

Digital Magazine Checklist

March 25, 2009

Digital magazines are becoming more important to publishers every month. Partly because they provide cost savings over print, partly because they offer publishers a circulation lifeline given existing auditor (ABC and BPA) rules (see *Recessionary Concerns Advance Digital Delivery*), and partly because, done right, they are incredibly compelling. This is not even considering the developments in e-paper e-readers that are specifically geared to this type of paginated media.

By David Renard

As publishers press forward with digital magazines, it is important that they actively pursue the following:

- **Determine scope.** Why is the digital magazine being offered? What value will it provide readers? Publishers need to define their short to long-term return expectations (e.g. financial, branding, adoption) and plan how the product will evolve based on hitting or not these targets.
- **Resolve rights.** As digital magazines continue to evolve and become independent products, content creators will become more militant in defending their rights. Publishers need to change their agreements now in order to protect themselves.
- **Identify delivery mediums.** How is the digital magazine going to be read (e.g. through a desktop, laptop, netbook, PDA, e-paper e-reader, mobile phone)? What are the properties of the platform and how is it accessing the content? How does it permit the collection of usage metrics?
- **Determine distribution model.** For now, only the most richly interactive digital magazines or unique content-filled facsimile digital magazines will be able to charge for their access. The majority of publishers will give either digital companion editions or standalone editions to subscribers in exchange for their email.
- **Design for limitations.** The digital magazine will need to have different properties depending on the type of medium it is delivered on and the medium's limitations (e.g. color, refresh rates, interactivity, user interface, internet access). The size, functionality, and purpose of each medium will need to guide the look, feel, and functionality of the digital magazine. For example, an interactive digital magazine makes sense on a desktop or laptop (e.g. *PopSci Genius Guide*), while a facsimile digital magazine with a high concentration of text works best on an e-paper e-reader (e.g. *The New Yorker*).
- **Create value.** Interactive digital editions (e.g. iGIZMO) provide value to the reader/user based on the way the content is presented, but facsimile digital editions generally do not. Publishers, even those with limited resources, need to provide some additional value with or within

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their digital magazines. This is similar to the bonus content on a DVD and can include behind the scenes videos, audio or video interviews, archives, and live comment sections.

- **Devise marketing plan.** Digital magazines, like any new product or technology, have a reduced chance of being adopted if they are not properly marketed. Publishers need to have a clear value proposition to attract readers/users. Enriching their digital magazines with extras or providing access through new delivery mediums becomes the core of a publisher's marketing message. That message then needs to be diffused through all the publisher's properties (e.g. emails, ads, editorial), through DMEs (Digital Magazine Enablers) and their affiliates/partners, through targeted conversational media campaigns (e.g. blogs), and, depending on budget, traditional media campaigns (e.g. list rental, ads on relevant sites, PR).
- **Focus on usage.** Usage is the weak part of most digital magazine programs. Comfortable with the old media notion of circulation (delivery of the magazine as opposed to its use) and reinforced in that belief by auditors, magazine publishers forget that the digital world runs on usage metrics. Aggressively pushing for more digital subscribers can leave publishers exposed to possible rules changes if elevating reader/user usage is not a primary goal (see *Magazine Publishing's Great Realignment*). Ways to improve usage include:
 - **Ask.** Some subscribers would accept to only receive digital editions given the right incentives or just prefer them (for ecological reasons or because of media consumption practices). Even if this group represents just a single digit percentage of a magazine's entire subscriber base, when asked to convert to digital editions these readers will be more inclined to actively use them.
 - **Remind.** An initial email announcing a new issue is not enough. To increase each digital issue's actual readership (and overall email open rates) publishers need to send a second email several days or up to a week later. This email should highlight and/or excerpt key content from the current issue.
 - **Adapt.** Usage data and active reader feedback can help publishers understand what readers want. This in turn can be applied to the digital magazine to keep it interesting, customized (e.g. multiple editions/versions), and above all, used.
- **Monetize everything.** If the digital magazine is a companion product then the paginated ads are tied to the print title, but not possible ads on or above the navigation bar, in the background, and on the announcement emails. Some DMEs also enable the magazine to be split into paginated sections/articles and then sold or freely distributed with a sponsor. The success of such digital issue/section sponsorships is tied to usage.

Improving Usage: Email Announcements

April 8, 2009

Digital magazines are increasingly becoming an important part of a publisher's distribution arsenal. But, regardless of current circulation audit rules from ABC and BPA (see *Recessionary Concerns Advance Digital Delivery*), digital magazines mean little if their usage is not being tracked and expanded. Their benefit, beyond accessibility and rich media, is that publishers can finally know what their readers are actually reading and seeing. And, when audit rules change (see *Magazine Publishing's Great Realignment*), those publishers that will have focused their resources (human and financial) on improving usage will have a critical competitive differentiator. This is the first in a series of notes that look at the best ways to improve usage.

By David Renard

Until digital magazines are automatically delivered to large color e-readers, much like books are sent to Amazon's *Kindle*, the email announcing a new issue is the first line of attack in getting readers to click through to the edition. To maximize response rates, it is important that publishers actively pursue the following:

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- **Emulate newsletters.** Digital magazine announcements should not be bland reminders of the availability of an issue. These should be looked as newsletters communicating important information to readers and moving them to read more in the paginated edition. They need to provide some form of value if publishers expect them to be opened every time an issue comes out.
- **Brand "Sent From".** This is basic but too often forgotten. The name associated with the email address sending the digital edition (i.e. the name under the "From" or "Sent From" column in an email queue) needs to be the same as the title of the magazine in order to be easily and clearly identified every time.
- **Tighten subject line.** The subject line should not be the title or the tagline of the magazine, but should be information clearly identifying the current issue (e.g. a key headline with or without an issue number or date) that is going to make the reader react. However long the subject line is, only the first few words are typically seen in an email list, so the text should be kept short or the key words should be front-loaded.
- **Improve contents.** The email itself needs to be completely geared towards inciting the reader to click through to the digital magazine. Once opened, it is a space to be filled with opportunity:
 - **Support multiple formats.** Though digital magazines are still mostly read on laptops and desktops, nothing is more dissatisfying than receiving a new issue announcement on a PDA (e.g. Blackberry) that is not properly displayed. Both text and html formats need to be supported by these outgoing emails.

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- **Multiply feature links.** Identify the key stories in the digital edition and link to them directly (to the actual story not to the cover) from the email. In essence, these are like the cover lines on a physical magazine, the more compelling they are, the more an individual will pick up the title.
 - **Show cover.** The cover is very important in print because of the amount of direct and indirect information it imparts to the casual onlooker. Above all, a good cover sells copies and will help deliver click-throughs. It should be linked to the digital edition and placed in the top right area of the email for best effect.
 - **Shorten text.** Keep text short and easy to read. Its purpose is to push readers towards the digital edition not keep them reading the email. The contents of the email should fit “above the fold”, in the area visible without scrolling down.
 - **Recall key content.** One of the benefits of digital editions is that usage metrics can still be improved after a new issue is released. Linking to “hot”, “most popular”, or “favorite” content the reader may have missed can help get more usage out of previous issues.
 - **Provide teaser.** Set expectations about the contents of next issue.
- **Send follow-up.** One email is not enough, publishers need to remind readers that the issue is available at least a second time. This should be done several days or up to a week after the first email (depending on the frequency of the digital magazine). This subsequent email, apart from needing to be short, accessible in both text and html, and linked to present and past content, needs to be a progression from the first in terms of subject matter and design:
 - **Concentrate on one story.** This second email should highlight and excerpt one piece of key content from the current issue.
 - **Show spread.** Instead of showing the cover again, the follow-up email should present at least one spread that is linked to the actual spread in the digital edition.
 - **Keep clean.** Emails bouncing back because of a wrong address is one thing, but emails not being delivered because they are blocked by corporate firewalls, ISPs (Internets Service Providers), webmail providers, or user-controlled software is another. Publishers must be careful to keep their emails free of evolving spam telltale signs.
 - **Segment readers.** A publication’s readers will react differently to the variety of content it contains. Differentiating between these preferences and segmenting a magazine’s readers will help publishers take advantage of the power of affordable customization (e.g. varying content featured in follow-up emails and in popular past issue links).
 - **Test.** Improving usage through announcement emails needs to remain an evolving project where multiple email compositions (e.g. structure, contents) are continuously tested to enhance user responses.

Improving Usage: Avoiding Spam Label

May 6, 2009

As digital magazines grow in importance, publishers need to focus on promoting them and tracking their use (see *Magazine Publishing's Great Realignment*). Correctly announcing the latest issue's availability is necessary to get subscribers clicking through to the digital edition and reading it (see *Improving Usage: Email Announcements*). But, for potential readers to actually access their digital edition, the email announcement must actually get to its destination and not be blocked as spam. This is the second in a series of notes that look at the best ways to improve usage.

Even if publishers have the correct addresses for all the subscribers, and everyone of them has specifically requested the digital edition and the email announcing it, many of these emails will end up not being delivered. They will be blocked by ISPs (Internets Service Providers), corporate firewalls, webmail providers, or user-controlled software (i.e. email clients and spam filtering tools). A publisher may not be sending unsolicited commercial or bulk emails, but if they are perceived as such by the recipients or their anti-spam gatekeepers, it can be very costly. Being reported as spam to an ISP and then blacklisted can seriously hamper a publisher's goal of enabling access and improving usage to their digital editions.

To minimize spam-related email bounces, it is important that publishers actively pursue the following:

- **Inform at sign up.** Subscribers will generally be more attentive to the information presented to them during the registration process. Make sure that this opportunity is used to:
 - **Offer opt-in.** Until digital magazines are automatically delivered to e-readers (e.g. Amazon's *Kindle*), the email announcing a new issue is necessary. This needs to be clearly indicated at sign up. If publishers want to use this email for other programs, it is important to follow the lead of some US states and European countries by adopting an opt-in option (a one or two step process with or without user confirmation), rather than the less respected opt-out option or than just assuming that the email can be reused.
 - **Get safe.** Get subscribers to add the email address from which the digital magazine announcements are sent from to their safe list or address book.
 - **Open policies.** Keep policies about subscribing, unsubscribing, and sharing of personal information clear and visible during this process.
- **Offer removal.** At the bottom of every email communication an unsubscribe option needs to be clearly available (a one or two step process with or without user confirmation).
- **Avoid filtering.** Incoming emails are always being checked by filtering tools in order to identify spam. The criteria (and point system) they use

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are continually evolving, and publishers must be careful to keep their emails free of typical spam signs by:

- **Be consistent.** Use the email address that was indicated to the subscriber at sign-in, and always use the same one.
 - **Clean subject line and contents.** Be careful with overusing sales-focused words, typical catch phrases, words in all caps, punctuation, words spelled out with punctuation between letters, misspelled words, and non standard characters. Each of these will not raise flags on their own, but combining too many of them will.
 - **Clean code.** The html used in the body of the email should be cleaned of unnecessary code and too many tags. Primarily standard web fonts should be used.
 - **Limit images and attachments.** Avoid using too many images or one big image for the body of the email. This can be perceived by the filtering tools as an attempt to bypass them by putting spam content in the image or images. Refrain from adding any other attachments for the same reason.
- **Provide Value.** Email communications, whether digital magazine announcements, newsletters, or new product offers, must clearly provide some form of value if publishers expect them to be opened and not be considered as spam.
 - **Test.** As with improving usage, this needs to remain an evolving project where multiple email compositions (e.g. structure, contents) are continuously tested with different email accounts (corporate, user-based, or web-based) using different protection settings (including some that are behind firewalls).
 - **Update list.** The list of emails for digital magazine subscribers needs to be updated regularly for change of address requests, unsubscribe requests, bounces or undeliverable emails, and duplications. Sending an email announcement to a non-existing email, to someone who no longer wants to receive it, or twice to the same person is risking some form of filtering or negative user action.

Improving Usage: Social Media and Digital Magazines

July 22, 2009

As publishers work to promote their digital magazines (see *Magazine Publishing's Great Realignment*), in order to get more on-line users to open and read them, social media sites and tools will become invaluable. This is the third in a series of notes that look at the best ways to improve usage.

By David Renard

Social media, with its community sites and tools, is primarily about enabling users to tell others what they are up to, share content, comment on/discuss content, and generate new content. It is also a very compelling way for businesses, and specifically content publishers, to disseminate information and news about their valuable products (in this case content), get users to react to and become engaged with that information, thereby improving the dialog with their community of interest, and ultimately widening their active user-base. In the case of magazine publishers, that means gaining subscribers and driving traffic to their sites and their digital magazines.

Though most offer a blend of the above functionalities, there are three key types of social media sites/tools available today for consumer and B-to-B magazines:

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- **Social Content Sharing Markets** A place for users to post and share content. Social media sites that offer this functionality include YouTube for video, MySpace for music, and Scribd for paginated documents.
- **Social Networks** A community space where users can share information and news about their activities, their interests, and their experiences. Social media sites and tools that offer this functionality include Facebook, MySpace, and Google Groups on the consumer side and LinkedIn and private label networks (e.g. Folio: mediaPRO) on the business side.
- **Social Messaging Platforms** Most social media sites and tools offer some form of news or updates delivery service (e.g. daily or weekly emails, RSS feeds). Twitter takes this concept further by delivering user-generated news and updates in real time (dependent on the connectedness of the recipient) to interested followers.

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To take advantage of the opportunities provided by these social media tools and sites to widen a digital magazine's usage, it is important that publishers actively pursue the following in their social media campaign:

- **Update Community.** Help remind potential readers of a new issue through all relevant social channels. The reminder can be in the form of a video from an interview, image out-takes of a photo shoot, or a Twitter Tweet (i.e. message) with relevant story information.

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- **Watch Frequency.** Finding the right frequency for a publisher's updates can be tricky and will depend on how valuable the information is to the magazine's community. It is important not to turn off users with too much information. Rapidly developing celebrity news will permit updates several times a day, while gardening news may only be relevant once a week.
- **Brand "From".** The publisher's Twitter or Facebook name needs to be the same as the title of the magazine in order to be easily and clearly identified every time and across multiple social media channels.
- **Improve Contents.** The publisher's social media update or Tweet needs to be compelling and addictive enough to prompt user interest and reaction:
 - **Tighten Subject Line.** Increasingly, especially with Twitter's character limits, the subject line is the content and a door to more extensive content (through a link). It needs to be rich in valuable information.
 - **Include Feature Links.** To drive traffic to the digital magazine, the update or Tweet must link to it. And, not just to the cover, but to the specific article. Varying a digital magazines entry point helps improve overall usage.
 - **Show Cover or Spread.** Whenever possible, given the social media site or tool, the magazine's cover and spreads need to be shown (and linked to the digital edition) as it helps to deliver click-throughs. This should be done only one at time (per post).
 - **Shorten text.** If there is the ability to put more text than just the subject line, then that text should be kept short. Its intent is to make readers want to access the digital edition and view more. Services like www.tinyurl.com can be used to shorten the link address in the post or Tweet in order to give more unobstructed space to the valuable content.
 - **Avoid Repetitions.** Each update should always be different from any previous update and add its own value.
- **Use Feedback.** One of social media's strengths is the ability to comment on what is viewed or read. For publishers, that means a great possible source of user feedback for editors and marketers. This involvement from its community of interest can help improve the magazine.
- **Test.** Social media campaigns of posts and Tweets must remain an evolving project where multiple frequencies and text/image formulas need to be tested to maximize positive feedback and response rates.