



Sponsored Content

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF
YOUR PAY-TO-PLAY DOLLARS



The sponsored content opportunity

In an age of inbound marketing, content is king. It's why 82% of marketers are investing in some form of content marketing, and why content marketing is predicted to be a \$417 billion market by 2025.

Content marketing takes many forms—from social posts to video blogs. One popular form of content marketing, especially among B2B companies, is sponsored content.

Sponsored content is paid-for content that fits naturally within the outlet where it's shared. The content itself matches the outlet's style, tone and focus, but does so in a way that promotes the sponsoring business' brand, product(s) or thought leadership.



Let's break this down

What kind of content can be sponsored?

Opinion pieces, bylines, webinars, eBooks, infographics, whitepapers, podcasts, interviews, etc. These can be published on the outlet's website and distributed via its newsletter, social media accounts or other channels.

Who creates the content?

Often, the sponsoring business creates the content—either in-house or with the help of a third-party content creator—and then pays to place it with the outlet. However, most outlets also offer their own content creation services—some may even require it. We'll dive into this later.

Can any content be sponsored content?

Sponsored content is a broad term and could ostensibly include paid social posts like LinkedIn ads, influencer marketing campaigns, sponsored speaking opportunities and more. However, this playbook will focus on how to implement sponsored content partnerships that generate leads and build brand awareness and value.

Content Marketing

An inbound marketing technique that involves creating and sharing material (such as bylines, blogs, videos and webinars) that does not explicitly promote a brand but is intended to stimulate interest in its products or services.

Native Advertising

Brand-created editorial content that aligns with the style of the publication to naturally flow into the publication's other content.

Sponsored Content

Brand-sponsored content that leverages a media outlet, trade group, influencer or organization to promote, publish and/or distribute content on the brand's behalf.

Branded Content

Brand-created or funded content that highlights the brand's attributes, not necessarily their products and services; though designed to subtly make a connection between the two.

Syndicated Content

Republishing the same piece of content—either paid or earned—on multiple websites.



You might wonder why bother with sponsored content when there are free platforms to promote your content.

There are several benefits of placing high-quality content in trusted media streams:

- Larger audience and reach
- Reaches targeted segments and key verticals
- Generates positive brand perception and increases awareness
- Builds trust with your audience
- Garners leads, increases conversions and can help drive sales/revenue
- Supports campaign-specific timing and objectives when aligned with seasonal programs, product launches, etc.
- Improves SEO/referral traffic

The data bears out the benefits: sponsored content is [22x more engaging](#) than banner ads. [Research also shows](#) marketers who distribute their branded content through a publisher's network see 50% higher brand lift than those who publish independently.

Marketers are finding clear value in diversifying content assets, and leaning more aggressively into sponsored opportunities. But how do you get started with an effective sponsored content strategy? Below, we share insights from our extensive experience managing sponsored content programs, including how to get started, keep campaigns on target and on budget and how to measure performance.

STEP #1

Marry your campaign to your goals (and be specific)

Start with an internal assessment. Before you pursue sponsored content opportunities, you must identify the purpose of the campaign, and how it aligns with your organization's marketing and sales goals. For example, do you want to boost brand awareness, generate leads or both? Know your end goal before you get started.

Budget

Know what you want to spend so you can balance your budget against opportunities. Calculate the sponsorship cost, and factor in your company's or your agency's time to create content and manage the distribution process with the media outlet. And keep wiggle room to nurture any new leads that the campaign generates.

Audience type and size

Know your target audience, their stage in the buyer journey and how they engage. Have a clear picture of success, specifically your lead gen or engagement goals. Invest in outlets that target the right buyers through the right channel.

Type of content

Match content with campaign goals. For lead generation, offer downloadable assets like webinars, eBooks, whitepapers and research reports. Consider videos or short articles that highlight your brand's identity for brand awareness. Sponsored articles or bylines can position your organization's executives as thought leaders, while webinars should highlight lower-in-the-funnel topics and target those already engaged with your brand.



Timeline

Estimate turnaround times for work done in-house, by partnering outlet(s) and by third-party agencies so you can keep the project on budget and schedule.

Measurement

Set success goals before content is published and track key metrics throughout the campaign, including views, referral traffic, leads, followers and/or conversions, depending on your goals.



STEP #2

Find the right partner

Sponsored content campaigns are transactional, but they must be mutually beneficial partnerships. Vetting outlets takes legwork, as does finding a partner that meets your needs. Here are questions you can ask during the planning phase:

OUTLET ANALYSIS

1. What industry or industries does the outlet cover?

Ensure the outlets are part of your ecosystem. Think of what publications you subscribe to, and where your peers and competitors are present. Trade publications should be firmly in your brand's vertical. For national media, the outlet should at least report on your industry.

2. How big and how engaged is the outlet's audience? Is your target audience included among the outlet's visitors?

Get specific with audience demographics and reach. Ask about unique site visitors per month, readership metrics, open rates and click-through rates. Connect these numbers to your goals and ensure the content will reach your target audience.

3. What are the average costs for sponsored content one-offs, campaigns and packages?

Prices vary by publication, and getting a quote often requires working with an outlet rep directly.

Content questions

Next, evaluate potential partners based on their content offerings. You should ask your target media outlets the following:

1. Who will create the content?

Depending on the outlet, you may be able to sponsor a piece of content you create yourself with practically no oversight from the outlet's editorial team, or you may be required to cede the writing and design of the content to the media partner's creators.

Oftentimes, the content creation may happen vis-a-vis a back-and-forth collaboration between the two teams. See our chart on the next page to understand the pros and cons of each option. Next, determine your capacity to execute an effective campaign. Do you have the time and expertise to achieve content ROI? Consider engaging a third-party for content planning and creation.

2. What types of content do you publish as sponsored content?

Most trade outlets offer many of the following: editorials—short and long form, bylines, eBooks, whitepapers, infographics, sponsored eBlasts and newsletter pieces, webinars, podcast appearances, video interviews and more. Ask for examples of any type of content you're considering sponsoring.

3. When will the content go live?

Knowing campaign timing is important for your brand and the outlet. Many media companies publish editorial calendars that lay out their topical focus for each month or quarter. Optimize publishing times by aligning specific content topics with your audience. Word of warning: the most popular and impactful inventory sells out early in the year—and sometimes by the end of the prior year. Plan accordingly. Many outlets offer discounts if you commit to a package before year-end for the following year.



4. Where will the content live and for how long will it live there?

Understand where the sponsored content will appear on the outlet's channels. You can estimate impressions by multiplying average daily page views by the number of days the campaign will be live.

5. How will the outlet promote the content?

Does the sponsorship campaign include some form of post-publication promotion from the outlet? Many outlets offer one or two dedicated social posts linking back to the content. Some offer eBlasts or newsletter mentions. Ask if the promotion is included in the sponsorship package.

6. What rights do you have to the content once it is published?

Can you re-publish this content on your own site while it is living on the outlet's site? What about after the campaign is over? Understanding who owns the content will help you plan to re-purpose it down the road.

Who's in charge here?

It's important to know who oversees ideating, drafting, revising and approving the content. You have a few options:

1. Brand creates the content (internally or with a contractor)
2. Brand creates the content, outlet edits and shapes the final draft
3. Brand and outlet co-create the content from start to finish
4. Outlet creates the content



BRAND GENERATED

Pros

- Full control of the message
- Leverage internal understanding of business and products
- Usually a more streamlined process; brand sets the timeline

Cons

- Outlets may not guarantee leads unless content is co-created
- Producing high-quality content requires skill and time (especially true with content like videos and podcasts)
- Brand-created content may still undergo reshaping to adhere to the partnering outlet's tone, style and formatting requirements

OUTLET GENERATED

Pros

- Most outlets now boast content creation studios, with a team of content pros, from copywriters to designers
- Streamlined process if the outlet has a strong grasp of your content/business/message and can turn out the content quickly
- They will likely guarantee you leads

Cons

- Outlet may not have a good grasp of your content/messaging/business/goals
- Outlet may cap the number of edits to two or three rounds; this is especially problematic if they haven't provided a satisfactory initial draft
- Potential to get stuck in a seemingly endless cycle of editing, disrupting your timeline
- You may end up dissatisfied with the final product

THIRD-PARTY PARTNER

Pros

- Can be an asset to your campaign, whether you want to create the content in-house or with the outlet
- Takes much of the in-house work off your team's plate and can act as the go-between with your media partner
- Working with a content-savvy PR and marketing agency saves time, money and headaches on your campaign

Cons

- Working with a third-party partner that doesn't understand your business can actually be more time consuming and costly
- This is an additional budget item to consider as you plan your content marketing strategy

Lead Gen Questions:

If your goal is to generate leads, you will want to run through the following list of questions with the outlet before finalizing the contract.

1. Does the outlet offer lead filters?

Get granular when evaluating audiences. Make sure the outlet has specific lead criteria that match your target customer. Lead filters can be tailored by company size, geography, industry vertical, buyer title, role, seniority, etc. Ask if lead filters are included, or an add-on cost, and determine how filters impact your addressable market and lead potential.

2. Does the outlet guarantee or cap leads with their sponsored content package?

Demand-gen content arrangements typically offer two options: a guaranteed number of leads (with pricing based on that number) or no guaranteed leads for a flat fee. It's also worth asking if you have to pay for leads that exceed what was promised.

3. How long will the campaign run and how are leads delivered?

Will the campaign run indefinitely until the lead quota is met, or is there a specific sunset for the content, at which time the outlet stops collecting leads? Be sure to ask when and how leads are delivered, as this impacts your lead nurturing processes.

4. What is a typical range of lead numbers for different kinds of content?

Always know what to expect. If the outlet doesn't guarantee leads, it is important to assess average lead generation numbers for the kinds of content you're considering. The outlet will usually give you a range of lead numbers, say 50-150, for a 30-minute webinar with a three-month onsite shelf life.

5. What will the outlet do if you receive an unusually low number of leads?

What happens if the results are well below the expected range either quoted or promised by the outlet? A good partner will want your business again and will offer to run the campaign longer, try new promotion tactics or offer to replace the content to reach the lead goal.

Outlet interviews:

Once you've gathered the relevant information and compared outlets, it's time for a few final steps:

1. Be a smart negotiator

Have you or your colleagues worked with this outlet before? Often? If so, it's worth asking about discount options.

2. Take timing into account

Most outlets increase prices annually. You can often save on costs by planning out a content calendar and signing contracts before prices increase.

3. Understand the media ecosystem

Many trades have merged into conglomerates. This can lead to deals where you work with multiple outlets under one umbrella. Know where your content will be published, who the point people are and where opportunities exist to cross promote.

4. Take your time to decide

Don't feel pressured to sign a contract straight away. Take the info you've collected back to your team/third-party partner to evaluate which route aligns with your original goals.

Make it happen: the execution phase

Once you have agreed on the sponsorship details with the outlet, you can move forward with the execution phase:

1. Review and sign

Review the fine print to ensure it matches all the details you discussed, and account for amendments as needed. Once signed, your point of contact will likely switch from a sales contact to someone on the outlet's editorial team.

2. Have a work back plan

Create a work back plan and designate tasks to the appropriate parties. This process will look different depending on whether you are co-creating the content (or working with the outlet in any capacity for approvals and reviews), or if your team has full ownership of the content creation process.

Start by getting all applicable deadlines from the outlet. Typically, they will provide the major deadlines for drafts and revisions. You also want a detailed timeline that includes every step — from delivering logos and headshots to writing and design to each stage of revisions and the launch date. And don't forget about the promotion plan (see below)!

If the outlet's timeline doesn't feel achievable, contact them to adjust it. A general tip is to lengthen the revision period if you plan to co-create the content with the outlet, especially if you have a specific vision for the piece and the messaging. You should also determine whether there is any wiggle room if you encounter hurdles.

3. Drive the process

You or your third-party agency partner can drive the process with the outlet. Remember, this is your content and brand reputation on the line, so you must ensure the process is being managed properly from start to finish to avoid surprises or setbacks.

Tip: Don't dismiss the design

Your sponsored content campaign will require some design work, such as a banner ad, social image or infographic. First, consider who is responsible for design elements: you or the outlet. Are you clear on the specs and other design requirements? Can the content be designed according to your specific brand guidelines? And don't neglect design in your work back plan—include time for multiple rounds of design revisions to make your investment count.

The content is live! Now, make the most of it.

Now that your content is live, you can rest easy and watch those leads funnel in. But then, it's time to quickly build on the momentum and maximize your content campaign's impact.

Accountability

Hold the outlet accountable for the promised results. Ensure they delivered on impressions, clicks and/or the number of promised leads. You should always know when to expect metric reports and lead lists. Review those items to ensure they align with your expectations and that no irrelevant leads have slipped through. Push back if you don't feel the outlet fulfilled its side of the partnership. Refer to item No. 5 under lead questions for tips on what to do if your partner fails to deliver.

Lead nurture

Marketing and sales teams must be aligned on the goals of a sponsored content campaign, including a plan to nurture qualified leads in a timely manner. Don't let valuable leads get stale or lose momentum with a potential customer. Ideally, the sales team—or your marketing automation program—is equipped to nurture those leads through the funnel.

Promotion plan

Promoting the content should begin as soon as the piece is live on the outlet's site and continue until the campaign is complete or later if you plan to re-purpose the content on your company's website. Here is a standard checklist of promotional items to consider that are essential to successful lead nurturing:

- Social posts (both yours and the outlet's)
- Email blasts
- Blog posts
- Newsletters
- Sales enablement package

Sales enablement

The marketing team should consider creating a sales enablement package as part of their own promotion plan. This resource creates a touchpoint for the sales team to engage prospects. Consider including a sample email for the sales team and Twitter or LinkedIn posts that the sales reps can share.

UTM links

Embedding UTM parameters within URLs allows a brand to track the performance of the links using Google Analytics. Your team will want to create and use UTM links for all the promotional materials so you can measure their effectiveness and show that you are generating web traffic and engagement.

Re-purposing content

If your sponsored content allows you to re-purpose the materials, it's worth cross-posting on your company's website. You may need landing page copy and a gate on the content to generate additional leads. You can post the content directly on your website or leverage the landing page copy to direct readers to the gated content on the outlet's site.

CONCLUSION

The big picture: making sponsored content part of your marketing and sales toolbox

Sponsored content with a reputable outlet is an effective strategy to engage your target audience, reach new audiences, generate leads, expand your brand's value and position your organization's executives as thought leaders.

To deliver a successful sponsored content campaign, you need a smart and thorough plan that aligns your goals with your partner outlet. Typically, this is done best with a third-party content marketing agency to manage the process, from content creation to deadlines and execution. Don't underestimate the lift involved and prioritize the follow-through to ensure you maximize the value of your content marketing investments.



About The Fletcher Group

At The Fletcher Group, we're just as passionate about everyone knowing your name as you are. Unlike most PR and content firms claiming knowledge of the Payment and Fintech space, we have 17 years of experience driving measurable results using a mix of positioning, story-telling content, promotional PR and marketing. Our network and expertise extends to every corner of the industry and enables the TFG team to get you the coverage and partnership opportunities you deserve. It's who we are and our only focus.

Need help building your sponsored content strategy?

Contact us at info@fletchergroupllc.com.

