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Native Advertising: Trick or Treat?

By: Jennifer Marsnik

John Oliver, host of HBO's *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, recently criticized the practice of native advertising, arguing that it blurs the lines between editorial and advertising – often referred to as “church and state” in the world of journalism. Oliver’s assertion that native advertising compromises the integrity of a free press is not without merit, but was his overall conclusion about its value entirely fair?

Native advertising is often defined as an *online* advertising method, but in fact, it has been around far longer than the Internet. Sharethrough (www.sharethrough.com) defines native advertising as “a form of paid media where the ad experience follows the natural form and function of the user experience in which it is placed.” While many examples of native ads exist in today’s digital world, this broader definition serves to include more traditional examples such as print advertorials, single-sponsor issues of magazines and product placements.

Hershey’s introduced Reese’s Pieces to the market in 1978, but it was not until the candy featured in the 1982 movie *E.T.* that sales skyrocketed. The placement did not seem awkward or forced; it was just a part of the story. Not only were moviegoers unoffended by the product placement, but they responded in droves to the implied call to action by purchasing Reese’s Pieces. This is a classic example of successful native advertising.

Discussions about native advertising today often focus on online content in its variety of formats. Of course, social media plays a big part. Promoted tweets and sponsored posts leverage targeted marketing to reach the demographic an advertiser seeks. Consumers have a higher retention of visual information than text-based information, making platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram especially popular.

There is no such thing as a free lunch and there is no such thing as free media, so consumers tolerate advertising on their social media platforms. But Oliver’s point is that expectations are different for journalism-based online platforms. Newspapers, magazines and other news sharing sites on the Web are held to a higher standard because viewers equate them with their traditional printed counterparts. Thus, online advertorials and sponsored content – regardless of how explicitly labeled – are often seen as dishonest and untrustworthy.

Advertisers are counting on consumers to be confused by native advertising. The point is to blend in with the content around which the advertisement appears, thus seeming to be editorial in nature. But Shane Snow, cofounder of Contently, has stated that two-thirds of people say they have felt *tricked* after reading sponsored content, suggesting that the potential erosion of trust may do more harm than good to the advertiser’s brand.

Beyond its questionable effectiveness, native content advertising is not always efficient. A traditional ad campaign uses clear, consistent and repetitive messaging to create awareness. An ad is designed once and run through multiple channels to reach a target market. However, to match the form and function of the environment in which it is placed, a native ad such as sponsored content must be tailored to the unique audience of each platform. The resources required to rewrite content for every insertion should be factored into the overall cost of the investment.



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Amy L. Juers, MBA

Founder & CEO

651.450.9090

ajuers@EdgeLegalMarketing.com



Trade publications have included sponsored content for years, though it is not always explicitly labeled as such. The trick is to know how and when to apply this form of advertising to ensure your message reaches the right people without any negative response. Native advertising can support and complement other advertising activities as part of a comprehensive marketing program. When done well, it can provide value and actually enhance the content around which it appears, simultaneously promoting the advertiser's brand and thought leadership.

About the Author

Jennifer Marsnik is a senior account manager with Edge Marketing, Inc. Leveraging more than 20 years of experience working in professional services industries, Jennifer consults with clients to develop and implement strategic marketing plans that complement and support their overall business goals.

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Amy L. Juers, MBA

Founder & CEO

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ajuers@EdgeLegalMarketing.com