

ATTRACTING YOUNG(ER) AUDIENCES:

A guide for small(ish) legacy organizations



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Ethar El-Katatney

Executive Program in News Innovation and Leadership
Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism
City University of New York (CUNY)

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INTRODUCTION

Hello there,

So you're a legacy organization — perhaps with tens of thousands of readers and viewers, or perhaps just a few thousand. Maybe you produce a newspaper, or social video. Perhaps you TikTok, or perhaps you have your own website. Maybe you produce a podcast, or you write newsletters. Whatever and wherever you produce, you all share the same concern: How do we target a younger audience? How do we capture their attention, and how do we get them to keep coming back to us?

I'm sorry to tell you, but there is no magic formula. There's no combination of A, B, and C that can help you capture that elusive young'un, or get them to pay you money. There are dozens of things you can experiment with — formats and distribution platforms — some of which may work, but not all of which will be for you. There are, however, several guidelines to keep in mind that can help you figure out what you should be doing.

This guide is based on the author's years of experience as a media industry leader and that of experts from a dozen journalism organizations — some purely digital, some old school, and some that are a hybrid of both. From BuzzFeed to Chemical & Engineering News, the advice is surprisingly similar. Case studies throughout this guide will shed more light on each section. All interviews were conducted and this guide was written in early 2021.

This guide aims to help you start drafting your own strategy tailored to your organization, hopefully with a starting point of buy-in from higher ups along with a small team. For the purposes of this guide, by “young audiences,” we mean Zoomers or Gen Z: those born after 1996 and before 2012, with the oldest turning 25 this year. Although we discuss how to attract and produce content for them, we will not be addressing monetary issues, or to put it plainly: how to make money from them.

Let's get started.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ethar El-Katatney is an award-winning digital newsroom manager and strategist with over 15 years of international journalism experience working on news, features, and investigative stories for print, online, and TV. As Young Audiences Editor at The Wall Street Journal, she co-launched a digital news and culture magazine. Previously, Ethar was the executive producer overseeing the digital newsroom at AJ+, where she was also a founding member.

Ethar has been awarded a CNN African Journalist of the Year Award, a Samir Kassir Freedom of the Press Award, and an Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Journalist Award. She is the author of a book on Sufism in Yemen, and holds an MBA and an MA in Television and Digital Journalism from the American University in Cairo.

THE GEN Z AUDIENCE

LEARN WHO THEY ARE

The first thing to do is research. Talk to those who belong to the Gen Z demographic. Hire them. Immerse yourself where they are in the content they consume and produce.

Gen Z is racially and ethnically diverse, with 48% being non-White¹. Zoomers are on track to be the most well-educated generation. They are digital tech natives who consume hours of content a day and can be on up to half a dozen screens. They are plugged into the world around them and can jump from platform to platform in seconds. The majority are more comfortable expressing themselves digitally rather than in person, but are more guarded in what they express than their parents.

Gen Z is progressive. Zoomers are more likely to believe in climate change, racial injustice, same-sex marriage, and gender fluidity. They are pragmatic, and care deeply about the world and activism. They are more global in their outlook. They specialize early in their interests, and are more niche-focused and entrepreneurial. Many see themselves as entrepreneurs or brands in their own right. They are competitive and want what they want now, and are comfortable breaking the rules. They embrace change easily but are a stressed and anxious generation — anxious about the job market, personal debt, and the environment.²

¹ [Nearly half of post-Millennials are racial or ethnic minorities. Pew Research Center. Nov 13, 2018](#)

² [On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z. So Far. Pew Research Center. May 14, 2020](#)

CLEARLY DEFINE YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

A 15-year-old in high school has very different worries and fears than an 18-year-old starting university. So does a 21-year-old embarking on a career versus a 25-year-old thinking of buying a house. The more specific you can get in defining your target audience, the higher your chance of success. If you try to appeal to everyone, you'll dilute your content and appeal to no one. Know their demographics, their psychographics, their lifestyles. What are their interests? Which topics matter to them? Which platforms do they use? How do they spend their time? Drafting personas can sometimes help you decide on story choices and angles that relate to your target audience and encourage them to share it.

LISTEN TO YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

Listening is necessary to understand the needs and motivations of your audience, and figuring out what they want from you.

A relationship-centric model will help you serve them best. Relationship-building focuses on trust and how newsrooms can forge deeper connections with their target audience. Centering your audience needs and interests, their questions and curiosity in your content selection will result in higher engagement (see [audience development and engagement](#)). If you listen, you won't just be able to join the conversation they're having, you'll be able to lead and foster conversations. When you listen, you'll learn how they're impacted by the stories you cover, and in turn, how to empower them with your coverage.³

Social listening will let you find out who they follow, who they listen to, and why. It will allow you to tap into niche communities (see [niche topics](#)) which will in turn allow you to see who are the content makers and distributors in that space you can collaborate with (see [influencers](#)).

FORGET THE STEREOTYPES

“Young people aren't interested in news.” No, they are. Yes, they are often less interested than older adults, but they often get news at equal or higher rates, whether intentionally or not, by virtue of being online 24/7. When asked where they saw news yesterday, a BBC News lab reported a majority said from online media, including social media. And they found that the news needs of Gen Z are the same as their older counterparts. News needs are constant, but the tools of producing the journalism change.⁴

³ “How listening can benefit your business model.” Cole Goins. [American Press Institute](#). Sept 2018.

⁴ “Beyond 800 words: What user testing taught me about writing news for young people.” [BBC News Lab](#). Dec 2018.

HIRE THEM

Hire young, diverse Zoomers. And empower them to pitch and produce and be creative. What better way to target an audience and understand them than to hire them? They already live on the platforms. They intrinsically understand the behaviors. The benefits outweigh the challenges, and they can be trained and taught.

FOCUS

Understand that the media landscape today is vastly different than it was a decade ago. What worked for digital organizations like NowThis and AJ+ back in the day will not work now. They capitalized on a moment in time. Today, the digital landscape is crowded and has grown exponentially. The saturation of content and formats not just from organizations, but from content creators, influencers, politicians, and every Tom, Dick, and Harry means you are competing for crumbs against those who have vastly more resources, money, time, or expertise. You cannot be everywhere, and must decide where you can be.

RESPECT

Respect your target audience and understand the different aspects of what it means to be a young person consuming content today. They aren't flighty or unable to concentrate—they're bombarded with information and fast-moving types of content.

WHAT DO YOU STAND FOR?

What is your mission? Is it aligned with what Gen Z believe in? There will be a disconnect between you and them if you don't say what you stand for. Impartiality doesn't work with them. It will turn them off, and you will find it difficult to appeal to them. You can maintain editorial integrity and prioritize the truth without catering to false equivalency.

Case Study: JUV Consulting

Ziad Ahmed, CEO

Ziad Ahmed is in his early twenties. He's the CEO and founder of JUV, a six-year-old Gen Z consulting company staffed with a group of diverse Zoomers. In his words:

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The world is better when young people have a seat at the table, so we're claiming our seat.

At JUV, we hustle to make magic happen by co-creating with our clients' campaigns and products and ideas that resonate with us and empower us forward. We want you to think bolder and bigger, and we want to disrupt industries that need disruption. Gen Z is not a monolith and our time is not later, it is now. Our memes and movements and overconsumption allow us to be more informed leaders and doers, which is forgotten a lot in the discourse over the time we spend on our phones. Companies want our attention with only a surface understanding of us and the tools we use and the kinds of conversations we're having.

We are a cash-strapped group. We want **convenience, accessibility, representation, diversity, sustainability**. We want to feel like we make a difference and to be part of something bigger than ourselves. We want influencers to help us get people to the polls in Georgia, and for you to produce **impactful** content. There is so much content everywhere, and everyone and their mother has a publication. We consume a vast amount of information super quickly. We're tired and exhausted by the news, and fatigued. We're desensitized by trauma. It's no longer enough or interesting to tell us a politician is corrupt. We've come to expect that everyone will let us down. We want an escape.

To produce content for us, you have to understand what we're going through. And have **purpose-driven content**. What causes do you support? Who are the cultural influencers bringing color? What digitally savvy production techniques are you using? What platforms are you on? Are you producing a holistic campaign or message?

The media industry will look so much better when a bunch of White men stop controlling it. Content is often boring, and we don't see ourselves represented because they don't know anything about us, and they're not hiring us. And the people producing the content for us are doing a bad job of **social listening**.

I don't envy media their challenge: If you prioritize clicks over journalism, you're doing the wrong thing, but you'll get your audience. If you prioritize journalism over the clicks, you won't get us. But clickbait stokes misinformation, erodes trust, and further results in division and ideological silos.

Can **you entertain us while we learn**? We want to learn through entertainment. We are curious and voracious consumers. We can watch 15 seconds or 15 hours. Can you tap into that? Blend news and information and entertainment?

What do you stand for? Tell us and stick to it, so we can trust you. The era of objective news is long gone. Positionality matters, and bias always exists. Your personhood impacts your journalism. And the people who do well with us are people who know who they are and say it loudly. In an influencer culture, we want to know who we are learning from. It's not just about format and video. It's also about identity politics.

And the idea of loyalty to an outlet has passed. We read and consume what we discover. What Apple News pushes as an alert to us. What is trending on LinkedIn. What's on Twitter Discover. Often it's the individuals we follow and the people who are active who we hear from.

Hire the young person to produce. Understand that that person's social media is part of their brand, which will become part of your brand. Use that. It can be a reflection on you and good for business. Brands don't live outside of their employee personalities anymore.

To **engage us**:

Create great content or products. Write concisely. Give us the info we need and give it **fast**. We used to be able to watch 10-15 mins easily. Getting that attention span is harder today. Now it's 10-15 seconds. Don't commission horrible op-eds. Give students **free subscriptions**. Be **creative**. Think of **every part of the equation**, from **platform** to **voice**. **Innovate** in trends. **Partner** with influencers, they're a huge opportunity you need to tap into, cross post. Engage us. And above all: Give us **something of value** and **mean what you say**. Be **authentic** in who you are and what you stand for. You must be quick to **adapt** to new platforms, nimble and quick and fluid. Come to where we are. And we'll always go to new places. It gets harder the

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more platforms we're on, but think of this as a huge puzzle, and every piece matters.

CONTENT

FIGURE OUT WHAT YOUR UNIQUE SELLING PROPOSITION IS

- What are you good at?
- Why do people consume your content?
- What value do you provide your audience(s)?
- How is your content different from your competitors?
- What are your niche coverage areas?
- Why should a new audience pay attention to you?
- What is your unique offer?

You must be able to answer the above questions to be able to come up with a solid audience strategy. You must know what differentiates you, what makes you unique. It's vital to identify your strengths as an organization and make sure you can center them within any experimentation or innovation you carry out in any format on any platform.

WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS?

Setting clear goals, objective and key results (OKRs) and key performance indicators (KPIs) will help you drill down, focus and make informed decisions. Is your goal to have a high click-through rate? Is your goal to create an engaged community? Is it to innovate in content? Do you want to tell new stories or new formats of existing stories? How will you judge success? Is it scale? Revenue? Brand?

CONTENT THAT RESONATES

What are the topics that matter to your audience? If you're covering a story or topic, you need to know and clearly articulate why it's relevant to your audience, and commission stories that match subjects to their interests.

Gen Z is an audience that looks at the intersections of stories and the impact they have on their lives, whether it's stories around politics or tech or climate or money. You need to know why this story you are covering affects them, and why it matters to them, or why it should.

Do not attempt to compete on breaking or current news. It is very, very difficult to enter the news space and succeed. Legacy organizations have the value of habit, and people will most often go to them for major news events. If you are covering news, cover the stories behind the headlines, the explainers, the ones that show how this news impacts your Zoomer. More than 60% of Zoomers say the news makes them feel angry, afraid, sad, or depressed,⁵ so if you're covering news, focus on solution-oriented news stories.

Here's the type of content that will resonate with Gen Z:

- Value-added — Informative and contextual. Adds depth. Focuses on meaning and insight. Helps them make decisions or take action/inspires change. Illustrates the impact of the story on their lives.
- Emotional appeal – Stories that strike a chord.
- Character driven – Real experiences and human-interest stories. Local stories can be made relevant to global audiences by finding and letting them identify with the human angle.
- Raw or viral/trending. Surprises or entertains. Weird or quirky.
- Original or exclusive stories they haven't seen elsewhere.
- How-to/utility/ solutions-oriented.
- Representation and diversity.

This, in particular, is a topic that matters especially to younger audiences. Who they see helps shape their sense of self. And in a very diverse generation, underrepresented groups and minority stories are crucial to include. 50% of Zoomers say that when they see non-Whites in the news, for example, it is negative, or related to crime and or violence.⁶

⁵ News and America's kids: how young people perceive and are impacted by the news. [Common Sense Media](#). March 2018.

⁶ Ibid.

- Relatability — Showcases their voices and vocalizes their personal experiences and perspectives. 74% of Zoomers say media should include more people their age.⁷
- Content surrounding issues they care about and topics that matter (ex. gender equality, LGBTQ equality, minority rights, mental health).
- Stories showing the process behind the production of stories and how editorial decisions are taken. Take them behind the scenes. Be transparent about why you made the decisions you did, and own up to any mistakes.

NICHE TOPICS/ EXPERTISE

There's so much content out there, you'll find Zoomers gravitating toward communities of interest and causes, passions and beliefs. Loyalty to a news outlet is less common than loyalty to a coverage area, group, or community. They are more likely to follow issue-based groups and pages, and more likely to interact and engage more.

If you can identify a gap in the market that intersects with your mission and editorial goals, focus on that. Don't try and be all things to all people. Tap into those communities on Facebook groups, Reddit threads, subcultures on TikTok. Be strategic. Find your voice and the platforms your target audience is on, and serve those communities. Becoming a niche content producer will allow you to build strong relationships with those communities. Better relationships equal more engagement and a shift to an audience-centric model.

Smaller organizations have an edge here because they can be much more focused and directly connected to their communities and the people they serve. They can be more flexible in experimenting. Take advantage of that.

PRODUCE WITH, NOT FOR.

Listen, listen, and listen some more to your audience. Interact and engage with them. Involve them in the process of pitching and producing, not just in comments after the work is published. You should ideally be producing by, for, and about. Reflecting and serving their needs is best done by involving them in the process.

This is a generation used to DMing their favorite celebrities. They've grown up with social platforms where communication access and interaction are built-in and they have a much greater expectation for that ability to be present in their interactions with publishers. They expect to have an immediate connection and get a response. (For more, see [audience development and engagement](#)).

⁷ Ibid.

Case Study: Vice

Dory Carr-Harris, then Executive Editor of Vice.com

Carr-Harris ran the Vice newsroom and a team of over 75 reporters and editors, overseeing everything from major editorial projects and investigative features to daily story selection. She wrote the journalistic ethics and policy guidelines for the newsroom, and spearheaded a network of young journalists who reported on issues that mattered to them on Instagram and Snapchat. In her words:

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When thinking of the stories you want to tell, it helps to be really clear about **what your mission statement is, who your audience is, and what the segments of that audience are.** [...] . Our initial audience were 18-year-olds in Montreal, who then aged up. So we ended up with a broad range from 16 to early 30s. Stories for an 18-year-old might not be relevant to a 34-year-old, who may be at a different socio-economic stage of their life. Thinking of each of those segments and how to break them up is key.

Our **mission** statement evolved, but we wanted to be a source of enlightening information for young people and their guide to navigating the world. As journalists, we were writing as part of the audience group we were trying to target, which made it easier in a lot of ways, and it allowed us to speak as us. And that was helpful in communicating externally to our audience and in how we spoke on social media.

Our audience was always young, and to engage with them, we had to create content that was **relevant** to them. Most people in the newsroom were 35 or under, including top leadership. And we always made a point to **hire young, diverse staff** from a non-traditional pipeline to tap into those **authentic voices**. That is key in terms of targeting that audience. Have your young people pitch the stories surrounding a specific lens you want to produce through. But doing so is a really intentional decision which requires an infrastructure because it provides institutional challenges. You get energy, enthusiasm, drive, and a knowledge base that is truly authentic and organic. But challenges are that they are less experienced and might not be as knowledgeable of the institution of journalism and its ethics. But all those things are teachable if you take that time. I wrote policies and guidelines, and I held lots of workshops and training.

When it came to **content**, we chose specific **core interests aligned with our identity** as a news and culture publication and with our audience: counter culture, niche communities and things that would now exist in Subreddits. News, politics, identities of LGBTQ, and people of color, with an intentional focus on finding stories from within those communities and making it intentional for those people to highlight their **voices**. That ethos of sharing was the throughline. Your **storytelling** is what will build loyalty. We looked at **data** to see what was working. Loyalty isn't the same today and doesn't work the way it did before, but if you create content that reflects them, they come back.

Gen Z is about authenticity and taking a stance. We had already decided we were on the left side of the spectrum which may have limited our audience somewhat, but because we had

started as a counter culture publication giving a giant f**k you to the world, it worked. To straddle that line of **objectivity and stance**, providing a platform for first-person essays or reporting or mediums is a way to toe that line. By doing that, you're finding sources and a spectrum of opinions. Thinking about the mediums can be a way to navigate that as well, such as selfie videos. They're authentic voices and opinions.

Video was a key driver. We optimized for **mobile** — 80% of our traffic came from it. We **experimented** all the time. We didn't have a fear of failure — it was embraced. But then the stakes were lower. Today, the media landscape has become such a challenging place to experiment because of financial constraints and how business models work, as well as the influence of tech companies. It's gotten narrower, and there are only a few ways to fund journalism right now — grant based or advertising and sponsored content (which drives impression-based type of journalism) or subscription-based (which can be very exclusive). Your funding model pushes you into a specific journalism path, and the playing field keeps getting smaller and a lot more competitive, which makes it harder to take risks or fail.

Vice was comfortable being in a constant state of flux and a **constant stage of change**. And organizations aren't always comfortable in that, but to target new and young audiences who are so media and tech-savvy in their DNA, you have to be. They want to be on the bleeding edge of everything. And to keep up with that, any organization has to be willing to **constantly innovate** and change and keep pace. Some of our experiments:

In the early days of Snapchat, we saw we had a really young audience of 13 and up, and we wanted to really **engage** with them, so it made sense to find correspondents of that demographic. We wanted them to be recognizable to young people that it was them, members of that specific age group. We didn't want to force our content into that voice. We partnered with Instagram on the IG portion of this initiative to tap into a network of creators to find some initial people, and then we did outreach. We had them film themselves and lead first-person reportage all through video. Hearing and seeing these young people and voices and faces brought their stories to life. We were always looking at platform **engagement** rather than reach and built a loyal audience. It was a relevant and useful experiment.

In 2018, when FB was really trying to bring back groups, we created one called the “Vice Guide to Online Dating” and people are still posting in it today. **Communities around specific utility** really allowed us to gain insight into what content people were interested in. Then we closed the feedback loop by sharing what people talked about. Another example was the Vice Guide to Life, a starter kit for when you're 18 — **service journalism**. We got **engagement** and **organic evangelists** — people spreading the word for us and showing that their voices are heard and listened to. We **met our audience on the platforms they were in the ways they**

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used it, constantly innovating and changing our approach as the platforms did.

STORYTELLING

If there is one main takeaway from this guide, it should be: **Storytelling first**. Yes, it's a more competitive landscape and stories need to work harder to resonate with audiences, but it doesn't mean they can't still connect. Over the next few sections, we'll tackle how to take a story from beginning to end. It boils down to:

- Define the editorial principles and values for your news organization, and your goals. Find the areas that you believe you can add value in telling stories to young folks that aren't being told. Once you define those:
- Look for where the story is highly visual. Are we being told or shown something that is important or evocative? Do we touch on the reasons [why this content resonates](#)?
- How do you best package that content to tell the story in different ways for every platform?
- Understand the rules of the platforms you're on and the audiences on them, as well as how you distribute to the audience and engage with them.

VOICES

Personal-first storytelling is one of the core ways you can appeal to Zoomers. Many feel that their voices are missing from media coverage, and 3 out of every 4 believe they aren't represented in the stories they see.⁸ They want to be heard, and they want to see themselves reflected in the stories they see. You need to center their voices. On any big issues, you need to focus on individual voices.

⁸ Ibid.

AUTHENTICITY

It's crucial. They are a wary and skeptical generation. To connect with them, you must be authentic and consistent, and stay true to your principles. Commit to truth and accuracy, always. Provide nuanced perspectives to gain their trust.

tone

Don't speak at or to. Speak with. Speak like. Don't condescend or talk down to.

EMOTIONS

Another core way to connect. Look for the human emotions: How does this story affect normal people on a human level? Show me.

SIMPLICITY

To explain something succinctly is hard. One of the biggest misconceptions about Zoomers is that you need to summarize everything and make it simple, but that's an oversimplification in itself. Be clear, but don't water stories down. Explain in an engaging, explanatory, human way. Don't assume they want just bullet points and listicles. Ask yourself: Is this easy to understand? Is my message conveyed in an understandable way, without a lot of explanation needed? Offer more entry points — summaries, timelines, etc. Don't use jargon, but don't dumb down your material.

Case Study: Hashtag Our Stories

Sumaiya Omar, Co-founder

Husband and wife Yusuf and Sumaiya Omar are on a mission: “To empower people to tell stories with their phones and wearable devices. More views, more perspectives, and more angles mean more truth.” Their current audience is composed of 13-24 year olds.

“We noticed that we never used to hear the voices of the young people on the ground. We realized that could be something that differentiates us when all video content looks the same. It’s **all about them.**”

They trained over 100,000 under-25s to participate in what they called “selfie journalism.” Thousands in remote communities began to tell their stories, and many of them became contributors. Hashtag Our Stories followed the **rules for social video, innovation, experimentation** and producing **platform-specific content**, but believes their core unique selling proposition is **letting young people speak for themselves**. They produce with, for, and to. Curating voices, they believe, is the best kind of journalism. They call themselves an experimental lab with the ability to test ideas with their audience and then spin off shows based on that.

“Stories had to be based on the voices of young people, not viral cat stories. That wasn’t the DNA of our brand. We tell people’s stories through their eyes, and that’s the golden thread. Stories have to be **factual** and **provide learnings** in the vein of “Today I learned.” They should be **relevant** — why now and so what — and **constructive**, tackling the issues we need tangible solutions for or have some way of moving the conversation forward. We focus on **constructive/solutions journalism**. But above all — our stories must show the unique voices of young people who are often spoken about but not heard about.”

Their stories understand that their audience is young with lots to learn. They aim for **simple**. They avoid jargon, speak colloquially, and produce lots of explainers and listicles.

The landscape, they add, has also changed. Young people are even more candid and open today than they were five years ago. They want to share their stories, their personal lives. They want to educate.

“A 14-year-old has Tourette’s syndrome? They want to tell people not only what it is — but what it means to live it. And they know how to do it. They understand the platforms, how to engage people, and they’re savvy. And what we want is to tap into that. Our highest engagement metric is to get them to contribute content. And when they do, the audience gets even more engaged.”

But they were a small, scrappy team with few resources. So they applied and became members of Snapchat's incubator program. They tried creating verticals based on geography and quickly realized they were spreading themselves too thin. Instead, they needed to focus on **specific stories** and **specific platforms**. They look at their **analytics**, focusing on watch time on each platform, understanding that you need to know why people are clicking and what they're watching.

“Understand what you are not before you understand what you are. What works for others won't necessarily work for you. The smaller you are, you have to care about sustainability and go where revenue-generating options are. Our brand is so small and not yet recognizable across platforms, so we need a loyal audience and go where our audience is. We know we're on Snapchat and Instagram, so we shoot video all in vertical, for example.”

What's next? They constantly dabble and experiment with new teachings. Right now, they're trying out Spectacles by Snapchat to have people tell the stories literally through their eyes. Their current content is about immersive storytelling, which they believe is huge. Which topics? Right now, they're focusing on the environment and climate change.

“You have to constantly be looking ahead, or you'll get left behind.”

PRODUCTION

TAKE STOCK OF YOUR RESOURCES

Although this guide doesn't tackle the issue of monetization, it would be remiss if it doesn't acknowledge a simple truth: Your budget, resources, and the number of people dedicated to focusing on your target audience will often dictate what you can and can't do. Be absolutely clear with what you have. Don't underestimate the resources needed to do this work properly. One person cannot create a strategy, produce, publish, distribute, and engage with your audience.

FOCUS ON A FEW

Unless you have a sizable budget and can hire the right team, if you try to produce videos, podcasts, newsletters, and TikTok content all at once, you will fail.

There is so much possibility everywhere — Twitch, Clubhouse, etc. There's always something new popping up. You need to pick the right places to invest your energy and get a return on your investment. Don't try to be everywhere, or on too many platforms. It costs a lot of money to be there. To maintain online presence is a job. To maintain online presence on mobile and desktop are more jobs. To maintain one platform is more. Two, even more.

Some is better than many, with coherent brand presence on your platforms where you can ensure quality control. And on each platform, keep it tight. Don't start verticals or multiple pages if you don't have teams for them.

DON'T DUPLICATE

Don't copy what you do in your core business. You cannot just tweak what you do or reversion into a different medium or upload in a different platform and expect to succeed. You must tailor your content to each platform. (See [off-platform production](#)).

MOBILE-FIRST

Assume all your content is only being viewed on mobile. Once you've produced your content, watch it on your desktop at 25% of the size to simulate the size of an average smartphone screen.

VIDEO

Video is king. Gen Z watches hundreds of millions of hours of video content daily, and the numbers grow exponentially. It's true that the consumption of short-form video is not what it was a few years ago, but it is still voracious. In some instances it's evolved, sometimes even becoming the gateway to short documentaries.

Video views, shares, likes and comments lead to engagement, brand loyalty, audience growth and new paths to monetization.

Video consumption is often unintentional, meaning your content needs to be optimized for discovery. For your audience to search for it intentionally, its value must be very high to compete for their time, attention and loyalty. To do so, you need to be producing consistently, with either a niche topic of interest or a personality/host. The content must [resonate](#), whether through entertaining or educating.

Video doesn't have to be super complicated, and the editing doesn't need to be the flashiest or the best, but it does need to be optimized for mobile, with clear text and captioned audio, working on the knowledge that the majority of people watch with sound off on their phones. It does need to be shot according to the format you're using. For example, is it for IGTV? Then shoot in vertical.

(The COVID-19 pandemic has actually taken us back somewhat when it comes to video quality and editing. Because filming is harder, footage is now rawer and less slick — more people are filming themselves at home and Skype calls are back. We've removed some of the sophistication and nuance, and added authenticity).

You don't need dedicated editors — there are myriad third-party tools online that have made video production a lot more accessible and cheaper.

Your video production quality and resources put into it depend on your story, but in all cases, your footage needs to be compelling.

“Amazing footage needs minimal production. It’s like cooking meat. Really good steak doesn’t need much seasoning. But bad meat needs lots of it.”

– *Jon Laurence, Senior Executive Producer, AJ+*

A decade ago, user-generated content was sparse, as was its verification and clearance. Today, breaking news is uploaded near-instantaneously from people at the scene. A decade ago, you could trawl the internet for good footage from C-SPAN parliament soundbites to cute animal videos from national parks. Today, politicians are posting their best bites themselves, and zoos have their own live camera. All organizations, even the legacy and “uncool” ones, produce their own video. So making your footage stand out is ever-more challenging.

VISUALS

It’s the 3-second rule: If you cannot grab someone’s attention in three seconds to pause and watch your story, they won’t watch it. The second most important takeaway in this guide after storytelling first is: **Your first shot is crucial**. Other things to keep in mind:

- Strong visuals are a necessity.
- Video should be scaled and positioned, shot for format, and optimized for mobile.
- Audio should be captioned or subtitled when possible.
- Visual components add to the story: illustrations, graphics, maps, infographics, etc.
- Avoid elements that do not have a clear purpose or help with the storytelling. Always ask: Does this image or shot serve the story?
- Create a strong visual identity and compelling branding for your organization.
- Edit for impact. After placing your most important image up top, use big text cards and strong fonts. The visual and typography elements should be clean and basic and focused. Be smart with the space you have. Don’t waste the space, or clutter it — busy elements are overwhelming.
- Text composition: Clean alignments, make use of space, respect line spacing and dim the background, or add gradients to assist with reading the text.
- Transitions should be used for a purpose, and kept subtle.

TEMPLATES

Templates can be a lifesaver, and also help with branding. They can be created for anything — from lower-thirds in video to quote cards on Twitter.

Reusable formats do sometimes result in tension between the creative team and the producers and reporters: What can an organization rely on an ongoing basis, versus the creativity required to create one-off, beautiful projects? Each requires different approaches and the output looks different. Can you be creative and also templated? The balance differs from organization to organization depending on resource, time, size of team, volume of output and the number of platforms you're on.

OTHER FORMATS

Not everything needs to be a video. Let the content dictate your format. Ask yourself “What’s the story and what’s the best way to tell it?” That helps you figure out what needs to be in it. Telling me a vaccine is 99% effective is a fact card, not a video. You can make any content relevant with the right angle and format — just look at TikTok. There is content for every topic under the sun. There are multiple ways to tell a story, and choosing the right format is crucial.

Podcasts, newsletters, YouTube shows, smart speaker news roundups. You can create a content strategy for each type of format and each target audience. The more focused you are, the better you can grow. And the more complimentary your experiences, the better they will be.

Interact with the right people at your workplace who can help you learn what the possibilities are and tell stories in multiple ways.

Case Study: Financial Times Special Projects

Robin Kwong, then Head of Digital Delivery

Robin Kwong spent 12 years at the Financial Times. As the Special Projects Editor and then the Head of Digital Delivery, he was in charge of leading a team to pioneer digital storytelling formats, creating templates to encourage visual storytelling. “The question you should always ask is: **What is the best way of reporting this story, and how do we take our audience along?** How do we want them to interact with it?”

If you ask that question, Kwong believes you’ll inevitably end up with better told stories. Under his watch, the FT won multiple journalism, design, and innovation awards, pushing the boundaries of digital storytelling.

But don’t silo your work and produce a small number of great projects, he advises. Instead, you need to think about how to make the dominant content more digitally native. And that starts from before a story is commissioned. To begin bringing that way of thinking into the newsroom, **he embedded digital editors on desks**, and worked to bridge the gap between editorial, product and tech teams.

Kwong believes it’s easier than ever to **experiment** and be creative — but make sure to have **goals, KPIs, a timeline, and a definition of success** before you start.

“Tools and platforms to produce different kinds of journalism have proliferated. They’re easier, cheaper, more accessible than ever. And more democratized. It’s never been easier to make videos and for the newsroom to experiment with audio and video interactives.”

But, he warns, even though it’s easier to produce, younger people’s expectations of what they want to see and how they expect to see it has changed drastically. For example:

“If something pops up on your phone, you immediately associate it with a specific app and apps act in a certain way. If I swipe right or left, this or that happens. The way people expect to be presented with information and how they interact with it is shaped by the media environment they’re in. All this is to say: There is opportunity for us to think of how we can use the tools at our disposal to present [content] in a way the user expects.”

Hiring the right people is crucial. Finding people with the sensibility at the time of commissioning to know if we should go down the text or video route and later on edit in multiple formats was a challenge for Kwong: “Documentary video and long-form articles may seem similar, but in practice they’re very different.” People who can then take output and refine and make it better. He **empowered** people and gave them freedom to run with a story and to have fun. He believes that’s how you end up with the most creative stories. A challenge he notes will always be how we can direct creativity into sustainable, profitable output. He believes that the goal to do so can be good justification for trying out a lot of different things until you settle on a way where you tell the story this way because it is the best way to tell it, *and* it supports your business model.

EXPERIMENT AND INNOVATE

Digital-first news organizations experimented with everything: Vines, Facebook lives, shows, vertical video, VR, 360, periscope streaming, documentaries, satire, first-person narratives, selfie journalism, commissions, listicles, user-generated content, and the list goes on and on. There is nothing you can try that is wrong. Some things will stick, some will succeed, and some will fail spectacularly.

Be strategic about your experimentation. Remember that you must be fulfilling a need. Don't just create something for the sake of it. You need to contribute and add value. Always think of your target audience's experience and behavior on platforms, and how they consume content.

It's vital to experiment, and to adapt very quickly and be agile. You cannot remain stagnant, and must constantly change. If you're only getting on TikTok now, you're late. You have to evolve as quickly as the platforms do, and experiment with everything you can. The more you experiment with innovative visual content, the better your chances of success. And the more you experiment with how to use platforms differently, the better your understanding of user behavior and need will be, and the better your understanding of the content that resonates and the engagement tactics that work with your target audience.

The larger you are as an organization, the less nimble you are with a lot of stakeholders, and so the speed at which you can try things can be challenging. The smaller you are, the more control and the more democratic you can be with your experimentation. It is easier to try things with easier sign-offs, and it is easier to work across teams with less territorial problems that are counterproductive to innovation.

TEAMWORK

One of the most dangerous phrases to hear is "everyone should be able to do everything." We need to scale down the expectation of the skill set needed for content creation in digital. Instead, work together: Embed specialists within teams. Invest in training, so everyone can be aware of how things are made and be part of the process, but they shouldn't be expected to do everything. Collaboration is the name of the game.

Listen to people who are closer to audiences and have the data and desire to try something different, even if they're on different teams. Don't be siloed. Elevate the non-legacy people who will help you change the status quo. Bring people with different skill sets into your groups. Utilize the skill sets across your organizations and leverage its strengths — get reporters to do Q&As on IG lives or answer questions using Stitches on TikTok.

Your social team (if you have one) is equally as important as your reporters and producers. Involve them from the beginning of the pitch process, not when you come to publish.

There's a consistent pattern of success whenever you empower the people closest to your target audience and give them editorial control and freedom with a clear mandate to make the best of what they can of the platforms you want to be on:

“Put a social platform editor in charge. They know what they’re doing. Give them autonomy and freedom to not just crank out lots of stories and posts, but to have fun. Let them be bold and brave. The creativity that will result will speak for itself.”

Robin Kwong, New Formats Editor, WSJ

“Let the people in the room who know what they’re doing take the lead, rather than try and fit square things into round holes. Let young people step up, take the lead and the reigns. All organizations need to do this. Listen to them.”

Deblina Chakraborty, then Editor of Global Programming, CNN Digital

OPTIMIZE FOR ENGAGEMENT

Always ask yourself: Why would my target audience share this? Is this video meant to educate, inform, entertain? What is the intended tone? What is the shareable message? What chord does it strike? Emotional? Character driven?

Audiences are more engaged than ever before. Even with the content saturation and news fatigue Zoomers experience, they're still a captive audience who are looking for new ways of communication, which has become more important than ever in this COVID world. They're wanting to interact and connect, with time to do so. It's never felt more personal as it is — we're all going through the same pandemic with huge opportunities for personal connection, authenticity, and community building. (For more, see [audience development and engagement](#)).

CREATE WORKFLOWS

Standardizing your editorial processes and digital workflows will pay off 1000 times over. It means consistency, efficiency, shared best practices and will affect and benefit every aspect of production. It will make training easier.

TESTING

This will allow you to optimize your content, figure out what's working and what's not, and help you in your decision-making. Test everything and anything you can. And when you do, really drill down on your [data](#).

CREATE A SUB-BRAND

This isn't an option for everyone.

But sometimes, it's hard to create change in a legacy organization, and creating a sub-brand allows you to get started on trying new things on a smaller scale. You can cut through some of the bureaucracy, allow this "pocket" to flourish, and once you have demonstrated results you can then begin to expand outwards.

Creating a sub-brand can work when you want to build a different brand identity, especially in legacy organizations with very strong brand identities not often associated with younger audiences. You will surprise audiences and sometimes help to reconcile younger values and older ways of thinking.

It also allows you to have a targeted strategy and not have to stick to a one-size-fits-all policy. It can be useful initially to drive a very specific and targeted strategic initiative, because to engage young audiences is of course very different than engaging other groups. Without one, it can sometimes be hard to cut through to that audience because they have very specific expectations and perhaps rigid ideas of your parent brand and what it stands for.

But be careful you don't end up with two vastly different brands. You can't always reintegrate back into the mothership, and be careful you're not just kicking the can down the road for the parent organization to deal with later. And of course, to create a successful sub-brand you need to have even more dedicated resources, budget and team.

Case Study: The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT)

Riyaad Minty, Director of Digital

Minty has spent more than a decade immersed in digital storytelling for young audiences, whether it was as the Head of Social at Al-Jazeera, the founder and creator of AJ+, or currently as the director of digital for TRT. The national public broadcaster of Turkey, TRT has over 8,000 employees working at 15 TV and 17 radio channels. In his words:

“

The biggest challenge in major legacy organizations is making a **culture shift to digital-first**, and understanding that it's a completely different space where you can't just copy TV onto digital. You also can't reverse engineer backwards from legacy to young audiences. 2020 shifted the goalposts and forced everyone to move online and realize we have to be fully digital. The potential is there, and the pie is big enough.

At TRT, the TV side consumed the majority of resources, mindshare and talent. So first, you have to **educate**. Second, you have to **hire young**, despite the challenges. Third, take space and time to build something new. Fourth, help TV evolve and don't leave it behind: Provide lots of **trainings** in how to change narrative style and produce for digital.

It takes time and iterations and playing with formats and finding the right team dynamic to succeed. Laying the groundwork is important — think years ahead in **innovation** and **experimentation**. Be ahead of the curve. A lot of success is in timing and getting in early, and making sure staff is aligned with the vision. Convincing the higher ups is sometimes the hard part, and sometimes you have to **depart from the mothership** to do so.

Be okay with failure. I failed spectacularly many times. **Be early adopters.** Get on the news apps now, not in a year. It's harder to grow an audience the later you join a platform.

Experimentation starts from the top. I sit and experiment on TikTok even though I have 200 people reporting to me. Experimentation doesn't mean publishing something. Just immerse yourself in things for a period of time. Learn and be in that space. That's the base level to start with. You'll get connected to creators.

You need to **clearly identify what young means to you.** There are vast differences between 16, 18 and 21-year-olds. You need to get even more specific about age brackets. That level of **segmentation** is very important. Target 16 – 19 or 19 – 22, not 16 — 22. They're different. The more you **focus**, the more you'll succeed and grow.

If you want a large bracket, then do you have the ability to create **offerings and products that cater to every segmented group**? It's a strength when you have the resources to do so. If not, then it's fine to say we can't invest in new audiences. And **be clear on what you can and have the resources to do**, and hone in on it. It's okay to focus on one core audience. Don't try to do too much at once and be on every platform.

Stories should be **visually focused**, faster and more **reaction based**. They should be **platform-specific**.

You need to entertain your audience and be relatable. That doesn't change. A lot of people try to reinvent the wheel, but base needs throughout history are the same, just with **new tools to express ourselves or produce content**. As long as you keep in mind your audience needs, and keep them entertained and informed and use that formula in whatever platform of the day you're on, then you will connect with them.

Discoverability is a challenge because there's so much content. And this generation are all excellent content editors. So the **age of the influence is evolving** from "I'm at the beach having coffee" to "I'm at the beach but let me inform you and let me tell you great stories."

This is a generation that wakes up and immediately looks at their phones and moves from entertained to laughing to crying to learning a new skill all in three minutes.

And you have to **understand the ever-changing nuances**. They don't use gifs, that's for millennials. They use stickers. They don't like skinny jeans, side-parts, and the laughing crying emoji that's popular with millennials. Can you keep up?

Understand the audience. Gen Z wants people to stand for something, but they also consume everything and have less loyalty. They want to connect regardless of who they're following. You need to create something people feel they are part of. A **niche club**.

Because everything is so saturated, we might move into the space of **less is more**. A Marie Kondo digital life. Mass curation and mass unfollowing, so unless you're **giving your audience something that is especially for them**, then they won't have space for you.

Have a strategy for what to do when your audience ages. Do you evolve and cater to your original user base? Or do you move on? When FB got older, did you move to Instagram and

”

start experimenting with reels? **Figure out what you're capable of doing.**

OFF-PLATFORM PRODUCTION

The first question you must be able to answer is what are your goals for being on any social platform. Are your social channels marketing channels with the hopes of driving traffic to your site, or are you building an audience to connect and engage with on social platforms? Are you wanting to build a new audience or experiment with storytelling or explore new revenue opportunities? Be very clear on what you want to accomplish before you make any decisions.

Your strategy on each platform will be influenced by your goals, and today, many organizations are much more aware of their business needs for off-platform production. Even so, the reality is that sustainable revenue sharing of social platforms with publishers hasn't been figured out. And despite the fact that you have to produce off-platform content to target Gen Z, only you can determine how to translate value to platform, and diversify your portfolio revenue. Don't rely too heavily on one particular platform.

A decade ago, Facebook paid publishers to produce videos, and the algorithm amplified the content to millions around the world. But after the Facebook gold rush, they're no longer really sharing the pie. They're still often the biggest driver of traffic for many legacy organizations, but today, many believe there is no real future for news publishers on Facebook. And any organization that grew on Facebook has the same problem: The platform is saturated, the algorithm doesn't help you, and — particularly relevant for Gen Z — the audience is much older.

When you natively upload content for social platforms (which you must always do if you want it to be consumed), you will be at the mercy of social platforms, who will often change their algorithms and not let you in on what's next. You don't own your audience. Making sure your content has reach and impact is often difficult. You will get brand growth, but not necessarily brand loyalty. But unless you're a huge news organization with a history and solid audience on your owned-and-operated products, it's often difficult to succeed without off-platform production. So you must have an off-platform strategy, but also make sure that's not all you have, and work on a post-platform strategy.

LEARN ABOUT THE PLATFORMS

Every social platform is wholly unique. Certain audiences live in certain spaces, and the demographics of audiences on each platform are different, as are the behaviors and usage of the platforms. You must ask yourself: Who is our user? What is the environment they thrive in? You must have a clear picture of your audience on each platform.

Before you even dip your toe in off-platform production, take the time to thoroughly understand the behaviors of your existing and target audience, and how they consume content in those spaces. As an example:

- Facebook is now older, video first with no audio. Mobile-first, keeps users on platform.
- Twitter is best for breaking news, raw footage, headlines. You can tap into communities.
- YouTube is a lean back experience for longer sessions with audio on. More intent, more search for answers. Deepest engagement will be there.
- Instagram is more visual. Feed video experience is different from stories and IGTV.
- Snapchat is more interactive.
- TikTok is the most popular kid in school. Reaction based, heavy on experimentation and on edits.

And know that even if you thoroughly understand the platforms today, the behavior changes and goes through cycles. If Instagram is about news today, tomorrow it's a refuge from the news. TikTok has snowballed exponentially. New platforms will come up. Format and style will consistently evolve.

OFF-PLATFORM CONTENT PRODUCTION

By now you know that to target your Zoomers, you meet them where they are. And where they are is often off-platform, and so you must have an off-platform focus. You can't be on every platform, and so you have to be strategic about where you're going and why.

When deciding what platform to be on, in the same way you ask yourself what format should this story be, ask where it needs to be for your audience to see it and engage with it. You've taken the time to understand the platforms, so you should be able to answer those questions. And if you have the ability, don't limit yourself to just one platform. There are many avenues to distributing content, and each one will connect differently with your audience.

You must also understand your target audience don't just exist on one platform and stay there — they move from one to the next at an incredibly fast pace.

For example, the drop-off from Facebook in the past few years for Gen Z is astounding. But the usage of 'stories' that exist for 24 hours and disappear — whether on YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat or the like — has seen exponential growth.

Remember that your content will live in the middle of everything they follow: their friends' lives, their interest-based page follows, their inspirational content. Your content can't be jarring or out of sync. It has to be produced to match and fit in with that experience, and to feel similar. You have to really think of voice on those platforms. It's more intimate, casual, vocal.

Natively upload or embed your content as much as possible — don't link out. Gen Z won't usually follow you, and the platforms will punish you. Even if you have your own platform or website, understand that this is crucial. And if you can't incorporate off-platform analytics in your KPIs, you have to reevaluate your business model or your goals of being off-platform.

PLATFORM-SPECIFIC CONTENT

You don't have to just meet your audiences where they are — you also have to tailor the content to the platform itself. And it's not just about using the formats of a particular platform (i.e., Instagram stories in the voice, tone and ethos of that platform). It's also about being fluent in the nuances of the usage: It's about creating an Instagram story and using stickers and polls and all the tools and trimmings available to you. You must incorporate those elements into your content because it's authentic to that platform. You must also understand elements around the platform as a distribution channel, and think of how your content looks on different phones and homepages. You're aiming to present a holistic experience. (See also: [distribution](#)).

HYBRID MODELS

There's definitely an upside to not being on social platforms and having your own website or app, etc., but it takes a lot of resources to do so and a lot of brand loyalty. Having your content on your own platforms will benefit you in the long run, but if you're limited on resources and trying to build scale and growth, social is the way to go. You'll have higher audience and customer value if you stay on social platforms, especially if you're breaking into a new space. (If, however, you're providing a very niche new space you can choose to own your own audience from the get-go because the value you're providing is much higher).

If you have the resources, then go for a hybrid model. Funnel social content to website content, and allow your audiences(s) to consume your content on multiple platforms. If you have the ability, a multi-platform and own website approach is a good option. Build owned-and-operated products, such as newsletters. If you can create really good gateway products that appeal to specific demographics, you can gain a bit of loyalty and bring audiences to your platforms.

Case Study: NowThis

Versha Sharma, then Senior Correspondent and Managing Editor
Chetan Patel, Senior Vice President, Growth

NowThis began producing social video on Facebook in 2012, one of the earliest organizations to do so. At the time, the Facebook market wasn't yet saturated. Sharma was there from Day 1. NowThis, she says, was clear on its editorial mission and what it stood for: **For young people, by young people.** They focused their stories on what their target audience cared about.

“And we handed them the megaphone, giving them **voice and representation.** That's what makes us authentic.” (Sharma)

Their strategy when they began was to focus on the stories and formats that **resonated: video, strong visuals,** text on screen, and **solution-oriented stories,** not just doom and gloom. They covered social justice, racial equity, LGBTQ rights, climate change, immigration — areas where they knew they could add value and were of interest. They hired a **young, diverse staff** that found the stories that would resonate with their communities. They directly engaged with politicians, not through the prism of a middle-aged D.C. staff, but from the viewpoints of their target audience. They captured the anger. They didn't shy away from the “blood, bomb and bullets,” but balanced it out with a wide spectrum of stories.

Their understanding of **platforms** was a vital component in their success, and understanding that things change very fast.

“My day-to-day is in spreadsheets and looking for areas of optimization and what are the rules and tools of each platform that allow me to engage with my audience better and get them to watch the content.” (Patel)

In 2012, Facebook was still ripe for social views, when native social video was still burgeoning and there was space to grow. And yet, even with the size and team of NowThis, they knew they couldn't focus on both YouTube and Facebook, so they chose Facebook. They make their decisions of where to invest beginning first with their resources and investment, and secondly with their goals on platform. They researched and understood what audience looked like on each platform:

“Once you do that, you have to figure out if and how that is then aligned with your strategy. Twitter for breaking news is good if you do that. Instagram for visual content if you have beautiful footage. YouTube for explainers if you're going to do the work.” (Sharma)

Patel moved from production to distribution years ago to build workflows for Facebook and Twitter that would allow NowThis to produce content at scale. Then he did the same for Instagram and YouTube. And today he's moved to vertical format content such as TikTok and Instagram stories. His team was less than five people, then more than twenty before scaling back a bit.

“We are **beholden to the platforms**. Facebook changes its rules all the time. The platforms rule. The landscape is challenging because it’s hard to be everywhere and still run a business. It costs money to be on these platforms, takes resources to really scale, and the monetization process is really slow. And on platforms, you will have connection with your audience but not true connection. You can’t directly tell them things — they often only interact with you through an algorithm and discovery, not by intentionally seeking you out.” (Patel)

How do they judge success? The metrics change. In 2021 Patel focused on watch time and retention:

“How many minutes can I get my audience to watch and for how long? How can I focus on **optimizing the content to increase retention rate** and how can I multiply that so I can increase watch time? Watch time is the engagement of folks who don’t want to comment.” (Patel)

Today, Sharma and Patel say, it would be very difficult to have the same audience growth brands such as NowThis and AJ+ had. The bar to entry is high. But not impossible if you **identify a gap and a niche you can fulfill** where you focus on that topic and create a name for yourself.:

“The more niche you go, the more successful you will be. It has to be really specific to a category of content and a type of audience to succeed now. And you can build that **community** with a greater chance of success. You’d have to commit and invest in community management, but there’s definitely a space for that.” (Patel)

What NowThis did in its early days was zone in on the key topics of interest to their audience, and create **verticals** for them — politics, women-centered, entertainment etc. At the time, they had a dozen different pages. Today they focus on three: News, Politics, Earth.

“For a while, verticals work, but then you hit saturation and people don’t want to follow 14 different pages. It was an excellent move for us to focus on different topics for different audiences. If we had more resources, I would continue to **segment**. But you can’t do that out of the gate, or you’ll fragment your work. You have to build a core audience first.” (Patel)

NowThis went where their young audience went. When the audience moved from Facebook to Instagram, so did they. When they moved to Snapchat, so did NowThis. When they moved to TikTok, so did they. They looked at the **behaviors on platforms** to make decisions on production. On Snapchat, they saw the audience swiping to longer video explainers, so that’s where they put that feature content. Same with Instagram TV. The more features are introduced, the more they **experiment** with them. The carousel feature on Instagram allowed them to evolve their graphics and images to tell stories in different ways. Instagram Live allowed them to do interviews that got huge **engagement** where people ask questions and participate. It’s not just text on screen anymore.

NowThis tried in the beginning to adapt a piece of content for multiple platforms but, Sharma says, it didn't pay off for the amount of work needed. Instead, they began to produce content that was specially **customized to a platform** "and that's vital if your goal is audience growth."

They publish regularly on their platforms. When they decide to enter a new platform, they put 1-2 young producers on it who are regular users of the platform. They hire young people and **empower them to tell stories the way they like to consume them**, and encourage them to give peer-to-peer feedback.

"We let our young staff members come to us and tell us what they use the platform for. We need to listen to them and look at the insights. If I were to give advice, it would be to **put resources into researching how behaviors on platforms change, and experiment on them. Prioritize engagement.** Look at the comments. To succeed at a platform, you have to dedicate people to it." (Sharma)

NowThis understands that Gen Z are on platforms almost simultaneously:

"They are extremely creative and casual and loose with their news creation and consumption. They're so digitally connected that they'll consume news and politics and pop culture content even if they're trying not to. They can't get away from it, it will bleed into their feeds, and it's part of the ecosystem. Everything becomes more fragmented, but it's a positive because they understand that everything is interconnected, not just intersectional justice and politics, but that issues like climate affects everything in our lives." (Sharma)

What's next for NowThis? Today, they continue to experiment with **formats**. They have their own website, newsletters, and experiment with multimedia in a number of ways. They're building their own OOT channels with even more investment in emerging platforms. They want to create programming that allows them to be more connected to TV. They're also keeping an eye on the move to an influencer or independent journalism model and see that space as still developing:

"Look at Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Instagram Live, on Twitch. Young people don't want anchors behind a desk. They expect so much more. And you have to be able to provide it, or they'll go elsewhere." (Sharma)

DISTRIBUTION

Distribution often comes into play once content is ready to publish. But it should be built into every step of the process, from pitch to publish and beyond. Distribution involves commissioning the right [content](#) for your target audience, [production](#) and editing, producing [platform-specific content](#), publication, reversioning, and reposting. It involves data-informed decision-making and easy access to your content. We've tackled the first three earlier in this guide. As for the latter:

PUBLICATION

The task here is how to make your stories reach the most people. This includes the timeliness of your story, how engaging your copy is, and if the right people were involved in your process.

- Did you publish at the right time when your audience was online and had the best chance of seeing it?
- Have you paid attention to headlines, captions, thumbnails? The producers should be thinking of the thumbnail when they're pitching the story. Test the thumbnail option to see what works best.
- Is there consistency in branding and your publication schedule?
- How does the material appear on the platform and is there the right feedback loop there? Watch your content back as the audience experiences it through distribution.
- Have you paid attention to your metadata and SEO tagging? Does the content lend itself to discovery?

- Is your content easy to follow or subscribe to?

REVERSIONING AND REPOSTING

Content isn't just edited for platforms. It can also be reversioned for different times. Evergreen content is often a godsend. What about when content becomes relevant again — what does your re-push process look like?

DATA

Be data informed as much as you can. Don't just work with ideas and hunches. Invest in streamlined and multiple data metrics for decision-making. Use the data and audience insights to shape your content. Don't just look at your viral hits and try to replicate them. See what's underperforming. Look at habits, behaviors, topics of interest, ratios.

If you can afford it, you won't regret hiring a data analyst. Someone who is in the newsroom to sit in on conversations, and together you can start thinking of what are the questions you need to get answered. You can always just dive in and experiment and play around, but data will help you focus.

Data helps you see what stories are connecting and helps you give evidence to outside teams to help you shape future content. To prove your experimentation is worthy of investment, you need data to back you up. A lot of the work your social team does seems invisible. Data will show it isn't. You can test your theories about what stories engage well. You can see trends and showcase your findings in meetings across teams.

And as you're building up that picture of your audience and trends, share it. Share the information in editorial meetings and in 1-1 sessions of smaller teams. You can create advocates around the newsroom, which is also vital to change.

Always, always look at the data.

Case Study: CNN Digital

Deblina Chakraborty, then Editor of Global Programming

Chakraborty's job focused on off-platform programming and alerting strategies to help curate and distribute content. She managed alerts that went to the core app and Apple news. Her team focused on social publication on multiple platforms, desktop and mobile web. Her job entailed getting as many people as possible to consume the content produced.

“To create the right content and distribute it, we need to understand what it is the target audience connects to, where they get their info and how they prefer to receive it. **What they want, how they need it and where.**”

Despite the relatively large size of her global team, she has the same advice to small organizations: Every platform needs different strategies, and every platform needs people dedicated to it.

“Your biggest challenge is **figuring out where you want to be**. There's only so much you can do. Can you cut video, edit for multiple platforms, produce social content around it and engage your audience? You have to decide what are the things to put resources in. And if you want to try new things, you need to ask: Do I have the money or some way to get another body, or do I need to cut something out? If I start producing on [TikTok], who will do it and what will suffer?”

Her team understood the demographics and psychographics and behaviors of each platform. That few young people go to an app, even if it's CNN:

“Think of your target audience's news experience. They jump from place to place. Figure out how they are consuming news. Go off-platform. They won't be on a computer or homepage all day. They're on mobile, off-platform.”

Sometimes, she says, their target audience gets the news just from the push alert. So the **copy** is sometimes the story, and therefore vital.

Testing was one of the most important components of her job. She tested headlines, reframed content, and helped producers present their stories in the best light. She paid attention to **SEO**. Looked at the **data**. And **the timing of stories** published can be critical. And every story, she says, must be packaged for the platform. Everyone on the team thinks mobile. And **listens**.

“We know our priorities as a news organization. The stories we want to tell. But to target younger, you need to **follow the conversations** at the moment, **see what they're engaging with**. Look at data to see the stories they are responding to and what format do they want the story in. You must think outside the box. Audio, newsletters, multimedia. **Let story dictate the format**. And whatever the format is — **meet them where they are.**”

Listening externally resulted in a race and inequality alert. It was a valued and relevant storyline CNN followed and of importance to a younger audience. Listening internally to “people who don’t think legacy” helped them go beyond working on just the news that needs to be told.

She set goals in terms of the stories CNN wanted to tell even if they weren’t big audience grabbers, but put in the work to see how they could make them attractive, how to get people to interact with the content in different and more meaningful ways, and how to build a **relationship** with the audience.

Change is inevitable, she says. And she believes change needs to be holistic.

“A lot of legacy organizations do things in a way that appeals to people in the past, and none of us are those people anymore. We need to evolve in every step of the process.”

OFFER CONTENT FOR FREE

If you're a legacy organization with a paywall, consider offering your content for free. Your Zoomers have access to so much free content and don't prioritize loyalty to a brand. At least in your initial forays into content production for them, allow them to access your content easily and freely.

Case Study: Financial Times Schools Project

Andrew Jack, Global Education Editor

Krishan Puvvada, Project Lead, Education

When he was a 16-year-old student and an FT intern in 2016, Puvvada pitched the idea of providing global **free digital access** to FT for students aged 16-19 and their teachers. In 2021, more than 3,500 schools and 25,000 students in 107 countries were registered. And that's not all he did:

“Young people are growing and becoming decision makers. The FT wasn't serving them, so we started **research** to see what we could provide. The **needs of students** were centered around **three pillars we could serve**: academic attainment, career advice and financial literacy.”

They found where it was the FT could add value. The **value proposition** was around financial coverage and intellectual curiosity. They launched a website and a YouTube channel for each of the three pillars. They created a **free board game** sent to schools designed to start conversations around money. They 'hired' **ambassadors** in schools as feedback loops and who helped them have a physical presence in schools. They held small **events**. They got students to blog to **give them a voice** and created **competitions** with third-party partners as an incentive for wider readership.

Andrew Jack is the global education editor for the Financial Times and runs the program:

“The most important factor is **relevance**. We don't do storytelling on what university life is like because that's not where the FT has authority. We cover topics where FT has affinity and where our brand is the story. We showcase the content that is relevant to that audience rather than reversion our existing content. We encourage them to stretch towards us rather than devote huge editorial resources to something outside of our core expertise.”

There's still a long way to go. They don't yet reversion content that could appeal to a younger audience, they don't customize the homepage and the stream page is still standard FT content. They haven't published much content off-platform that represents the diversity of relevant content offerings. But small steps: They've created an automated stream to push stories with tags they consider relevant. They have **Twitter channels** for schools, they work with teachers who flag content they curate on a landing page. They create a weekly **curated email** to flag specific content. And they've decided YouTube is the platform to focus on and in 2021 have more resources to produce more video.

COMMUNITY

AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

Audience development, social, engagement, community management — all teams that are often grouped under the same umbrella, if not the same team. Sometimes these roles are on half a dozen teams with people working together or in silos. Sometimes it's just one person.

These roles are not the same. But they all have the same goal: to [listen](#) to your target audience, get them involved, get them engaged, build a relationship with them, retain them and grow the reach and impact of your work. Always chase engagement and relationship building, not volume. What ties these teams together should be data. Putting aside the labels, here are some of the important roles these teams should address:

- Running social platforms and platform specific social production.
- Social listening.
- Optimizing for engagement.
- Publishing.
- Creating campaigns.
- Overseeing community callouts and contributions, and curating responses.
- Content moderation.
- Soliciting feedback or questions from audience.

We've talked about the importance of [producing with and for](#) your audience, and of Zoomers being a generation that expects direct connection with the brands, organizations, and people they follow. The smaller you are, the more influential you can be with a direct relationship with your audience.

The voice you cultivate on your platforms is crucial. Depending on where you are on the 'legacy' spectrum, there are different implications regarding the style of voice that needs to be considered. But when you nail the right voice, it will be really effective in engaging with your audience.

Soliciting engagement from your audience, no matter its form, often leads to the highest level of audience growth and retention. How you judge engagement will differ. Decide what your metrics are and how they align with your goals.

Respond to those who interact. Allow them to leave comments and questions, and then create content from those responses. Think of how a lot of storytelling today for Zoomers is reaction based — such as how TikTok is often about creating moments for others to communicate with and react to.

Developing and maximizing community (not reach) is the better goal. The more you can involve your audience in conversation about content and engagement around it (polls, questions, etc.) the more you'll understand them, and the more you'll deepen the relationship and embed yourself with them. That's how you get them to come back. That's how you'll tap into niche communities and build projects through specific community groups.

PARTNERSHIPS AND COMMISSIONING

Don't underestimate the power of amplification from partners who co-produce with you or simply cross post. Work with your wider newsroom on stories. Commission outside stories, whether from a stable of contributors, callouts, or partners. Do outreach to partner with those who will have access to audiences you don't but want to have.

Case Study: BuzzFeed News

Sara Yasin, then Managing Editor

Before she was promoted to Managing Editor, Yasin spent four years on the **news curation** team as lead editor, deputy director, and director. “I started out on the social team, and the difference between me and a lot of other people on it was that I was fascinated by **audience**.”

The role she led straddled **social, mobile, audience development, engagement and homepage curation and personalization**.

“I didn’t know how to run a mobile app. I knew curation. But I expanded my skills. I learned that what makes a good tweet makes a good push alert. What makes a good caption could be a good headline. And that’s the kind of thinking you need when you think of engagement/social/audience development and how they work together.”

Yasin reshaped and restructured the teams, and focused on building collaborative teams. She built a new strategy around audience. But despite the size of her team, she doesn’t just join every platform. “For example, we haven’t invested in TikTok that much yet, because **you have to make it someone’s job**.” Each audience, she says, needs people to focus on it:

“Tell stories **native to platform**. Ask does this story do well for this platform. We tailor according to platform and how we think the story will perform relative to what the audience will look like. We want to be the smart friend in your pocket — write smartly, engaging, concisely. [...] Really think about the **formats** and how to bring news into formats that are native into how people are consuming news. [...] It’s not just about the story and what it means for the audience, but also how you are telling it.”

To Yasin, BuzzFeed’s authenticity comes from treating the internet as a real place, and being internet native. But still, **platforms aren’t stagnant**:

“We’re all at an existential point of do you invest more energy in an existing platform or move to the new ones. You have to know what it means for you. On Instagram, for example, it means we increase engagement which hopefully increases growth, but the big question is what we get out of it: If you have several million people on a platform, what does it mean to make money or make them more dedicated BuzzFeed followers? Where do we push them to? It’s not just about growth. Engaging on Instagram is a passive way for people to become a fan of your work, but how do you make them more dedicated?”

You have to think of the day to day running of platforms. The internal problem of audience development is how to deal with [the] future and how platforms are changing while also focusing on the here and now. In 2014, it was easy to grow an audience and not think of what’s next, but you can’t do that anymore. You can’t throw yourself onto a platform and expect to get the engagement, let alone drive click-through.

Formulas are how we kill an audience development team. You have to factor in the element of surprise. There are a lot of charlatans in our universe who predict what will work, but the truth is you shouldn't. You should **optimize** and understand that platforms change."

When it comes to Gen Z, Yasin knew they saw BuzzFeed as "not old, but not them either." They associated the brand with fun, but with millennials. "The only way to attract them is to be **authentic**, and that's how we'll bring them in."

So she decided to hire teens to make videos for BuzzFeed in 2019. And so started the **teen ambassadors program**. She wanted to choose teens who have normal and relatable experiences in places around the country to create native content on social platforms. She did direct **outreach** on Twitter and to schools in purple states, as well as national student organizations.

The results were mixed, but she's not concerned. It's only one experiment. What's next?

"Thinking about **personalities**. Dave [Jorgensen] at the Washington Post is probably more trustworthy than some of the biggest names. He's seen as authentic. And when you're pumped with **influencer culture** and slick images, it's very important to be authentic. Younger people are obsessed with that."

INFLUENCERS

The influencer network is huge. Millennials cared about traditional celebrities and reality and talk show celebrities. Zoomers care about nano-influencers, who are particularly worth researching if you have a niche topic specialty. Young creators are great to partner with if you can content share and choose them carefully — those who will add value and help shape your brand identity, not just the ones that go viral. If you can tick the boxes of influencer in a niche topic or unheard voice, then all the more kudos to you.

There's always been content creators (think YouTube personalities) so don't despair when you think of competing with Zoomers with millions of followers on TikTok. Instead, think of how you can work with them, and how you can use their community to gain trust. And remember that Gen Z trust individuals over institutions.

“Take the example of an app called Hive, run by Kassandra Pop, a 22-year-old CEO with ~500 followers. The company paid a [fellow Zoomer], 22-year-old Jolyne Cujoh [...] to promote the app. The video did well, with approximately half a million views, but here's where it gets interesting: A One Direction fandom account [then] amplified the video.

Then, *stan* Twitter went OFF about the app — prompting a FRENZY of people asking “wtf is Hive?!” I'm OBSESSED with this story because it demonstrates what I always say — that you simply cannot understand the present or future if you do not deeply understand Gen Z. If you are unfamiliar with the POWER of stan Twitter, the capacity of young womxn to set the trends for the rest of us, the specific frustrations that many of us have with major platforms like IG, the influence of Directioners (1D's fandom), or the potential of ANY TikTok to go viral — you may just miss the next #1 app.”

- *Ziad Ahmed, CEO, JUV Consulting*

Within 24 hours, the app was #1 on the App Store.

EVENTS

An often-overlooked part of community building, events provide ample space to engage your target audience.

Case Study: WFAE 90.7, NPR

Joni Deutsch, then On-Demand Content, Audience Engagement Manager at WFAE

Joni was the only young person at Generation Listen, her NPR workplace in West Virginia, and the youngest host of a nationally syndicated public radio program when she was 24. Public radio was graying, and they weren't engaging with or attracting young, diverse audiences, let alone encouraging them to monetarily support. They were using the same marketing techniques to encourage them to subscribe as they did older audiences, and weren't producing content that reflected their needs. Her higher-ups saw value in possible audience growth.

“I was the resident millennial, and the CEO asked if I could be the point person on those efforts, encouraging younger people and educating them on the value of public radio. I said sure, why not? **I understand the target audience and I understand their needs.** [...] I had to start from the drawing board... we can't just use our own airwaves and social accounts, otherwise we would be shouting into the same void. The target audience considered radio to be older, whiter, more boring and had no attention span for it. And so we had to **create unique content that reflected** the people we wanted to target.”

Deutsch spearheaded a statewide initiative. Her strategy was dictated by her limited resources and lack of team. “**I worked with a shoestring budget and 90-95% of the time it was me alone.**” She did an audit on internal practices first to see how they work with digital, and then an external audit to see how they engaged with communities. She looked at their competitors for inspiration and to see if there was space for **cross-promotion**.

Based on her research, she decided to focus on **engagement**, tapping into **communities**, and **events**. She did **outreach** to young professional groups that network, getting in touch with them to tap into the audiences that weren't aware of what Generation Listen provided.

She **collaborated** with businesses and organizations to host **music and podcast listening parties**, and established seasonal **events** across Virginia. To advertise these events, she finagled whatever **graphic resource** she could to create flyers and advertising that were less stagnant and spoke to a younger aesthetic, and posted them on social platforms. She drafted radio promos that **sounded like a young person** inviting other young people.

“We used to use outdated language. We said things like **tune in**, which isn't how we listen to audio anymore, it's on demand.”

For the events, she **partnered** with musicians, NPR music personalities, and tapped into existing resources, like Tiny Desk concerts.

“We need to **capitalize on what we have**. We had personalities aligned with the Tiny Desk brand. We had some music and a little bit of celebrity to bring people out. And you have to layer in all the reasons why a young person with no interest in public radio would come.”

She found **free swag** to hand out and the concerts were **free**. She partnered with brands that **resonated** with young audiences, from their favorite breweries to screen printing companies for T-shirts. She ticked all the checkboxes to help younger people attend who may not have even known about the brand.

She relied on **data**, creating surveys pre- and post- to see what the impact was. And then she followed with pledge drives, which did bring in members who had attended the events and said they joined because the events managed to convey the value.

She learned that word-of-mouth referral was huge. So they launched a **young audience brand ambassadorship**, sponsored things they care about, and created ‘awards.’

The audience NPR wanted to target doesn’t “tune in,” and so she became a manager that created on-demand content for the app store, voice activated devices and **other distribution channels**. “We have to translate our content into the **mediums** our target audience is in. Can we involve Alexa? Yes. So we did. Can we show using data that our efforts are working in order to encourage investment from the higher ups? Yes we can.”

Public radio, she says, is a slower medium to adapt to change: in content, production and the necessary engagement techniques.

“We have to tackle content and production. We have to tap into stories that we haven’t touched. We have to construct stories and scripts better, condense duration to fit the needs of a digital audience. You can’t put an hour-long radio program onto an on-demand distribution channel. I used data to help NPR One see how to frame our content to make it flow better, so we don’t waste time for our audience.”

She worked to help producers bring in more **community voices**, and to remember that this is a conversation, where they talk but also **listen**. They started **community engagement practices** — like getting the audience to send voicemails to be featured.

What’s next? Hopefully **hire younger people, train** existing people, more data insights and a bigger budget. The pipeline for young talents, she says, is small. So they’re looking at partnering with colleges and beginning there. She’s not on many platforms, “**though it gets you exposure and helps open your target audiences’ eyes to you as a brand and then find their way to you,**” simply because there’s no one to do it.

“The sad thing is what I do is often a passion in many places. It’s always one young person that makes time for innovation and creativity, and it’s rarely a full-time role. And that has to change.”

THE CASE

You made it all the way through this guide!

I hope it has been useful, and that the case studies helped shed light on the guidance practices shared.

I want to leave you with one last case study of a small legacy organization that I feel has done a solid job at attracting, connecting and engaging with a much younger target demographic. They built a strong off-platform presence, created new offerings, worked with the wider organization to leverage skill sets, solicited contributions from their target audience and created free content in multiple mediums and platforms:

Case Study: Chemical & Engineering News (C&EN)

Dorea I. Reeser, Executive Editor, Audience Engagement

Chemical & Engineering News (C&EN) began publishing as a weekly print magazine in 1923. Almost 100 years later, they're still thriving, with a new suite of digital offerings. Published by the American Chemical Society, they're "the world's most comprehensive and authoritative source of news about chemistry and related fields [...] committed to keeping you up to date with the chemistry news that matters most."

In recent years, they've launched social accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. They have a podcast, a newsletter, voice products for your smart speaker, an app, and so much more. As a whole, they've implemented many of the guidance practices you've read in this guide.

And in 2017, they decided they wanted to attract a younger audience and wanted students to be aware of them early on in their careers. So the first step was **hiring exactly the right person**, Dorea Reeser, and tasking her with the mission of **expanding their content, products and presence** to places where a new, younger target audience was.

Reeser has a Ph.D. in environmental chemistry, started a chemistry blog in graduate school, hosted a scientist podcast, was part of a winning chemistry video contest, and has a certification in Environment Visual Communication. In short: exactly the right person for the job. When she was the Senior Audience Engagement Editor, she was the only full-time person on social, but was able to borrow editors who dedicated a few hours a week, and used freelancers for a total of 20 extra hours on social every week.

She **created and managed the social media presence and team, engagement strategies, newsletter production, and all interactive content.**

The first thing C&EN does right? Provides a **unique service for a unique community.**

"Having a niche means audiences are much more interested in our topics. They're either really interested or not, so if they are, they do spend a lot more time on us."

They're **clear on their goals** and what they provide: a resource for research and information, inspirational and motivational events, and entertainment on social platforms.

Beyond the number of subscribers, they have clear goals **for every platform and every project.** Whether it's growing audience, building loyalty, or inspiring.

Reeser chose to feature **content that resonates** with a younger audience. You might think chemistry and issues that intersect with Zoomer interests might not be common, but you'd be surprised. In March 2021, they highlighted 30 Black chemists, one a week with hashtag #BlackinChem and produced an issue on Black trailblazers:

"I know the impact of having scientific role models who have the same heritage and background as you do, who have faced the same obstacles. **Representation matters.**"

Other topics include chemistry and climate change, chemistry and tech (like wearable tech that turns body heat into power), chemistry and current news (such as chemical missions of the rovers landing on Mars and how President Biden's stance on immigration will affect scientists admitted into the U.S.).

Some stories tap into curiosity: #STEMatHome experiments or explainers on what is snake venom. To get access to these stories, Reeser focused on **collaboration across teams**: She establishes good relationships with staff, sharing **insights from data**, pitching them stories based off of **audience feedback**, and being involved in stories that would work for her target audience from the get-go, advising on everything from imagery to headlines.

“I’m also a big proponent of generational teams to bounce ideas off. My team is Gen Z and millennials. My boss is Gen X. We each see different things.”

She made **visuals** a priority.

“Before I came along, we used to have a lot of stories with no visuals, imagine!”

In addition to photography, Reeser made sure to feature cartoons and illustrations from the magazine. On social platforms, she created a color palette and chose fonts, building a consistent and recognizable brand aesthetic. She created the art herself using graphic design platform Canva.

They don’t produce much **video** yet, but they do produce some, and even then they **experiment with distribution**, such as telling the video in three parts. And when they do video, it is **text-based**, with **audio off**. They’ve learned that short explainers do best. “**Video takes resource, but there are tools to help us automate.**”

Data: Reeser is data driven. She looks at the data on social platforms every day to see what is and isn’t working. She looks at Google Analytics on their own site to see where the traffic comes from, and it often comes from the platforms they’re on. C&EN brings in people for **focus groups** and labs to offer **feedback**. She sent out **surveys** with a chance to win a gift card.

Google Analytics helped give her proof of why she should be creating **platform specific content**. C&EN’s three main platforms of choice are Instagram (28.6K followers), Twitter (99.3K followers), and Facebook (102.2K followers).

Reese understands that each platform needs the right content, because each one has different audiences with different strategies. Not only that — “**We also have a strategy for each part of the platform. Instagram posts are not like Instagram stories. Everything is intentional. And it takes expertise — I [did] the grid myself because it’s so much more intuitive and specific.**”

“**Tumblr [is a] brand awareness space [for us] rather than for growth. Twitter is our most loyal audience — people who are active on social media and easy to reach. We chat with them, do**

polls, interact a bit more with people there. Our click-through rate is incredible. On Facebook, we do get reach and engagement, but the quality of interaction isn't as high. Platforms can be gateways to membership, but they also have other goals to measure success."

Reeser chose Instagram as her platform to start from scratch and in less than two years, had built a dedicated following.

"I chose Instagram because we had the content for it. Chemistry is beautiful with such great and entertaining photos. I'd say our audience is 50-50 in terms of Gen Z and millennials, with a higher percentage of Gen Z."

But it's not just photos they publish:

- #SketchChemistry are comics from the magazine.
- #FlourescenceFriday, a beautiful hashtag collaboration/**partnership** between the magazine and @fluorescent_chemist, a chemistry professor with a very strong following and engaged audience.
- #PeriodicGraphics, an infographic series that is visual, educational, relevant, and consistently published (For example, "What does a visit to the dentist entail?")
- #CENChemPics a **competition** launched for the audience to submit their chemistry photos and win an Amazon gift card.
- Instagram takeovers with young researchers around the globe.

And for Instagram stories? "I hire[d] Gen Z freelancers to do them as they use it in their personal lives every day. They are great because it's part of their life."

Reeser managed **content strategy** for **engaging** with audiences.

"We focus on **social listening**, driven not by tools but by interacting and paying attention to our audience. We listen and encourage them to contribute and participate."

That **audience participation** takes many, many forms: polling on Twitter, periodic table challenges and quizzes on Facebook, Live Q&As with C&EN journalists and chemists on Instagram Live. All with the aim of growing engagement.

Tone: Despite the official magazine being much more formal, their tone on social is much more colloquial, "with a sassy personality." Reeser put a lot of focus on wording, social copy, captions and titles. And the fact that their work on social results in the highest traffic to the website speaks for itself:

"We want it to be authentic and feeling so it sounds like something your friend would have done. We want people to be natural when we feature them. We've had people do really creative

things, very candid. We want people to **have fun with us** and know that we have personality and get to know the people on the team.”

Innovation and experimentation in engagement-focused products:

Grad School Survival Guide:

In Fall 2020, Reeser launched C&EN’s first email course, on surviving grad school. 2,800 people subscribed. In it, **every element has been carefully thought out**: from the colloquial, personal tone, to the Zen illustration of a person of color sipping tea, to the color palettes and the topics. Written by students themselves, it is anecdotal and personable. The goal was to **build loyalty and trust** with a younger audience, and not necessarily traffic. (The course is sponsored, so it also brings in revenue).

“I get an email a week that is quite long and says it has meant so much to me because I’ve felt so alone because of the pandemic and how much it resonates with them. It’s wonderful.”

More email courses were planned and launched.

Live Storytelling Events, Table Talks

“We had a virtual session [in 2021] similar to ONA table talks. One was on coping with chaos, another on managing mental health. We won’t get a lot out of it for the work, but we **serve our audience** and **build loyalty**, and that’s high value for us. [...] We build rapport and trust. We also get to see what people are most interested in during those types of events and if it’s resonating.”

Webinar Series:

In February 2021, they launched Kitchen Chemistry: a live zoom baking event to answer questions about the chemistry of cooking. In the first one, an organic chemistry professor made heart-shaped thumbprint cookies and answered questions on cookie chemistry. The recipe for the webinar was shared beforehand, and 200 people registered to attend. It worked so well, Reeser thought of turning it into a monthly event or finding a sponsor. To promote the event on social, she created special art on Canva.

“Push hard to be allowed to experiment. And when you prove it, after a while, the newsroom will put more resources into it.”

Partnerships: Lots of cross-posting on Twitter in particular, with organizations that have young audiences, and she pushed to have a dedicated person to do more.

Her advice: “**Know what you’re offering, experiment as much as you can, be on the platforms your target audience are in, engage them, use captivating visuals, have a clear voice and personality, have fun, meet people where they are, solicit feedback, look at the data and use whatever tools you can to produce the content they need.**”

INTERVIEWEES

In order of appearance:

JUV consulting

Ziad Ahmed, CEO

Vice

Dory Carr-Harris, then Executive Editor of Vice.com

Hashtag Our Stories

Sumaiya Omar, Co-founder

Financial Times

Robin Kwong, then Head of Digital Delivery

Andrew Jack, Global Education Editor

Krishan Puvvada, Project Lead, Education

The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT)

Riyaad Minty, Director of Digital

NowThis

Versha Sharma, then Senior Correspondent and Managing Editor
Chetan Patel, Senior Vice President, Growth

CNN Digital

Deblina Chakraborty, then Editor, Global Programming

BuzzFeed News

Sara Yasin, then Managing Editor

WFAE 90.7, NPR Charlotte

Joni Deutsch, then On-Demand Content, Audience Engagement Manager

Chemical & Engineering News

Dorea I. Reeser, Executive Editor, Audience Engagement

All interviews were conducted in March 2021.

THE END.