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THE PUBLISHER'S GUIDE TO AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Tactics and insights for personalized content recommendations

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Content recommendation technologies are evolving rapidly and transforming reader experiences on publisher sites. Marketers are turning to audience-facing tactics that range from showcasing the most read articles — a common model in the early days of digital media — to more sophisticated algorithms that serve content based on specific user metrics.

"There are so many places and outlets, so publishers are providing relevant content for their users in more dynamic ways to keep them on their sites," said Matt Broad, vice president of strategic services at Piano. "They want to keep them engaged with their content and provide relevant information to their users so that they're not going somewhere else to get that content."

This evolution comes at a time when, for publishers, personalized recommendations are more important than ever. More than **two-thirds of customers** expect publishers to offer content that addresses their needs and over **90%** say they prefer shopping with brands that offer personalized content over those with basic offerings.

Data-driven content recommendations have become effective tools for addressing these preferences. These are helping publishers better engage with their audiences at every stage of the customer journey, whether it's serving higher ad value content such as video or sponsored content for active users or subscriber-only content targeted toward high-propensity readers.

In this guide, Digiday and Piano explore the tactics and steps successful publishers are taking to capture audiences with personalized content recommendations that drive quantifiable reader, viewer and listener engagement.

Addressing engagement and identity challenges with content recommendations

As U.S. adults continue to **spend more than half their days consuming content,** publishers are looking for content recommendation technologies that keep users on-site and engaged. However, exactly how they do that is becoming a nuanced set of choices. Many are realizing it's necessary to consider their main KPIs and objectives before choosing a specific recommendation solution.

The first nuance is that specific types of content align with specific audiences. Recommendations can't be a spray-and-pray process. For instance, publishers wanting to increase engagement for a specific type of content — i.e., white papers, articles on a certain topic, etc. — are looking for recommendation models that identify the pieces of content in those areas that consumers are most likely to read.

"We use algorithms to determine what people are engaging in," Broad said. "It's all about being able to serve readers articles that are contextual to the article they're reading. You're providing content similar to what their interests are, and much of that information is gathered through first-party data."

Other important considerations involve striking a balance between algorithmic effectiveness and familiarity with audience needs and data transparency.

On average, **68% of first-time website visitors** do not engage with publishers' content. Further, in a typical month, a significant percentage of a given audience will abandon the experience altogether, so serving content recommendations with which readers will actually engage is more important than ever.

To mitigate this outcome, publishers are working to keep audiences engaged with content while **protecting their data from exploitation.** Unlike abandoned carts following shoppers around on e-commerce sites, content recommendation solutions are using machine learning to offer options with which users want to engage. And because these solutions rely on first-party data from the publisher's platform, marketers can rest assured that they will only employ consented data when serving up recommendations.

Tactics and Insights

Publishers are using content recommendation algorithms to determine what people are engaging in, which helps them use first-party data to connect with readers' interests.

Publishers need to consider their main KPIs and objectives before choosing a content recommendation solution; this ensures they'll be able to optimize for the outcomes their organization values.

To protect user privacy when personalizing recommendations, publishers are using clean room technologies and first-party data solutions to ensure the information they use is collected in a manner that protects consumer privacy.

Types of content recommendations publishers are testing

Publishers are employing various types of content recommendation engines, including on- and off-page solutions, as well as more sophisticated models to increase readership and improve customer experiences. Some of the most popular algorithms include recommendations based on:

Personally recommended

These use reader behavior and semantic analysis to find recently published stories that are the most relevant to individual readers based on their reading history.

Highest readership

By analyzing article consumption, these models identify the most popular stories on the website so publishers can show them to new audiences.

Latest content

This model serves up the latest pieces of content in chronological order based on the publication date.

Look-alike content

This algorithm analyzes group behavior patterns and recommends the content that other readers with similar interests are reading.

Regardless of the model or algorithm, however, all modern content recommendation systems employ user data to personalize and optimize content suggestions to individual audience members.

"There's a variety of different software out there that people can utilize for content recommendations, making sure it's dynamic and relevant to the user," Broad said. "You can customize the templates to have the same look and feel as the publisher's website. The end user won't know that that's a personalized content module.

"We're even testing out the bottom of the article and going beyond that to section fronts or website home pages," Broad continued, "making those dynamic so it's always fresh and unique to the user."

Publishers are using these technologies to determine which locations, times of day and topics have the greatest impact on their readers. For instance, if a user routinely visits an organization's site to read about sporting events, they can tune their content recommendation modules to display this segment of content to keep readers engaged.

Tactics and Insights

Publishers are testing out multiple types of content recommendation engines to help increase readership and improve customer experiences.

Successful campaigns test the placements of content recommendations to see which ones are most engaging for users.

Publishers can customize content templates to have the same look and feel as the publisher's website, so the end user won't know it's been tailored.

Using analytics and tagging tactics to personalize content recommendations

For publishers, employing content recommendation technologies is one part of the process to engage audiences. Successful teams are also employing strategies and advanced analytics to make the most of their capabilities, especially when it comes to data insights.

"We look at a lot of different data metrics," Broad said. "For instance, visibility metrics show how many people saw the content recommendation. If it's below the fold or at the end of the article, we're focused on getting the user to get to that point, and then seeing if they're engaging. We're asking, 'Are they clicking it? And once they click it, what's that journey from there? How many articles do they continue to read? Did that content recommendation drive additional engagement for that user?"

Publishers are also using advanced tagging to draw insights from readers to empower content offerings in effective new ways. For example, successful campaigns are using analytics tools to remove previously read and unclicked articles from recommendation zones, heavily reducing clutter.

Aside from choosing the right content for users, publishers are also ensuring that the recommendations are placed in prominent locations on the website, sparking curiosity without disrupting their reading experience. These sites are including assets such as responsive images in these areas to drive engagement and encourage clicks.

However, publishers are also considering more specific factors when building content recommendation experiences. These include placement of the recommendation, content attributes, the time of placement and user segmentation.

"It's important to look at things like the publish date," said Broad. "Is it things that are published in the past 30 days that are contextual to that article or personalized to that user? Because there are different types of factors to look at, such as content tags or authors: Is it the journalists that are driving engagement?

"It's kind of a blend of all those different variables, coming up with the right mix for the user segment," he added.

Identifying the elements of content that resonate with specific groups at specific points in time is what makes recommendation solutions successful. Not every author or topic will engage these chosen audiences, so publishers are relying on a combination of analytics and tagging tactics to pinpoint the pieces of content users will find most relevant to their contexts.

Tactics and Insights

Successful publishers are using analytics to remove previously read and unclicked articles from content recommendation zones, which helps reduce clutter.

Evaluating content elements such as the publish date helps publishers identify content that will be most personalized to each user.

Publishers are taking time to place content recommendations in prominent locations on their websites, helping encourage clicks without disrupting readers' experiences.

Finding effective content recommendation resources

Many publishers need tools, technologies and partnerships to serve up content recommendations that engage readers and meet campaign goals. In particular, many seek partners and solutions that allow them to automate content recommendations.

High-quality recommendation solutions enable publishers to choose the content type, the recommendation model — i.e., latest, look-alike content, most-widely read, relevant to the user, etc. — and delivery mechanisms such as email templates, on-site approaches and more.

In addition to these features, one of the more significant elements of an effective content recommendation solution is its ability to customize modules and algorithms.

"You may have one module that serves up what's most relevant, so that's going to be contextual to the article you're on," Broad said. "Or you might go with most-read, so there's popularity there, or you may want to provide that dynamic approach of being able to put some filters on those dynamic recommendations. You don't necessarily want to have articles from four or five years ago that people aren't engaging with."

When it comes to choosing a partner and solution, publishers are looking at whether they power recommendations with data-driven technologies, comply with privacy regulations to protect user information and use machine learning to surface the most engaging, contextual content. This requires thorough testing and evaluation.

"I always like to test everything," said Broad. "It's important to find a solution that will allocate resources outside developing content recommendations. So for the newsrooms we work with, if we're able to provide these in a dynamic fashion, that's alleviating some of the resources needed from the newsroom. There's potentially some cost-saving there. But it's about looking at what parameters are available within the content recommendation, making sure that there's the customization available to define what's included in that content module."

Content recommendations are enabling publishers to engage audiences like never before. Solutions that allow marketers to use automation to pinpoint the most engaging content pieces for specific segments, place them in optimal areas and circulate them effectively are helping organizations drive more revenue.

Tactics and Insights

The best recommendation solutions enable publishers to choose the content format and delivery mechanisms such as email templates and on-site modules.

Being able to customize content recommendations allows publishers to dynamically shift elements on the page to better connect with readers.

Publishers should consider whether the partner's content recommendations are powered via data-driven technologies and comply with privacy regulations to protect user information.

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Piano empowers organizations to understand and influence customer behavior. By unifying customer data, analyzing behavior metrics and creating personalized customer journeys, Piano helps brands launch campaigns and products faster, strengthen customer engagement and drive personalization at scale from a single platform. Headquartered in Amsterdam with offices across the Americas, Europe and Asia Pacific, Piano serves a global client base, including Air France, the BBC, CBS, IBM, Kirin Holdings, Jaguar Land Rover, Nielsen, The Wall Street Journal and more. Piano has been recognized as one of the fastest-growing, most innovative technology companies in the world by World Economic Forum, Inc., Deloitte, American City Business Journals and more.

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