



BY **ALLAN BRITNELL**, Managing Editor of *Renovation Contractor* and President of the Canadian Society of Magazine Editors

THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF SPONSORED CONTENT

A GLOSSARY OF MANY TERMS

With traditional ad revenues on the decline, publishers have increasingly turned to various forms of sponsored content to fill the gap. The options range from “advertorials,” where there is an obvious slant in the reporting to “native advertising,” which is intended to closer mimic the style and tone of the unbiased content in the publication.

Native advertising, content marketing, special supplement, advertorial...these terms and more have been used to describe sponsored content. Regardless of what the material is called, sponsored content must be labeled as such and designed in a way that is distinct from the editorial content of the publication.

BE CLEAR, BE HONEST

Readers expect—and deserve—unbiased writing in a magazine’s editorial pages. When content is being produced to promote a particular brand, theme or message, any potential biases must be clearly stated.

To start with, there should be an explicit statement that this content is advertising. The word “advertising” or phrases such as “special advertising section” or “sponsored content” should be prominently and conspicuously displayed at the top of every page of a sponsored article or section.

Further, there should also be a detailed explanation of how this sponsored material differs from the publication’s regular content, ideally in a letter from the editor or publisher.

To help further denote the distinction, sponsored content should use different fonts from those used in the magazine, and be designed in a way that it does not mimic the publication’s layout.

CHURCH AND STATE

To avoid any potential conflict of interest, editorial staff members and regular freelance contributors should not write sponsored content. Instead, it should be produced by the sales or marketing department.

Advertising supplements should not be mentioned on the magazine’s cover or included in the table of contents, and recurring editorial components of the magazine, including the editor’s note, table of contents, columns or sections, should never be “Sponsored by...” or “Brought to you by...” Sponsor logos should also not appear on those pages.

The only time content should bear these labels and logos is in special sections, contests or other packages that will appear as one-offs in the publication.

MULTIMEDIA MESSAGES

As with the print publication, any sponsored content on a magazine’s website, electronic newsletters, Twitter feed, Facebook page or any other social media platforms must be labeled as advertising and presented in a format that is distinct from the design of editorial messages.

With online native advertisements, many publishers now use a rollover tab labeled “What’s this?” to provide further explanation of how it differs from regular content.

Sponsored microsites should be designed distinctly from regular sites and labeled as “Sponsored” on each page.

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For video content that's preceded by a sponsor's message, the advertiser's video should include an option to skip or close the promo within 10 seconds of it launching.

If online sponsored content allows comments, it should be moderated following the same guidelines and standards as editorial material and not prohibit commentary that's negative toward the sponsor.

A CASE STUDY IN CONTROVERSY

Like it or not, sponsored content is here to stay as part of the publishing business model. Even with policies in place, controversies and potential conflicts may occur.

In January 2013, The Atlantic magazine ran a sponsored piece on their website that was highly favourable of the Church of Scientology. It was only up for 12 hours before being pulled down by the publisher and quickly followed by a retraction note from senior editor and blogger.

Ta-Nehisi Coates that began: "We screwed up." Coates' mea culpa on behalf of the magazine went on to say, "We now realize that as we explored new forms of digital advertising, we failed to update the policies that must govern the decisions we make along the way... We remain committed to and enthusiastic about innovation in digital advertising, but acknowledge—sheepishly—that we got ahead of ourselves."

The rules for how to handle sponsored content aren't changing, but they are evolving. Having a transparent policy in place before pursuing such revenue streams is essential so that all parties have a clear understanding of what can and cannot be done.

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