

# WHAT TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN CREATING SPONSORED CONTENT

By Lisa Murphy



Sponsored content is an increasingly common revenue source for many magazine publishers today. Specifically, sponsored content is paid promotional content that appears in a magazine's print pages, video, podcast and web content, social media posts, contests, newsletters and more. Different definitions exist for terms such as advertorials, native advertising, brand partnerships, custom content, paid content marketing and sponsored content, and their meanings can vary widely among publishers, advertisers and agencies. In this context, then, it's vital for magazine publishers to proactively determine their sponsored content offerings and guidelines to comply with local and platform standards, as well as maintain reader and advertiser satisfaction.

## **Serving Your Audience**

Staying focused on your reader's needs and interests is key to creating sponsored content that serves your publication and advertisers. Putting your audience first will result in more compelling and informative pieces that reflect more favourably on your advertisers' brand.

As a former digital and creative services director of several magazine brands, I considered the following questions when developing branded content ideas to pitch for specific advertisers or advertiser categories:

- What are some questions that consumers typically have about a product? Can a sponsored article, gallery or event answer those questions in an informative and interesting way?
- Is there a special section, magazine, online gallery, podcast or video series that our audience would really enjoy that a relevant advertiser could sponsor? (Something that our editorial budget can't afford, perhaps?)
- Are there experts or influencers relevant to an advertiser's product whom we could pay to appear in sponsored articles or videos to make them more distinctive?
- What are some different ways that advertisers could sponsor existing content? For example, sponsoring a relevant section on our website that includes some sponsored articles and brand ads in addition to related editorial?
- What are some different editorial style formats, for example, a Q&A, Quiz or How To article, which could make an advertorial more exciting?
- If the advertiser's supplied photography isn't high quality, can we pair it with editorial-calibre photos or illustrations (obtained either by commission or via second rights purchase) to make the content more appealing?
- What type of sponsored content package (within budget) can you create that includes custom print, video, social posts, newsletters, contests and supplied brand ads? Even if an advertiser can only afford some of these offerings, it's good for them to know what's available in future.
- Are there materials that our brand could create for an advertiser, such as a branded retail magazine, flyer or catalogue? If they're paying an agency to produce these materials already, could our brand create better materials, more affordably?

## Getting Inspired

If you're not sure which types of sponsored content to offer advertisers, learn what other magazine and media brands have done by checking out the [Content Marketing Awards](#) website and [Pressboard Media's Inspire section](#). The engaging branded content examples below illustrate how to interest readers and delight advertisers:

- Outside Magazine [created guides and videos on the theme of "The Modern Guide To Running,"](#) sponsored by Under Armour.
- FASHION magazine [produced a fun online fragrance quiz sponsored by Guess Perfumes.](#)
- Meredith Publishing introduced [Paw Print, a controlled-circulation magazine sponsored by Mars Petcare,](#) after seeing success with their editorial Dailypaws.com website.

## Creating Clarity

Canadian magazine brands should clearly mark sponsored content in print and online to maintain editorial credibility and be consistent with the Canadian Ad Standards Code, which outlines that “No advertisement shall be presented in a format or style that conceals the fact that it is an advertisement.” Some commonly used labels for sponsored content include “Ad,” “Advertising,” “Promotion,” “Sponsored,” “Sponsor Content” or “Presented By.” Ideally, publishing teams should proactively discuss and design how print and digital sponsored disclosures will appear, in addition to choosing different fonts and visual styles to help readers better discern between regular stories and sponsored content.

Sponsored digital content such as newsletters, website articles or galleries, special web sections or microsites, videos and social media posts should also be clearly labelled. Many Canadian magazine websites have easily discoverable sponsored content or promotions sections, for instance, and some publishers use a rollover tab labeled “What’s this?” to explain how sponsored content differs from regular content. Publishers often disclose when an article contains potentially revenue-generating affiliate product links, as well.

A 2016 Magazines Canada Hotsheet on sponsored content also suggested that “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.” These practices are more common today, however, so publishers should pre-emptively determine their own guidelines that will preserve reader trust and sponsored content transparency.

Some sponsored-content partnerships can allow a magazine brand to fund additional editorial print or video guides, special projects, content hubs or events featuring well-known experts that are exciting to the magazine’s audience. These “brought-to-you-by” type opportunities may be surrounded by the advertiser’s ads, but any advertiser-influenced content should still be labelled as such.

- Architectural Digest created a [three-part docu-series, “A World Of Water,” sponsored by Moen faucets.](#)
- Zelle—a service to send and receive money—partnered with Vox Media [to develop an online video series and quiz to help people understand and avoid scams.](#)
- Vogue partnered with Grey Goose vodka to produce [branded recipes, articles and videos featuring influencers such as actors Alexandra Daddario and Jeremy Pope.](#)

## Establishing Guidelines

Magazine publishers who are developing sponsored content ideas and pitches should also clearly communicate their branded content creation process to advertisers and their agencies. For example, a magazine may reserve the right to curate which advertisers’ holiday products they include in a sponsored gift guide, or to use clear, lingo-free language in addition to an advertiser’s tag line or logo – practices which will maximize the likelihood that readers read or view the sponsored content. (When appropriate, use analytics to prove this point to advertisers – for example, if sponsored videos with light brand mentions have higher views and completion rates than more heavily branded ones.) In other cases, advertisers may supply their own advertorial content that a publisher can choose to run with clear disclosure.

Before agreeing to run any sponsored content, publishers and advertisers should be up to date on the Canadian Ad Standards Code and the disclosure guidelines on different platforms. (See the sidebar on Creating Clarity.) Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, TikTok, Snapchat and other social channels have their own rules about flagging advertiser or sponsored posts. Failure to comply could result in posts being taken down, for instance. Marketing and sponsored content sent via newsletters, text and other commercial electronic messages should also conform to Canada’s Anti-Spam Legislation (CASL). Ask content distribution partners about

their sponsored content labelling requirements, too. Take note also that to be eligible for funding from the Canadian Periodical Fund, Canadian digital periodicals must “have a clear distinction between editorial content, advertising, advertorial content and sponsored content clearly identified.”

In an ideal world, sponsored content should be created by dedicated branded content, promotions or sales team members at a magazine, rather than editorial team members. However, that may not be realistic given the small size of some teams. Again, publishers should have proactive conversations about how to compensate team members and freelancers for working on paid promotions or sponsored events.

Magazine editorial and sales teams should also discuss what different sponsored content packages include and don't include, so that sales staff can confidently tell advertisers and their agencies what to expect. Marketers may press for blurrier lines, so clear communication can help prevent misunderstandings and boost the likelihood of more successful, repeat partnerships.

## **Raising The Bar**

Canadian magazine brands are creating increasingly sophisticated and even award-winning sponsored content packages that include custom print, video, audio, social, newsletters, apps, events and more. The best examples of these are clearly labelled and bring compelling stories and ideas to life in ways that truly serve and entertain audiences. Smart publishers stay abreast of ever-changing disclosure guidelines and develop transparent policies within their organizations and advertiser communications to ensure that readers, magazine staff, marketers and their agencies are all equally well-informed.