



Why Branded Content Fits This Advertising Moment

Michelle Vielma and Julie Campbell

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About

About the authors



Michelle Vielma is vice president of digital for Southern California News Group and also heads the company's Skyline division. Taking a 360o approach, Skyline encompasses traditional media, digital media, social, and experiential opportunities for advertisers. The Skyline division is also part of the Branded Content Project for Local Media Association, Local Media Consortium, and Facebook Journalism Project. Michelle can be reached at mvielma@skyline.studio.



Julia Campbell is a branded content project manager and innovative project manager and also leads a combined initiative focused on branded content for the Local Media Association, Local Media Consortium, and the Facebook Journalism Project. Campbell is organising an alpha group of 35 publishers to test out promising business models with the ultimate goal of reporting back to the industry and providing sales collateral and playbooks that publishers can use to sell in their local markets. Julia can be reached at julia.campbell@localmedia.org.



About the International News Media Association

(INMA) The **International News Media Association (INMA)** is a global community of market-leading news media companies reinventing how they engage audiences and grow revenue in a multi-media environment. The INMA community consists of nearly 15,000+ members at 850+ news media companies in 70 countries. Headquartered in Dallas, INMA has offices in Antwerp, New Delhi, and San Salvador. Celebrating its 90th anniversary, INMA is the news media industry's foremost ideas-sharing network with members connected via conferences, reports, Webinars, virtual meetings, and an unparalleled archive of best practices.

Executive summary

Branded content is a strong strategy for today's COVID-influenced market and for consumers influenced by viral videos, on-demand entertainment, and unique experiences.

A deep look at research and trends by the Local Media Association and Local Media Consortium's first Branded Content Project digs into ways local media organisations in the United States approach and profit from sponsored campaigns. The study drew on findings from 40 diverse local news organisations, finding high-profit margins, high renewal rates, and increasing revenue potential. The Project started with an open call for applications to be part of its first round. The research shared in this report pulls from the application responses of those participants. The Project found 30% of local U.S. publishers reported margins better than 30%, and 24% reported client retention rates of more than 80%.

"Why Branded Content Fits This Advertising Moment" draws on this research plus case studies from eight news media companies around the world to discuss how news media companies can:

- Leverage the value of storytelling, with case studies from LNP Media and Newsday in the United States.
- Build awareness and increase brand loyalty, with case studies from Grupo RBS in Brazil and ABP in India.
- Capitalise on influencers and social media, with case studies from News Corp in Australia and Ringier Axel Springer in Poland.

- Create conversion tactics and measure success, with case studies from Skyline in the United States and South China Morning Post in Hong Kong.

Research and case study performance show branded content can create trust and lucrative relationships between media publishers, advertisers, and audiences when it's done with an authentic voice, across multiple platforms, and backed by data. One of many interesting tidbits from the report: Influencer marketing is growing faster than digital advertising.

Branded content is relational — just like a publisher's successful interaction with its audience and its advertisers. It isn't new, but the timing may be perfect for it to be a successful and lucrative bridge to connect all three. ■

Introduction

Branded content.

It involves articles, videos, podcasts, and even live elements that bring relevant value to a reader.

It entertains, it teaches, it inspires.

It grabs the attention of today's consumer and drives better brand engagement returns than standard content.

And it's not advertising in the way most people think of advertising in terms of banner ads, commercials, and social media ads.

Branded content is not a new concept. It has just become more popular as it has expanded into podcasts, videos, Web series, articles, and even virtual reality. It's even more imperative in a COVID-19 world to educate and inform consumers about the value of your products, services, and solutions.

We're living in an era in which more people than ever before skip ads, block banners, and ignore traditional advertising. Companies are challenged to rethink how they get their message across to consumers. Branded content is a strategy well designed for this time, which is why the Branded Content Project came about.

According to Brand Fabrik, a provider of industry insight for today's marketers, branded content is born from a generation obsessed with viral videos, on-demand entertainment, and unique experiences. Branded content falls in line by

representing a new approach to advertising. From sponsored pieces in magazines to podcasts, live video, and more, this new kind of content strategy is so innovative, exciting, and entertaining that customers seek it out and share it with practically no prompting at all.

The message is subtle — almost invisible.

It's a way for companies to engage with their audience, improve their reputation, and cultivate new relationships. Branded content's messaging and tone as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are uniquely important. The pandemic has taught marketers that empathy towards consumers' altered lives needs to be incorporated. Consumers have changed their consumption patterns, lifestyles, and expectations. A combination of COVID-19 illnesses, high unemployment rates, reduced wages, work-from-home, and distance learning has led many marketers to replace sales-focused messaging with a "We're all in this together" approach. Marketers are choosing to build relationships and trust with consumers, as well as show leadership in their industries, hoping to build long-term brand loyalty.

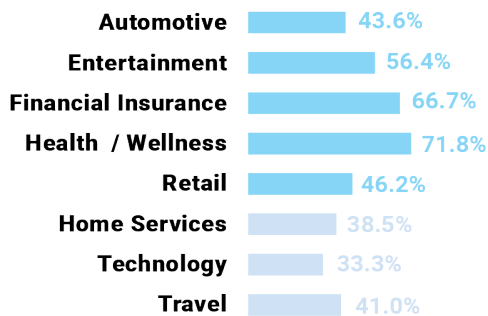
The results point to industry-wide revenue growth, high profit margins, high renewal rates, and increasing revenue potential, so much so that branded content annual revenue totals for local publishers in the United States in 2018 were nearly evenly split with over 35% hitting at least US\$500,000 and 17% over US\$1 million.

Many of the organisations are also in the introductory steps with their revenue efforts, with over 20% of respondents noting branded content revenue at just a few thousand dollars. For many, growth is happening quickly at the local level.

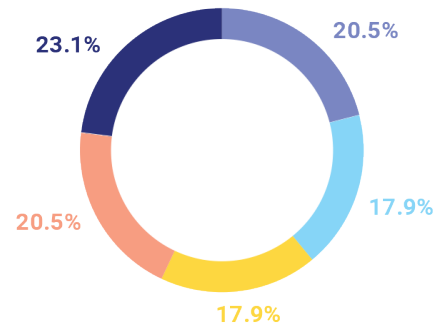
According to the Local Media Consortium and the Local Media Association, both based in the United States, the use of branded content reported:

- Profit margins are strong across the board on branded content initiatives. Over 30% report margins of 50% or better and 72% have margins better than 21%.
- Client retention rates are strong for branded content initiatives. Over 24% have a retention rate that reaches past 80% and another 24% cross the 50% mark. With more media organisations looking for initiatives that are sustainable for the long term, branded content is a clear choice for many moving toward products that renew year over year.

What categories or types of business participate in your initiative?



How much revenue did your organisation generate through branded content programs in 2018?



Responses gathered from 40 news media publishers in the United States found as consumers continue avoiding traditional marketing, branded content has become more popular. Source: The Branded Content Project

- With one-third of respondents reporting year-over-year margins over 50% and one-quarter seeing client retention rates over 80%, this data suggests that that when sold to businesses that need to educate or inform local audiences, branded content can be a successful way to increase and diversify revenues.

As consumers continue to avoid traditional marketing, Brand Fabrik found branded content will inevitably grow more popular. Readers find standard ads annoying or uninteresting, but a branded content strategy will offer useful and exciting information that gives an audience something entertaining to watch.

Branded content also gives companies the opportunity to maintain the credibility and trust they normally lose when a customer realises they were sold a product. It sells an experience, a relationship, and in return, gains a lifetime of loyalty.

As Molly DeWolf Swenson of AdWeek explained: "If a story is moving, no one is going to care that it's brought to you by a brand. Rather, they're going to be happy the brand brought it to them."

Branded content works for both traditional and non-traditional advertisers. Business categories fall into industries that often need to educate or inform the audience.

The top five categories include:

1. Health and wellness
2. Financial and insurance
3. Entertainment
4. Retail
5. Automotive

Non-traditional advertisers have also found success with branded content strategies. For example, political advertisers can use branded content to offer thought leaders a forum to engage with an audience with important policy issues such as immigration, healthcare, and education.

Branded content offers a unique opportunity to use a larger canvas to tell clients' stories and support the story with additional assets such as slideshows, infographics, and videos. ■

Leveraging the value of storytelling

A. The art of storytelling in the digital age

Stories are the oldest form of exchanging information, but they have meaning beyond entertainment value.

When implemented effectively, advertisers have the ability to distribute their information in a strategic way, creating articles that bring a wealth of valuable and relevant content that conveys purpose and builds audience engagement. That all leads to consumer trust of a brand.

In today's busy digital marketplace, forms of advertising have evolved. The key is grabbing the attention of today's consumer — in new and innovative ways — and driving real engagement through content that makes it easier for people to resonate with, consume, and share with others.

Research shows that readers want this form of information as they believe the content is more consumer-focused. Since the message isn't a sales pitch, it creates trust between the brand and the consumer.

Stackla.com is an international visual content engine that helps marketers manage and display content. In 2018, the company conducted a survey, "Bridging the Gap: Consumer & Marketing Perspectives on Content in the Digital Age," among 1,590 consumers and 150 B2C marketers from the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia to understand the types of content consumers create, reference, and are influenced by across an array of buying experiences.

90%

Percent of consumers who say authenticity is important when choosing brands

50%

Percent of consumers who think fewer than half of brands create authentic content

Source: Stackla

The survey analysed industries from travel and dining to automotive and consumer packaged goods (CPG), while simultaneously exploring the viewpoint of marketers who create content experiences for consumer. Stackla found 90% of consumers say authenticity is important when deciding what brands they like and support, and more than half of consumers think fewer than 50% of brands create content that resonates as authentic.

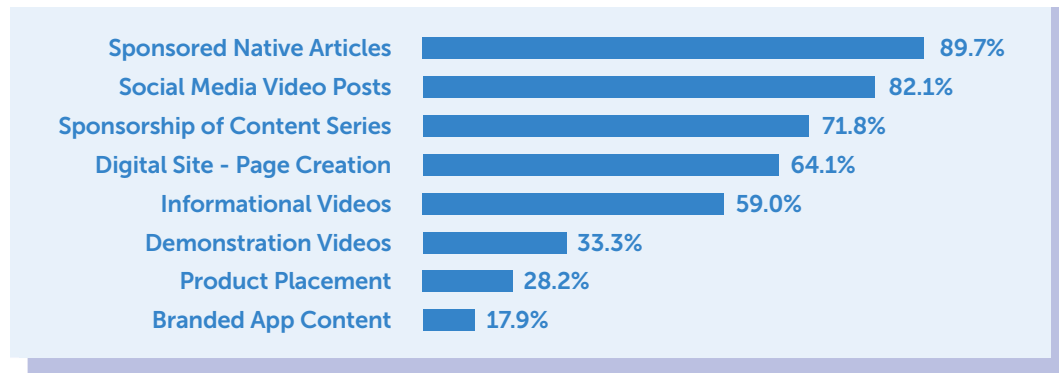
Through premium advertising mechanisms, there are new forms of media that create ways for clients to express messaging that lead to reader consumption. This includes an array of methods and resources in the fast-growing areas of branded content, custom content, influencer marketing, social media, and creative services.

Communicating the brand's purpose and amplifying what the audience wants to hear are two of the many tangible benefits provided to advertisers.

Branded and custom content solutions are tailored for each advertiser. While this may be time-consuming, the work pays off. When skillfully created, clients see positive results.

Quality branded content costs money and is more difficult to create than a banner ad or a Facebook post. It is critical for a sales team to completely understand and explain to their clients the absolute need for branded content. If it's done right, clients will express their thanks for implementing branded content as a tactic.

What categories or types of businesses participate in your initiative?



Responses gathered from 40 news media publishers in the United States found branded content campaigns include all of the above, but sponsored native articles and social media videos are the most popular.
Source: Branded Content Project

Branded content is the fastest way to amplify a message and drive sales. If sales teams and clients see how valuable great branded content can be, it pays off for everyone.

When asked about the pieces of content created for advertisers, sponsored native articles are the most common among respondents to the Branded Content Project survey, with social posts/videos in second place.

The top five elements of a branded content campaign:

1. Sponsored native articles
2. Social media videos/posts
3. Sponsorship of content series
4. Digital site/page creation
5. Informational videos

Success with branded content means cross-platform distribution. This is encouraged through the use of multiple platforms.

The ability to offer advertisers exposure for their branded content stories across a full scope of platforms — from broadcast and OTT to Web sites to mobile and apps to social channels — combined with a data-driven approach to determining content and categories yields a win for advertisers.

B. LNP Media (United States)

Balance Magazine

LNP Media in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, USA, wanted to create something that would provide the business owners in Lancaster County with a unique platform to reach readers. Instead of simply creating ads that told readers who these businesses are, LNP Media created a beautifully designed platform, Balance Magazine, to explain who these businesses are, why they are experts at what they do, and why it is so important to support them.

LNP had often heard from businesses that, while the newspaper's sizeable circulation was attractive to them, newspaper's didn't fit with their brand. And so the news media company created Balance, a magazine that answered all of the objections and



LNP created Balance Magazine to attract businesses that weren't a good fit for traditional newspaper advertising.

checked the boxes advertisers were looking for.

This branded content magazine features a glossy, high-end approach that includes stunning on-site photography and relatable stories about the county's businesses and the people who run them.

With its first two editions, Balance Magazine immediately attracted 14 advertisers who had either never advertised with LNP before or who had not been an advertising customer for one or more years. The advertisers found it enticing enough to want to test the product, and the response from advertisers has been overwhelmingly positive.

"This is an outstanding piece of work with incredible content and well thought out placement and photography. I am so happy to be a part of this publication," said Kathy Frey Turkeltaub, owner of Festoon Boutique.

Current advertisers were also excited about this product. Two-thirds of the advertisers in the first two editions of the magazine were current advertisers. The magazine also accounted for an incremental 10% increase in ad sales to the monthly advertising budget and the revenue generated from the publication has far exceeded original expectations.

C. Newsday (United States)

To help smaller local advertisers benefit from the power of branded content, Newsday's custom content studio, Brand360, developed budget-friendly and turnkey special features that align category-specific brands with relevant content.

These themed features, which are placed in the center spread of Newsday's Main News print section, are written and designed entirely by Newsday Brand360's in-house studio and offer informative and entertaining content that resonates with Newsday readers. Stories are designed to allow marketers to effectively promote their brand throughout the story, and each section includes promotional messages on Newsday's market-exclusive "Pop-Up" banners. These banners are high-impact advertising units that extend an inch above the paper.

The idea behind this initiative was to develop turnkey, budget-friendly and high-impact custom content special advertising features to retain and/or acquire print advertisers. It also was a way to provide smaller advertisers with increased brand

visibility and awareness and to allow them to position their brand as thought leaders in their field.

However, it also was an effective way to provide a new revenue source and an effective turnkey programme for Newsday's advertising sales team and to encourage participating brands to complement the special features with a strong digital media plan on Newsday.com.

It also provided a supplement to Newsday's niche publications and special sections schedule, with themed pop-up sections covering topics in the areas of education, health, career recruitment, and family.

The 11 pop-up special features generated impressive results for both Newsday and the participating advertisers. Incremental revenue was nearly US\$200,000 and, more importantly, the programme retained several advertisers and brought in new clients.

Most of the advertisers that participated in one or more of the special features supplemented their print advertising with a Newsday.com digital media plan, and most have budgeted the special features into their 2020 print advertising budgets. ■

NEWSDAY MEDIA GROUP

BEST IDEA TO ACQUIRE/RETAIN ADVERTISING CUSTOMERS

Pull-Out Pop-Up Special Features

OBJECTIVES

- **Develop** turnkey, budget-friendly and high-impact custom content special advertising features to retain and/or acquire print advertisers
- **Increase** brand visibility and awareness; position brands as thought leaders in their field
- **Supplement** Newsday's niche publications and special sections schedule
- **Provide** a new revenue source and an effective turn-key program for Newsday's Advertising Sales team
- **Encourage** participating brands to complement the special features with a strong digital media plan on Newsday.com



Click image to view feature

NEWSDAY MEDIA GROUP

Special pull-out pop-up features allowed Newsday to help smaller advertisers extend their reach.

Building awareness and increasing brand loyalty

A. How content defines a brand

It's no surprise that people crave stories.

Consumers want content to be driven by a strong narrative. The more unique experience clients can provide through digital storytelling, the more intimate connection clients drive for brand awareness, user engagement, and ultimately their business.

Such strategic messaging may be revitalised through the art of branded content. According to a 2016 report from Nielsen, brand recall is 86% in the United States for branded content compared to 65% for regular ads.

The purpose of branded content also matters to consumers when they are in the market to make a purchase, according to marketing firm Edelman. Communicating the brand's purpose is easier with branded content than with traditional advertising. Edelman pointed to an additional key insight, explaining that while valuable online content still garners heavy attention, 82% of Americans ignore online ads. This signals why it's time to do something that will get people's attention and keep it.

Those who are creating great branded content are getting results.

Branded content, created and written in the voice of content writers and featured or sponsored by an advertiser, utilises the voice or perspective of the brand. To further the effectiveness of branded content, trusted publishers matter as they help build and solidify trust in a brand.

Brand recall for branded content vs display ads



In the U.S., brand recall is 86% for branded content compared to 65% for regular ads. Source: Nielsen

A piece of sponsored content created by a trusted source is a stronger alternative, as this makes a brand appear more credible, memorable, and, most importantly, trustworthy. When it comes to branded or sponsored content, trust is a major factor that engages potential customers. In fact, Nielsen reported four years ago that when marketers sponsor content from a trusted publisher, they see a 50% higher brand lift than marketers who create their own content.

Partnering with publishers gives brands access to pre-existing formats, known personalities, and loyal audiences where trust already has been established.

To further help drive awareness and conversion, brands may access organic social posts on editorial Facebook and Instagram handles. Sponsored social campaigns are dedicated to an advertiser and its current brand efforts. This first-to-market social alignment drives visitation among heavily engaged readers through giveaway contests, custom videos, influencer programmes, as well as sponsored Facebook and Instagram posts and stories.

Such branded content entertains people, educates them, and results in better brand engagement returns. Traditional advertising does not have the same outcome.

"Content is king." The phrase rings true as creating content for a company not only generates interest in the brand, but also provides genuinely valuable information to an audience.

Custom content, written in the voice of the advertiser, allows a company to build trust, connect, and educate its customers, all while telling its story about who it is as a company.

Custom content practices have greatly expanded with the use of blogs, video, infographics, and other materials. That includes non-traditional and unique advertising formats that follow the brand style and voice of the advertiser.

For example, Skyline's product offerings include a native e-mail newsletter that allows client brands the ability to position their content alongside SCNG's (Southern California News Group) content headlines, admail (where an advertiser can send their message to an SCNG opt-in list), sponsored social posts, and creation of unique or non-traditional premium-priced advertising units. Skyline is a division of Southern California News Group created to fulfill online and offline marketing needs through both traditional and digital media.

Custom advertorial sections also present an effective marketing tool. The custom publishing and digital edition raise awareness engagement through



Disneyland's Resort Reporter is a monthly custom publishing and digital solution by Skyline that drives employee education through storytelling.

several owned and operated channels like the OCRegister.com Web site, video distribution, and Facebook.

“Resort Reporter,” a monthly insert by the Disneyland Resort, is a custom publishing and digital solution that drives community and stakeholder outreach through deep storytelling, while online sponsored ads on OCRegister.com enhance awareness of Disneyland Resort as a good corporate citizen.

Such highly customised content provides tremendous results, since the bespoke content solution allows a client’s story to be told using examples and language that speaks to Southern California News Group’s audience while staying true to the client’s brand. Online audiences are reading, viewing, and sharing custom content as valuable content and they become engrossed in the story, finding an emotional connection and consider how the content topic could impact their lives.

Around the world, news organisations are taking advantage of the incredible journalistic talent they have to broaden their experience into expert storytelling. In 2018, the Native Advertising Institute conducted an interview with Joanna Carrigan, head of branded content for News UK (the British publisher of The Sun, The Times, and The Sunday Times), to gain insight on how their publications are growing in the branded content space.

Carrigan shared how the News UK team convinces brands to invest time, creativity, and budgets in native advertising. A powerful tool in their kit is sharing successful case studies and being able to demonstrate success for a wide range of clients while hitting a broad spectrum of performance KPIs. It’s hugely important, especially if you’re at the start of becoming a branded content outfit, to have a robust content strategy within the pitch — being able to show your clients in an undeniable way why you know this piece of content will work with your audience and theirs, Carrigan explained.

The platform the branded content is being consumed on is also important. Integrated video is now a top priority and has an additional bonus as News UK has an in-house video production unit. Mobile is also essential as 92% of News UK’s audience use the platform and require a straight-to-the-point approach, as attention span of mobile consumers is short. To ensure content is being viewed as intended, daily optimisation is necessary to tweak it.


For example, if the content is destined for social, show through trend analysis and social listening that these topics are resonating and likely to achieve the desired audience engagement. Having an unbreakable thread from the top to the bottom of a campaign is key to success.

B. Grupo RBS (Brazil)

When Grupo RBS in Brazil needed to introduce their new client, Warren, they knew a traditional advertising approach wouldn't be enough. Warren, a digital investment platform, challenged what people traditionally think of investing. So to increase brand awareness and show just how different Warren's approach is, Grupo RBS created an exclusive video series that showcased the company's unique approach.

The video series, Prometendo Mundos e Fundos (Promising Worlds and Investment Funds), was shared through Grupo RBS' main online channel, GaúchaZH, and was also available on two radio stations — Atlântida and Gaúcha. Bringing in Brazilian journalist Luciano Potter as its anchor, the video used Warren's content presented in a fresh format to explain the products and services offered by the company.


Content



PROMETENDO MUNDO E FUNDOS

Promising Worlds and Investment Funds

The series was anchored by Luciano Potter. Potter is a journalist who works in both entertainment and news areas, and has more than 300 thousand followers on Instagram. Therefore, Potter was able to approach formal matters such as investments in a more relaxed way targeting the younger audience.

**300 mil**
followers

Grupo RBS used an innovative video series featuring a trusted journalist to introduce its new financial client, Warren.

With this Web series, listeners were encouraged to change the way they use their money: investing instead of saving. Potter, a journalist who works in both entertainment and news areas and has more than 300,000 followers on Instagram, was able to approach formal matters such as investments in a more relaxed way, targeting the younger audience.

Using different formats, the programme spoke about investment in a simple way, addressing the main doubts, concerns, and issues to encourage the public to invest with Warren.

The series was divided into two seasons, bringing the experience of new investors of the platform as content. To intensify Warren's content to the public, radio spots were also produced containing quick investment tips that were broadcasted by both radio outlets (Atlântida and Gaúcha).

This solution created an organic way to advertise Warren to its target market. Having a digital influencer as an ambassador and using Grupo RBS' channels, it quickly established confidence and trust within the target audience.

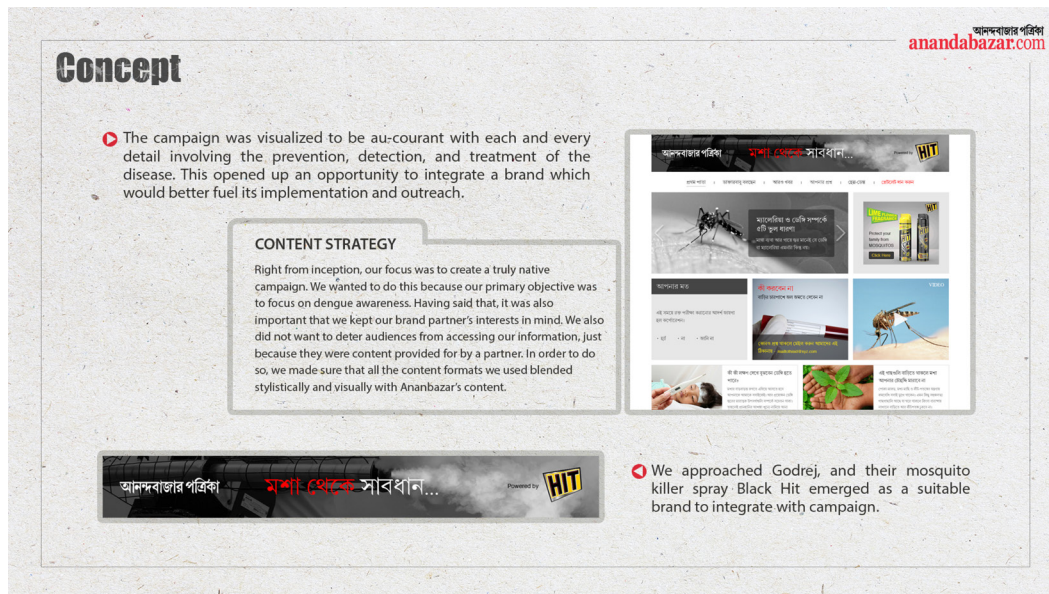
The result was a video series that covered several investment strategies endorsed by an influencer and Grupo RBS. The videos had more than 10,000 views and the project reached more than 50,000 people.

C. ABP (India)

As the most widely read Bengali daily in India, Aandabazar is a respected and trusted media institution. Following a major dengue outbreak in West Bengal in 2017, the state has experienced an annual recurrence that has put some 390 million people around the world at risk.

In 2017, Aandabazar ran its own campaign to spread awareness about this deadly disease, using articles, infographics, expert write-ups, and offering tips and tricks. Aandabazar also partnered with the mosquito and pest control company Godrej HIT to launch a platelet donation drive. The following year, they again worked with Godrej HIT on simple banner campaigns.

When cases rose significantly in 2019, Aandabazar approached Godrej about partnering on a branded content campaign that would alert readers to the dangers of dengue. Since Godrej's Black HIT spray was effective at killing



Aandabazar's branded content campaign with Godrej HIT educated readers about prevention of dengue and included survivors' stories and doctors' advice.

mosquitoes, they made the perfect partner for building a campaign of awareness, prevention, and treatment.

The campaign, called Sushtotar Jonyo (For the wellness for all), sought to educate customers in an original and innovative way.

Aware of the skepticism that can accompany a brand with economic interests in the outcome, Aandabazar was careful to create content that was authentic, meaningful, and helpful. They created a dedicated microsite for Godrej to host a range of articles that included doctors' advice, preventative measures, awareness, myth-busting, remedies, and public utility information.

In addition to that content, they created video testimonials featuring real people who had survived the disease. These compelling, first-person stories ran as Godrej ad spots on the Aandabazar homepage and were created to look like other Aandabazar videos.

The campaign also was active on social media, with attention paid to ensuring the posts looked like regular Aandabazar posts.

The results of this branded content campaign exceeded expectations. The innovation in different types of content was effective in engaging audiences, and it registered a CTR that was 2.83 times higher than its benchmark goal. Godrej HIT was extremely pleased with the results, as the campaign was high-impact, cost effective, and well received. ■

Capitalising on influencers and social media

A. Social platforms as solutions

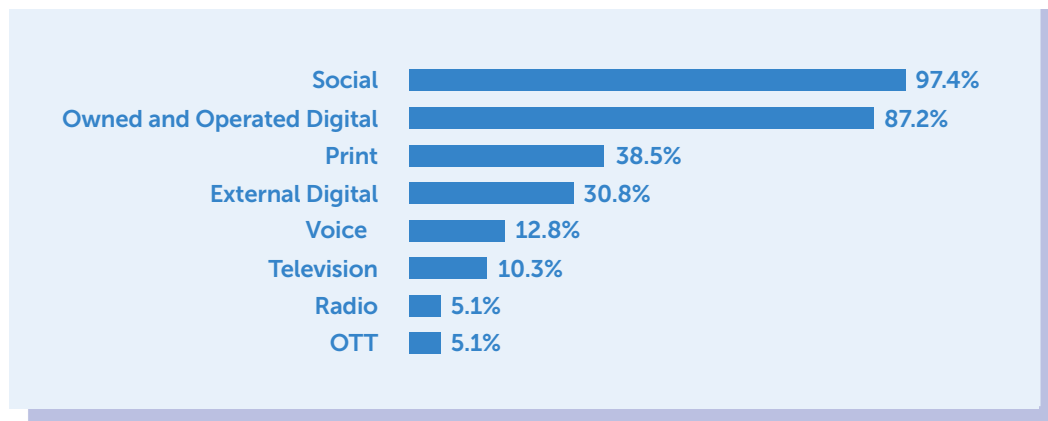
As far as what platforms are included in sales packaging for branded content initiatives, social and owned and operated digital dominate the space. Nearly all respondents reported using some sort of social platforms for advertisers. Traditional platforms like print and television are represented, but digital and social are used by most. Emerging platforms such as voice and over-the-top (OTT) media services are still just that — emerging but significant.

As social media has become a primary channel for brands to engage with their most loyal digital audiences, modern consumers are forced to identify the sources of information and inspiration they can trust. These consumers are turning to social influencers as a way to identify products, services, and travel destinations that resonate with their unique lifestyles.

To begin, it's important to note how consumers view the concept of an influencer. In research conducted in 2017 by Olapic, an influencer is someone:

- With 10,000+ followers.
- Brands engage with to help promote their products/services/messages.
- Who shares information about products they love.
- Who is an expert in their field.

What platforms are you using as part of your initiative?



Responses gathered from 40 news media publishers in the United States found social and owned-and-operated digital are the two most commonly used platforms in branded content initiatives. Source: Branded Content Project

The research states that across the world, “authenticity” is the main reason those surveyed choose to trust influencers online. Additionally, personalisation is critical, with 66% of respondents citing a need for an influencer’s content to be relevant to their unique needs. With 80% of consumers making purchases recommended by an influencer, an active tactic to include in company social media initiatives is the use of influencer marketing.

On average, across platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and Pinterest, respondents said they have considered a purchase after seeing an influencer post about a relevant product or service.

Consumers align with influencers that match their lifestyle choices and personal values. With this form of meaningful connection, influencer marketing is one of the top ways to quickly build a company’s brand online, raise awareness among the target audience, and place content directly in front of new viewers.

Influencers already have established relationships and cultivated trust and credibility with their fans.

By putting the company’s message in front of an actively engaged audience, the company will soon gain attention and expand its reach and positioning online: 66%

of consumers who follow influencers share interesting and different content, and 50% refer a friend to a brand or product, according to the 2019 Influencer Marketing Global Survey Consumers.

To maximise the influencer strategy, one method is to launch and curate unique personas who can influence the purchase decisions of its followers. Each influencer offers a distinct voice and area of expertise. Advertisers have the ability to engage with influencers to promote their brands or service to their followers, with the ability to create and post content on a daily basis.

The first step is identifying a curated selection of opted-in influencers who match the brand's image. The second step is reaching the desired audience through multiple platforms of social media to include Instagram, YouTube, and blogs.

The audience growth strategy is further developed by placing content in front of social users who already are interested in a company's niche. Guest posting, boosted posts, contests, and viral content will all be deployed to build followers and solve problems, educate, and inspire a company's intended audience.

Consumers who follow influencers



Influencers can boost a brand's power because a significant portion of followers share the content with others, and half will refer a friend to a brand or product. Source: 2019 Influencer Marketing Global Survey Consumers

As influencers become more plentiful and proven, brand dollars have flooded into the space. Brands are set to spend up to US\$15 billion on influencer marketing by 2022, per Business Insider Intelligence estimates based on Mediakix data.

Across the world, branded content based on data is raising the bar for success in native advertising. David Landes is a Stockholm-based industry expert on creating relevant content in digital channels and native advertising. As head of native advertising at The Local, a pan-European digital news publisher based in Stockholm, Landes explained: “What’s going to help raise the bar for native is learning how to tell stories with all the data that we create and that is created on digital platforms — both for how content is produced and distributed, and the kind of feedback and relationship that we can have with our advertisers,”

Access and interpretation of data is important in branded advertising, as a publisher can learn from the data what readers respond to and what they don’t. In an interview with Johanne Eliasson for the Native Advertising Institute, Landes continued: “We use a lot of data from our editorial side to keep track of what our audience is interested in. So it’s not only looking at data for how our campaigns perform, but it’s also looking at our channel overall. What is moving our readers? Where are their interests? What kind of inspiring stories, and new angles, and ideas, and pitches can we come to our clients with, based on what we know our readers are already interested in? It is using the data to connect readers and the advertisers. And we become that sort of that bridge.”

B. News Corp Australia

When Samsung was ready to roll out the launch of its first foldable phone, the Samsung Galaxy Fold, News Corp Australia turned to the country’s leading fashion and lifestyle brands — Vogue Australia and GQ Australia — to help attract a luxury audience.

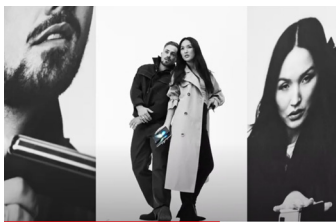
Working in partnership with Vogue, GQ, Samsung, and Starcom, News Corp unveiled a truly unique approach designed to build interest in and awareness of the new Galaxy Fold. Calling on top talent like fashion designer Nicole Warne and Stranger Things star Dacre Montgomery, the campaign immediately held the attention of its intended audience.

During a photo shoot for the print campaign, the team created a “Behind the Scenes” video that became part of a teaser for the campaign. That content, called Behind the Fold, immediately aroused interest about what was to come. The still images were used in an eight-page spread for Vogue and a two-page spread for GQ, and both brands created display banners to be run on their sites along with branded content galleries.

The folding motif was a common theme throughout the video and the ads, from an origami paper crane to the visuals of someone folding materials.

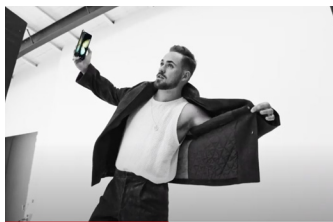
Next, the campaign launched Vogue and GQ’s Immersive Galleries, which featured imagery, video, and content that was directed, shot, and styled by the two fashion publications. Those galleries and videos were housed on vogue.com.au and gq.com.au and were amplified across social media. In addition, native articles and editorial posts on social media also supported the campaign.

Video highlights from the Samsung Galaxy “Into the Fold” campaign



Video #1: Behind The Fold with Dacre and Nicole – Vogue & GQ

views 1,482,474



Video #2: Into The Fold Starring Dacre Montgomery - GQ

views 245,285



Video #2: Into The Fold Starring Nicole Warne - Vogue

views 297,356

Total video views: 2,025,115 *(across three videos)*

Page views: 252,682 page views *(across the campaign)*

Social reach: 3,044,727 social reach *(across the campaign)*

Social impressions: 4,546,838 social impressions *(across the campaign)*

Display impressions: 1,656,811 display impressions *(across the campaign)*

The News Prestige network, Vogue, and GQ worked in partnership with Samsung and Starcom to develop, plan, and execute this truly unique and immersive project. By creating this innovative content, they helped the brand find its position as a leader in style and luxury, and were able to build awareness for the Galaxy Fold. At the same time, the campaign increased sales and consumer loyalty, ultimately helping the brand become aspirational and engaged.

By creating immersive experiences, innovative digital and social content, and long-form print features, they established reader connection and inspiration through meaningful content experiences, ultimately driving ongoing consumer conversion for Samsung.

The pinnacle of the campaign has been the reach and coverage of all video content, with Vogue and GQ's Behind The Fold video in particular. The "Behind The Fold" video has received 1,482,474 video views and a social reach of 1,854,014, making it the highest performing video on record for Vogue and GQ.

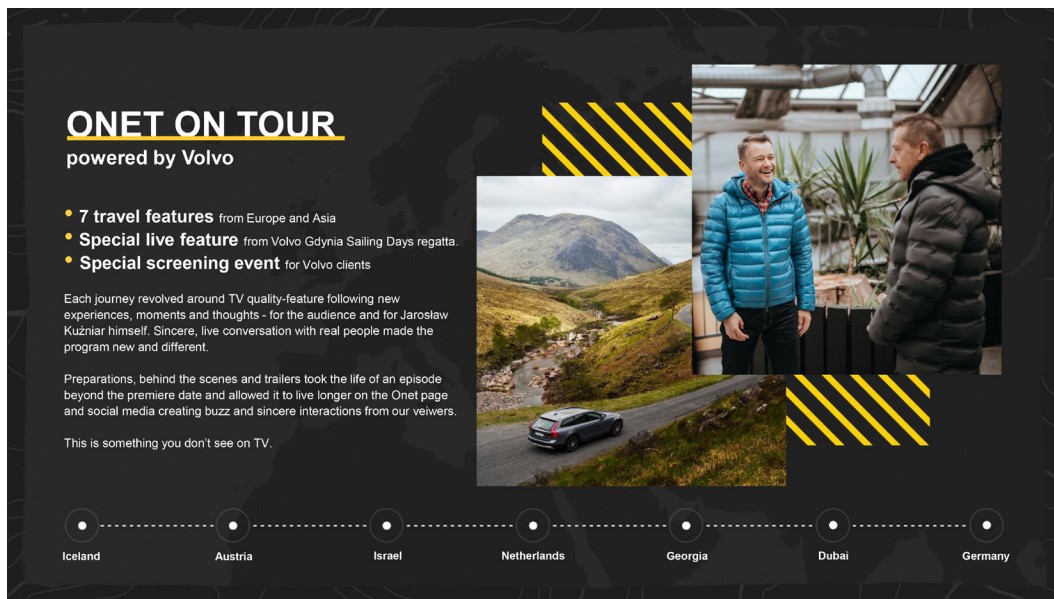
C. Ringier Axel Springer Poland (Poland)

The Volvo name is synonymous with quality and safety. This is reflected in brand communication efforts that avoid technical aspects and features of cars, focusing on being close to human needs and nature (not the machine). This has been an effective approach, evidenced by the fact that Volvo has enjoyed growing sales since 2005.

However, one challenge still remains: The average age of a Volvo customer is 47. Volvo wanted to create a campaign that built premium brand awareness with younger clients between the ages of 25 and 44. In addition to the overriding objective of achieving maximum reach in this age group, Volvo also wanted to:

- Increase spontaneous awareness of the Volvo brand.
- Build engagement in the specific target group.

Ringier Axel Springer in Poland created the "Onet On Tour" powered by Volvo video campaign, which told intriguing, real-world travel stories through the eyes of the young people living those stories. Well-known Polish journalist and influencer Jaroslaw Kuzniar became the face of the series, leading viewers on a journey to six countries around the world — all powered by Volvo.



The Onet on Tour powered by Volvo campaign gave Volvo a discreet but continuous presence amongst its target audience.

A special live programme with Volvo Gdynia Sailing Days and an exclusive live show for Volvo customers featuring Kuzniar were among the features of the campaign. Throughout filming of the series, video was capturing what was happening behind the scenes as well.

Each video premiered on the Onet home page and Facebook page, but distribution also hinged on video platforms throughout the social media ecosystem, including Kuzniar's well-followed social channels.

Volvo's presence was discreet but continuous, including native registrations offering test drives and social media hashtags.

This unique content marketing project and the premium influencer engagement led to exceptional results, meeting or exceeding original objectives.

Nearly 1.3 million unique users in the core target group and over 2.6 million overall* participated in the campaign, which enjoyed nearly 22.5 million video views**.

Onet on Tour also was the most popular format watched in autumn and spring flights of Onet.pl programming.

The campaign also was successful in building engagement in the target group, with an average visit time of more than 15 minute on onetontour.pl native site (per Google Analytics) and an average watch time of nearly 20 minutes on full-branded content episodes (per Ringier Axel Springer Poland). ■

Conversion tactics and measuring success

A. Discovering branded content's secret sauce

The creation of compelling content translates to strong conversion statistics.

Not all branded content is equal. Nielsen Holdings found there are certain qualities in effective branded content. These are: a central personality, a unique concept, and connection with the audience. It also is important for the style of content to be a good fit for the brand.

Research from Key Difference Media shows 78% of consumers believe that companies providing custom content build long-term relationships. Content improves SEO results as search engines reward Web sites that continually update content with fresh, in-depth articles that answer the search intent.

This takes a keen understanding of the recipient of a given story. With a team of experienced writers, editors, designers, photographers, videographers, and social media specialists excelling in branded content marketing strategies, strategic messaging will lead to increased traffic, long-term relationships, and further trust among consumers.

With consumers less interested in sales promises, readers strive to invest in a brand's narrative or story. A recent study suggests that by telling a brand story well, companies have the power to increase the value of a product or service by more than 20 times.

To do so, companies need a host of mediums that share a compelling brand story that engages and influences customers.

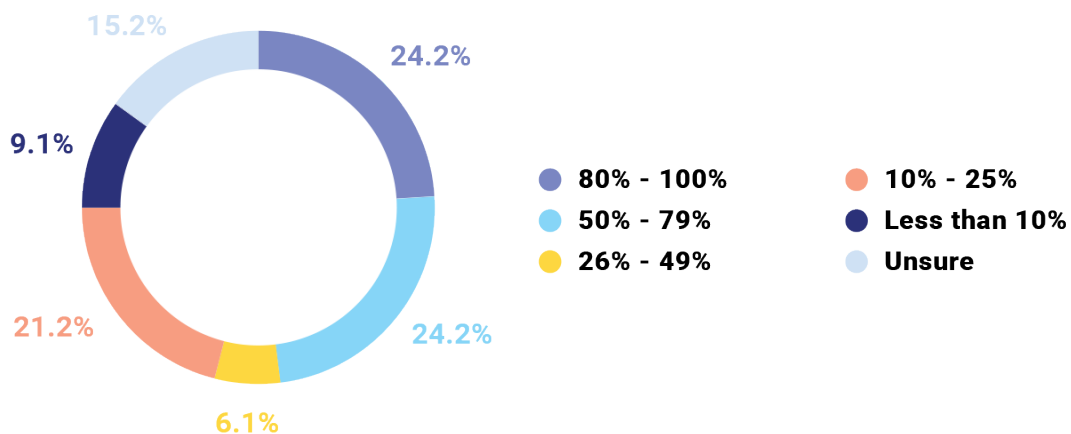
According to 2019 research by the Custom Content Council, U.S. consumers feel better about a company that delivers custom content. Return customers tend to buy more from a company over time, so it's all the more important to cater to this audience. According to Bain and Company in 2018, a 5% increase in customer retention can increase profits by more than 25%.

Research by Local Consortium Media shows when companies create content specifically related to its products and services, they can reach existing customers who are searching online for helpful content.

Digital and strategic messaging builds credibility, boosts social media visibility, demonstrates a brand's uniqueness, and most importantly, creates brand loyalty.

The COVID-19 pandemic has required messaging adjustments to not only build credibility and brand loyalty, but to exhibit empathy and industry leadership. Consumers' lives have been altered, and many marketers have adopted a "We're all in this together" approach rather than more traditional sales-focused angles. According to Manish Dudharejia, founder and CEO of E2M Solutions: "Sales-focused content

What was the client retention rate from 2017 through 2018?



The Branded Content Project survey amongst U.S. consumers found that client retention rates were stronger for branded content initiatives.

marketing is not going to thrive in a lot of industries right now. In the United States, unemployment is higher than it has ever been in history. Now is not the time for many to push sales-oriented campaigns.”

Instead, marketers are building brand awareness, loyalty, and trust. Companies like Ahrefs.com, Keen Footwear, and Repair Smith are offering free products and services. Financial institutions and auto manufacturers are being more flexible with payment options and solutions. Digital experiences have replaced in-person interactions. Brands are adjusting to where consumers are (i.e. stuck at home, shopping online) and what they’re shopping for. According to a May 2020 MIT Sloan Management Review study, “Growth Opportunities for Brands During the COVID-19 Crisis,” consumers are focused on function over brand, are open to trying new brands whose parent companies exhibit pro-social behaviour, are less interested in status-driven purchases that show conspicuous consumption, and care about how companies treat their employees.

The same study showed that small- and mid-tier brands can gain on larger, established competitors by:

- Thinking of relevant solutions, not just products.
- Thinking access, not just place, and implementing omnichannel strategies to where consumers are shopping or seeing messaging.


B. South China Morning Post (Hong Kong)

Although Qantas Airways has served Hong Kong for 70 years, it still has relatively low brand recognition and awareness in the market. Other regional and local carriers usually are thought of first, but Qantas wanted to change perception and awareness of the brand.

As the national carrier for Australia, Qantas wanted to position itself as the first choice for air travel, particularly to Australia. To do that, the airline worked with South China Morning Post and Morning Studio to create a campaign celebrating the 70th anniversary of the first Qantas flight landing in Hong Kong.

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Qantas Airways



Qantas continues to upgrade its offering to build a closer and cosier connection between HK and Australia

- Since its inaugural flight to Hong Kong in 1949, the Australian carrier has served as the key connector between the Asian city and Australia
- While Qantas passengers enjoy the state-of-the-art Boeing 787-9 Dreamliners in service now, there will be more refurbished Airbus A380s by 2020

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f t y i n

South China Morning Post's Qantas campaign showcased the airline's history in Hong Kong.

Choosing the theme, "The Past, The Present, and The Future," the idea behind the campaign was to show the role Qantas had played for culture, trade, and travel between the two countries for seven decades. Using archived materials from SCMP and the airline, along with original new interviews with pilots, the video provided an innovative way to strengthen recognition of the Qantas brand and solidify its connection to Hong Kong.

To support the video, which was the anchor of the entire campaign, SCMP ran three written articles. These branded content pieces were as well researched as SCMP's traditional content and viewed through a journalistic lens. The three stories were:

- Stories of Chinese Australians from Hong Kong and how their roots affected their daily lives in Sydney.
- The story of Australian expatriate Bruce Ryde, who now calls Hong Kong home.
- A travel guide to lesser known places in Australia.

This innovative approach found a high level of engagement with readers, attracting more than 207,000 page views for the series. The launch episode with the video ranked No. 2 on SCMP.com's "Most Shared" dashboard.

Overall, the combined reach of this campaign was 3.6 million, including banner impressions and social media reach. The total engagement — including pageviews, video views, and social media engagement — exceeded 619,000..

While this showed an encouraging response for SCMP, the response for Qantas was even greater. Its Web site saw a 32% increase in site visits and enjoyed nearly a 50% increase in unique visitors to its site. Thanks to the highly engaging content that was distributed through the SCMP channels, the airline saw a 13% growth in customers with a significant increase in bookings of premium cabins.

C. Southern California News Group (United States)

As a full-service agency providing both online and offline marketing expertise, SCNG's Skyline has been able to leverage social influencers to increase interest, sales, and traffic for its clients. Specifically, it takes an innovative approach to incorporate digital storytelling that can be delivered across multiple platforms to get the desired results.

Case No. 1: Social influencer

Skyline worked on a social influencer campaign with the largest annual fair in California. Using macro and micro influencers, the team generated interest, awareness, and engagement of special events and promotions at the fair while also increasing attendance with key audience demographics.

As influencers posted content while they attended the fair, their followers learned more about the variety of fun activities and special events that were taking place. This inspired them to attend the fair themselves.

The results were compelling: The campaign reached 2.7 million views and benefited from a relatively high interaction level, with a 32.7% engagement rate using Instagram.

Case No. 2: Disneyland Resort

Skyline partnered with Disneyland Resort on a custom content campaign. The goal was to deliver the resort's message to prospective employees. In doing so, it also increased community awareness about several fun happenings and behind-the-scenes details at the Resort.

Within the resort's online page on the Orange County Register Web site, readers found customised stories ranging from an architect spending decades building detailed miniatures of the Disneyland Resort railroad that run around his backyard to a story on Disneyland Resort easing rules on beards and jewelry for cast members.

The results showed that the campaign was a success. The sponsored content page generated ad clicks, afforded the resort to command complete exclusivity on all ad positions, and was available for downloading and sharing.

The campaign additionally fostered anecdotal chatter via OCR (optical character recognition) social channels, with comments sharing what readers wanted, from: "I'm interested in reading anything about theme parks in SoCal," to acknowledgement and praise such as "Galaxy's Edge looks amazing! Thanks for sharing those unbelievable photos!" ■

Conclusion

Branded content remains an important part of a local publisher's offering to local businesses — and it is a growing area for many publishers.

The Local Media Consortium and the Local Media Association reported results from its first Branded Content Project study on ways local media organisations approach and profit from sponsored campaigns. The study drew on findings from nearly 40 diverse local news organisations open to sharing their branded content experience and success stories. Research documented within the Branded Content Project reported high profit margins, high renewal rates, and increasing revenue potential.

Creating content primarily in-house, from conceptualising native articles and social media to building a content series on multiple platforms, moves clients toward a common goal of informing and inspiring the public while making a profit.

As local media companies explore ways to diversify and increase revenue, branded content is the best vehicle for marketers to bridge the gap between initial awareness and ongoing affinity.

What makes this approach universally appealing — to viewers seeking a great story as well as businesses looking to enhance brand awareness?

The Content Marketing Institute shared the following hallmarks of the technique when executed properly:

- They take an immersive, sensory-driven approach to storytelling: Branded content typically leverages multimedia formats like audio and video, which

can enable deeper topical conversations and more emotionally resonant experiences than text and/or static images alone.

- They build connections through mutual interests and shared values, not sales goals: Because these content pieces are often focused on establishing thought leadership, raising awareness, and generating positive brand perceptions, they are more likely to be viewed as worthy of the audience's trust and attention as compared to more product- and pitch-driven formats like digital ads.
- They make the experience entertaining, valuable, and memorable for viewers: Branded content campaigns excel when it comes to capturing audience interest, but they also are well-suited to contributing to lower-funnel goals. In fact, a recent study by Turner Ignite and Realeves found they make viewers more likely to consider the featured brand when it comes time to make a purchase (compared to traditional 30-second ads).
- Their potential for cross-channel distribution capabilities enables on-the-go engagement: It's easy for brands to publish branded content campaigns across multiple social networks, owned media properties, and other external Web sites. And, because they are primarily audio- and video-driven, these efforts are well suited for mobile consumption.
- They present opportunities to collaborate with other high-profile brands: Co-producing stories with other businesses that share your values and interests makes it easier to gain much-needed traction among your partner's established audience.

Branded content is a key part of the advertising future.

With 86% of business-to-consumer brands now employing content marketing, the quality of stories being told is at an all-time high. But with so many brands jockeying for audience attention, it's become all the more important to stand out from the crowd.

Try thinking of branded content not as just articles but as human interest stories: as these will resonate with audiences far more than run-of-the-mill content.

Journalists have been teasing emotional stories out of broad topics for decades, and that sentiment has carried over to branded content. There are many ways to tell a compelling story. It all comes down to who it's aiming to reach, what resources are on hand, how to customise a unique message to share with the target audiences — all in an effort to create loyal and trusted customers for your brand partners. ■