

COLUMNS

Snapchat opens the floodgates to publishers and brands

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Last month Snapchat, the popular mobile messaging application famous for self-destructing messages, launched a new feature entitled Discover. It functions as a media portal, allowing publishers to curate a daily mix of short-form content. Launch partners include top-tier media properties such as ESPN, the Food Network and CNN. Primarily online publishers such as Yahoo and Vice are also represented.

In launching Discover, Snapchat has begun to answer the questions around how to monetize its massive and desirable young mobile audience. Slapping banners into the app or injecting screen-takeover units into chats were never real options. The Snapchat audience has grown as fast as it has because of the intuitive and simple user interface, and ad clutter is certain doom for that kind of experience.

Story time

Worth mentioning here is the already-launched "Our Story" product, which combines snaps videos and stills from people at an event into one continuous montage. These can be paid promotional streams think the Dew Tour or whimsical events created by the Snapchat team.

By the time you read this, you will likely have just missed the "Snowpocalypse: Juno" Story, featuring micro-contributions from everyday Snapchat users riding out the recent blizzard in the Northeast United States.

Only those at the event i.e. in the affected area as determined by GPS were allowed to post into the montage.

Similarly, only those at a sponsored event could contribute to a sponsored Story, even if it is accessible to the global Snapchat audience. This is striking evidence that the product managers at Snapchat are executing a very careful and deliberate approach to the design of their app. They impose limits on functionality to fend off chaos and clutter. The experience is tailored to their audience's attention span. They can see spam problems coming a mile away and try to design to prevent them.

Having brand sponsor Stories at events has thus far been one of the only ways "in" for brands, besides the very Twitter-like approach of joining Snapchat themselves and asking users to follow them. But now we have Discover, and a whole new realm of marketing opportunities has opened up.

The Discover portal is accessed by an unobtrusive circle in the upper right of the app. Like Stories, all the content in it has a 24-hour shelf-life. Miss it, and it's gone. Thus each publisher typically features roughly a half-dozen items.

The user interface of Discover takes some in-app explaining but is easy to master. From the home screen you click on a channel, say Cosmopolitan.

You then see a full-screen teaser for a piece of content. Whether an article or a video, the teasers feature large imagery and minimal text just enough to draw you in. Swipe up to see the content, swipe left to see the next piece of content. Swipe down to get back into regular Snapchat. It is as simple as that and the more you play with it, the more it seems like a very intriguing way to rethink the mobile Web experience.

By design

Responsive design is great and all, but this kind of interaction not unlike Tinder is simple, slick and mobile-first by design.

Another winning touch is at the end of a channel, when you have left-swiped through all the content for that day. You are often greeted with a message along the lines of "that's it for today, check back tomorrow for more," and then you are bounced back to the portal landing page. The logo for the channel you just completed is now inverted, from dark background with a light logo to the reverse. You have marked the channel as read, you don't need to look at it again until tomorrow.

Already at launch, brands are taking advantage of the platform. The ESPN channel is sponsored by an upcoming movie, and an easily skip-able trailer plays as you swipe through their content. The Food Network channel is sponsored by Ritz crackers, complete with a 10-second video alongside their editorial content teasing "The Ritz Bowl" ending with "To Be Continued."

We have now entered the age of brands telling stories 10 seconds at a time, with each episode expiring after one day. That plays so well into the attention span of the Snapchat audience and is clearly not an accident.

An obvious step for brands would be to have a branded channel in the app's media portal. It is surprising Red Bull was not a launch partner, as they are one of the leading producers of branded content. Addictive short episodic content created by a brand could be a big draw for Snapchat's audience.

The key is creating a sense of authenticity, and feeding immediacy. Snapchat is about what is happening now or very recently. Old news feels out of place. Traditional mobile ads too feel awkward.

IT IS KEY to remember that whatever you make is still within Snapchat and users expect quick hits of content before they bounce off to the next thing they care about.

Since the content is short, and you do not have to make that much of it, brands could probably pull off pretty amazing campaigns on the platform if they get the creative right and remember the audience to whom they are speaking.

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