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Responsibility



And never the twain shall meet

Never underestimate the importance of your advertisers.

In many cases, advertisers are the most essential asset a publication has, at least from a financial perspective. And in times that can be described as challenging for publishers, maintaining this asset is mission critical for your success.

“...it should be said that readers can see right through publications that pander to advertisers, play favorites and subsequently do not offer quality content.”

So how do you ensure that your relationships with your advertisers remain strong? Follow sound, ethical advertising policies, and make sure those policies are abundantly clear to both advertisers and readers. Let's take a look at some of the key issues that should be addressed.

Setting boundaries

First and foremost, your advertising policies should establish a firm line between advertising and editorial content. Given the symbiotic and therefore delicate nature of the relationship between advertisers and magazines, there are plenty of opportunities to blur that line. The rules you establish to govern this relationship are sort of like the chaperones of generations past: they protect against inappropriate mingling. And the less you have of that, the better.

The most egregious example of unethical behavior is when advertisers are provided editorial coverage in exchange for buying advertising. It's hard to believe this actually happens, but it does. It goes without saying that not only should you avoid this practice, you should steer clear of even the perception of allowing it.

Another obvious area of concern is editorial coverage — namely, interviewing sources for articles and news briefs. In many cases, especially for niche magazines, it makes sense to interview an advertiser about a subject that falls within his area of expertise. However, be sure that you spread the wealth equally among advertisers who fall into the category. Also, use quotes that are germane to the story at hand, not the ones in which the advertiser is extolling the virtues of his product or service.

In a similar vein, careful consideration should be taken when deciding where to place ads in relation to editorial content that pertains to your advertisers. Some magazines do not allow such placement, feeling that it could damage their credibility. Others have an upcharge for specific placement. However you decide to handle it, be sure to apply the same rules to all advertisers so there is no sense of favoritism.

Tread carefully

Speaking of playing favorites, this would be a good time to discuss what might be considered the granddaddy of all ad/editorial conflicts: advertorials. Advertorials are advertisements that are laid out to look like articles. Some publications use the same fonts and design they use for editorial content — and even include a byline — to add to the impression that their advertorials are regular articles. We highly discourage this practice.

If you publish advertorials, it is absolutely critical that you label them for what they are. Place the words “Advertorial” or “Paid Advertisement” prominently at the top or the bottom of the page. Don't jeopardize your credibility by misleading readers.



In an ideal world, advertising and editorial would remain separate components, handled by different staff members. Of course, that's not always realistic for small publications. If you or your team members have to shoulder multiple responsibilities to get your publication to press, maintaining a clear division between advertising and editorial gets a bit more challenging. That said, if you establish clear rules, put them in writing and follow them to the letter, then the picture is clear for all parties concerned.

The last factor that we would like to address on this topic is your readers. We don't want to sound overly dramatic, but it should be said that readers can see right through publications that pander to advertisers, play favorites and subsequently do not offer quality editorial content.

The efforts you make to maintain your credibility as an ethical publication that offers valuable substance to both advertisers and readers will go a long way toward earning their trust. And that, in turn, will help lay the foundation for strong, long-lasting relationships and, consequently, a publication with a long shelf life.