

Does Your Content Have a Value Proposition?



Meredith Xcelerated Marketing

March 16, 2015

Does Your Content Have a Value Proposition?

As marketers, we pour a great deal of time and energy into positioning, creating and publishing our brand message. Yet as consumers, we share our target audience's distaste for branded messaging that detracts from their desired content experience. For content to be successful we need to exceed the ever-rising bar of content quality and quantity. With a seemingly infinite content stream available—and a growing number of increasingly intelligent filtration, curation and personalization tools—consumers have become content connoisseurs. Hence, for brands, it is even harder to break through the content 'noise' and be seen, let alone be the focus of a consumer's attention.

As with many trends, the shift from content consumers to content connoisseurs is unfolding most rapidly in social media. Social flagship Facebook announced that as of January 2015, they had begun further filtering the brand posts users see in their newsfeeds. Posts considered too promotional are being filtered out, with the intention of giving users a better experience with superior content. Technically, any brand post is promotional. So unless Facebook releases its special sauce for determining where the line is, brands will have to guess (and monitor their analytics closely.) However, with consumers already acting as content connoisseurs, Facebook's new policy simply allows it to enforce what had already become the norm. It is further confirmation of a shift in consumer expectations, forcing brand messages to better align with the consumer's content needs.

Instagram, Facebook's artsy younger brother, is purposefully void of the marketing and advertising tools provided to brands by Facebook and Twitter. By nature of its extremely visual, mobile platform, and by withholding special bells and whistles for marketers, Instagram drops brands onto the same playing field as users. This forces those brands to compete for users' attention rather than buying their way onto screens. Brands have reacted by putting their audience's content needs first, creating (or attempting to create) the content users want in their feed. Starbucks, Nike and Stella Artois have led the charge by producing great visual content *around* their products, not *about* their products. They have put culture and context above product shots and brand messaging.



confidential – not for distribution

This content shift is perhaps most acutely visible in the rise of native advertising, as publishers challenge brands to deliver the same high-caliber content they produce themselves. From BuzzFeed’s Diet Coke article on “13 Reasons It’s Great to Be Taylor Swift’s Cat” to financial advice from Forbes, sponsored by Fidelity, native ads permeate the content landscape. For some, these ads blur an already obscure line between paid and editorial content. For others, they are outright deceitful. Transparency is key in native advertising. But for marketers, the rise of native advertising also signals that we can no longer crowd the space around a user’s content feed—we must be part of it. And that means playing by the rules of the space and creating quality content tailored to the audience and platform.

We need to stop thinking like marketers and start thinking like publishers, a process that starts with looking at our branded content and asking, “What value is this content providing our audience?” If the answer is only “It lets them know about our great product,” then we have a long way to go. To find the sweet spot, take a look at both the target audience and the existing content ecosystem. With a strong understanding of an audience’s likes, behaviors and content preferences, you can accurately assess how well the existing content aligns (or doesn’t) with their content needs. Within that overlap lies the content value proposition.

What is the content value proposition? It is the answer to the question, “Why would someone want to see my branded content?” It is a content need met, be it bite-sized humor, actionable information, entertaining storytelling or just pretty pictures. Often this value proposition lies in the feelings, associations and lifestyle *around* your brand and product rather than the product itself. And a product can have multiple content value propositions, aligned to different parts of the consumer journey, supporting different needs at each phase.

Good examples include Instagram photos of beautiful drawings on Starbucks’ cups, or soccer player stat-graphics by Adidas. These two brands deliver content users want to see, content that adds value to the experience, and content the brand has authority to speak on. As one-offs, these pieces of content are a flash in the pan, but by regularly producing content that is built around a consumer journey and their associated needs the brand demonstrates that this it is one worth keeping close.

The image shows a screenshot of a BuzzFeed article titled "13 Reasons It's Great To Be Taylor Swift's Cat". The article is dated November 12, 2014, and is published by Diet Coke. The main headline is "1. She always has the best seat in the house." Below this headline is an Instagram post from Taylor Swift showing her sitting on a bed with a white cat on her lap. The caption for the Instagram post says "Meet Olivia Benson." and has 996k likes and 41.5k comments. Below the Instagram post is a quote: "Gives a whole new meaning to 'lap of luxury:'". The second reason listed is "2. Taylor lets her help sign autographs for her fans." Below this is another Instagram post showing Taylor Swift signing autographs for fans. The article also features social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, Email, Pinterest, Google+, and Print. On the right side of the page, there are several social media feeds, including a Facebook feed with a post from Diet Coke and a tweet from Sanat Karkat. At the bottom right, there is a section titled "Top Posts From Diet Coke" featuring a photo of a white cat.

It is important to differentiate the content value proposition from the brand value proposition; they are not the same thing. The brand value proposition encapsulates the consumer benefits of a product or service. And while not etched in stone it should change very slowly and incrementally. The content value proposition, however, can and should change much more rapidly, this helps to maintain cultural relevancy. And while there can be multiple content value propositions there should only be one brand value proposition.

It is one thing to talk about creating a viable content value proposition, it is another to actually do it and live by it. This is the first step for incorporating a “publishers” mindset. For many brands, producing content the way publishers do goes against the grain. It means walking away from a line of thinking that has worked successfully for years and adopting one that is—at least initially—more difficult to create, measure and distribute. But it’s immensely important. So let’s find the content value proposition in three (not so) easy steps:

1. Product Personality: Seemingly simple, but deceptively difficult, distilling your brand/product personality is an essential first step. It will define what content is appropriate for your brand to produce, what topics you can speak on and what channels are most appropriate.

2. Audience Understanding: What type of content is your brand’s audience consuming on a regular basis? What channels and devices do they consume it on? What brands are they going to for content? By answering these questions, you will find the content leaders your audience enjoys and form your ‘Aspirational Set’—that is, the content producers outside your brands competitive set that consistently deliver on your audience’s content needs.

3. Themes: Your brand has 100% authority to speak about itself and its products, but how far away from that core can you theoretically go? What other themes does your brand have authority to speak on? The goal here is not to create a tenuous crossover that only makes sense in theory, i.e. the Michelin restaurant guide. Rather, it is to start broad and explore new spaces, often in which your product is secondary or tertiary, but still relevant.

So let’s work backwards through this construct using a brand with a strong yet simple content value proposition: Oreo*. Let’s break down everyone’s favorite cookie:

*MXM is using Oreo as an example based upon publicly available data.

1. Product Personality: Oreo’s personality is strong, and its promise is simple. It has a long-standing relationship with most Americans. Oreo relies on the consumer’s association of their product with the childhood feeling of eating it. It makes the product personality fun, exciting, innocent, lighthearted, positive and humorous.



2. Audience Understanding: Oreo's target audience is about as broad as they come, which marketers know can be both a blessing and a curse. However, when we think of where the general population goes for things lighthearted and fun, we think of channels like YouTube and Facebook, and brands like BuzzFeed, Funny or Die and Comedy Central. Looking at Oreo's content, particularly in social, it is easy to see the niche they are carving out in their aspirational set.

3. Themes: Oreo's themes revolve around several key areas. One theme could be called 'come play with us' and uses creative and humorous expressions of the feelings the product elicits. Two additional themes are tied together by their juxtaposition to each other. First, their tag line 'milk's favorite cookie' is a theme in itself and is all about the fun of dunking your Oreo in milk. The counter theme to this is 'new ways to enjoy an old favorite' and focuses on new and exciting uses for Oreos that you may not have thought of before.

4. Oreo's Content Value Proposition: Based on Oreo's personality, audience and the themes they employ, we can posit several versions of a content value proposition for Oreo that align to the "trigger" or "awareness" phase of the snack food consumer journey. The one that seems to ring most true is powering 'light, quick diversions' which deliver 'snackable fun.' This holds up well when you take a look at the content Oreo has been producing for the last few years.

While Oreo is a hypothetical exercise, the reality of applying this process to your own brand is no short or easy endeavor. But often, the more difficult the process, the more positive the outcome. It may force you to face some hard truths about your brand, your audience or both. However, in the end you will have a new North Star to follow, a goal that all your content aspires to meet. Then you will have the not-so-simple task of reorienting your brand's content engine to drive in this new direction. Change like this is difficult organizationally. It starts slowly, but you will begin to see results as your new content gains traction and volume. With such fundamental shifts often the hardest tasks are staying the course, shucking old habits, and staying true to your new content value proposition.

However, when you have a true understanding of your audience's content needs, and the role your brand can play in their content mix, it is easy see the value you can provide your consumers. Then, you can confidently answer the big question; 'what value is this content providing our audience?' Each piece of content may provide slightly different value to consumers, but they will always ladder up to the brand's content value proposition. In the end, when you deliver high value content, you will reach high value consumers.



CREME BLOT TEST 

confidential – not for distribution