when the partner's audience wants to read that content.

For example, a smaller publisher could explore a partnership with a large news portal. If successful, the publisher gains access to the portal's audience. While the content is hosted on the portal, it typically includes a link back to the publisher's site for the full piece as well as a "related features" module with links to related and trending stories from the publisher's site.

To find the right partners, publishers should explore multiple avenues, according to Brian Ernst, head of business development for Bloomberg Media.

> **As long as the two sites are strategically aligned in terms of voice and style, publishers can start by reaching out to these potential partners and seeing what they need.**

"Publishers can start with the top or most relevant content providers in their category," he said. "Keep in mind, even the largest portals and news sites may need content. What publishers need to seek out is a qualified audience that will be interested in their content and a publisher partner that is willing to experiment."

Publishers can also explore opportunities to fill gaps in other publishers' coverage. Sites that offer more generalized content, for example, can partner with those that specialize in niche coverage and vice versa. On both sides of the relationship, publishers will be interested in exchanging access to qualified leads aligned with specific content categories.

"As long as the two sites are strategically aligned in terms of voice and style, publishers can start by reaching out to these potential partners and seeing what they need," Ernst said.

PARTNERSHIPS AND PAID EFFORTS

Once a partner has been identified, there are many choices for structuring a deal that will benefit both publishers equally. Reciprocal links are a popular option because they allow two partners to expose their content to a combined audience very easily. Quid pro quo links, however, can be trickier to manage if the publishers are not the same size. If one partner drives 100,000 referrals but the other drives only 10,000, a monthly reconciliation may be needed to ensure mutual benefit. The smaller publisher, for example, could offer to pay a reasonable CPM for any traffic shortfalls to make up the difference.

Teaming up with a PR department is another path editorial teams can pursue. Like large portals, PR teams are always in need of high-quality content to pitch and promote through their networks of bloggers, thought leaders, influencers and media companies. This content will typically include a link back to the publisher's site and drive traffic by exposing the content to untapped audiences.

ANOTHER POSSIBILITY:

A publisher works directly with an author, blogger, thought leader or market influencer to bring his content to a bigger audience on the publisher's site and provide the content creator with more exposure and compensation than he would be able to achieve independently. Examples of such relationships include David Pogue and Katie Couric with Yahoo and Nate Silver with ESPN.

PARTNERSHIPS AND PAID EFFORTS

Paid strategies

Spending on audience development can be worthwhile. The two primary tactics publishers can pursue are content recommendation platforms and search engine marketing (SEM).

Content recommendation platforms are paid to promote content on websites using a pay-per-click (PPC) model. These platforms offer a great deal of flexibility, enabling publishers to choose the sites where their content is placed or commit to using a specific network of sites. Examples include Outbrain, Taboola, Contextly, nRelate, Gravity and YARPP. As long as these platforms are promoting content on sites that align with the publisher's brand and strategy, they provide an easy way to drive traffic for a predictable payment. Publishers may also seek out these platforms on an as-needed basis to meet their obligations to advertisers (if site traffic experienced natural fluctuations in the number of visitors).

SEM can be an expensive proposition, but it can be a valuable technique if the publisher's revenue model can accommodate it. With SEM, publishers bid on keywords related to certain topics. When these keywords are used, the winning bidder's content rises to the top of the rankings. Publishers can bid across a range of campaigns, ad groups and budgets to find the right fit.

"For publishers that are marketing their content alone, SEM can be expensive," said Jocelyn Lee, digital analytics and audience insights lead for Bloomberg. "But for those that use a subscription model, or those that are converting audience to a product sale, SEM can deliver positive ROI."

Working out those numbers requires publishers to check their SEM progress regularly, especially their average CPC and do a comparison of average CPC to effective CPM, or eCPM. Popular SEM platforms, such as Google AdWords, can measure average CPC, which publishers can use to calculate earnings. For example, eCPM is calculated by dividing earnings by impressions multiplied by 1,000. If a publisher earns $225 from 75,000 impressions, for example, the eCPM is $3.00.

Make the right choice

TACTIC	Search engine optimization	Social media	Partnerships	Content recommendation	Search engine marketing
PROS	Easy	Instant	Free	Simple	Reliable
CONS	Unpredictable	Time consuming	High maintenance	Less differentiation	Expensive

MEASURING RESULTS

No matter which tactics publishers use to grow an audience, measurement determines those that are worth fine-tuning and those that should be abandoned. Key performance indicators (KPIs) that publishers need to pay particular attention to include unique visitors (UV) and time spent per UV.

"The UV number indicates how far your content is reaching," said Lee. "It is a high-level KPI that helps estimate audience size. Time spent on the site can be used to estimate the degree of engagement on various pages. Is your audience spending an hour on the home page every day? Or only a couple minutes? When you see minutes per page view trending upward, that is a good sign your content is resonating. More important, it validates the quality of the content for advertisers and helps drive higher CPMs."

The importance of analytics can't be overstated. Publishers that want to drive traffic need to become familiar with Google Analytics, Comscore and other platforms. With these tools, publishers can make sense out of traffic numbers that fluctuate for many reasons— and not always in intuitive ways. The monthly news cycle can have a dramatic effect on traffic that is as unpredictable as the headlines. Seasonality can cause audience levels to dip during summer vacation. Overall, analytics help publishers choose the KPIs that align with their audience-development strategy.

"If you are doubling the amount of published content, you want to see UV rise," Lee said. "On the other hand, if your strategy is to deepen engagement with your existing audience, the UV number is not going to move. What you care about is time spent on the site. As long as you are paying attention to the right metrics for your strategy, you can chart the right course."

Specifically, publishers should try a variety of tactics for audience development and track the results precisely. Tracking needs to done across various channels and sources so publishers can understand how traffic changes throughout the hour, day, week, month and year. Relative measures, such as month-to-month traffic, are also critical for identifying which tactics are working. With this knowledge in hand, publishers can make specific adjustments (such as tweeting about every story and including a compelling visual) and measure the outcome.

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MEASURING RESULTS

More important than any of these, however, is involving the entire publishing organization in the effort to build an audience. When traffic growth is a shared responsibility among editorial, product and R&D, the work will be more effective.

"Integrating audience development across the organization requires a great deal of cooperation and communication," Lee said. "It involves an orchestrated effort to understand which stories are outperforming and why. It means coordinating social promotions. It means fine-tuning the amount of content and the timing, and having enough data to understand the results. When publishers adopt a truly integrated approach, the growth in traffic can be significant."

Content drives traffic

The common thread among all these tactics is high-quality content. While many publishers excel at producing large volumes of content across numerous categories, others need help filling gaps in coverage or adding depth and variety to certain topics. The Bloomberg Content Service provides high-quality content that publishers can rely on to attract target audiences and grow online traffic.

PHOTOS

VIDEO
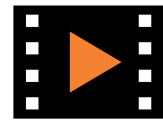
ARTICLES

DATA

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Bloomberg Content Service is a leading provider of global business and finance video, news, photos and data for more than 1,000 media outlets in 60+ countries.

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