The average consumer is bombarded by thousands of marketing messages each day.\(^1\) With so much noise, marketers continually seek new ways to break through the clutter. Native advertising, the latest tactic these savvy marketers are employing, places brands’ messages directly within the content itself. And with good reason: that’s where users are engaging. On Facebook, for example, 40\% of users’ time is spent within the News Feed,\(^2\) making it the most coveted real estate on the platform.

As the rules, formats, and measurement for Native advertising take shape, brands are finding that this new form of marketing drives significant value – in earned media, awareness, and engagement.

**Native Advertising On the Rise**

Native advertising is already a billion-dollar business. According to a recent study by the OPA, 73 percent of publishers offer some form of native advertising\(^3\) – ads that integrate directly into the design of the publisher’s site, and are often produced by or in conjunction with the advertiser and run in the editorial stream.

Based on the new format’s early success and growing adoption by businesses across industries, recent reports estimate native ad spending is on track to reach $2.85 billion next year.\(^4\) As consumers start to spend more time each day with digital media than with traditional media like television,\(^5\) brands continue to shift their budgets and attention to these new digital formats to reach audiences more effectively. From sponsored posts and slideshows to infographics and promoted articles, all types of native advertising are on the rise.

Interestingly enough, “going native” in many ways takes marketing back in time, to the era of soap operas, in which radio and television hosts would incorporate sponsor messaging directly into their programming, or more recently, to magazine advertorials and the high-impact product placements found on shows like Bravo’s *Top Chef*. Then, as now, the benefit to marketers is evident. Why market around the content when you can be part of the content?

As more and more users fast forward through commercials, opt out of online pre-rolls and interstitials, or simply ignore traditional banner ads, marketers seek tactics that drive
impact by adding value to the content experience. Accordingly, marketers have turned their focus to content marketing, of which native advertising is a subset. As brands reimagine themselves as publishers, they seek both stories to tell and channels through which to disseminate them. Whitepapers, videos, infographics, ebooks, sponsored posts and tweets are all now part of the brand marketer’s portfolio.

According to eMarketer, content marketing is now the #1 focus for the greatest proportion of marketers worldwide, surpassing even SEO and Social Media. It’s clear that marketers are starting to recognize the critical interplay among SEO, Social Media, and Content. In order to build their social presence and drive SEO results, they need to have a story to tell.

**Infographics & Videos: The Native Formats of Choice**

A handful of formats are driving the overall growth in content marketing efforts – and it’s no coincidence that these formats are especially conducive to storytelling. Specifically, according to eMarketer, infographics and branded videos are the fastest-growing content marketing tactics among business-to-business marketers, and rank among the most effective.

Infographics and videos invite users to watch, engage, and share. These formats are highly visual and grab consumers’ attention right away – a key benefit for marketers in an age when the average user has an attention span of a mere 8 seconds. By inviting users to engage, these formats also encourage greater recall and impact on consumers: We remember only 10% of what we read, but 80% of what we experience. Finally, these formats also tend to drive greater social activity and sharing. In fact, visualizations are 30X more likely to be shared than posts containing text alone, so their impact can be both immediate and far-reaching.

**Best Practices for Successful Native Advertising**

As with any new format or tactic, it’s hard to know where to begin. At Visually, we have the benefit of experience, having created thousands of high-performing infographics, interactives, and videos. We also draw lessons from our experience partnering with leading digital publishers like The Huffington Post to help grow their native advertising businesses. The best native advertising tends to follow the best practices below.

**GMC POSITIONED ITSELF AUTHENTICALLY AS A TECH INNOVATOR AND GENERATED THOUSANDS OF SOCIAL INTERACTIONS THROUGH THIS PIECE**
1. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE.
First and foremost, you have to know your audience. What engages them? What interests them? What need is your audience fulfilling when it visits your site? Do users come to your site for entertainment or for news? For quick sound bytes or longer investigative stories? Make sure your native ads take these interests into account, or they will feel forced.

2. BLEND IN.
The best native ads don’t feel like ads at all. They feel like content – content that could have been produced by your editorial team without advertiser underwriting or involvement. The best native ads use the same tone as the editorial that they appear alongside, and they use the same graphic conventions and styling. So if your site is image-heavy, your native ad videos, slideshows, or infographics should incorporate photos, too. Ask yourself, “If I were a reader, would this feel like an ad?” If the answer is yes, you have more work to do.

3. FOCUS ON VALUE AND THEMES, NOT PRODUCTS.
When working with a brand to develop the concept for a native ad, focus on the values the brand wants to express versus the products it wants to promote. As native advertising expert Adam Clement of SlateCustom, Slate’s native ad team says, “Don’t include a product plug unless it makes sense. With automotive clients, they tend to want to put their car front and center. And that’s challenging, because it doesn’t tell the reader anything except, ‘Buy this,’ which isn’t that interesting or engaging.”

Clement suggests drilling down into the themes the brand wishes to be associated with, and then developing a concept that will resonate with readers based on those themes. For example, while part of The Huffington Post’s native ad group, Clement helped GMC position itself as a tech innovator through a native ad called “The Future is Now” that showcased 9 incredible futuristic technologies that exist today. The piece generated thousands of social interactions, and was even picked up by Forbes.

At Visually, we work with clients from the concept’s inception, and keep brands involved throughout the development process. This empowers brands to tell their stories, and ensures the final piece reflects the brand’s values – something that’s nearly impossible to achieve when brands simply “sponsor” content that’s created separately.

4. HAVE A GOAL – AND STICK TO IT.
Is the goal of the native ad to entertain readers, to inform them, or to spark debate? The most successful native ads have a clear goal in mind – and don’t deviate from it. When the Sundance Channel wanted to promote its new show, Dream School, via a native ad on The Huffington Post, its goal was to raise awareness of the US school dropout epidemic and to spark debate. To achieve this goal, The Huffington
Post tapped Visually, its infographic provider, to create a robust, informative piece that spoke to the causes and impact of the dropout epidemic.

The strategy worked, with the infographic generating nearly 300 comments on the site, and more than 2,000 likes and shares to Facebook, Twitter and via email, spreading the conversation far across the web.

5. MAKE IT SHAREABLE.
Part of the US School Dropout Epidemic infographic’s success can be attributed to the ease with which the piece could be posted, embedded, and shared. Make sure all of your site’s social functionality is enabled, and that you use whatever additional channels you may have at your disposal to aid content distribution.

At Visually, for example, we use the Visually Marketplace platform to showcase and share the infographics our community of designers and data journalists creates. We also promote client work to our social channels – whose followers number in the tens of thousands – and through our newsletter, which is sent to more than 500K subscribers weekly. The bottom line is, successful native advertising must think through distribution strategies in addition to content development strategies.

6. KEEP IT HONEST.
While the best native ads don’t feel like ads, they are sponsored content, and should be labeled as such. We’ve all bemoaned the cautionary tale of The Atlantic and its bungled native ad for Scientology, but that is an extreme example.

You want your audience to feel positively toward the brand behind the content, not duped when they find out an entertaining graphic or video was produced wholly or in part by a sponsor. An example of how to be authentic and transparent we’re proud of is the recent Cajun vs. Creole infographic we produced to help Bravo fuel the excitement for Top Chef: New Orleans. The introductory copy for the infographic clearly ties the piece to Bravo’s Top Chef: New Orleans – even including airing date and timing information – and the Bravo logo is featured at the bottom of the visualization. For publishers and brands wondering if such a clearly branded setup impedes engagement, the definitive answer is ‘No’: this was the most-shared native ad the publisher has run to date, generating nearly 5,000 likes, thousands of shares, and more than 100,000 pageviews.

In the end, each publisher will develop its own standards for transparency, but being honest and authentic with your audience will be critical to native advertising’s success.
Looking to the Future

The number of publishers expanding their native advertising offerings continues to grow. Among those publishers who do not currently offer native ads to clients, nearly half plan to begin the practice within the year. Why? Because native advertising works. Facebook’s ads in the News Feed achieve 49X higher CTRs and a 54% lower cost-per-click than traditional placements in the right-rail sidebar, and on more traditional content sites like those in the Hearst portfolio, native ads enjoy CTRs of 1%-1.5%, a tenfold increase over industry averages for display ads.

Of course, for marketers, native advertising isn’t just about clicks. Brands also actively measure earned media impressions, time spent, brand association, awareness, and engagement.

For publishers, native advertising represents a growing revenue stream and an opportunity to innovate. As publishers across the globe adopt the BuzzFeed model of forming teams of experts dedicated to helping clients create custom content for their sites, these teams will face two challenges: establishing the best formats for their unique audiences, and scaling their business once they do.

We’re already witnessing some exciting advances in the area of new formats, from custom Pinterest boards to LinkedIn Promoted Updates and an overall increase in interest in formats that support rich media and interactivity.

As publishers attempt to scale their efforts, the choices are clear: grow your team of producers, or partner with platforms that already have scaled production platforms in place. “Clients are requesting native ads more and more,” Clement says. “First it was slideshows and listicles, then infographics, and now it’s evolving so that interactive, ‘Snowfall’-type executions are the hot commodity. The interest is there. Partnering with vendors who can produce the content at scale has helped us capture it.”

SOURCES: