



Farm to Feet's SNEWS series on the wool industry resonated with its partners.

Native Content Grows Up

Sponsored content levels up as more and more brands embrace the format. **BY MORGAN TILTON**

A AUDIENCES GET SAVVIER about native content—sponsored articles and videos that are similar to their editorial counterparts—brands are becoming more liberal with how they create it. The result: better storytelling, more engagement, and greater brand awareness.

That's largely because sponsored posts help brands develop deeper connections with consumers through storytelling that's comprehensive or tailored to the brand's values. "Good native content is not just a platform for a brand to get on a soapbox to talk about itself: The content teaches readers something that's valuable, and it's a way for readers to interact with brands without disrupting what the consumers are experiencing," says Leslie Barrett, strategic campaign manager at Active Interest Media's (AIM) Outdoor Group.

Due to higher quality, readers spend more time on these types of ads. For instance, "Facebook considers a typical video view to be three seconds, whereas

readers spend more time with our sponsored articles—an average time of two minutes, and a high of three minutes, 50 seconds," Barrett says.

Outside magazine clients are also reaping those benefits, evidenced by the rate of client return year over year and the publication's overall increase of its native content, which has grown by more than 200 percent since 2016.

"Ultimately, brands are selling product," says Sam Moulton, VP and director of marketing at *Outside*. "But it's hard to get their brand message or origin story out on their own website, because people go there to buy products. People come to *Outside* to read stories."

Also, native content has a longer shelf life than traditional advertisements, which are meant to be consumed in very short periods of time, points out David Petri, vice president of marketing at Farm to Feet, which began native content creation two years ago. "There's only so much information you can include

in traditional ads, and most people are turning off pop-up ads," he says.

In 2017, Farm to Feet partnered with the American Wool Council to sponsor a series on SNEWS to educate readers about the wool industry. The collaboration gave the brand resources to share a message on a larger scale—and it worked. "Anecdotally, the articles with the American Wool Council resonated among our retail customers and reaffirmed with them the value of our relationship," says Petri.

Traditional native content includes product integration, but some brands are now opting for zero product placement, or even empowering an editorial team to develop the entire story with no requisite of brand inclusion. "A compelling story with no product placement or brand mention can be a huge win for a company, because people were entertained, and hopefully, the audience connects with the story on a deeper, emotional level," says Moulton. In cases like these, the content's goal is to build awareness and positive associations around the brand.

A handful of companies—like Patagonia, REI, and Eagle Creek—might have the resources to host consistent content on their own blogs or catalogs. For other brands, allotting marketing dollars toward native content is like firing a cannon: Brands can bypass the management and time that's required for a blog to gain traction. With today's high volume of digital content, it can be difficult to catch an audience's attention through all of the online chatter, but publishing content via an established, credible channel helps: Publications already have their own audiences, editorial integrity, and media teams with the skills and equipment to produce attractive stories.

One critique—and continued challenge—of producing native content is ensuring that audiences understand that it's sponsored. To help readers avoid confusion, both SNEWS and *Outside* have strict, consistent policies regarding the labels of advertorials and branded content on their social platforms, magazine, and websites.

And, as consumers get more accustomed to native content, brands are upping their game. Native content used to be boring, with brands typically paying to cover safe topics in a straightforward style, Moulton recalls. But as sponsored content becomes normalized, it's gaining its own level of credibility and creative liberty. "Brands are becoming more open-minded and willing to take risks with native content, like developing content with humor—which is the hardest thing to do," says Moulton. And they're growing more comfortable with handing over the creative reins to outside editorial teams. "Branded content is about trust for the media partner to represent a brand. That's a big step for brands to take."

But when done right—and with integrity—it's one that pays off. 