



WHAT'S NEXT

By David Ward

The ascent of native advertising and the **five trends** shaping custom content

Over the past decade,

custom content has shifted rapidly from the traditional custom publishing print model to a digital, always-on platform — an agnostic suite of tools used by brands to break away from the chains of traditional advertising.

For all the disruption that the transition to digital has caused for virtually every other medium, it's been a liberating experience for custom content creators. Brands have come to realize that they can now use native digital advertising to deliver custom content to consumers on a number of different platforms and in a variety of formats, including video, podcasts, and infographics.

Whether they're using in-stream units in social media feeds, recommendation widgets on media pages, paid search units, promoted listings, or other formats, brand managers have grown increasingly confident in planning and executing custom content programs that run parallel to their brand advertising — and that often contain similar messaging.

“Done well, custom content can be a vital part of a brand's overall media mix,” says Trevor Fellows, head of global media sales at *The Wall Street Journal*,

which includes the WSJ. Custom Studios division. “But it has to be a part of that mix, not a standalone.”

This growing belief in what native advertising can do is already having an impact on spending. According to an ANA survey released earlier this year, 63 percent of marketers say they plan to boost their native advertising budget this year — this after more than half of the 127 marketers surveyed indicated

that they'd already spent more on native advertising in 2014 than they had the previous year. The ANA survey indicates that the main benefit of native advertising is its ability to create relevant associations between the brand and the consumer. Given today's media landscape, where consumers can avoid ads more than ever, advertisers are looking for new ways to get their messages noticed.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. SPONSOR GENERATED CONTENT What's This?

MULTIPLIERS OF PROSPERITY HOME ABOUT MetLife Foundation IN PARTNERSHIP WITH WSJ

Oikocredit: How One Company Is Financing Financial Inclusion

AROUND THE WEB

The Financial Inclusion Challenge
The Wall Street Journal invited organizations worldwide to submit short video proposals on how to spur financial inclusion in Asia.

Financing the Future
Two billion people worldwide lack banking access. This Wall Street Journal multimedia news hub shines a light on those struggling to join the economy.

IFMR Trust Blog
IFMR Trust is a private trust whose mission is to ensure that every individual and every enterprise has complete access to financial services.

MicroSave Blog: Financial Inclusion in Action
MicroSave is an international financial inclusion consulting firm with 17 years of experience, operating in 10 offices around the world.

Alliance for Financial Inclusion Blog

MetLife Foundation, in partnership with WSJ. Custom Studios, developed a custom content campaign, “Multipliers of Prosperity,” to help drive attention to the importance of financial inclusion in emerging markets.

Over the next four years, U.S. native advertising spending is expected to nearly double, reaching \$8.8 billion annually by 2018, according to eMarketer. But that spending will go toward more than native ad units or the creation of custom content. With that in mind, WSJ. Custom Studios has identified five trends that will shape the direction of native advertising and custom content in 2015 and beyond.

1

IT WON'T ALL TAKE PLACE ON MOBILE

Yes, mobile growth is exploding. The growth rate for Internet-enabled mobile devices will remain impressive for years to come, with predictions that the number of smartphones alone should reach a staggering 3.5 billion worldwide by 2019, according to Forrester Research analyst Satish Meena.

But, Fellows says, the good news in all this mobile growth is that it hasn't cannibalized the use of desktops for consuming all types of content, including custom content delivered through native advertising units. "Most brands should become agnostic when it comes to platforms, particularly in the B-to-B space, but also in B-to-C," Fellows says. "It should be about reaching that consumer, irrespective of device."

BRANDS NEED TO BE WILLING TO EXPERIMENT AND EXPAND AND EVOLVE THEIR STRATEGIES.

In fact, the complex storytelling and deep engagement that custom content can deliver is often better experienced when the target consumer is not on the go — a fact that most end-users already seem to understand. According to Fellows, consumption of content on tablets is often done at home or at work, even though tablets are defined as mobile devices. No one is arguing that mobile should be ignored, he says, only that it shouldn't become the focus of native advertising at the expense of other platforms.

2

THE AUDIENCE BECOMES INSPIRATION

Increasingly, brands will be looking to their custom content campaigns not just to educate their target audience, but also

to provide a two-way engagement channel so that marketers can learn from and be inspired by those consumers.

Some of the audience-inclusion tools are as simple as incorporating a poll or a questionnaire into the content and inviting consumers to voice their opinions. But that might just be the starting point for an ongoing conversation that includes the brand, key influencers, and average consumers.

Just as with other media, if consumers find custom content useful, they're going to be more inclined to join discussions with their peers about that content or its sponsoring brand. The real challenge is homing in on the specific type of custom content that consumers want to engage with.

In broad categories, such as automotive or travel, quality custom content can encourage readers to share their stories with others. Those engagements can provide brands not only with potential leads, but also with insights they might not be gleaning through other channels or research.

In other categories, especially B-to-B, brands should look to their publisher's expertise to create a secure space where the audience can discuss the nuances and lessons derived from custom content. For example, C-suite executives can be encouraged to use a custom-published article as the starting point for a wide-ranging and candid discussion of an important issue to their industry — provided the conversation is being tightly monitored and that the information is only being shared with a carefully defined group.

"It all depends on the content, the context, and the audience," Fellows says. "One of the most important things a

publisher can do for their brands is to really help them understand how their audience likes to engage with that content, what they're likely to do with it, and what's a realistic outcome."

3

AGILITY BECOMES EVERYTHING IN THE CONTENT GAME

In the same way that the overall marketing industry now creates, executes, and measures campaigns in real time, brands need to become equally nimble and flexible when it comes to their content initiatives. Consumers today want information and insights in fast, easily digestible formats, which means that the process surrounding custom-content creation will have to adapt to meet that demand.

The first — and arguably hardest — step will be to change from the inside. Brands need to undertake a thorough and honest assessment of their in-house capabilities when it comes to creating custom content, particularly any potential choke points in the creation and approval process. Some brands might feel that they have the bandwidth to create custom content internally, without fully realizing that quality, compelling content is a specialty that an internal staff of generalists might not be suited for.

"Oftentimes the company's compliance team may have to get involved, or there could be stakeholders in other countries," Fellows says. "But if you can

get those mapped out in advance, it won't take long to get content through."

The other key to developing an agile custom content program is choosing an outside custom publisher wisely and then working closely with that partner through every stage — from program conception through execution. "A great relationship allows both the brand and the custom studio to be more nimble," Fellows says. "If we start out producing multiple pieces and a quarter of the way through find that one piece is outperforming all the others, we can quickly work with the brand to double down on that. It's about going into this with a degree of flexibility on both sides."

4

SEE IT, HEAR IT

For anyone old enough to remember when "online" meant just text and still pictures, the projected growth of video can be mind-boggling. According to a recent report from Cisco Visual Networking, 80 percent of all consumer Internet traffic will be video by 2019. For brands, the danger is that the video they create for native advertising programs can easily get lost in the shuffle. But if it's well produced and well placed, then their video can stand out.

MetLife Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the global insurance giant, recently partnered with WSJ. Custom Studios to build a dynamic, multimedia initiative called the "Multipliers of Prosperity." The

goal of this initiative is to educate the general public on the importance of financial inclusion in emerging markets and to communicate that via custom-produced content in the form of articles and videos in a digital environment.

One of the five-minute videos featured on the site is the story of several Indian women micro-entrepreneurs who have benefitted from small-business loans provided through MetLife Foundation's non-profit partner, Ujjivan. These loans have allowed the women to create viable businesses that have had a positive financial effect on them and their families, as well as for the communities in which they live and work. The compelling human-interest stories these women were able to tell allowed MetLife Foundation to tap into the emotional side of its program.

"MetLife Foundation has long understood and applied the art of storytelling to bring to life the complexities of a topic like financial inclusion," says Nandika Madgavkar, assistant vice president of corporate responsibility at MetLife. "We know that video, visual formats, and client stories help consumers better understand and engage with the issue, hopefully leading to action."

WSJ. Custom Studios was also able to edit that five-minute video into shorter segments to promote the initiative on social media. It will also be displayed on screens in the lobbies of MetLife buildings around the world.

With all the focus on video, it's easy to forget that audio still plays an important role online and in the custom content world. Nowhere is this more evident than in the recent revival of podcasts. Sponsored content seamlessly integrated into programming has become the business model that many in the podcast industry have been wanting for much of the past



As part of the MetLife Foundation's content mix, WSJ. Custom Studios created a five-minute short showing micro-entrepreneurs who have benefitted from access to small business loans.

decade. For some podcast hosts and producers, it's the difference between survival and extinction.

And while some purists grumble that a podcast's host reading sponsored scripts blurs the line between content and advertising, it's really no different than what radio and TV personalities have been doing on behalf of their sponsors for decades.

5

ANALYSIS ABOVE ALL

If there's a disconnect in the custom content space, it's that some brands are still reluctant to commit to a program because its metrics are too hard to come by.

A report from the Content Marketing Institute (CMI) found only 23 percent of B-to-C marketers reported success in tracking the return on investment of their content marketing programs. The report also found that more than half of the 5,000 marketers surveyed said that measuring custom content effectiveness could be a challenge.

The good news is that putting a content marketing plan in writing makes a huge difference in those numbers. The CMI report found that 43 percent of brands that had a documented content marketing strategy claim success in tracking their ROI.

What many marketers seem to be missing is that not only are there plenty of metrics available to analyze the effectiveness of these programs, but those measurement tools and standards are quite similar — if not identical — to the metrics used in print and digital advertising. That means that brands can and should be developing ROI metrics for all their native programs.

"I think it's absolutely fair to hold native advertising to the same metrics that you hold display advertising to," Fellows says. "Brands have really got to look at their total ROI.

"You've got to be evidence driven," he adds. "Data will be expected to drive custom content programs in the same way that it's already beginning to shape the messaging in display, social, and mobile campaigns."

Finally, if a brand has custom content that it feels deserves a wider audience, then the marketers behind the program should be willing to invest in advertising. "Every brand should have an amplification strategy," Fellows says. "It doesn't mean you do it every single time, but you need to have a clear strategy in place. If a brand is working with us in a particular vertical, it makes perfect sense for the brand to provide that content to other channels."

With all the ways to consume content and the volume of content available, it's increasingly difficult to harness the attention of today's consumer. Brands need to be willing to experiment and expand and evolve their strategies in real time to engage in meaningful conversation with consumers.

Working closely with media partners who have established a trusted relationship with their audience and who understand how and where to reach them, brands can turn their marketing messaging into moments that matter. ■

Contributed by WSJ. Custom Studios, the content marketing division of The Wall Street Journal. For more information, please visit wsjcustomstudios.com.