RESOURCES

Owning Engagement in a World of Social Algorithms and Ad Blockers

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Introduction

Digital media and publishers are at the forefront of digital marketing. They're finding creative ways to engage their audiences through new avenues (like Snapchat and Facebook Live) and tried-and-true channels (such as email marketing.)

In the ever-changing digital landscape, people are less likely to visit a media site's homepage, and much more likely to engage with that site on platforms where they already hang out, such as Facebook and Twitter. Because of this, digital media companies and publishers increasingly rely on social media, usually paid, to deliver their message.

People are spending more and more time online, and digital media companies and publishers have to continually adapt to the changing landscape. They have to change the way they sell to advertisers, find creative ways to get traffic and figure out how to create a seamless brand despite the many editors, marketers, and designers who are involved in marketing initiatives.

In this guide, we'll explore how digital media companies and publishers can compete in a digital landscape where everyone wants a piece of your publishing site. We'll cover the power of owning an audience, how to convert visitors to subscribers and keep them engaged, as well as how to present yourself to advertisers. Finally, we'll cover how you can get your team on board.

Chapter 1:

The power of owning your audience

Traffic is the lifeblood of any digital media company or publishing site. After all, if no one is reading articles, watching videos, or visiting the site, how can the business sustain itself?

In years past, loyal readers would visit a media site's homepage to get their news. But today, more and more people use social media sites to learn about what's going on in their community, country, and in the world-at-large. According to the Pew Research Center and the Knight Foundation, 40 percent of American adults get news on Facebook.

Relying on social media sites to drive traffic seems innocent enough at first, and many publishers have found clever ways to grow traffic using these channels. However, there's a darker side to this story.

Media companies and publishers reliance on web advertising has led to problems. In the past year, traffic has plateaued on many large sites after years of growth. Many have compared trying to distribute content on social media to building a house on rented land.

> "With each turn of the screw, people began to realize, viscerally, that this is what it feels like to not be in control of your destiny," Scott Rosenberg, a co-founder of Salon, told The New

> York Times.

The answer to this challenge? Ownership of your audience.

Increasing reliance on social media

When we think about where we get our news, we no longer envision ourselves at the kitchen table with a morning paper. Although we still rely on media sites like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* for information, we often arrive at these sites through platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, or Twitter.

Media companies and publishers have caught on in a big way. For example, *The Washington Post* has embraced social platforms, particularly Facebook, as well as viral videos, to increase traffic. According to Digiday, *The Washington Post* surpassed *The New York Times* in traffic, with multi-platform unique visits now at 63 million, up 32 percent year over year, according to comScore.

Digital media companies and publishers have embraced social media, but what happens when these third party social media sites make changes? Can media companies remain competitive? How can you adapt?

Changing algorithms and changing prices

Social media platforms are invested in providing high-quality experiences to their users, but publishers and digital media companies are not always a first priority. When sites like Facebook and Google make changes to their algorithms and prices, what happens to the businesses that rely on them?

For example, Facebook recently released Instant Articles, allowing users to instantly read directly on the social media site. Although this change may benefit users and provides an opportunity for publishers to partner with Facebook, it can have a dismal effect on click-through rates.

These changing algorithms have sent publishers and digital media companies scrambling to find ways to combat the social media reach decline and save their traffic.

Reliance on traffic and performance to attract advertisers

Amidst the changing landscape, digital media companies and publishers continue to rely on traffic to attract advertisers. After all, advertisers want to invest in properties that get tons of views, shares, and clicks.

But attracting advertisers has proven challenging. According to *The New York Times*, Mashable made layoffs despite having recently raised $15 million in 2016. Similarly, *Salon* made budget cuts and trimmed back on headcount.

Digital media companies and publishers are rethinking how they can attract new visitors, sustain their readership, and create room for advertisers. They're finding creative ways to bring in traffic, and have a keen understanding of how important it is to have owned channels.

How ownership can help

If a digital media company or publisher existed in a vacuum without social media, how would it generate traffic and interest? Rather than relying on social media sites, media companies and publishers would find ways to reach their audiences directly.

Of course, social media will continue to play a role in how digital media companies and publishers get the word out, but companies are increasingly looking at how they can own a greater share of their audience.

Channels like email marketing, as well as apps, are surging in popularity as they provide a direct link to an audience, and provide a safe harbor from changing algorithms and prices. Media companies and publishers are increasingly investing in email marketing as a primary channel, not just as an afterthought, to try to gain control.

Chapter 2:

Converting visitors to a loyal audience

Owning an audience is a noble goal. If you have a direct tie to your audience, you can gain information about them, such as their age, gender, and geographic location. You can send them content they're interested in and keep them coming back for more.

But ownership requires digital media companies and publishers to convert one-time visitors, often those coming in from social media, into a loyal audience. Once you get a visitor to your website, what happens? Do they click away from your site and go elsewhere, or are you providing them with

opportunities to stick around?

Because so many people are getting their news via social media sites, the savviest digital media companies and publishers are finding ways to capture visitors and turn them into loyal readers. Marketers are finding ways to encourage visitors to download apps, sign up for email updates, and subscribe to specific email series.

Improving content for multiple distribution channels

Mobile has taken over, and people are opening emails, spending time on social media sites, and surfing the web all from their smartphones. According to a 2016 report from comScore, the bulk of digital growth is coming from mobile. People spend 55 percent of their digital media time on mobile devices and in 2016 email open rates on mobile climbed to 68 percent.

Digital media companies and publishers now need to consider where their content will be read, and adjust strategies accordingly. If you want to convert visitors into loyal audiences, you need to provide a cross-platform experience. You want to meet them on Snapchat, as well as in their email inboxes.

Ownership through apps

If visitors no longer visit a web homepage, then how can digital media companies and publishers build their own properties? Many are building custom apps.

Digital media companies and publishers are able to own their audience through custom apps. Unlike a website, visitors can browse within the app, and digital media companies and publishers can consider how to create a user experience that is interactive, innovative, and compelling.

BuzzFeed's app provides a gateway to content, all controlled by BuzzFeed. It allows users to take quizzes, access trending topics as they happen, and integrate the BuzzFeed experience with iMessage as well as the Apple Watch.

VICE offers a similar experience through its app, which showcases live content, video dispatches, and a streamlined way to get the news.

NPR News, CNN, BBC, and The Guardian all have their own apps which help them gain ownership over their audiences.

Podcasts as an alternative medium

A growing number of people are getting news and information through podcasts. According to Pew Research Center, about one-third of Americans have listened to a podcast.

These podcasts, which are essentially radio shows, allow listeners to ingest content away from a screen, using a mobile device as the audio platform. Regular listeners can subscribe and get notified whenever a new episode is available.

Podcasts help brands showcase personality and offer commentary, as well as give an opportunity for audience ownership. Digital media companies and publishers are jumping on board.

For example, *Slate* offers a variety of podcasts and offers even more to those who become paying Slate Plus members. Not only do the podcasts offer great content, but the paid Slate Plus option also provides Slate with an opportunity to generate revenue.

Email as its own channel

Email marketing has long been a channel for digital media companies and publishers, but many have seen it as an afterthought. Instead of seeing email as a separate channel, worthy of its own strategy, many simply send whatever is published on their site out in an email. Often, this content is pulled directly from an RSS feed.

Media companies and publishers see email as an opportunity to own an audience. They're treating it as its own channel, worthy of time, consideration, and resources. Email marketing is no longer just an extension of marketing efforts– it's a deliberate focused effort.

One reason? The ROI of email is undeniable at approximately $44 for every $1 spent.

"You could look at the whole newsletter portfolio, that's almost the size of a chunk of our website," Joey Marburger, director of product for the *Washington Post*, said in an interview with Digiday. "Email newsletters are critical to our business."

Additionally, LiveIntent offers media companies and publishers an opportunity to add ads directly to their emails. This gives companies the opportunity to not only communicate with their audience but also attract advertisers.

Clever content delivered straight to the inbox

In order to encourage visitors to sign up to receive emails, you have to offer content they value. Media companies and publishers are finding clever ways to create content specifically for email, no longer seeing email as a channel to broadcast every piece of content that is posted on the media site.

reddit

Reddit is an entertainment, social networking, and news website for the masses, but it's filled to the brim with content. It can be difficult to parse through reddit to find interesting articles, so the website delivers Upvoted Weekly, their newsletter with the best of reddit for those who may have missed it.

The Player's Tribune

The Player's Tribune creates sports-related content for die-hard fans. Rather than asking visitors to sign up for a generic daily update, the media company has created email series, such as "The Five Toughest Players I've Ever Guarded" by Paul Pierce.

An email series like this allows subscribers to sign up for exactly what interests them, rather than a one-size-fits-all style email. Once the subscriber begins receiving emails from *The Player's Tribune*, they'll be more engaged with the brand.

Sign up forms

Once you have a compelling email strategy, you need people to sign up. Today's sign up forms allow you to capture subscribers' first names, geographic location, gender, and interests. Having this information allows you to develop a strategic email marketing strategy with precisely the right content.

Here are a few examples of sign up forms:

Refinery29 promotes comprehensively

Refinery29, a fashion, beauty, and lifestyle company, promotes cheeky articles such as "How to Shop For Boyfriend Jeans If You're A Skinny-Jeans Girl." To gain loyal readership, Refinery29 heavily promotes their daily emails while reading an article.
Additionally, after a reader has been on the site for roughly 15 seconds, Refinery29 shows a reminder encouraging readers to sign up. The well-designed sign up forms with eye-catching pinks and blues remind the visitor how fun it is to read Refinery29.

BuzzFeed reminds of value

BuzzFeed offers a BuzzFeed News app to help readers stay on top of current events and issues in the world today. To the right of each news article, they share a bulleted list of the biggest stories in the news today.

After providing this valuable content, BuzzFeed reminds visitors that they can sign up for more of it by downloading the BuzzFeed News app.

The New York Times considers the device

Digital media companies and publishers see substantial traffic from smartphones and tablets. When you're encouraging readership to sign up for email lists or apps, you have to make sure your ask complements the experience on the given device.

For example, *The New York Times* reminds readers to sign up for their morning briefings midway through articles. This is particularly compelling on a mobile phone, where the ask is shown in the center of the screen.

Complex catches readers when interest is already piqued

If you ask visitors to sign up for an email before they're interested in you, they're likely to say no. It can be an intricate dance to catch subscribers at the right time.

After cruising the Complex website, a sign up form appears from the bottom of the screen, encouraging you to sign up. This sign up form is not as invasive as a full-screen pop-up, but still draws readers' eyes and encourages them to sign up for emails.

Chapter 3:

Keeping an audience engaged on the channels you own

When it comes to engaging an audience on Facebook, you can pay to promote an article, and make sure it's targeted to the people who will be most interested in the content. When it comes to a channel you own, it's on you to keep your audience engaged.

The benefits of engaging your audience can't be ignored, even though it can seem challenging to promote the right content to the right people. Remember– as long as you rely on sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat to keep your audience engaged, the more susceptible you are to changes on the platforms. Not to mention, paying for advertising can get expensive. Recall that analogy about building a house on rented land.

So, how can you keep an audience engaged on owned channels? Once people hit your website, download your app, or sign up to receive your emails, how can you ensure they'll stay around and keep coming back for more?

Right content to the right person at the right time

If you want to keep your audience engaged over the long-term, you have to show that you know them. You have to respond to content they digest, actions that they take, as well as their individual desires.

This requires you to get to know them, but you don't have to go out and have a conversation with everyone who subscribes to your emails or downloads your app. Instead, you can use automation and personalization to populate your owned channels with the right content at the right time.

Emails with personalized subject lines are 26% more likely to be opened and marketers have found a 760% increase in email revenue from segmented campaigns.

For example, if you promote daily news articles within your app, and a particular subscriber, always clicks through and reads the articles on politics, you can reasonably assume this is an interest to that particular subscriber, and promote other articles you know she is likely to enjoy.

Refinery29 accomplishes this goal through targeted sign up forms. When someone signs up for a daily newsletter, Refinery29 asks them to choose their editions. People in Los Angeles will receive relevant content, particular to their local area.

Taking advantage of integrations with various apps you already use

To provide your audience with the right content at the right time, you can take advantage of integrations with apps you already use. For example, email marketing software can integrate with ad networks to populate emails with ads, such as the case of LiveIntent.

Here are a few integrations worth exploring:

- AdRoll – Sync your email subscribers with AdRoll's retargeting platform and target them across the web and social.

- **LiveIntent** – Turn your email marketing efforts into profitable display advertising campaigns – all while maintaining full control of your campaigns.

- **Boomtrain** – Boomtrain allows you to use machine learning to deliver a completely 1:1 personalized experience in your email campaigns.

- **Google Analytics** – Set goals, run A/B tests, track conversions and monitor the success of your integrated email campaign, using our automatic link tagging for Google Analytics.

- **Driftrock Flow** – Connect your email subscriber lists to Facebook Custom Audiences and create highly targeted marketing campaigns.

- **Facebook** – Add a subscribe form to your company's Facebook page using this simple, easy to setup app.

- **BriteVerify** – Remove invalid, risky and inactive emails from existing lists inside Campaign Monitor, verify and onboard new data into Campaign Monitor or migrate lists/entire databases from other platforms to Campaign Monitor in one simple step.

New ways of measuring success

Media companies and publishers have often measured success through web traffic, and these numbers are what they've touted to advertisers. But with innovations like Facebook Instant Articles, as well as all the people who read the headlines on social media sites, but don't click through, web traffic has plateaued.

Because of this, media companies and publishers are finding new ways to measure analytics and engagement. Here are some of the metrics they focus on today:

- Number of email subscribers to various newsletters

- Number of followers on social media sites

- Email open rates

- Unsubscribe rate from emails

- App downloads

- Number of daily active app users

- Email open rates over time

- Comments and likes on Sponsored Facebook Posts

- Overall revenue

For example, *The New York Times* measures success through revenue and number of subscribers, rather than page views. They're working to get everyone on board with these metrics.

> *"We are, in the simplest terms, a subscription-first business. Our focus on subscribers sets us apart in crucial ways from many other media organizations. We are not trying to maximize clicks and sell low-margin advertising against them. We are not trying to win a pageviews arms race. We believe that the more sound business strategy for The Times is to provide journalism so strong that several million people around the world are willing to pay for it."*
>
> *–The New York Times* , "Journalism That Stands Apart: The Report of the 2020 Group ."

Similarly, many digital media companies and publishers are changing how they measure email engagement. They want people to open the emails and read them, but they don't necessarily worry about click-through rates. They're allowing email to act as its own medium, without the expectation of a visit to the site.

Chapter 4:

Looking beyond traffic to attract advertisers

Just as media companies and publishers have measured their own success through web traffic, so have advertisers who are looking to generate revenue. In an age where adblockers are rising ([26 percent of desktop users turn them on](#)), click-through rates on ads are stagnating, and users are increasingly getting their news from social media sites, you should look beyond web traffic to attract advertisers to your site.

Media companies and publishers have not failed if they see static traffic. Instead, they have to dig deeper to find out how readers are engaging with content. Are they interacting with the content on social media, then sharing it? Are they opening emails? Are they downloading custom apps?

As the digital landscape continues to change, media companies and publishers are getting savvy about how they attract advertisers.

What advertisers want from media companies and publishers

Advertisers support media companies and publishers, for better and for worse, but the landscape has changed. Display ads on sites are going out of fashion as native advertising, email ads, and other channels prove to bring more ROI.

At the end of the day, advertisers want to reach your audience in whatever way possible. Whether that's through an email, your app, on your homepage, or through social media– it doesn't matter much to them.

What matters is that you can prove to advertisers that their ads will get high engagement. That means you should shift how you present yourself to advertisers. Rather than tagging on your email list as an additional offering, you can promote it as your most engaged channel with the highest ROI.

Attracting advertisers based on new metrics

When you're talking to advertisers about opportunities, focus on the metrics that prove people are engaging with your content, whether that's through your website, your app, or through email. Here are some stats to have on hand:

Social media engagement

- Likes, clicks, and comments on Facebook

- Snapchat story views

- Snapchat custom filter use

- Likes, clicks, and comments on Instagram

Email engagement rates

- Number of subscribers

- Abilities to target relevant subscribers

- Open rates

- Click-through rates

- Number of different newsletters and lists

Web traffic engagement rates

- Time on site

- Number of articles read

- Video engagement rates

- Returning visitors

App engagement

- Number of app downloads

- Daily active users on app

Focusing on new ad opportunities

In a world where ad blockers are now the norm, advertisers are challenged to get content in front of an audience. According to a report by AdReaction, 69% of Generation Z (those aged 16 – 19) will employ ad blockers and other strategies to avoid advertising.

"No one likes the deal advertising is giving them right now," Joe Marchese, advertising executive for Fox, told Recode Media. "No one wants to be interrupted 10 times or see a 30-second pre-roll to get access to a one-minute clip."

Advertisers are not giving up. There are new opportunities for audience engagement, and many are of interest to advertisers.

For example, many media companies and publishers are using LiveIntent to sell email ad spots to advertisers.

Rather than hard-coding an ad directly into emails, LiveIntent offers media companies and publishers the ability to personalize ads based on demographic data. One subscriber might get an ad from Gap, whereas another might get one from Harry's.

Advertisers are also increasingly willing to sponsor podcasts. Companies like Casper, a mattress retailer, has seen rapid growth and visibility thanks to podcasts. In native podcast advertisements, Casper offers promo codes to encourage listeners to give the mattress a try.

Showing the value of email

Media companies and publishers recognize that email has a bit of a "marketing problem." It's been seen as a legacy channel, one that media companies and publishers use, but not one they focus on as a main driver of traffic, engagement, or revenue.

However, email results in greater ROI than ever. Digital media companies and publishers are conquering email's so-called "marketing problem" and finding new ways to package email as something advertisers will be interested in.

Here's how:

- Stop calling it an "email blast" or "email newsletter." Because the word email has an old-school connotation, repackage your email offering and call it something like "direct inbox messaging." It's the same service but will pique advertiser interest.

- Share the stats around ROI. Email results in ROI, and media companies and publishers know it. But do advertisers? Remind them that email results in $44 for every $1 spent.

- Go deep into email analytics. Because email is an owned channel, you have access to all kinds of analytics that you don't have when promoting on social media. Dig into these analytics and promise advertisers that you'll share the results.

- Tout that email is a permission-based channel. Remind advertisers that everyone who subscribes to your emails has chosen to subscribe. Unlike a display ad on a website that is seen by everyone, ads within email are seen by those who've decided they want those messages in their inbox and want to hear from you.

Chapter 5:

Digital marketing for the entire team

Most digital media companies and publishers have multiple team members involved in digital marketing.

While it's great to have involvement from so many, it can result in clunky workflows and processes. Worse, it can feel impossible to maintain brand standards that editors and designers have set. For example, there are lots of people working on email marketing, but not everyone is a designer.

Coding and technology are an issue, as well. In a recent article in Digiday, writer Lucia Moses lamented that publishers love newsletters, but grapple with the underlying technology:

> *"Publishers are embracing newsletters as they try to drive people directly to their sites. The third-party tech behind those newsletters, on the other hand, leaves something to be desired."*

Despite the challenges, new tools have made digital marketing more seamless. With lockable templates, drag-and-drop builders, and a better understanding of the digital marketing space, media companies and publishers are getting their entire teams on board.

Improving clunky workflows and processes

Clunky workflows can be improved with style guides, locked templates, drag-and-drop email builders, and integrations with existing tools.

Style guides

Media companies and digital marketing companies have style guides with guidelines on how the company presents itself. If you want to streamline your process, it's best to make these style guides as comprehensive as possible.

These style guides include:

- Editorial rules, such as use of AP style

- Specific spelling suggestions (for example, "we always spell internet with a lowercase 'i'"

- Logos and their use cases

- Voice & tone

- Best practices for specific social media sites

- Best practices & templates for email

Some media companies are building custom tools and using products to catch mistakes before they make it into publication.

Locked templates

It's impossible to involve the entire team when it comes to marketing assets that need to go out on a regular basis. Involving designers and engineers can be a waste of time and resources.

When it comes to email, you can use template management for teams. This feature allows you to create templates, but lock certain aspects so that editors can not accidentally edit a logo, social media button, or other important email feature or content.

This allows more members of your team to be able to create and send emails without relying on designers or additional resources and increase your efficiency while maintaining brand standards.

The digital landscape has shifted. Digital media companies and publishers have seen many challenges, from ad blockers to stagnating traffic. However, there is an opportunity for media companies and publishers to gain ownership over their audiences.

By taking advantage of owned channels such as apps and email marketing, digital media companies and publishers can make the changing digital environment work for them.