

Vice Media: The Revolution Will Not Be Televised

SYSTEMS THINKING

BY MATT O'MARA & JAMES MORRIS 15 DEC 2014

Founded in 1994, Vice Media has become an expert in making and distributing exciting, provocative content for the millennial generation. By Matt O'Mara, Vice's UK Managing Director and James Morris, Global Head of MediaCom Beyond Advertising, MediaCom Worldwide

Initially a magazine business, Vice is now a \$2.5 billion business reaching 150 million people each month across every conceivable platform in 36 countries. The power of Vice's content – along with the company's strong bond with young trendsetters – has been rewarded with investments from A+E Networks, 21st Century Fox and WPP, among others.

So what makes the Vice system so effective and powerful among its target audience? How does it create such engaging content and what can brands learn from its distribution strategy?

James Morris, Global Head of MediaCom Beyond Advertising, gets the answers to these questions and more from Vice's UK managing director, Matt O'Mara.

James Morris [MediaCom]: Matt, tell us your elevator pitch for Vice?

Matt O'Mara [Vice]: Vice is the most relevant media company for young people in the world. We create and distribute content that people genuinely want to consume, and brands can be a big part of that. If you want to reach Gen X/Y and you're not working with Vice, we need to talk.

MediaCom: Shane Smith (Vice CEO) has said that you create content that you yourselves think is cool. But how do 40+-year-old managers interpret "cool" for younger audiences and remain an evolving and iconic brand?

Vice: Shane is very hands-on and drives a lot of what Vice is. However, he's the first person to say that what makes Vice great is that the brand is for and by young people. The vast majority of our staff is below the age of 30 and they are incredibly switched-on, smart people. They know first-hand what their generation wants, and it's not the sanitized view of the world that many media outlets promote.

MediaCom: You're creating a wide range of content, from "Some Genius in LA is Selling Weed Pizzas" to "We Are Laying Down Like Dogs: The Long Wait for Ebola Treatment in Liberia". Can you describe your creative and editorial process for creating content? For example, how do you decide whether the format of a story should be short-form video or written editorial?

Vice: We have editorial and video teams in each territory generating ideas and – although they operate independently – their conclusions are often complementary, and there is

crossover in terms of talent. For example, Clive Martin, one of Vice UK's most celebrated writers, is also a rising star in video. Like any media company, there are editorial meetings and a vetting process for every story.

MediaCom: Please tell us how you develop key formats, verticals and channels?

Vice: We produce formats that fit a particular medium or content environment. Online, we create a huge variety of programming franchises across the various verticals, and we're completely unrestricted in terms of length and design. On the other hand, our HBO show is 45 minutes long and is produced in a more standard television format.

MediaCom: Investing in high quality content appears to be your single-minded strategy. How has this system evolved, and has it been an intended evolution or something that has happened organically? Where does Vice go from here?

Vice: Shane had the foresight to recognize that – in the mid-90s, when the YouTubes and Hulus of this world were building the infrastructure for video distribution – people would eventually crave high-quality content. Our model is pretty simple: make the best content for as many people as we can through as many distribution points as possible. We intend to be the biggest premium content creator on the planet, so we'll keep producing formats as long as there are new places to present them.

MediaCom: You have created new news formats for the younger generation, and challenged the perception that they're uninterested in current affairs. Can you describe how this came about?

Vice: With huge numbers of young people spending less time watching traditional TV and more and more time viewing our documentaries on YouTube, we knew that young people were interested in the world... they were just changing the way they got their information. Vice News is only six months old, but has already become the fastest-growing news channel on YouTube. The reaction to our video dispatches covering Ukraine and the Islamic State, to name just two of many global stories we cover on the ground, have resulted in traditional news outlets taking us very seriously.

MediaCom: You have a host of digital channels, from the new “Munchies,” with a focus on food, to “Motherboard” on tech and “Noisey” on music. Why does it make sense to keep them under separate brands or names rather than have them all under Vice?

Vice: Vice is a network, and we wanted to create digital destinations around the cultural areas most interesting to young people. “Young people,” though is a very broad category, and to suppose that everyone under, say 30 years old, is into everything would be naïve. That said, Vice.com is essentially the mothership: an aggregation of the very best content from all our verticals. A site re-launch later this year will make this even more apparent.

MediaCom: Condé Nast says it is spending as much on distribution as content creation. How much does Vice invest to promote its content?

Vice: We spend money on content activation, both for ourselves and for our brand partners, but there is less reliance on paid distribution for premium content. Our engagement rates on YouTube, where we have the best ratio of likes vs. dislikes, and Facebook where Vice has 55% higher engagement rates than average, prove that social advocacy is still at the root of what we do. Technology is critical, but – at the end of the day – being creative is still the most important thing we do.

MediaCom: Vice isn't the biggest when measured by views or monthly unique visitors, but the company still engages audiences at a very high valuation. What is unique about your offer to advertisers?

Vice: Vice reaches more than 150 million people per month across all platforms. This reflects not only our scale, but also the diversity of our business: a network of 10 online channels, 10 global YouTube channels, multiple linear shows and franchises (like our Emmy Award-winning show on HBO), mobile, a record label, book publishing and, of course, our magazine. Coupling this level of distribution with sought-after content makes us hard to beat.

MediaCom: Describe your success on YouTube.

Vice: We have debunked the myth that content needs to be bite-sized. Audiences are watching our content from beginning to end, even though our shows can be more than 30 minutes long, and millions are subscribing to our YouTube channels. The engagement rates are off the charts, we have the fastest-growing subscriber channels, and our content has the best ratio of likes to dislikes. This is what we bring that others don't: truly premium content and real engagement. We help brands shift consumer opinion, which ultimately translates into sales.

MediaCom: What do you think about advertiser content at the moment?

Vice: Some of it is pretty depressing. Everyone is having a go at it, but it's tricky to do well and much of it is throwaway, with clients having to pay massive amounts to get it seen. That's not good for anyone. Clients need to learn that you can explain what your brand is or showcase a product benefit without artificially forcing it into the narrative.

MediaCom: What do advertisers need to remember about creating engaging content?

Vice: Make your content entertaining, thought-provoking and authentic. Whatever you deliver has to be something audiences love and want to share with others.

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