

4 EASY WAYS ANALYTICS CAN HELP EDITORS

Hotsheets

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WHY ANALYTICS MATTER

As journalism shifts further from print to digital, the job of editors remains the same: assign and refine stories that are relevant to the reader. Digital readers, however, have a lot more power to tell us exactly what they think is relevant. So it's also an editor's job to listen, and one of the best ways to do that is to embrace analytics. Today's editor can smell a good story, trim flabby copy, dream up a brilliant headline and draw meaning from their publication's analytics.

HOW ANALYTICS CAN HELP

Analytics are a tremendous source of insight into what an audience likes and what it doesn't. By looking at the data, editors can make smart decisions when creating editorial calendars and assigning stories. Analytics can guide us in planning an annual service package and even crafting those brilliant headlines. In other words, analytics are an invaluable editorial tool that helps us to work more efficiently, assign smarter and publish stories that stand out. Senior editorial staff can use analytics to make strategic decisions and aid in big-picture planning. The following suggestions are ones any editor can apply to their day-to-day work.

FOUR WAYS ANALYTICS WILL MAKE YOU A BETTER EDITOR

These tactics don't involve a major time commitment or in-depth knowledge of data analysis. They do require an ability to spot trends (something editors excel at) and a desire to reflect on past performance. Before you begin, it's important to know what metrics are meaningful to your publication—uniques, page views, time on page and so on—and that will depend on its editorial and business goals.

1. FIND OUT WHAT SUBJECTS READERS LOVE

Print out a list of the top stories in your section for the past year — this list is a gold mine. Depending on the volume of content, it could be 50 to 100 stories (or

more), and it may include galleries and videos. If you don't know how to find this information, I highly recommend setting aside a couple of hours for basic training on your publication's analytics program. Once you have the list, grab a highlighter and take note of any trends: What people, companies and topics are consistently popular with readers? For example, a fashion editor may note that stories about new H&M products always show up in the Top 100 and decide to cover the brand's launches more closely. You will uncover low-hanging fruit (a subject you don't often cover that actually performs well) and some surprises (a subject you didn't realize readers were fascinated by) that you can use to inform your editorial calendar.

2. FIGURE OUT HOW TO BEST PACKAGE YOUR STORIES

Once you identify the super-star subjects, this exercise will help shape how you cover them. With the same list of top stories, take note of the kind of story formats that do well: numbered lists, Q&As, photo essays, memoirs, tricks and tips, explainers and so on. A personal finance editor may notice that a story on the most common saving mistakes did exceptionally well, and assign a series of pieces about finance blunders. A features editor may notice that several first-person memoirs about loss were well read and choose to assign a series of memoirs on that theme.

3. WRITE WINNING HEADLINES TO DRAW READERS IN

Writing a solid headline for web — what I call a "clicky" headline — is difficult, but it's essential to digital success. A piece that's doing poorly will often attract a larger audience with a clickier headline. There are sure to be certain kinds of headlines that your audience responds to more than others. Get out that top stories list again. (Told you: It's a gold mine!) This time you're looking for trends in headlines. There will likely be certain words that make people click more or less. There will be styles of headlines that work (questions, statements, numbers). And there will be tones that readers prefer (incredulous,



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celebratory, sarcastic, blunt). You may discover “how” headlines (How the Conservative Party is appealing to women) do better than “why” statements (Why women are important to the Conservative Party). Or you may see headlines that promise readers how to achieve something within a set amount of time do well (What to clean if you only have 15 minutes). I’m not suggesting you default to one or two particular styles of headline, but to keep a list of what works handy for when you’re struggling.

4. PLAN IRRESISTIBLE EDITORIAL PACKAGES

Use past performance to help determine what to do in the future. If you are planning an annual service package, take a look at how previous years’ pieces performed before you create a lineup. For example, if you’re developing a gift guide with several categories (gifts for him, gifts for mom, time-saving gifts), check which categories did best. If gifts for mom was the top-performer last year, you may want to expand the number of gifts in that category or do an entire guide devoted to presents for mom (gifts for the foodie mom, the health-nut mom, etc.). If, on the other hand, you are dreaming up a new editorial package, use analytics to refine your idea. For example, a food editor may want to publish a guide to French cooking if three of her top 10 food stories in the past 12 months were about French food. She could then dig more deeply to learn what French recipes, cooking techniques or regions her readers are most interested in.

