

Is Native Advertising the New Black?

Content Marketing Institute research reveals that users are still in the minority, but the value of native advertising is evident.

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Native advertising is one way of distributing content and is a pay-to-play model. One of the greatest things that native advertising can do for a brand is guarantee content placement and visibility in some of the top news sources and websites outside of a company's owned media. Native advertising should not be promotional in nature and should conform to the same guidelines that other forms of content marketing follow. The content should always be relevant, informative, and valuable so that it helps to cultivate a relationship with the customer and establish trust and credibility.

Here at Advance Ohio, we focus on reaching the desired target audience given its motives at each stage of the conversion funnel—awareness, interest/desire, and action. We can help you determine where native advertising fits best in your overall content marketing strategy and help you implement it, analyze the results, and optimize your campaign along the way.

We hope you enjoy this report and realize what a valuable role native advertising can play in your marketing campaigns. Visit us at advance-ohio.com to learn more about our native advertising solutions.

INTRODUCTION

Going Native With Oysters and Beer

Picture this: a single-page guide to nine types of oysters, each described in a few clever, informative sentences. It seems like a great piece of editorial copy for a magazine like *Esquire*, where it appeared in the early 1950s. Except that a smiling pint of Guinness beer occupies the lower right corner, and the whole thing is an iconic “advertisorial” created by the advertising mastermind David Ogilvy.¹

Native advertising—a paid placement in which the ad blends in with the look and format of the surrounding content—isn’t new, but it is enjoying a major renaissance. According to one estimate, spending on native advertising in the U.S. has grown by more than 200% between 2013 and 2015, and will double again to \$21 billion by 2018. Investment in “native style” advertising, such as the Guinness Guide to Oysters, is pegged to grow nearly 600% during that five-year period.²

Many factors and forces are driving the renewed interest in native ad formats. For example, as digital media consumption goes mainstream, advertisers are paying more attention to optimizing the performance of their digital portfolio. Also, consumption on mobile devices (mostly phones) exceeded that on “fixed” browsers in mid-2014, and the gap continues to grow.³ The reduced real estate on a mobile screen encourages the use of native “in-stream” ads such as promoted Facebook posts and sponsored Tweets.

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Publishers have been quick to accommodate native advertising. New digital outlets such as BuzzFeed and VICE have built their (very successful) business models almost entirely around native content.⁴ More quietly and behind the scenes, traditional publishers have embraced native advertising, including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Atlantic*.⁵ Already in 2013, three out of four U.S. publishers offered native advertising opportunities.⁶

Feeding the Hunger for Information

But, at the end of the day, it is consumers, not advertisers or publishers, who are driving the rise of native advertising. Empowered by social networks and mobile computing, consumers have rapidly developed an insatiable appetite for information. Consumers seek insight rather than product pitches; they trust friends and colleagues more than salespeople; they want to navigate their own way to a purchase decision rather than get squeezed through a company's sales funnel. More than 70% of consumers say they prefer to learn about a product or service through content rather than traditional advertising.⁷

Announcing their own native advertising offerings in September 2015, the *Financial Times* noted, "It's all about creating quality experiences people want to spend time with,"⁸ which also is a fair characterization of the overall goal of content marketing. Content Marketing Institute (CMI) views native advertising as a companion activity to content marketing. The primary difference is that native is a paid placement on a media site that you are "renting," according to CMI Founder Joe Pulizzi. Content marketing, among other things, involves providing attractive, desirable content on your own properties (websites, blogs, print publications, etc.).⁹

To better understand how and to what extent content marketers are using native advertising, we recently surveyed random marketers from CMI's broader audience. For purposes of this research, native advertising was defined as *a form of paid online content placement that matches the format and function of the publishing platform on which it appears.*

In particular, we aimed to understand the attitudes and motivations among those who use native advertising ("users") compared to those who do not ("nonusers"). What led users to invest in native advertising formats, and what is holding back nonusers? Are there emerging practices and guidelines that can reduce the uncertainty and risk of investing in this relatively new form of advertising? Will native become a predominant outlet for marketers, and if so, how quickly? Is it really the new black?

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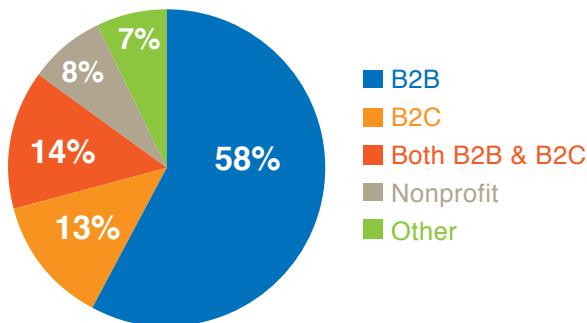
METHODOLOGY

In July and August 2015, CMI conducted an electronic survey of randomly selected marketers from its broader audience. A total of 111 surveys were completed. Of these, 96 respondents said they had a content marketing role within their organization and were qualified to respond to the main questions on the survey.

Survey respondents were primarily business-to-business (B2B) marketers in North America. Numerous other countries are represented in the findings; however, due to the small number of responses, we did not attempt to interpret the results by country or region. Further research is recommended to substantiate and extend these findings.

Respondent Profile

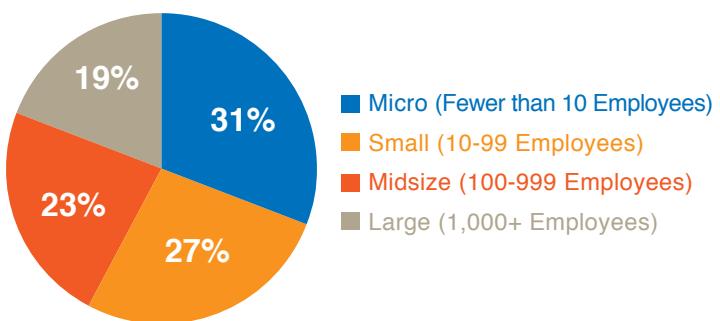
Nature of Organization



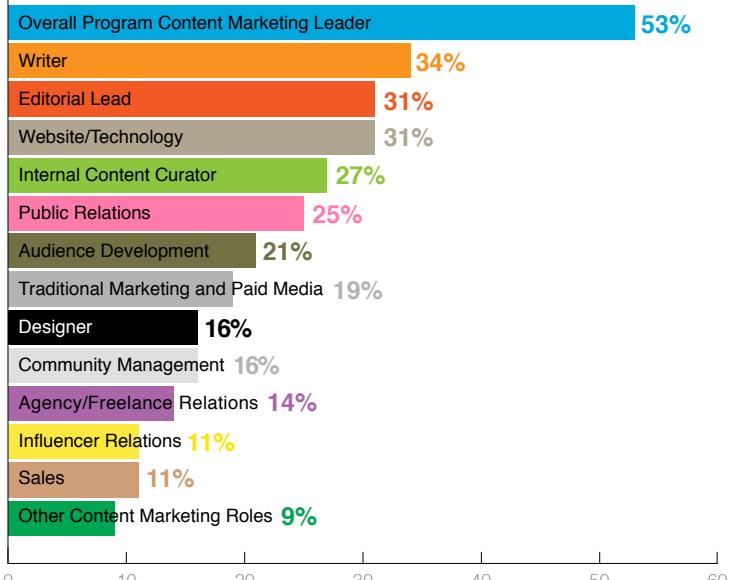
Industry Classification



Size of Organization



Content Marketing Roles



Base: Number of respondents who answered the question. Multiple responses permitted.

FINDINGS

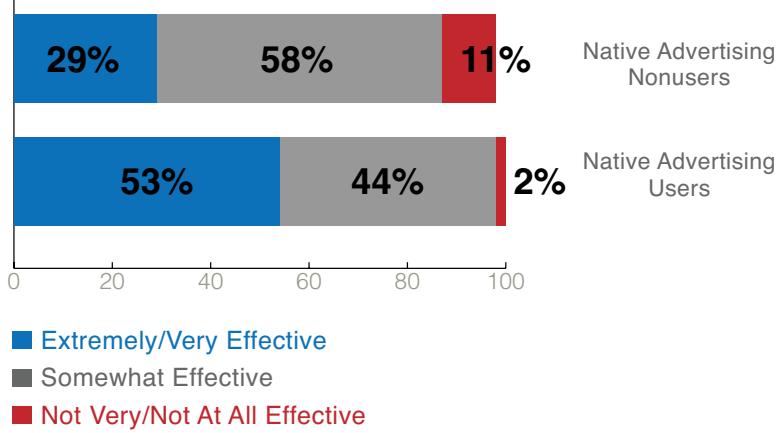
Overall Perception of Native Advertising Effectiveness

Unlike Green Eggs and Ham, There Is No Hard Core Resistance to Native Advertising

We first asked all respondents (users and nonusers) to state their opinion or perception of native advertising (see Figure 1). Predictably, users of native advertising rate its effectiveness more highly than do nonusers: 53% consider it extremely or very effective, another 44% rate it somewhat effective. Only 2% of native advertising users perceive it as not very or not at all effective.

Among nonusers, nearly a third (29%) perceive native advertising to be extremely/very effective; 58% say it is somewhat effective; and 11% say it is not very/not at all effective.

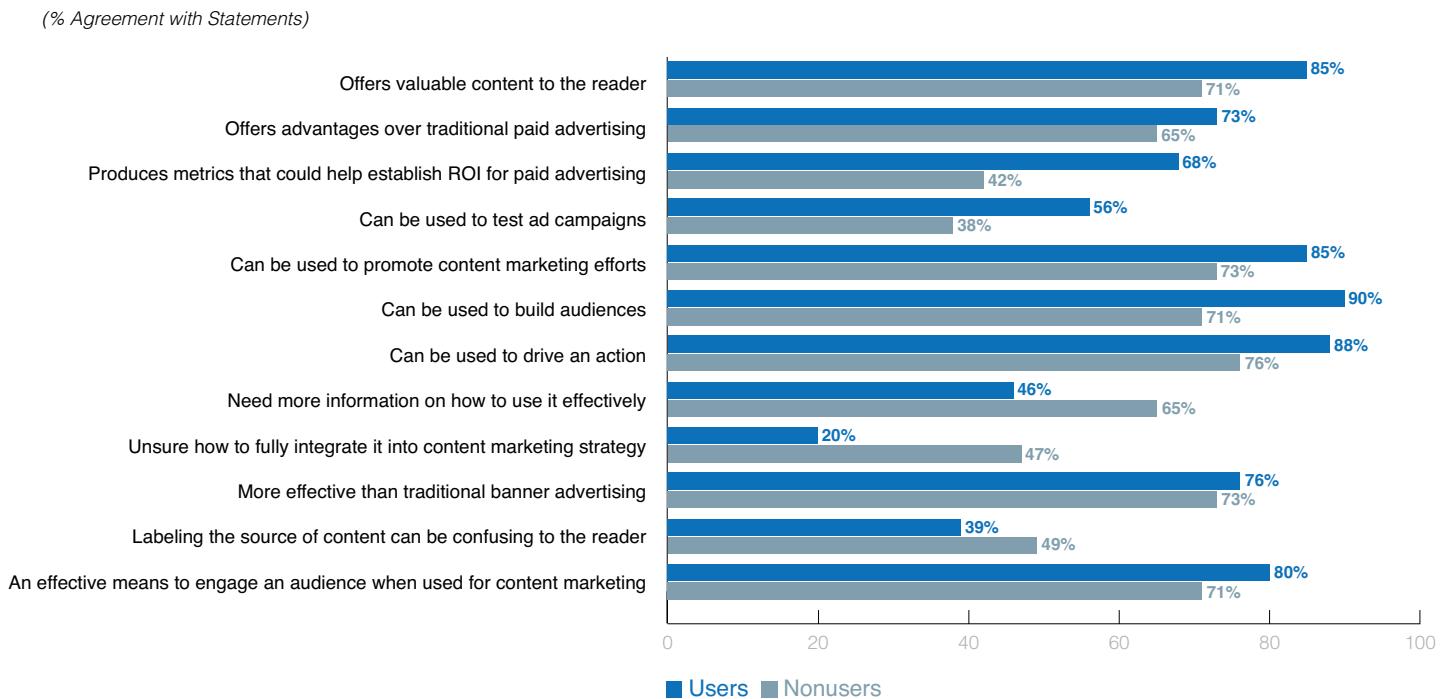
Figure 1: How Effective is Native Advertising When Used for Content Marketing?



Clearly, much depends on how one interprets the “somewhat effective” response on the five-point scale. If it indicates a generally negative attitude, we can conclude that nearly seven in 10 nonusers (69%) are not convinced of the effectiveness of native advertising. On the other hand, if “somewhat effective” indicates a wait-and-see, prove-it-to-me attitude, nearly nine in 10 (87%) believe that native may offer some beneficial impact.

When we drilled more deeply into the respondents’ opinions about native advertising, the difference between users and nonusers was even less clear (see Figure 2). For example, 85% to 90% of users agreed that native “offers valuable content to the reader,” “can be used to promote content marketing efforts,” “can be used to build audiences,” and “can be used to drive action.” Yet among nonusers, at least 70% also agreed with these statements. Moreover, 76% of native users (and 73% of nonusers) agreed that native is “more effective than traditional banner advertising.”

Figure 2: Please Indicate How Strongly You Agree or Disagree with Each of the Following Statements Concerning the Use of Native Advertising for Content Marketing.



To be sure, there were noticeable perceptual disparities between users and nonusers in some areas, such as whether native advertising “produces metrics that could help establish ROI for paid advertising” (68% agreement among users versus 42% among nonusers), or whether it “can be used to test ad campaigns” (56% versus 38%). But these strike us as areas in which it is hard to have an informed opinion without some practical experience with native advertising.

In short, we believe that the generally positive perception of the uses and impact of native advertising indicates that nonusers are not held back by prejudice or strongly held doubts about its effectiveness.

NATIVE ADVERTISING USE

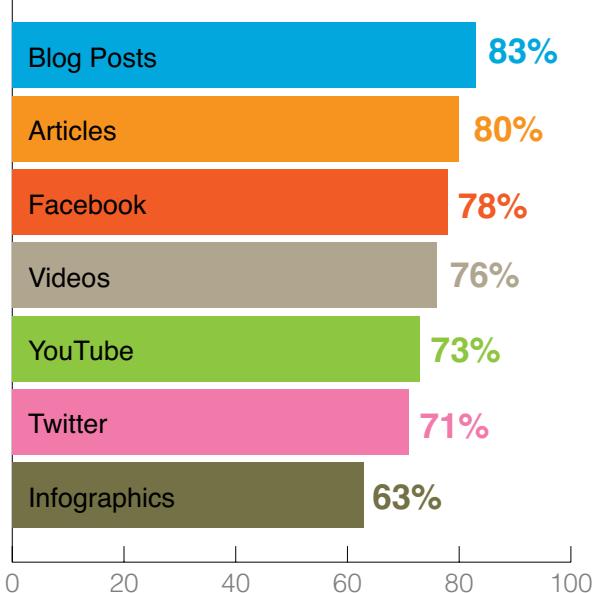
You Can Lead a Horse to Water, But Eventually You Have to Ride It

Going native is still not a mainstream activity. Forty-three percent of respondents reported using native advertising for content marketing purposes in the last 12 months, versus 57% who did not. Based on their experience (rather than their perception), 56% of users rated native advertising as extremely/very effective, one-third as somewhat effective, and one in 10 as not very effective.

These judgments must be considered as tentative, given that one-third of users have deployed native for less than one year and nearly three-quarters have used it for one to two years.

Not surprisingly, few firms have yet fully embraced native advertising and baked it into their content marketing efforts. Only 12% of users said they have incorporated it into their calendar and use it “on a continual basis.” However, another 29% use it “as often as we can.” More than half use native advertising on an ad-hoc basis (37%) or experimentally (17%).

Figure 3: Forms of Native Advertising That Marketers Use



Organizations are using a variety of native advertising formats (see Figure 3), including blog posts (83%), articles (80%), Facebook (78%), videos (76%), and YouTube (73%). Interestingly, when asked to rate the effectiveness of these formats (see Figure 4), users put YouTube (83%) and videos (81%) at the top, with Facebook in seventh place (at 50%). This suggests that content marketers use Facebook out of necessity (an expectation to be present on the platform) rather than due to effectiveness.

Other forms of native advertising that marketers use include: Podcasts and audio presentations (46%), Interactive polls/quizzes (39%), Instagram (27%), Tumblr (20%), Vine (17%), and Other types of native advertising (56%).

So, why have some firms hopped onto the native advertising saddle, while more than half are still just admiring the horse?

We asked users to indicate what initially motivated them to try native advertising (see Figure 5). The overwhelming top response (selected by 61%) was identification of native advertising opportunities. About half as many said awareness of others using it in ad campaigns and proven case studies (each at 32%) were motivators. Only 12% said they started native advertising after receiving education or training on the benefits.

Figure 4: How Marketers Rate Native Advertising Effectiveness

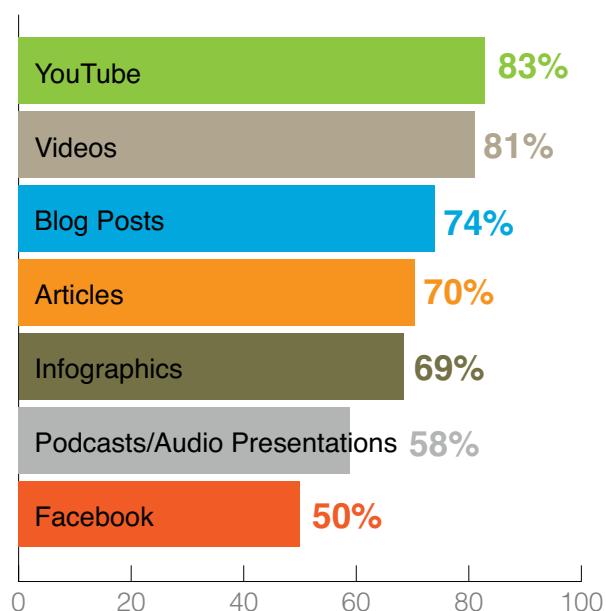
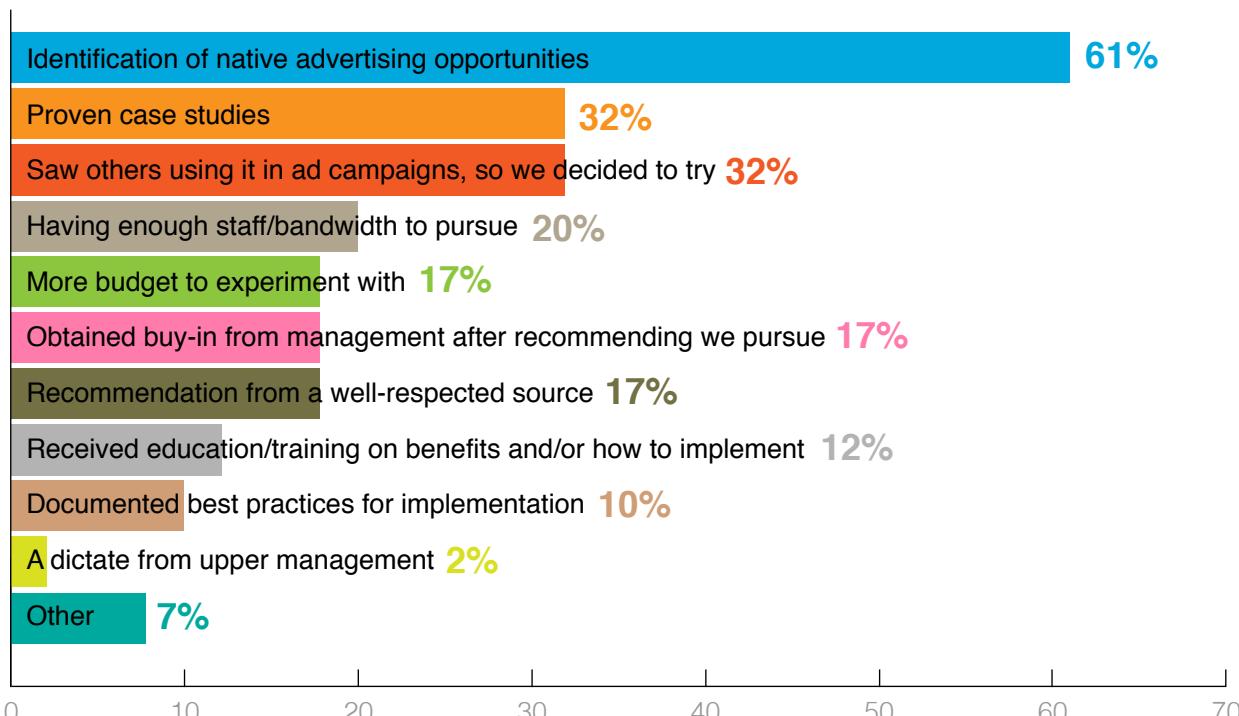
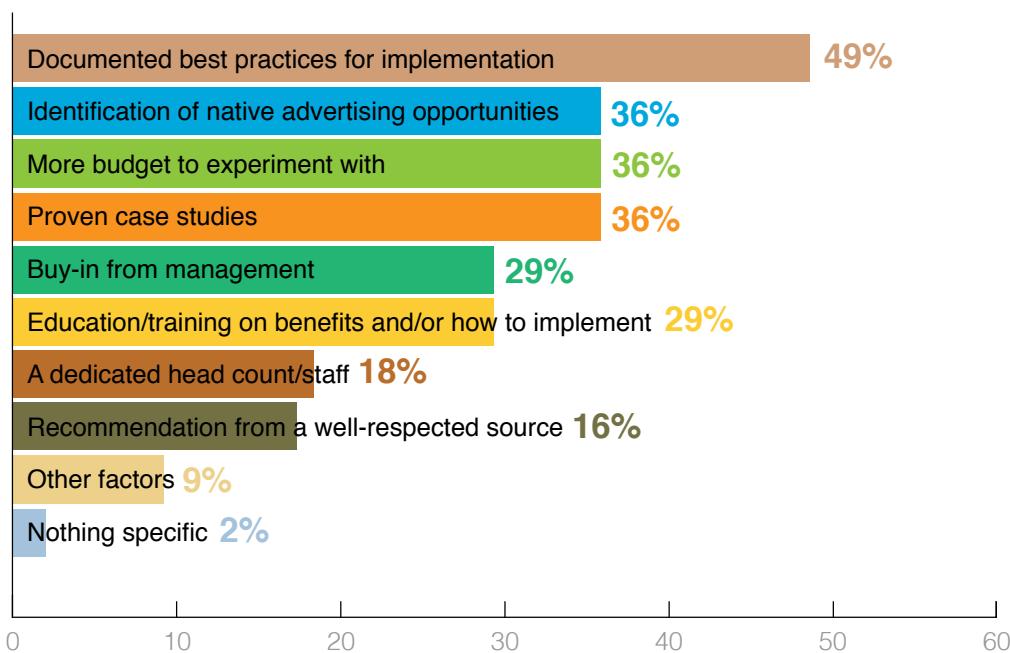


Figure 5: Marketers' Initial Motivations for Using Native Advertising



Now, compare the responses among nonusers, when we asked what top three factors would encourage them to start using native advertising for content marketing (see Figure 6). Again, there is a clear favorite response, with 49% selecting “documented best practices for implementation,” followed by identified opportunities, more budget, and proven case studies (all with 36%).

Figure 6: Factors That Nonusers of Native Advertising Say Would Encourage Use



The results are deceptively similar—but we believe that the clear number-one choice in each case points to the important role of company culture in the adoption of native advertising (and, no doubt, of other innovations). In short, users identified opportunities for native advertising and seized them; they demonstrate a culture of experimentation. Nonusers, on the other hand, crave documented best practices above all else; they have less tolerance for risk. It feels a lot like Geoffrey Moore’s classic adoption curve. And indeed, when percentages are applied to the groups in Moore’s adoption curve, the innovators through early majority account for half of the users of a product, while the late majority and laggards make up the other half—not that far from the 43% to 57% split today for native advertising.¹⁰

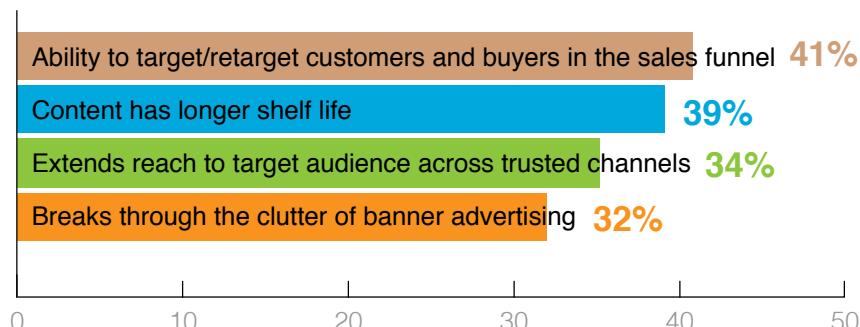
NATIVE ADVERTISING GOALS AND BENEFITS

Eyes on the (Right) Prize

The top goals for the respondents' organizations when using native advertising for content marketing are creating brand awareness (63%), building a subscriber base (39%), producing deeper brand engagement (39%), and generating leads (39%). These correspond nicely to the main goals of many content marketing initiatives, indicating that organizations are not making the mistake of treating native advertising as a direct substitute for conversion-oriented banner advertising.

Similarly, when we asked why content marketers use native advertising rather than other traditional forms of advertising (see Figure 7), they cited the ability to target/retarget customers and buyers in the sales funnel (41%), the longer shelf life of native advertising content (39%), the ability to reach target audiences across trusted channels (34%), and the way native breaks through the clutter of banner advertising (32%). In particular, the extended shelf life of content developed for native advertising also suggests the opportunity to use a single asset across multiple content marketing properties and projects.

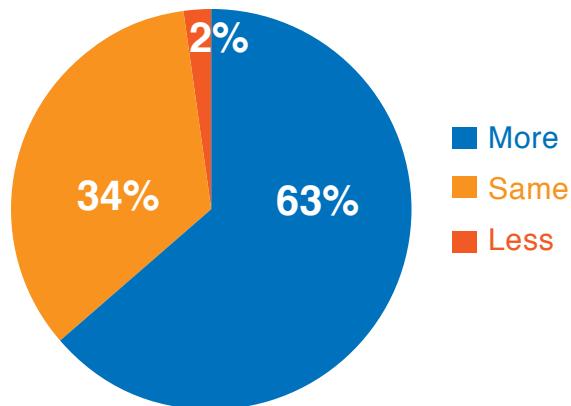
Figure 7: Top Factors That Motivate Marketers to use Native Over Traditional Advertising



The use of native advertising clearly makes the heart grow fonder. Almost all respondents (97%) indicated that their companies plan to use more or the same amount of native advertising for content marketing in the next 12 months, with 63% citing an increase.

Importantly, the use of native advertising clearly makes the heart grow fonder. Almost all respondents (97%) indicated that their companies plan to use more or the same amount of native advertising for content marketing in the next 12 months, with 63% citing an increase. Only 2% said they plan to use less native advertising (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Marketers' Plans for Using Native Advertising for Content Marketing in Next 12 Months



The data on spending for native advertising is, again, subject to contrasting interpretations. On the one hand, seven out of 10 respondents said their native advertising budget (excluding staff) is less than 25% of the total marketing budget. On the other hand, the average budget for native advertising was 22%—which is fairly impressive, given how recently organizations have embraced native formats. (Remember, one-third have used it for less than a year and 73% for less than three years.)

PRODUCTION AND MEASUREMENT OF NATIVE ADVERTISING

No Escape From Marketing's Perennial Challenges

The fact that the budget figures exclude staff costs is critical, especially because 66% of content marketers said the marketing team is responsible for creating native advertising content, and 61% said they create content in-house using a dedicated writer(s). Twenty-nine percent outsource to freelancers. Only 15% said they outsource production of native content to an agency, with 10% citing outsourcing to a publisher.

We expect that the latter will change, as publishers mature their native advertising offerings, expand their dedicated staff, and impose requirements to use their own resources in order to deflect some of the criticism of how native advertising undermines journalistic integrity.¹¹

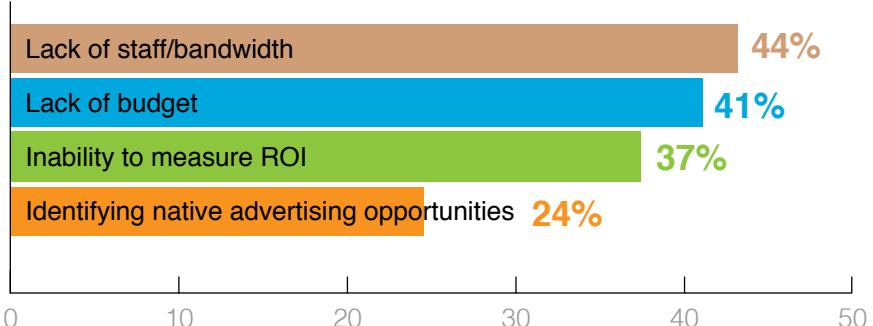
Given this pronounced reliance on

in-house resources, respondents not surprisingly cited lack of staff/bandwidth (44%) and lack of budget (41%) as their top two challenges when using native advertising for content marketing (see Figure 9), closely followed by inability to measure ROI (37%).

No budget, no resources, no way to prove ROI—the perennial marketing headaches, the Three Horsemen of the Marketing Apocalypse—also bedevil the use of native advertising for content marketing. Tellingly, respondents named quality of leads (51%) and website traffic (44%) as the top two methods used to measure the effectiveness of native advertising—yet these are hardly the best ways to measure progress on the stated goals of creating brand awareness, building a subscriber base, and producing brand engagement. Clearly, a key task for marketers using native advertising going forward is to understand and develop appropriate performance metrics—and to educate stakeholders about how to properly measure the impact of native advertising.

Finally: Is native advertising growing as dramatically as the projections suggest? We asked nonusers how likely they were to use native advertising for content marketing in the next 12 months. Only 11% said extremely or very likely. Still, another 36% said they were somewhat likely to deploy native advertising. If half of that total of 47% do begin using native advertising next year, it would represent roughly a 30% increase in usage for our sample—which is almost exactly the growth in native advertising spending that BI Intelligence predicts from 2015 to 2016.¹²

Figure 9: Top Challenges Marketers Face When Using Native Advertising



RECOMMENDATIONS

Resistance is Futile, Participation is the Key to Customer Engagement

Make no mistake: Native advertising is not just hype, and it is not a temporary fad. Native advertising is here to stay. It has been embraced by publishers because it tends to put them back into a direct relationship with the advertising brand. Whereas ad networks, and especially programmatic advertising, threaten to reduce publishers to a “dumb screen” (mere undifferentiated real estate for an ad placement), native advertising returns the ad buyer relationship to the publisher. That’s a fundamental business model incentive that will encourage publishers to weather both consumer confusion about native advertising content and the pressure from ad networks on the volume side of the business.¹³

But, make no mistake again: Native advertising does not displace digital banner advertising, nor does it subsume content marketing initiatives. Native may be the next big thing—in terms of interest from publishers and advertisers—but it is and will remain just one tool in the arsenal available to content marketers.

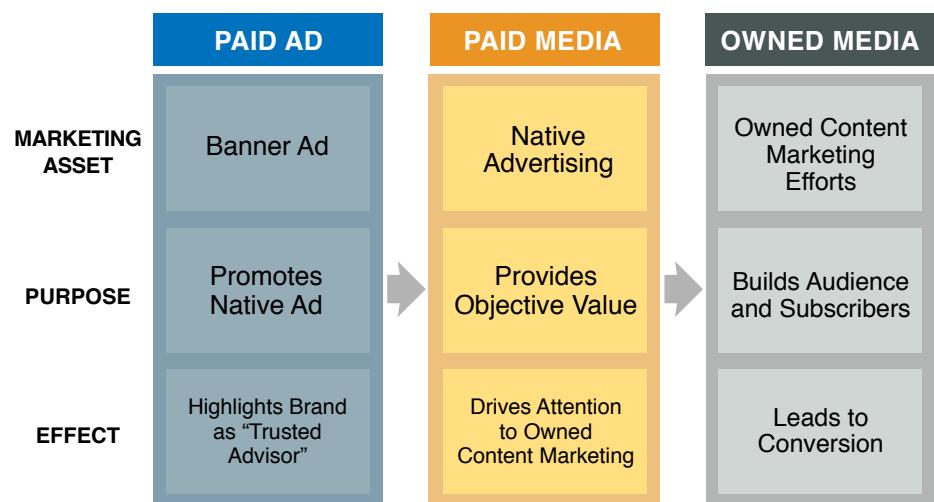
Building Audiences With Native

For content marketers, the challenge is to strike the right balance—given a particular audience and the goals of the campaign—between paid advertising (traditional ad placement), paid media (native advertising), and owned media (content marketing on your own properties). In the past, this often has been a question of splitting up the available budget and resources, which can lead to fragmenting the effort and diminishing the impact. We believe that, going forward, marketers increasingly should aim to use all three elements together, “dialing-in” the appropriate mix according to the specific project (see Figure 10). For example, for your early efforts at native advertising-sponsored articles, you might want to spend more on banner advertisements that draw attention and traffic to the paid media.

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The key to this kind of interrelated, holistic effort is to ensure what we call “continuity of voice” across every element in the mix. This means that all of the content—whether banner ad, sponsored feature article, or content marketing blog post—should maintain a consistent (but not necessarily identical) tone, messaging, and underlying brand identity. As Brian Clark, founder of Copyblogger and CEO of Rainmaker Digital, has noted, “People expect continuity in the information trails they travel.”¹⁴ Since native advertising aims to mimic the publisher’s editorial content, this expectation will greatly influence what types of native placements are appropriate for a given brand. Pharmaceutical companies are not a great match for the irreverent tone of VICE, just as a brand aimed at teens would be out of place in *The Atlantic*. In other words, although it is true that great native content is itself great journalism, it still needs to be a kind of journalism, and a type of publisher, that is appropriate to the advertiser’s core brand identity.

Figure 10: “Dialing-In” the Right Mix of Banner, Native, and Content Marketing



How to Get Going Native

As with most other areas of content marketing (and customer experience management, more broadly), native advertising is a learn-as-you-go process. Now is already the time to get started. There is ample evidence showing how other companies have successfully used native advertising, and publishers are no longer shy about the services they offer.

Moreover, we believe that it is foolhardy to wait for “best practices” to emerge.

First, because the native advertising dynamic is so new, and changing so quickly, any “proven” templates or guidelines you choose to follow will likely be out of date before you start. Second, even if the best practices do retain some validity, they can’t lead to a competitive differentiation. As we have previously noted at the CMI blog:

“Too often, marketers’ fear of failure in the short term stands in the way of the learning—even the breakthrough new practice—we might achieve in the longer term.”¹⁵

Still, that doesn’t mean you should dive blindly into an expensive native advertising campaign. Because it contributes to the content marketing strategy (which itself is part of the overall marketing and customer experience strategy), your first uses of native should be carefully selected, and have clearly defined goals. Of course, that raises the shadow of proving ROI, one of the key inhibitors to the use of native advertising, according to our survey.

So the question is, *what do you want the native content to achieve?* Broadly speaking, the answer falls into two categories: engagement and action. Unlike the banner ad, you’re not hoping that consumers will simply glance at the content and perhaps click on it. Native advertising (like the content in content marketing in general) is meant to be consumed—you want people to gorge themselves on it, appreciate it, and tell others about it. Fortunately, digital media allow us to deeply measure this kind of engagement—and far beyond the page containing native content. For example, Netflix-sponsored content on WIRED (about the evolution of television) and *The New York Times* (on women in prison, to promote “Orange is the New Black”) included numerous interactive graphics and design elements.¹⁶ Besides adding to the information and entertainment value of the article, such interactive features provide deep insight into the engagement of readers with the content.

Native advertising (like the content in content marketing in general) is meant to be *consumed*—you want people to gorge themselves on it, appreciate it, and tell others about it.

Perhaps most importantly, what behaviors are we aiming to provoke? Again, since native ads are supposed to feel and act like articles (that is, they should provide information or entertainment that is valuable in its own right), a product pitch or sales message is inappropriate (and probably wouldn't be allowed by the publisher anyway). Instead, the natural (and, from the consumer's perspective, welcome) thing to do is conclude the native ad with an offer . . . to get additional valuable information from your company or brand.

The action you want to trigger is to deepen the consumer's conviction that you are a "trusted authority." As Brian Clark notes, "The best thing to sell with the kind of content that makes an advertisement 'native' is more information [emphasis added]. Provide independent value in your native advertisement that inherently creates a desire to discover even more."¹⁷ Of course, as shown in Figure 10, the point is to move readers from the property that you're "renting" from the publisher to one that you own (your ongoing content marketing properties), so that you can build a sustained and valuable relationship with the audience.

Finally, what about budget and resource constraints (the other prime barriers to using native advertising, according to the survey respondents)? Frankly, one reason publishers have embraced native advertising products and services is so they can price them at a premium compared to ad space (which they may be selling in bulk to ad networks). What's more, when produced in-house (as it is for most of the companies taking part in the survey), native content may be even more time-consuming and costly to produce because it has to be crafted to match the tone of the publisher's editorial content.

In short, native won't come cheaply. We don't know of any magic wand that can increase marketing budgets and allow content marketers to use more native advertising. Except . . . as we noted at the outset, it's not a coincidence that native advertising opportunities are becoming available and attractive just as more advertising budget moves online *and* as marketers seek to understand the optimal mix of display ads, content marketing, and native advertising. That mix will, of course, vary according to your given campaign, audience, and goals—but it does mean that your native advertising efforts could be supported by reallocated resources rather than new resources.

Put that together with the potential of native advertising to accelerate your existing (and, hopefully, very productive) content marketing efforts, and native could indeed be the new black outfit in your content marketing wardrobe.

Even if it's orange.

ENDNOTES

¹ The Guinness Guide to Oysters was the first ad created by Ogilvy, who up to that point had evidently exhibited no great ability for creative thought. You can view the ad, along with a brief history and analysis, at <http://swiped.co/file/guinness-guide-to-oysters-by-david-ogilvy/>.

² These figures are from a 2014 report by BI Intelligence. See <http://uk.businessinsider.com/spending-on-native-ads-will-soar-as-publishers-and-advertisers-take-notice-2014-11>.

³ For a report on mobile consumption exceeding fixed browsers, see <http://www.smartinsights.com/mobile-marketing/mobile-marketing-analytics/mobile-marketing-statistics/>.

⁴ For a review of BuzzFeed's struggle to strike the right balance between editorial and advertising within their native model, see <http://adage.com/article/digitalnext/buzzfeed-s-editorial-fumble-a-buzzkill/298386/>.

⁵ See an analysis of *The Wall Street Journal*'s approach to native advertising and "custom content" at <http://digiday.com/publishers/wall-street-journals-native-approach-looks-like-puff-piece-nobodys-going-read/>.

⁶ Another 17% said they were considering offering native ads. Only one out of 10 publishers had no plans for native in 2013. See <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/How-Native-Ad-Campaigns-Shaping-Up/1010064>.

⁷ Roper Public Affairs and the Customer Content Council surveyed 1,005 adult Americans in March 2011. They found that 74% said "they prefer to get information about a company in a collection of articles, rather than in an ad." See <http://www.ascendintegratedmedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/63402297-Consumers-Attitude-Towards-Custom-Content-2011.pdf>.

⁸ The quote is from Dominic Good, FT's global advertising sales director. See <http://digiday.com/publishers/financial-times-readies-paid-posts-advertisers/>.

⁹ For a discussion about the differences between content marketing and native advertising, see Joe Pulizzi's "Native Advertising is not Content Marketing" at <http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2015/08/native-advertising-content-marketing/>.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Moore is popularly associated with the adoption curve due to his 1991 book, *Crossing the Chasm*. However, the adoption curve was initially developed by John Bohlen, George Beal, and Everett Rogers in the 1970s. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technology_adoption_lifecycle.

¹¹ John Oliver's rant on "Last Week Tonight" is the most (in)famous critique of native advertising. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_F5GxCwizc. A calm overview of native's inevitability (which begins with "Sorry, John Oliver, native ads aren't going anywhere") from Tessa Wegert, can be found at: <https://contently.com/strategist/2015/02/09/5-tips-for-launching-a-native-ad-offering-from-5-top-publishers/>.

¹² Specifically, the usage of native advertising for content marketing in our survey population would increase by 31.7%; BI Intelligence (see note 2) predicts a 29% growth in native advertising spending from 2015 to 2016.

¹³ For a discussion of consumer confusion about native advertising versus editorial content, see <http://fortune.com/2014/07/09/readers-dislike-sponsored-content-native-ads/>.

¹⁴ See Brian Clark's article, "Don't Waste Your Time With Native Advertising (Do This Instead)," at <http://www.saydaily.com/2014/02/dont-waste-your-time-with-native-advertising-do-this-instead>.

¹⁵ See Robert Rose's deconstruction of best practices at <http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2011/10/best-practices-mediocre-results/>.

¹⁶ These articles are analyzed in "Nine Examples of Native Ads People Actually Enjoyed Reading," available at <http://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/native-advertising-examples>.

¹⁷ See note 14.

ABOUT CONTENT MARKETING INSTITUTE

Content Marketing Institute is the leading global content marketing education and training organization, teaching enterprise brands how to attract and retain customers through compelling, multi-channel storytelling. CMI's **Content Marketing World** event, the largest content marketing-focused event, is held every September in Cleveland, Ohio, USA, and the **Intelligent Content Conference** event is held every spring. CMI publishes the bi-monthly magazine **Chief Content Officer**, and provides strategic consulting and content marketing research for some of the best-known brands in the world. CMI is a 2012-2015 Inc. 500/5000 company. Watch this [video](#) to learn more about CMI.

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