

BY MICHELLE KELLY, Editor-in-Chief, *Cottage Life*

As publishing budgets shrink and content needs increase, Canadian magazines can find opportunities in content licensing. Partnering with like-minded brands can expand your presence in a crowded publishing landscape and drive revenue for your business. And although giving your content to another brand can feel risky—no matter how you slice it, you are giving up some control over how an audience interacts with your work—there are ways you can do it without compromising quality and integrity.

BUT WHAT IS CONTENT LICENSING?

Licensing can be set up in various ways, but for the purposes of this Hotsheet, we will focus on three forms:

1. Third-party licensing
2. Content aggregators
3. Brand partnerships

THIRD-PARTY LICENSING

Third-party licensing is likely the most common way to license content. Here's how it works: You select a like-minded partner who can take your original, owned content and publish it on their platforms. For example, in 2018, *Cottage Life* entered into a partnership with The Weather Network, sharing both video content and written editorial on their site. This content helped them appeal to *Cottage Life's* niche audience of high-value readers and allowed *Cottage Life* to expose their brand to a massive new audience. Each piece of their content The Weather Network posted was branded with the *Cottage Life* logo and included several links back to *Cottage Life's* website, which helped increase *Cottage Life's* web traffic. The deal also included a revenue share on ads that ran across each piece of *CL* content.

The potential benefits to *Cottage Life* in this arrangement are clear: The Weather Network has exponentially higher web traffic and the ability to distribute *Cottage Life* content through their website has the potential for a lot of viewings. But there's a potential downside as well. The process can be time-consuming for potentially nothing: While *Cottage Life* retains absolute control over what content they access, there is a lot of time spent pitching stories, which may or may not be published.

Takeaway tip: Monitor the success of your content closely. Is the other brand promoting it adequately? Are they providing enough links back to your website? Is there branding—in the form of your logo or a blurb about your brand—included with each piece? Consider how you can use this content to drive other business needs. Can you include a call to action to drive potential subscribers to your newsletter, for example?

CONTENT AGGREGATORS

When Apple News (AN) Canada launched in early 2019, many publishers were keen to jump on board. Apple's considerable audience reach meant that the work of reaching new readers—marketing—would be covered. All publishers would have to do is make good content. An appealing proposition!

AN is divided into two portions. Both are curated by the Apple editorial team to target specific readers based on their preferences. Apple News Plus (AN+) is a paid product that offers full access to hundreds of magazine titles. The second portion, Apple News, is a free feed of aggregated content otherwise offered free online through publisher owned-and-operated websites. Content for each portion is loaded into pre-approved customized templates, allowing publishers to retain control over the tone and style of the pages (for example, fonts, colours and page architecture).

For publishers, both AN and AN+ offer benefits. Both platforms provide massive potential audiences far beyond what any one magazine can reach. And the Apple Editorial team relies on more than just an algorithm to find and push good content, staying in constant touch with brand editors to ensure that they are anticipating and capturing the content that will engage readers best. In theory, good content rises to the top.

The challenge here is monetizing the audience. While there are opportunities to earn revenue through in-app advertising in the free feed and through subscription payments in AN+, scale is a challenge, particularly for niche publishers. But, as the AN audience grows, the hope is that the revenue will too. As for driving traffic to *Cottage*

Life's website, while there are some clicks to *Cottage Life* pages via internal links, this is overall not a traffic play.

Takeaway tip: The editorial team at Apple understands the need for your brand to look like your brand, not like Apple. While the initial process of setting up templates was challenging, it has grown much easier in the months since the launch period. Brand pages within the Apple News and Apple News Plus platforms feel distinct and accurate. This is key for content licensing, especially when brand exposure is so important; if you are trying to reach new audiences, make sure those audiences are getting a clear representation of what you're all about.

BRAND PARTNERSHIPS

As magazine publishers, we form long-term bonds with our audience. We understand their needs implicitly and that connection to a specific audience has real value.

Brand partnerships are one way to leverage that value. In 2016, the communications team at the Ontario Real Estate Association (OREA) approached *Cottage Life* to discuss ways to connect with our audience of Ontario recreational property owners. OREA proposed creating a survey, overseen by their in-house research team, that would help understand key trends in cottage renting and buying. The *Cottage Life* team did not have the capabilities to create such a robust and in-depth survey and OREA did not have access to a large group of diverse cottage owners. *Cottage Life* sent the survey to a portion of newsletter subscribers and both partners had equal access to the survey findings. This survey helped *Cottage Life* inform their content strategy around a key pillar, real estate. The information became the basis for several pieces of content and also helped to better understand overall trends.

Takeaway tip: The main risk in this arrangement was the chance of churn from *Cottage Life's* newsletter, though that was not an issue in this case. Also, *Cottage Life* took great care to ensure that the arrangement was CASL compliant.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

Partner with like-minded brands

Is there a brand out there that you feel serves a complimentary audience? Can you offer them access to a

complimentary demographic with similar interests? Your chances of success with licensing depend on the answers to these questions.

Set strict guidelines

Any partnership should begin with a discussion of brand values—what you cover, what you won't; your brand's tone; your audience preferences. If your values don't align with a planned partner, the deal has the potential to harm your brand. Share your style guide, including your mission statement and your key audience demographics, to help clarify and clearly communicate your wants and needs. Remember, trust is key: as soon as you give your content away, you are relinquishing control of it. Any short-term gain in traffic or revenue is simply not worth compromising the long-term trust you've built with your audience. If you feel your content is being used in a way that betrays your readers, speak up—you know your audience best.

Be careful with contracts

It cannot be stressed enough: Solid, thorough contracts are more important than ever in publishing these days, to protect both publishers and creators. It is crucial that you negotiate your contracts with rights that protect your writers, illustrators and photographers. If content licensing is a part of your strategy, be explicit about that at the time of assignment. That way, creators can opt out of work or negotiate a rate they feel is fair. Transparency is pivotal.

Make sure it's not more trouble than it's worth

You need resources to help find an appropriate partner and to manage the relationship. Particularly at the beginning of your partnership, there will be a period of time spent building an understanding of what works for your partner and sometimes the content you think their audience will love isn't very successful. Try a "pitch period." Assign an editor to prepare a weekly list of content for licensing. While this can seem time-consuming at first, slowly you'll begin to understand the kind of content they need. The length of this period can vary depending on the frequency of content you are sharing. And remember: if you find your content isn't resonating with your partner's audience, perhaps you've picked the wrong partner.

