Contently

Paid Content Distribution 101:

The Beginner's Guide to Getting More Eyeballs on Your Stories
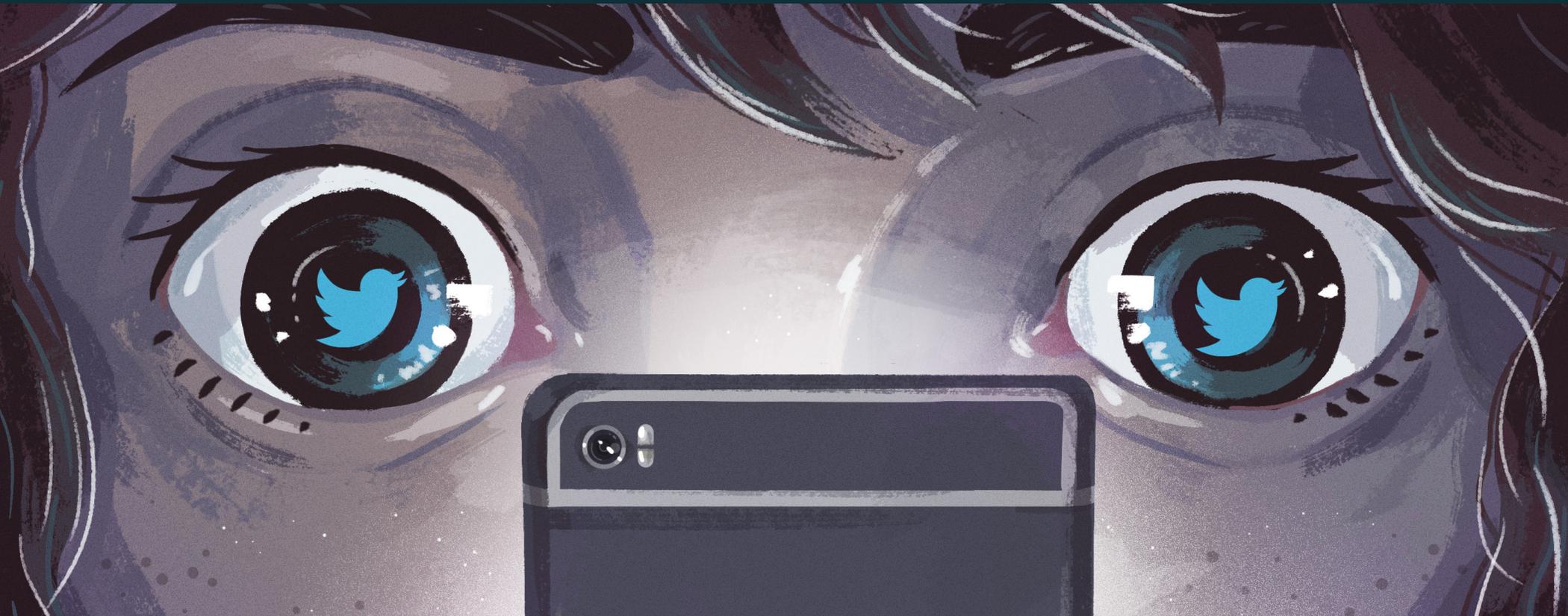
By Amanda Walgrove

Table of Contents

Introduction

If you're a content marketer, there's a good chance you want more eye-balls on your content. Even more likely, you want the right eyeballs.

You can do an "audience rain dance" and pray for a miraculous influx of social referral traffic, as our editor-in-chief has been known to do from time to time. Or you can take advantage of one of the many paid content distribution platforms that exist to make your job easier.

While it's important to play around with each option and find the one that works best for your content, there are four platforms in particu-lar that we advocate experimenting with right away: Twitter, Outbrain, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Let's look at what these platforms have to offer and the best practices for using them.

2. Twitter

If you're posting content regularly on Twitter, then you're already halfway to getting your paid campaigns started. Twitter the perfect platform for driving some extra traffic to your posts, boosting that list of email subscribers, and steering leads towards a downloadable piece of content.

To meet these objectives, Twitter offers a wide range of campaigns to choose from. In order to make sure you're getting the most value out of your investment, it's important to find the mix that's right for your specific content strategy. Here's what you need to know.

Which Type of Campaign Should I Choose?

Selecting the right campaign largely depends on how you want to grow your audience.

No matter which campaign you choose, though, there are some similarities across the board:

- You can schedule a campaign immediately and run it until you exhaust your budget, or choose specific start and end dates.

- All sponsored tweets will say "Promoted by [Your Business Name]."

- Twitter recommends using a few tweets for each campaign. This allows you to diversify your posts and engage a wider audience, but most importantly, it allows for trial and error so you learn what works for future campaigns.

Now, onto the four different types of campaigns.

Engagement Tweets Campaign

What used to be called a Promoted Tweets campaign is now an Engagement Tweets campaign—and it's by far the one Contently uses the most. It's also the easiest type of campaign to put together.

If you want to take a standard tweet and put some money behind it, this is the campaign for you. You can either compose a new tweet on the campaign page, or you choose one already published or scheduled through a third-party app like TweetDeck or Hootsuite.
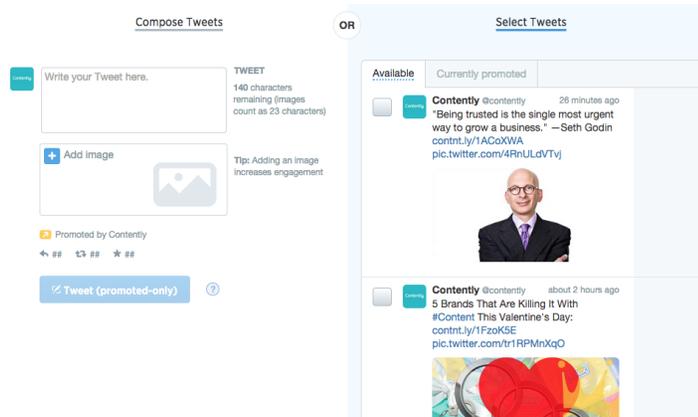
These tweets are best used to drive more traffic to your site, or just to gain some more visibility for a tweet that could perform well. By putting some more money behind a few tweets that promote a certain piece of content, you can make sure that your content gets in the feeds of Twitter users who might find it interesting, and might even look into what else your brand can offer. For example, we'll often use this campaign to give a little momentum to a tweet that has already gained good traction with our audience, and track how many more people it reached.

Followers Campaign

The sole purpose of a Followers campaign is, not surprisingly, to gain new Twitter followers. They're not meant for promoting individual pieces of content, driving leads, or tracking conversions. Given the focused goal, these tweets are often simplistic. Twitter suggests using only text—no links or multimedia of any kind, just a short description of why people should follow your account.

These tweets appear in targeted users' timelines and their suggestions for who to follow. To ensure that your campaign attracts high-quality followers instead of useless bots, keep your message simple and to the point, and always include a call to action that lets your audience know why they should follow your account.

Follower campaigns are also most effective if they're set up to run over an extended length of time, such as a week or a month, so you can steadily build your audience by spending a small chunk of money each day. For example, we've set up these campaigns on a monthly basis for The Content Strategist to boost our audience growth, and have used it sparingly to build an audience for our sister publication, The Freelancer. If you do this, it's best to keep refreshing your campaign with new tweets in order to keep your message up to date for new and potential followers.

Website Clicks or Conversion Campaign

This is where marketers get to flex their call-to-action muscles. For this type of campaign, you'll have to create a Website Card, which includes an image, a headline, a URL, and a call to action your reader can click on. Website Cards are used to direct people to your site and complete an action, such as making a purchase or signing up for a newsletter.

To see how this looks on Twitter, here's a Website Card template we created to promote our healthcare e-book.

Back on the campaign page, you then attach the Website Card to a tweet and add text to give a short description of the content you're promoting.

To track conversions from that call-to-action button on the Website Card, set up a website tag. For example, if you're promoting an e-book that has an email signup page and want to know how many people submit their emails due to your Twitter campaign, you go to Tools > Conversion Tracking > Create new website tag, and set up the proper code.
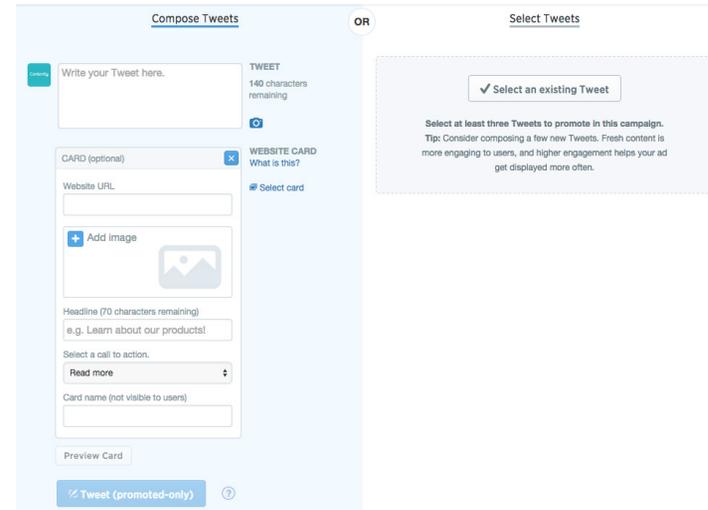
Leads campaign

This campaign is similar to the Conversion campaign above, except you'll be creating a Lead Generation Card instead of a Website Card. While Website Cards are used to send people to your website in order to complete an action, Lead Generation Cards collect emails from people who express interest in your business (meaning, the people who click the Sign Up button on your card) directly on the Twitter platform itself.

As an example, here's the template we use to promote our email news-letter.

How Can I Target My Desired Audience?

Each campaign type above allows you to target by various factors, including: location, gender, device and platform, keyword, interests, followers, tailored audiences, and TV targeting. Tailored audiences allows you to specifically target people based on custom lists that you can upload, such as email subscriber lists. TV targeting allows you to target users who engage with television programs in a specific market, narrowed down by country.

Additionally, here are a few tips that will help you fine-tune your targeting:

- For followers, it's smart to target people who follow your competitors. Try between seven and 10 to start, and then swap new followers in for future campaigns.

- For tailored audiences, if you have a larger list of email subscribers than you do Twitter followers, you can upload your subscriber list and target those readers and others like them. If you don't want to waste money targeting people who already engage with your brand, there's also a new targeting option that lets you exclude these tailored audiences.

- You can choose to target specific devices or platforms. Website Cards are optimized for mobile, so it's best to target users on mobile devices for these campaigns.

How Should I Budget My Spend?

Setting your budget for a Twitter campaign includes three main elements:

1. A daily minimum budget

2. A bid range per engagement

3. Total spend for that campaign

To keep a campaign running for a certain period of time without setting start and end dates, simply set an amount you'd like to spend per day and monitor your campaign as it progresses.

For example, when we ran a Followers campaign over the summer, I divided the budget by 30 days for the month and made that price my daily cap.

The budget and bid can also be adjusted while the campaign is running. This feature comes in handy because you might want to adjust the bid at different times in the day or week, such as when a buzzworthy event is taking over the conversation on Twitter. At times like this, you may have to bid higher to get your content seen.

And after you begin running campaigns, Twitter will offer suggestions on how you can improve. These tips will often suggest you add more money to a campaign or up your bid for higher engagement. Sometimes we test out these tactics to experiment with pieces that have performed exceptionally well.

How Can I Measure the Success of My Campaings?

Once your campaigns are up and running, you can track their performances in real-time on the campaigns dashboard.

As with most insights programs, you can view your campaign stats based on a certain range of dates, platforms, locations, and demographics.

The Engagements tab will break down campaign performance by individual tweets, impressions, clicks, retweets, replies, followers, and engagement rate.

Pair this information with the offerings at Twitter Analytics to see how your sponsored tweets perform in comparison to your regular Tweets. Note that "clicks" in Twitter analytics speak includes all clicks on your campaign, not just clicks on your link. To track the amount of link clicks a campaign is driving, we track a custom URL in Bitly.

From there you'll be able to optimize based on your findings, which is when the real fun begins.

3. Outbrain

Never underestimate the power of compelling headlines. Outbrain, a content discovery platform, is a great option for publishers looking for an efficient way to drive readers to their websites.

Outbrain places recommended links to your stories next to and below articles on premier news sites like Hearst and Condé Nast publications. With the right combination of compelling headlines and clever packaging, you can drive high-quality audiences to your content at a relatively low cost. But when it comes to Outbrain, you can't go in blindly and expect your numbers to jump. Here's what you need to know.

Which Type of Campaign Should I Choose?

Choose the type of campaign based on these three options: video, mobile, and desktop. While video is self-explanatory (best for brands promoting video content), and desktop campaigns can reach readers who are accessing their content on a stationary device, mobile campaigns tend to perform best, reaching audiences on the go who are willing to click around, especially with fashion and retail content.
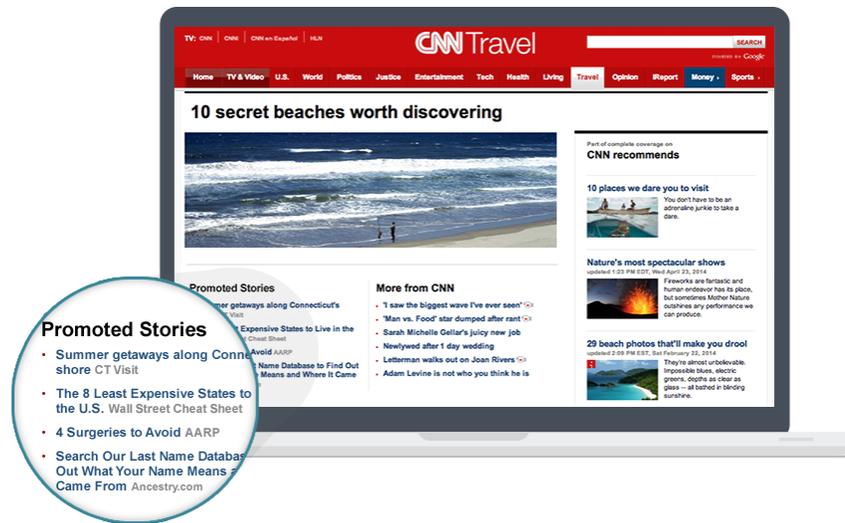
How Can I Target My Desired Audience?

On Outbrain, you can geo-target readers by country, state, and Designated Market Area (DMA). But the main targeting strategy for the program is to grab people's attention by experimenting with engaging headlines.

Outbrain advises publishers to add as much content as possible to each campaign, which means testing different headline, image, and subhead combinations. You can try out as many variations as you want, and we usually test 12 to 15 headline variations along with several image options.

Outbrain's algorithm will optimize accordingly, showing the best performing headlines to your audience more often. You can also add content to a campaign already running, which allows you to swap headlines and maximize performance.

Along the way, Outbrain recommends a few best practices for getting the most out of your headlines:

- Use strong adjectives, numbers, and questions—including words like "who," "hot," and "surprise."

- Keep headlines concise, between 80 and 100 characters.

- Don't be pushy with words like "must" and "need"—instead, use reader reference words such as "you" and "your."

How Should I Budget My Spend?

The budget can be assigned on a monthly, weekly, or daily basis. According to Contently's client services manager, Amanda Weatherhead,

You'll often see a lower cost per click (CPC) earlier in the week, month, or quarter, after which it becomes more competitive to get eyes on your content.

So plan accordingly to get the most bang for your buck.

For example, if you have $10,000 allocated for a quarter, spend $5,000 in the first month, $3,000 in the second, and $2,000 in the third. If you decide to set a daily, weekly, or monthly budget cap, Outbrain's system will divide that total amount each day to distribute content evenly.

The CPC is also adjustable throughout the campaign, so if you notice people are loving your content and eating up your budget quickly, you can drop the CPC. If engagement is low, increase your bid.

At Contently, we set up monthly campaigns for our clients and create progress reports at the end of each month.

Please name your campaign

For example: My First Campaign

Once you set up your first campaign, you can create additional ones so naming your campaign will help distinguish between them

How much do you want to spend per reader?

$ 0.60   **per click**   Suggested CPC: $0.45 - $1.20

What's your daily budget?

$ 25

How Should I Budget My Spend?

When it comes to measuring the success of your content distribution, Outbrain primarily tracks clicks, but you can also track conversions by embedding a code in your piece of content.

You can customize conversions to fit your specific goals, such as e-book downloads, email signups, or purchases on a retail site. In Campaign Settings, you can also enter your tracking code into Google Analytics to better measure its progress.

Campaign: ALL

* Please note, reporting metrics may be delayed by 2-4 hours

Don't forget to check the visit duration and bounce rate of your Outbrain referral traffic in Google Analytics to make sure readers are actually sticking around once they land on your site. Ultimately, you're not just hoping people will click on your headlines; you're hoping they'll click, spend time with your content, and keep coming back.

Outbrain suggests a certain CPC for each piece of content, and if you're beating that figure with a lower price per click and Outbrain visitors are spending quality time with your content, there's a good chance you have a strong content strategy in place.

Remember that tools like Outbrain can help tremendously when trying to build an audience—just be sure you know how to use what's in your toolbox.

4. Facebook

Facebook announced last November that they're going to restrict brand reach by punishing brands that are overly self-promotional. Why is this great news for content marketers? Because it means Facebook is shutting up the publishers and companies that give branded content a bad rap, potentially creating a tide that lifts all boats—at least among content marketers who are sharing content people find valuable.

Still, finding yourself at the mercy of Facebook's algorithm can be frustrating. This is especially true considering that the social network is such an effective driver of referral traffic to publisher sites. According to Shareaholic, Facebook's referral traffic is three times more than that of all other social networks combined. It also now drives a quarter of all web traffic.

Luckily, you can easily ensure your reach on Facebook if you have a solid plan and a budget devoted to sponsored posts. Here's what you need to know to get started.

Which Type of Campaign Should I Choose?

For sponsoring posts that go directly into your audience's News Feeds, you won't necessarily choose a type of campaign as you would on Twitter. Instead, you'll have to be particularly mindful of how you compose your content.

For example, if you just want to boost engagement with multimedia such as a picture or video you've posted, Facebook recommends structuring your content with the following specs:

- 90 text characters

- Image ratio: 1:1

- Image size: 1,200 x 1,200 pixels

If you're looking to drive clicks to your website via an expanded link (our favorite option), Facebook recommends using these parameters:

- Title: 500 characters (anything over is t runcated)

- Linked title: 1 to 2 lines

- Domain link: 1 line

- Description: 2 to 3 lines

- Image aspect ratio: 1.91:1

- Image size in ad: 470 x 246 pixels

Once your content is formatted, you can work on getting it in front of the right people with Facebook's targeting options.

Additionally, if you're looking to expand your Facebook reach, sponsored posts might be a good testing ground for seeing which content really pops and resonates with your audience.

The best way to do this is to create unpublished Page posts, or "dark posts," which can be done through Facebook's Power Editor. These posts will be shown to your target audiences, but won't be published to your News Feed, giving you the opportunity to give your content a test run before it goes live on your business' public page. By testing which content will appeal most to your Facebook fans, you increase the odds of appeasing the Facebook gods and seeing your organic reach increase.

In order to create an unpublished Page post, access the Power Editor, select Manage Pages from the drop-down menu, select your business page, and then select Create Post. From here, you can create a post as your normally would for your Facebook page, but choose the option to only use the post as an ad.

How Can I Target My Desired Audience?

First, choose the audience you want to reach. If you select "People who like your Page" or "People who like your Page and their friends," then the majority of the targeting is done for you. You just have to add a price and start the campaign. If you choose to target your own pool of users ("People you choose through targeting"), you can narrow your audience by location, age, gender, and interests.

In the Facebook Ads Manager, you can also customize your own pre-designed audiences. Custom Audienc-

es are compiled from your customer contacts, website traffic, and mobile traffic—in other words, people you've already connected with who have expressed an interest in your content or products.

Lookalike Audiences can also be assembled based on your existing Custom Audiences and people who like your page. These audiences include people who are likely to be interested in your business because of their similarities to your customer list.
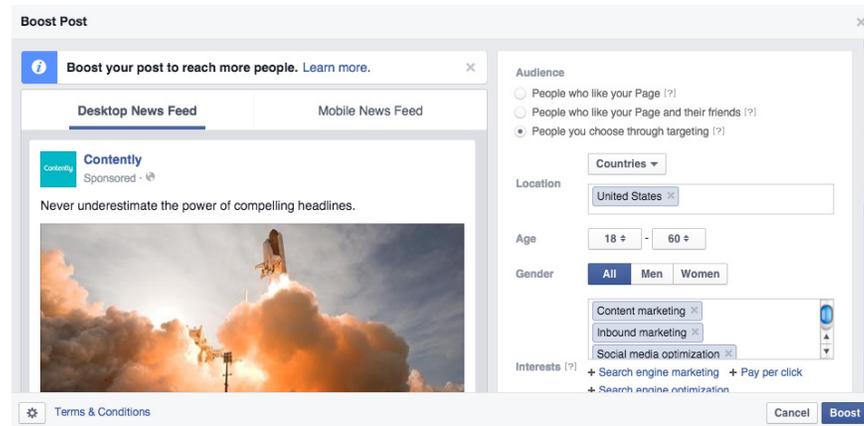
In our experience, the CPC seems to be a bit higher on Facebook than on Twitter. But with that price often comes better results: Hyper-targeting by location on Facebook has led to significant traffic.

For example, it's a good place to target readers who freelance in Chicago if you want to promote a piece about the best coffee shops to work from in the Windy City. Your audience might only be several thousand people, but they are likely to be readers who are most interested in what you have to offer. They will, therefore, be more likely to click on your content, which will drive down the CPC.

If you want to track conversions while targeting your audience on Facebook, set up a Conversion Pixel (by choosing Create Pixel on the Facebook Ads Manager), select a category (registrations, leads, adds to cart, etc), and embed the code on your page.

How Should I Budget My Spend?

Budgeting on Facebook is even easier than targeting. Set a fixed amount of money you want to put behind your piece of content and let it run. Just as with targeting, your budget will determine the size of your audience. More money equals more eyeballs. If you'd like your campaign to run for a certain amount of time, choose the duration and Facebook will distribute your funds evenly.

Maximum Budget	$200.00 ▼

Est. People Reached	**12,000 - 31,000** of 470,000 Your budget and targeting determine how many people your post will reach.

Duration	Boost this post for [2 days ▼] You will spend $100.00 per day.

While testing out new content on Facebook, it can be helpful to create several sponsored posts with really small amounts of spend and see which ones resonate best with your audience. That's the secret sauce of PetFlow's blog, which has expanded to reach 50 million readers in less than one year. As The Content Strategist's Natalie Burg explained:

[PetFlow crafts] 90 to 100 stories a day directed at women over 45, who make up 70 percent of the PetFlow's audience. You know, dog moms and cat ladies. The right photos, videos, and stories must be, in [co-founder[Zhardanovsky's words, "something my mom would laugh or cry at." Think headlines like "Rescue Pit Bull Protects 6-Year-Old Girl With Severe Autism. This Is Phenomenal," "Adorable Owl Gets His First Bath And Blowdry! ADORABLE!!" and even "What This Little Boy Sings To Grandma Will Melt Your Heart!"

Of those 100 or so fully composed daily stories, only about 15 will make it to the blog. The curators gnaw the contender list down by testing each with unpublished paid posts on Facebook. Rather than simply posting a link to their audience, PetFlow pays to distribute them to a certain segment of Facebook users who aren't fans. If a post meets a certain criteria—a classified combo of likes, clicks, shares, or comments—it graduates to the blog and is shared with the PetFlow Facebook pack.

If you adopt a similar strategy and want to double down on a successful post, adding more money while it's still running is relatively easy. The one thing you can't change, however, is your targeting. So target carefully or try posting again.

How Can I Measure the Success of My Campaigns?

Once the campaign is completed, click the "See Results" button at the bottom of your post to review how it performed. You can also visit the Facebook Ads dashboard to look further into insights and audience engagement.

There are granular filters worth exploring if you want to narrow down your results. You can base your filters on people and location, which will let you get a closer look at which age and gender groups engaged most with your post.
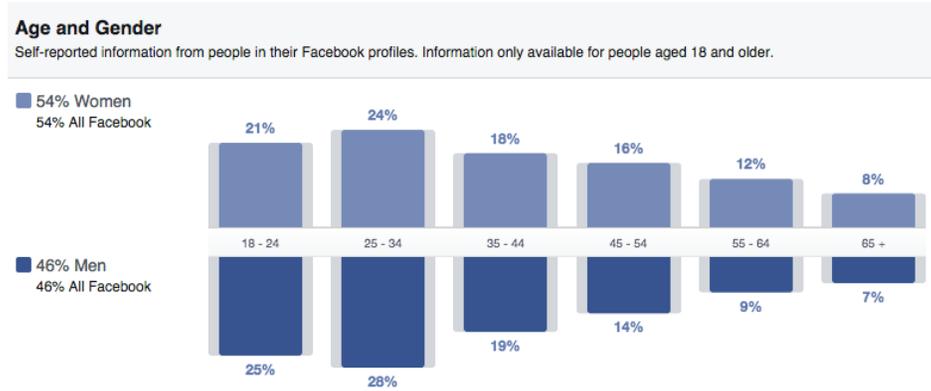
As with all content distribution platforms, you want to check your other analytics programs (such as Google Analytics) to make sure that your Facebook audience is driving engaged readers.

If you create a custom campaign link that ends with source=paidfacebook, you can track engagement from all of the visitors who are coming to your website from sponsored posts. This will let you separate paid visitors from organic visitors much more easily.

To get the most out of Facebook, just keep testing and adapting. If you have good content, you're halfway there. But riding the roller coaster of Facebook's ever-changing algorithm calls for some stamina and a strong stomach to deal with the inevitable twists and turns.

5. LinkedIn

While Facebook and Twitter might be kings of B2C marketing, LinkedIn is ideal for getting down to the nitty-gritty of B2B hyper-targeting.

Say you just published a Really Cool E-book, and you'd do anything to get it in front of the right people, like, for instance, the VP of Marketing at Really Important Retail Company X. You could try to track down the VP's email and fill her inbox with promotional messages.

Or, even better, you could post your e-book on LinkedIn for your whole audience to see (which you were going to do anyway) and spend a little extra to directly target the VP (who's already on LinkedIn and is probably open to finding some new retail marketing literature). Thanks to LinkedIn Ads, this is all within your reach. Here's what you need to know to make it happen.

Which Type of Campaign Should I Choose?

LinkedIn offers two options for launching campaigns: Display Ads (creating an ad with text, images, or video) and Sponsored Posts (putting money behind a piece of published content). For this guide, we'll focus on the latter.

Once you click Sponsor Content, you'll be prompted to choose one or more posts you can put money behind. You can also create a post by clicking Create Direct Sponsored Content.

When it comes to setting up the actual content of the post you'd like to sponsor, LinkedIn recommends several best practices.

- Be concise and mobile-friendly: More than half of sponsored engagement comes from mobile devices. Either eliminate intro text or keep it under 150 characters.

- Since you're creating little native ads for your audience, post content they'd come on LinkedIn to see. What do they want to learn? What helpful information can you provide?

- Be accurate: Watch what's trending on LinkedIn and speak directly to your intended audiences. Targeting marketers? Use the word "marketers" in your text.

- Be human: Include personal experiences, successes, and failures. Appeal to everyone's need for an occasional lighthearted break from work.

- Be helpful: Offer productivity tips and thought leadership advice.

- Use numbered lists. They make content easier to digest.

- Use first-person language.

- Include calls to action.

As a note, if you want to use Sponsored Posts and Display Ads in concert, be aware they run on separate analytics platforms—Sponsored Updates are proprietary, while Display Ads use Google AdClick. Piecing them together to get total campaign performance is a tedious multi-step process.

Targeting audiences with segmentation is more feasible with Sponsored Updates than with Display Ads because of the different distribution networks.

How Can I Target My Desired Audience?

LinkedIn's ads program is the holy grail of hyper-targeting—particularly for B2B marketers. The platform lets you target audiences based on location (down to the city), gender, age, LinkedIn groups they belong to, skills, and even schools they attend or graduated from.

However, the most unique and useful option LinkedIn provides is targeting by company name, category, industry size, job title, and seniority. For example, if you're looking to reach someone in retail, you can promote a thought leadership piece relevant to interests of retail marketers and target directly, even going so far as to focus on the senior VP of a specific company.

How Should I Budget My Spend?

LinkedIn's budgeting options are similar to Twitter's, offering the ability to set a total campaign budget, daily maximum spend, campaign length. However, LinkedIn differs by offering the option of paying per click (every time someone clicks on your post) or per impression (every time LinkedIn shows your post, per 1,000 impressions). You can choose one and then enter a bid for the maximum amount of money you want to spend.

You have the ability to set up a few larger campaigns and assign multiple pieces of content to each one. Say you want to target retail companies, but you have multiple pieces of content you want to use and only a $500 budget. You can establish one overarching campaign targeting those retail companies, then pick that targeted campaign when you sponsor each piece of content.

It should be noted that while LinkedIn is great for hyper-targeting, paying to reach a small but valuable audience has its tradeoffs—namely, higher CPCs and a longer-running campaign duration.

Most decision-makers on LinkedIn only log in one to three times per week, so your impressions on a targeted audience loses effectiveness if that audience is too small.

You'll need to bid more aggressively or play the long game in getting your message to that audience. But it's often worth it to pay more and wait a few weeks for that extremely valuable click, instead of getting a quick click for 30 cents that doesn't produce a lead.

How Can I Measure the Success of My Campaings?

After you create your campaign, the results will show up directly under the sponsored post on your page, with an option to manage or adjust the campaign once it's live. You can also access your LinkedIn Ads dashboard (which operates like the Twitter Ads dashboard), which lists your campaigns individually and breaks down performance by clicks, impressions, social actions, CPC, and CTR (click-through rate).

If you still need some assurance that LinkedIn Sponsored Posts are for you, let the social network's case studies speak for themselves.

According to LinkedIn, after Adobe started sponsoring posts, its audience was 50 percent more likely to agree that "Adobe is shaping the future of content marketing."

HubSpot also generated 400 percent more leads within their target audience on LinkedIn than on other platforms.

So follow suit and start getting your Really Cool E-book out there.

Conclusion

Whether you're just getting started with sponsored posts or looking to run a mix of paid campaigns on multiple platforms, it's important to comprehensively test which ad programs best line up with the objectives of your brand.

Each platform can bolster your distribution strategy in unique ways. LinkedIn is ideal for B2B marketing. Facebook can reach those key, hyper-local consumers. Twitter might be the easiest place to start with your sponsored posts. And Outbrain can get your content on more high-profile, high-traffic sites.

Ultimately, your readers will be the ones to tell you what's working. As always, the best way to connect with them is to listen to what they're saying, create compelling content that addresses their needs, find the most intuitive ways to reach them, and deliver.

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