

TOOLKITS

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Monetization opportunities for brand publishers

How brands are generating revenue directly from the content they produce and publish.

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INTRODUCTION

How brands are generating revenue directly from their content initiatives

Brands are increasingly attempting to directly monetize the content they produce and publish, turning what was previously a marketing activity into a source of revenue in its own right.

For companies that have invested meaningful resources in publishing operations – and in many cases hired journalists and borrowed strategies and approaches from “traditional” media companies – monetizing their content more directly may seem a logical next step. For some, the desire to explore monetization is underpinned by a need to diversify revenue streams, while others are attracted by the opportunity to offset their costs. In some instances, media might even offer more attractive margins than the core businesses companies operate.

There are a few other benefits to monetizing content initiatives directly:

- **The tighter economic climate of the past few months has put many publishing endeavors in a precarious position.** In many cases, content teams are often the first to be laid off when companies try to reduce costs and find efficiencies. It can be difficult for many companies to figure out exactly how and to what extent content efforts are driving actual business results. Figuring out revenue opportunities from publishing can be a way to change that conversation, putting the focus directly on dollars earned vs. other marketing KPIs. It can also enable companies to offset marketing costs, letting publishing teams “earn their keep” and keep their roles and the size of their teams intact.
- **Revenue affords autonomy and independence.** If a content and publishing team is self-sufficient and able to contribute meaningfully to a company’s bottom line, they also are better placed to demand independence from the wider company, and able often to produce content that is truly in their audiences’ best interests, vs. necessarily their companies. A well-monetized content team can often break free from being purely part of a marketing function and is able to get more leeway and flexibility in how it operates. This becomes particularly critical as content becomes a core priority for many companies.
- **Monetization may help legitimize brand content in the eyes of audiences.** Brand publishers that have successfully sold advertising on their websites or within their email newsletters, for example, report that audiences now put them in the same category as other news publishers, lending them a degree of credibility and legitimacy they did not have before.

However, monetizing content directly is challenging, as media companies can attest. Figuring out if and how brands can realistically expect to generate revenue from their content operations comes with a few key considerations.

- **Audience interests must come first.** Relatedly, A growing number of brand publishers are [eschewing “content marketing”](#) in favor of audience-focused approaches that ensure they’re delivering something of value to their readers. The goalposts have shifted to prioritize audience trust above all; a necessary step for any successful brand publishing operation, but especially critical

for those hoping to make money off their publishing. And the stakes are high: [Recent research conducted by Toolkits](#) found that 71% of consumers said that poor-quality content from a brand makes them trust the brand less.

- **Brands have to be willing to take on a significant amount of risk upfront**, building the infrastructure to create content worth paying for, the sales and marketing resources needed to build an advertising or sponsorship offering, or the tech or tools required to sell products or tickets to events, for example. They also may choose to partner with ad networks or other partners who can make that process easier, versus building an in-house sales function. Media isn't a passive revenue stream and requires multiple wheels turning, all in conjunction with each other. And it often takes time to see results: Building an audience is hard, and monetizing it can be even harder.
- **Brands need to figure out if their existing publishing operation is in a position to monetize.** If they're looking to sell advertising, they may need to ensure their audience is large and specific enough to be of interest to potential advertisers. Ultimately, their content has to be of high enough quality to continue to attract audiences – and if brands plan to go down the paid content route, they'll need to ensure it's differentiated and high quality enough to be worth paying for. Whichever monetization path – or combination of paths – companies choose to go down, they will need to consider whether their business can support it and if they can meaningfully commit.

In this Snapshot report, we'll explore the variety of ways brands are experimenting with generating revenue directly from their content. These include:

- **Paid content and intelligence products**
- **Access to communities and networking opportunities**
- **Print and physical goods**
- **Email and on-site advertising**
- **Event tickets and sponsorships**



LIVEINTENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Why email is the perfect monetization channel for brand publishers

By [Jon Beck](#), Chief Revenue Officer, LiveIntent

PERSPECTIVE FROM



Email increasingly serves as the backbone of brand publishers' content distribution efforts, opening up new pathways to monetization, revenue generation, and audience knowledge as a result.

As more companies use emailed content to engage with their audiences, demand from third parties to reach those known audiences is growing rapidly. A key challenge facing advertisers is a lack of opportunities to reach logged-in, addressable audiences, and brand publishers are well-positioned to help.

It's a rare instance of having your cake and eating it too in our industry. **Brands are already using email to build and maintain direct relationships with their audiences, and selling advertising can help subsidize those programs and turn cost centers into profit centers.**

Beyond that, email is also a particularly powerful and attractive monetization opportunity because of the data it throws off. **Brand publishers can use email data for their own campaign optimization and engagement**, and benefit from a dynamic source of first-party intelligence that can be used over time to improve addressability and boost sales.

Adding advertising to email can mean a more complete picture of overall audience behavior. For example, a leading retailer we work with uses our tools to monetize its email data and uses that data to inform its own advertising approaches. For brand publishing teams, this presents an opportunity to directly contribute to marketing optimization.

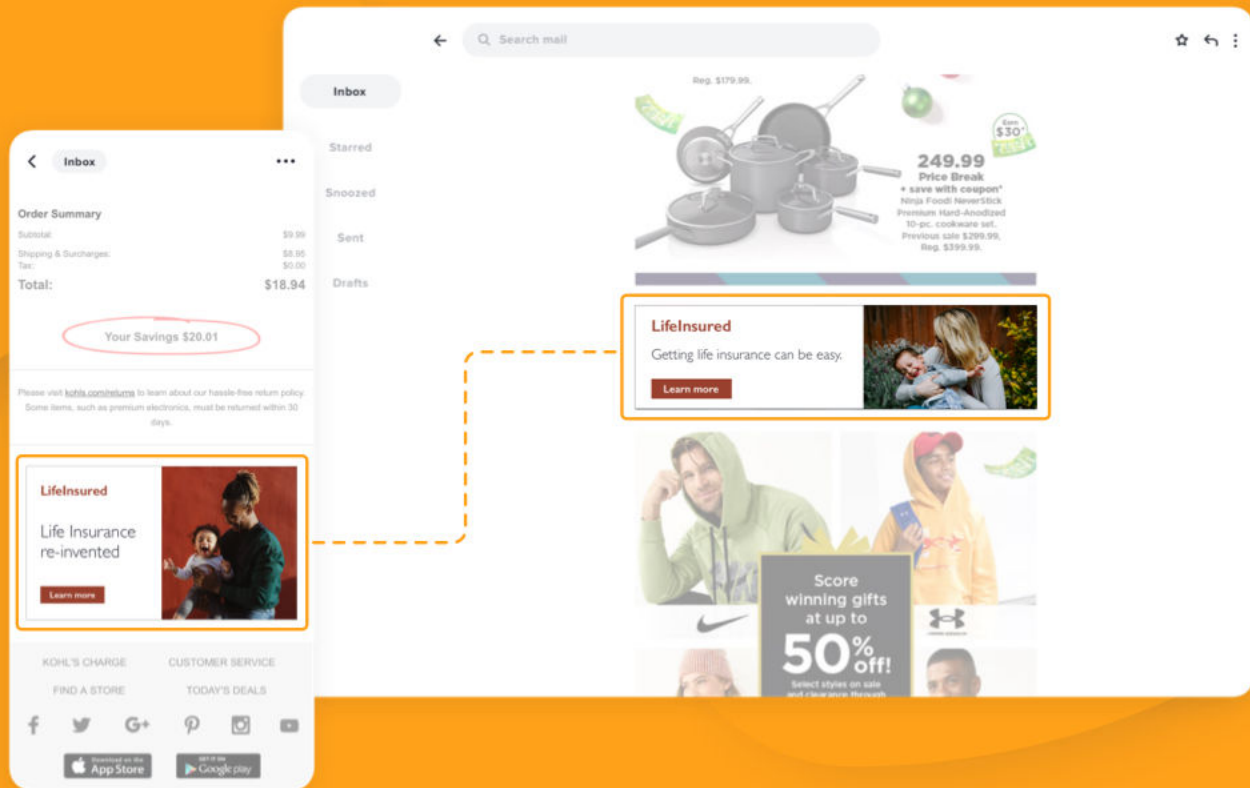
The email program, replete with ads, also solves the biggest problem for brands that are publishers: **creating enough first-party data to survive the end of the third-party apocalypse. Emails are rich in first-party data points.** Those data points are the fuel identity frameworks like LiveIntent use to deliver addressability – give data back – to publishers, and brand publishers. The result for brands is the ability to use email to build a treasure trove of known audiences.

Email is now the key to marketing and advertising in a world without third-party cookies, and our brand publishing partners are often surprised at the power they have within their organization once they realize the value that they can drive for their companies using email.

We'd love to talk more about how other brand publishing teams we work with are using their division's email newsletters to create real revenue today, and securing themselves for the post third-party cookie era.



Grow your retail media inventory with LiveIntent



Expand your onsite ad programs while **delivering personalized, shoppable ad experiences** all with one trusted channel: **email**. With LiveIntent's monetization solutions, you can **transform email communications into revenue generators** with one simple tag and:



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Improve onsite and in-store traffic and sales



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MONETIZATION OPPORTUNITIES

Direct audience revenue

Following in the footsteps of traditional publishers, some brand publishers are seeking to monetize their content directly by charging their audiences for access on either a one-off or recurring basis.

Paid content and intelligence products

One of the key considerations for brands trying to figure out how to make money off content is ensuring they have content valuable enough for people to want to buy it. For many, the answer is often found in content that demonstrates valuable expertise that the company has that is differentiated and unique enough to warrant being paid for. Consumers will often pay for intelligence and data, particularly if the company has in-house expertise it can turn into content.

Hubspot-owned Trends was probably the most well-known paid content product in brand publishing. The company made Trends free-to-read in late 2023, but it was born as an attempt to diversify The Hustle newsletter's revenue away from being 100% reliant on advertising. In 2021, Hubspot acquired the company, and Trends along with it. Trends is an example of a brand using in-house expertise and combining it with reporting and research to create a content product that focuses on intelligence. The product promises to help businesses by providing them with valuable market research and data that will enable them to unlock growth opportunities.

Access to communities and networking opportunities

While Trends' main component was intelligence reports featuring emerging business trends for professionals, people stuck around for access to its gated community of business owners and founders, according to Hubspot Media's senior director, Brad Wolverton. Subscribing to Trends also gives members access to training events on topics like SEO, marketing, and fundraising.

But Trends is also an example of how it can be difficult to sustain a paid content product. For Hubspot, which generated \$1.3 billion in revenue last year, revenue from Trends was largely irrelevant according to Wolverton. "Our goal with our media is reach, not revenue," he said in an interview a few months ago, saying Hubspot opted to keep it paid as long as it did to ensure high-quality discussions. Trends has now evolved into a free-to-read newsletter, possibly because it may result in a higher ROI for Hubspot as a top-of-the-funnel endeavor to grow an audience.

Print and physical goods

A few brands have sold printed materials – mostly books and magazines – as a way to generate revenue. While a less common way to implement paid content as a revenue stream, many can create high-quality materials and offset that cost directly.

One of the earlier entrants to this is Stripe Press. Launched in 2018, Stripe Press directly publishes books (and now films and podcasts) by authors that it sees as complementary to its corporate values. Books are sold via Amazon and online bookstores.

In 2018 when Stripe Press launched, [Axios wrote](#): “This is the latest example of how tech companies use content marketing to build their brands and connect with customers (and would-be customers) beyond the products they sell... Stripe’s mission is to grow the GDP of the internet... by sharing previously hard-to-acquire knowledge and expertise about starting and running companies.”

Similarly, Netflix sells issues of Queue, its magazine for filmmakers and other entertainment industry professionals, on its Shop site. Queue is just one of the entertainment company’s publishing endeavors – it also runs a popular news site, Tudum, and produces a plethora of podcasts going behind the scenes of movies and shows. Queue releases a slickly designed paid issue every few months. It also publishes a selection of articles and pieces on a website, for free. And Mailchimp-owned Courier sells issues of its magazine about modern work for \$20, but also sells print copies of guides and playbooks about business and entrepreneurship for about \$60 – as well as apparel like T-shirts featuring the Courier logo.

Commerce revenue

Commerce and affiliate revenue streams can also be options for brand publishers. While they remain a relatively rare monetization path for many brands that are producing content, alignment between editorial approaches and revenue generation opportunities can potentially result in a successful affiliate marketing operation.

Consumers are most receptive to content from brands when it’s useful and when it tells them something they don’t know: Research from Toolkits has shown that 37% of consumers say they’re likely to engage with content if it contains practical recommendations.

Brands that do answer that call to produce practical, useful content may also find they’re in a unique position to build merchant partnerships with other companies that are selling products their users are interested in. Then, the publisher can receive a percentage of revenue from any product sale.

Glossier-owned Into the Gloss is a beauty website that explores the beauty routines of celebrities, pop stars, reality stars, and in general, “inspiring women.” The site, which was launched in 2010, preceded the 2014 launch of Glossier. Today, ITG is described as an editorial arm of Glossier, but through its coverage of beauty products, also monetizes through affiliate links. For example, a roundup of beauty deals for products on sale during Cyber Month linked out to a variety of products from non-Glossier brands, each with an affiliate link attached.

More traditional publishers are becoming interested in commerce or affiliate revenue, particularly in verticals where advertising revenue has become more difficult to come by. Brands producing product reviews, comparisons, gift guides, or other roundups can often seamlessly work in affiliate links. The critical component here, as with any content endeavor, is trust: Audiences have to trust the publisher to provide reliable, accurate, and high-quality recommendations.

MONETIZATION OPPORTUNITIES

Advertising and sponsorship

An increasing number of brands are trying to sell advertising space to other companies, monetizing their content through traditional sponsorship arrangements, such as advertising on-site and in email.

Brands have certain advantages when it comes to attracting sponsors

Brand publishers may be uniquely positioned to attract advertisers. Generally, brands with robust and high-quality publishing arms attract very high-quality and specific audiences. Brands that are able to turn in-house expertise into content will often find that audiences find them very intentionally.

For example, 60% of the Snacks newsletter's daily readership is 44 and under, which the Robinhood-owned Sherwood's head of sales, James Denis, believes will help it stand out in the market and enable it to compete with other media companies. "When you think about some of the competitive set that exists there it's a big differentiator."

Another advantage brand publishers looking to monetize their content operations have is that they've already had plenty of time to build up an audience. Brands looking to monetize publishing via advertising rarely do so from the outset; instead, most are able to bankroll content operations long enough to actually build an audience. Denis of Sherwood said he views that as an advantage for the company as he goes out and pitches advertisers: "The relationship with the audience has been built up over the years, with trust and consistency, with education as a core component of the value exchange," he said.

One consideration for brands that are interested in monetizing through advertising or sponsorship is figuring out what internal infrastructure is needed to support this endeavor. For some, it may make sense to hire in-house account executives and client services staffers who can go out and sell ad space to brands.

For others, it may be much more cost-effective and efficient to work with ad networks or other intermediary tools that can help connect the right companies with the brand publisher. Ad networks often can gather inventory and then sell that in bulk to advertisers, which can ease the process for brand publishers that are still new to the media game.

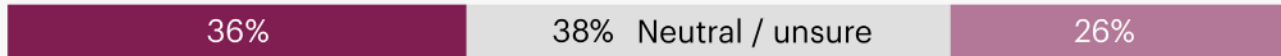
Email and on-site advertising

While revenue is usually the main goal, advertisements on-site or in emails can also have another welcome effect: They can confer legitimacy on a brand publisher. Audiences are now accustomed to seeing advertisements on traditional news sites, and therefore may be likelier to consider the brand publication in the same bucket as those sites.

The presence of other companies' ads also can make the publisher look more trustworthy. According to a survey of 1,007 digital content consumers by Toolkits in collaboration with National Research Group in October, 26% said that the presence of other companies' advertisements within brand publisher content will make them more likely to trust it, and 56% said it would have "no impact" on their trust.

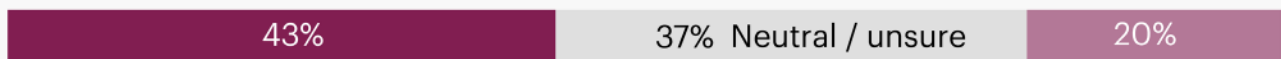
Consumer trust in brand publishing content

“I trust content **more** when it comes from a brand rather than a traditional media outlet.”



“I trust content **less** when it comes from a brand rather than a traditional media outlet.”

“Content from brands is **more** interesting and engaging to me than content from traditional media outlets.”



“Content from brands is **less** interesting and engaging to me than content from traditional media outlets.”

Based on a study of 1,007 current and former subscribers to digital publications in the US, ages 18 to 64, conducted in October 2023.

Research conducted by



Robinhood, for example, is relaunching its entire publishing operation hoping to turn it into a revenue stream via advertising. The company announced this year that it was setting up a new independent subsidiary, named Sherwood, led by Verge co-founder and former Bloomberg executive Josh Topolsky. The endeavor will be monetized entirely through advertisements, on-site, within newsletter products, and also via other upcoming projects such as a new podcast.

The key consideration is that the brand publisher already needs to have an audience scaled enough and high-quality enough for other advertisers to want to reach. The key is in figuring out what types of advertisers will want to reach the company’s existing audience, and why.

On-site and in-email advertisements remain the simplest and most effective way to implement advertising on brand publisher websites and within their content.

Events

A growing number of companies have capitalized on people’s desires for physical connections by hosting events. While virtual events remain common and popular, physical events are also coming back in vogue post-pandemic as people crave networking and community, as well as experiences. Types of events can range from massive multi-day conferences featuring celebrity speakers to demonstration-heavy events where companies show off their latest technologies and products, to private roundtable discussions. Regardless, many companies can now also use events as a monetization opportunity.

Hubspot’s Inbound conference, held annually, features top-tier speakers, including celebrities and Hubspot executives, as well as first looks at new Hubspot technologies and tools; tickets start at \$675. Other companies with ticketed event offerings include Dropbox, which holds an annual “Work in Progress” one-day event focusing on the future of work, in New York every fall.

Paid attendance can also work alongside sponsorships. Mind the Product, a media company acquired by software company Pendo in 2022 produces multiple product-management-related conferences throughout the year, with tickets starting at £700 (\$860.) Mind the Product's conferences are also pitched to potential sponsors, an opportunity for other brands to reach people working in product-related roles. The company also runs sponsorable ProductTank meetups, which allow sponsors to get in front of communities of product professionals globally.

Video content

For brands that are primarily producing video content, advertising can also be extremely effective (and lucrative.) While less common, there have been a handful of examples recently of brands that are launching entire libraries of streaming content. DraftKings, for example, has been a first mover in this arena. In May, it launched DraftKings Network on Samsung TV Plus, Samsung's ad-supported TV service. The stream is also available on DraftKingsNetwork.com, and the company has also licensed its content to other platforms, including iHeartRadio.

Brands are also able to post content on YouTube or other video platforms, potentially earning advertising revenue via those platforms.

Retail media networks

A growing number of retailers have also become media sellers, offering unique ad formats on-site to other brands. The growth of e-commerce has meant retailers are now sitting on a treasure trove of audience and data insights. While in the above examples, the content was the main driver of audience attention, retail media works a little differently. Retailers can leverage the fact that shoppers are already on their websites, and sell ad space on the "digital shelf" to brands looking to reach those shoppers. Ads are usually display ads that are presented alongside search results, or on the homepage or product detail pages.

What's next

Monetizing content can feel daunting for brands. But regardless of what monetization path – or combination of paths – companies go down, the bottom line remains that to do so, they will need to crack the content code first. Being able to churn out trustworthy, high-value content across a variety of formats and mediums will remain the critical cornerstone component of any future monetization strategy.



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Insight & intelligence for professionals building
content and publishing operations within brands.

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