

Telling Great Stories

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Nick Palmer, Global Head of Content Strategy for MediaCom Beyond Advertising, recently spoke with Jimmy Maymann, Executive Vice President and President, AOL Content & Consumer Brands. Below are excerpts from their wide-ranging conversation.

Nick – “Content -building is an integral part of marketing, with brands and publishers converging and competing for the same finite amount of attention. Are brands fighting with one hand behind their back given the resources publishers have?”

Jimmy – “It’s certainly one of the key issues facing brands today. We are also experiencing heightened competition as publishers test new business ideas. The same applies on the

brand side, where innovative models are attracting the biggest audiences. But brands and publishers need to ask themselves, are we addressing the real business challenges? We've seen too many examples where the goal has been to create viral content instead of building a brand."

Is that where we get to the juxtaposition between brand as publisher and brand as marketer/advertiser? Can a brand do both well?

I think a brand can do both, and we're certainly seeing this on the publisher side. While I was CEO of Huffington Post, we went from 40 million unique monthly visitors to 200 million. To achieve that rate of growth, we identified an opportunity in the market and moved quickly to build scale. To do that, we had to find a balance between the fast turn-around with a sexy headline and "slower" content that might deliver a higher level of quality. We would say that audience would come [to Huffington Post] for the Kardashians but stay for the Obamas.

Marrying content and storytelling with data, analytics and technology seems to be the holy grail. How does AOL use technology to ensure that content finds the right audience?

Real-time optimization is valuable. Huffington Post would test five to ten different versions of a headline, and our scale allowed us to identify a "winner" within sixty minutes of posting. This kind of testing made the difference between an article being read ten thousand or five million times.

Real-time optimization is the kind of thing that brands can learn from publishers. I am a big advocate of using data to decide which pieces should be pushed further.

Yes, and that leads me to the next great way to use data. Over the last few years, AOL has used passive personalization to build user profiles based on visitors' social media personas. The result is that users tend to stay in our funnel longer, rather than immediately returning to the social platform that pointed them to us. Plus, users don't have to log in for us to build the profiles and suggest articles based on past behavior.

I worry, though, that this kind of algorithmic activity will filter out discovery and curation.

Good point. We need to be sure that human curation doesn't disappear, but what's presented does depend on KPIs. Some KPIs might be served best with an algorithm. We have to live with that – but I do believe that, as publishers, we have a responsibility. We need to make editorial decisions as to what news should appear on the front page.

That makes me think about what I like so much about advertising, which is its serendipitous nature. No data will ever predict that I wanted to see a moonwalking pony sell a mobile phone, but it was cool when the UK mobile company 3 did it. Which brings me to my next question: will a powerful brand ever be built on programmatic media?

I have my doubts. Being a publisher is like preserving a brand. You can't rely 100% on data if the goal is to create premium content, and I believe the same goes for brands. It's difficult to build a brand with depth and meaning based only on algorithm.

So we agree that there is danger in developing a pathological dependence on optimization, which is always looking backwards to what's been done before. We have to find the balance between storytelling and programmatic that drives an acceptable level of value.

And also between machine curation and human curation. Human curation is more expensive, so you have to believe that it will help you sell more on the premium side, resulting in a higher CPM that can support the higher cost. If not, you'll need to lower the bar and accept that you'll have machine curation if you only sell via programmatic.

And therein lies the threat to human curation, when there is a finite amount of inventory that goes to the highest (or most optimized) bidder. It's possible the best stories never get serviced.

That is definitely a concern. On any given day, AOL publishes 1,600 to 1,700 stories, which makes discovery a challenge. An algorithm can go after the hard metrics (number of clicks, shares, etc.) but it won't tell you anything about the quality or importance of a story.

Combine that with the tendency, partly due to social, to highlight entertainment and lifestyle content, and you end up with a risk that the focus on share and reach crowd out what's important.

To wrap up, what is most important: data, technology or the story?

The story always has to come first. 85% of today's web content is created by users, and that will increase to 99% if we don't commit to creating truly exceptional brand and content experiences. The experience that is carefully constructed, and the story brilliantly told, remain the most important elements of what we do.

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