
How understanding audiences can drive organic growth and increased engagement

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Abstract This article describes how analysing audiences effectively can lead to organic growth. It provides an overview of the ever-changing media landscape and offers suggestions as to how brands can combat the uncontrollable algorithm changes in social media and search. The article outlines a five-step process that can be applied to any brand strategy or distribution channel. It will discuss the importance of all users and how audiences are not all created equal. Finally, the article will provide a case study and show how *Golf Digest* put the five-step process into practice, resulting in double-digit growth online.

KEYWORDS: audience development, onsite organic growth, engaged audiences

INTRODUCTION

The digital media landscape is constantly shifting and evolving. Media brands are trying to expand their digital footprint faster than their competitors, often with little or no paid budget. The challenge for audience development professionals is to maintain a relevant digital footprint while remaining agile in adapting to the ever-changing environment. The success of a brand's digital growth is directly correlated to its ability to understand its audience and how its users consume content.

Since their inception, the top social media platforms have continued to grow exponentially in terms of active users and engagement. In 2019, Facebook was the first

social platform to surpass 1 billion registered users.¹ As of September 2019, there are 2.45 billion active monthly users on Facebook, an 8 per cent increase from September 2018.² In addition, Instagram has become a major player in social media. In August 2019, 58.4 per cent of Instagram users were aged between 18–34.³ In conjunction with Facebook, Instagram's growth among a younger demographic gives brands the flexibility to market to two different audiences.

Search engines are also getting smarter, especially Google, which accounts for 88.6 per cent of global searches.⁴ So far this year, Google has introduced five algorithm updates. Most recently, its

high-profile October BERT update helps it to understand search intent better than ever before.⁵

Understanding audience behaviour across distribution platforms is crucial to digital growth, yet optimising a site's content is both an art and a science. The most successful brands have learned to understand algorithms, which help test, shape and prioritise their unique goals to determine the perfect mix of content for a particular set of users. As an example, *Golf Digest* (the golf magazine established in 1952 that recently shifted to a digital-focused strategy) has emphasised the importance of digital analytics and audience development since 2015. As a result, Golfdigest.com has seen double-digit digital growth and has become the world's most popular golfing website (see Figure 1). *Golf Digest's* digital growth has certainly correlated with that of the golf industry as a whole, but the manner in which it has consistently outperformed its peers is thanks to the prioritisation it gives to digital analytics.

By better understanding users and their behaviours on and off site, the brand has achieved three goals: maintaining its status as the number one player in the space; creating a successful e-commerce storefront; and growing its consumer revenue business, *Golf Digest Schools*, from the ground up. This formula was developed and executed across all platforms and distribution channels. The following sections discuss the steps identified by the *Golf Digest* team to build and execute a five-year growth strategy.

BUILDING AN AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT ROADMAP

Growing audiences can be a daunting task. With so many factors outside of a brand's control, the challenge of finding a meaningful starting place can be overwhelming. The successful execution of an audience growth strategy requires audience development professionals to address five main areas:

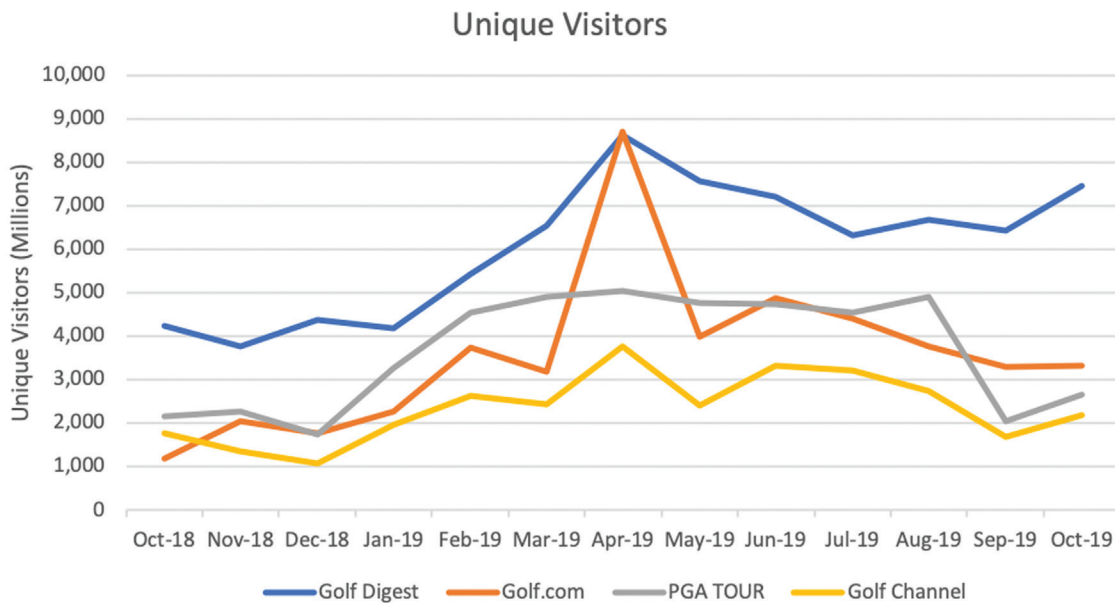


Figure 1: Monthly unique visitors to golf websites
ComScore Multi-Platform, Total Digital Population

- *Identify* — *Define key performance indicators (KPIs) that will determine the success or failure of the brand based on its overall business goals:* The main goal at this stage is to identify the key overall business objectives and how audience engagement and/or growth can support these initiatives. KPIs should be identified and created based on the overall revenue goals for the business. Make note of any questions that may arise at this stage.
- *Measure* — *What data should be measured to help achieve the overall KPI goals established? What measurement tools are currently implemented and are they enough? First-party data are crucial to understanding audiences. The success of an audience growth strategy is frequently dependent upon the implementation and integrity of its data. The ‘measure’ stage should identify all of the unique metrics that must be tracked on all platforms and devices. Are there third-party measurement tools that need to be included in order to evaluate behaviours holistically? They should all be addressed at this time.*
- *Analyse* — *Find the customer journeys and identify personas:* Start to look at the data for high-level trends. Where is the traffic originating? What are users from a particular traffic source doing? Look at all of the distribution platforms; what content are those audiences consuming? Are they the same across platforms, or are they different? Start to classify users into personas based on consumption patterns and behaviours. Note that it is important to maintain focus on the big picture — focusing on a specific area can be detrimental and can lead down the wrong path if not all customer personas are identified.
- *Hypothesise: Find the cause and effect:* Using the KPIs created during the ‘identify’ phase and the customer journeys found at the ‘analyse’ phase, ascertain what causes particular behaviours. Does an audience on a specific distribution channel spend more time on one part of the site? Does the site experience higher traffic or time spent during a particular hour or day? Using different personas identified in the ‘analyse’ phase, start to document the key metrics that define them. Once the causes and effects are identified, start to hypothesise what these audiences will do next, and then test the premise.
- *Test: Test, test, and then test again:* There should always be some kind of test happening. Whether on a particular distribution platform, onsite or at the content level, it is important to continue testing as audiences evolve. With the ever-changing algorithm updates on social and search, strategies cannot evolve without testing. Failure to test can result in potential growth opportunities being compromised or even missed. It is crucial to understand the drivers of audience behaviour both on and off site. Remember that one brand can have many audiences, so it is important to understand them all.

NOT ALL DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS ARE CREATED EQUAL, BUT ALL ARE EQUALLY IMPORTANT

Any successful audience development growth strategy should include e-mail, social, search, syndication, partnerships, etc as they are all equally important. Diversification of traffic is critical to protect against any detrimental algorithm changes. The steps outlined above should be applied to every distribution channel.

E-mail

In every e-mail audience there are two types of individuals: those who open e-mails and those who do not. With inboxes exploding and attention spans decreasing, making a brand's e-mail stand out in a sea of similar ones is becoming increasingly difficult. Newsletter audiences are incredibly valuable because they have shown intent by signing up to receive e-mail. These users

are signalling that they want to return to a brand's website more than once over a period of time, so it is imperative not to forget about them, even if the overall strategy is focused on growth.

Understanding e-mail as a platform can be complicated, but the crucial element is to understand e-mail frequency vs potential diminishing returns (also known as unsubscribes). Identify the audience's e-mail threshold, bearing in mind that this is often much higher than one might expect. Developing e-mail franchises can also be helpful in segmenting audiences to serve relevant content more quickly.

A/B testing is another incredibly important aspect of e-mail. In 2017, *Golf Digest* started to see e-mail open rates decline (unrelated to list size). An A/B testing roadmap was developed, which included subject line and time of day testing on two of the five daily e-mails. The goal of the tests was to equip editors with a toolbox of learnings that could be applied when writing subject lines. This subject line testing led to a 66 per cent increase in overall open rates.

Social media

The social media landscape is constantly evolving. New features on existing platforms are always emerging and new platforms are popping up. The ways in which brands adapt to this ever-changing landscape determines their success on that platform. A startling reality is that social platforms can change their algorithm without warning, seriously affecting traffic to a brand's website. A case in point is the 2018 algorithm update that Facebook pushed out to de-prioritise publishers, leading to posts from friends and family with comments and shares being more heavily weighted in newsfeeds.⁶ As a result, brands saw a huge decrease in traffic from Facebook and started to recognise the importance of traffic diversification.

It is no secret that all brands desire to create engaging content that resonates with their audiences. Before this, however, they must have

an understanding of what users seek — and this will differ by social platform. For example, users on Twitter have different consumption behaviours compared with those on Instagram. This difference must be addressed when developing engaging user content.

A brand's approach to its social strategy ties back to the 'identify' stage of building an audience development roadmap. What are the business objectives and how does social fit into the bigger picture? Once overall KPIs are identified, it is time to get down to the nitty-gritty of how content is optimised to achieve those overall goals.

A/B testing on social platforms is not as cut and dried as compared with e-mail. Audiences cannot be segmented to an even 50/50 split. *Golf Digest* started experimenting with post mix in 2016 (although what worked then does not necessarily work today). The success of a post was determined by two criteria (which were defined in the 'hypothesise' stage of building an audience development roadmap). The first criterion assessed whether the post drove traffic back to the site, and the second evaluated if the post had high, positive engagement. Working from those two benchmarks, over weeks of testing, *Golf Digest* was able to determine the proper post mix per day (ie how many link, photo, status, video and gallery posts to schedule per day). Unsurprisingly, when *Golf Digest* optimised content for engagement, it led to incremental reach and, ultimately, increased traffic back to the site.

Search

Search is one of the strongest distribution channels that can be used when trying to identify new audiences. As Google accounts for 88.61 per cent of all internet searches,⁷ it is safe to say that efforts should focus on Google. An effective search strategy needs to be divided into two parts. First, it should address the Google News algorithm and focus on trending topics. Being first to publish content can sometimes be

the difference between 100,000 or zero incremental unique visitors to the site. Secondly, it should address evergreen content, or content that is always relevant and not timely. Unfortunately, results from search engine optimisation of evergreen content can take months to realise. In the case of *Golf Digest*, it was hypothesised that optimising old evergreen content would lead to double-digit search growth. By conducting keyword research and looking at search volumes, 'opportunistic' content was identified. Two months after updating the content, *Golf Digest* saw a 104 per cent increase in average daily search visits.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Four years ago, *Golf Digest* embarked on a journey to scale its website. A multi-year strategy was put into place, and patience was critical to its success. It was decided that the brand would focus on understanding audiences by analysing onsite behaviour (through pathing analysis) and offsite behaviour (social platforms) to build different personas across the different site sections.

In year one, the emphasis was on growing social channels organically by creating engaging and entertaining content. A focus was on publishing cadence onsite. What content was performing well (and where)? Could that content be replicated across topics? It took nearly 12 months of analysing, hypothesising and testing before the brand came up with a successful posting cadence strategy. It was important to identify content franchises that could be replicated month after month (as a reliable source of traffic).

Year two concentrated on e-mail acquisition and how to get users who loved the content on *Golf Digest.com* to sign up for various e-mail programmes. Because *Golf Digest* offered a variety of editorial newsletters, it started to see a natural segmentation of audiences. There was a clear differentiation between users who consumed instructional content and those who consumed news and tours content.

Once e-mail list sizes became substantial, the brand started a series of A/B tests around subject lines, story placement and time of day. Research was conducted to ascertain audience demand for newsletters, with *Golf Digest* increasing its send capacity until unsubscribe rates started to spike. What transpired was that for certain newsletters, audiences really could not get enough content. The brand responded to this by increasing the frequency of e-mail sends. The KPIs that determined the success of the testing were increased open rates and increased traffic back to *Golf Digest.com*.

The focus in year three shifted to social. Facebook's algorithm started to impact the publishing industry negatively and, unfortunately, *Golf Digest* was not spared. This led to the brand looking at engagement data around all social platforms. Hypotheses were made about what content should be served where, and tests were implemented. Content mix, post type, time-of-day posting and post targeting were among the tests executed. Interestingly, many of the tests had zero effect on the overall social strategy. While not all hypotheses were proven, those learnings may have been even more important because they facilitated the brand's identification of the causes and effects.

Year four's emphasis was on search. Capitalising on big newsy events was beneficial to the brand but optimising evergreen content drove an increase in overall search traffic. Optimising content is not glamorous, and results are almost never immediate. The brand invested in search engine optimisation content, knowing it would take 6–12 months to see positive results. Search engine optimisation is an incredibly laborious process that requires lots of patience. Keyword research is one of the most important factors in optimising onsite content for search. Similar to social, it is important to understand any algorithm updates and how they can affect the overall traffic to the site.

Understanding audience behaviour and consumption patterns equipped *Golf Digest*

with the knowledge to understand that its audience was interested in new products and features. Golf Digest Schools and Golf Digest SELECT were both born out of proper audience analyses.

By understanding the loyalty and engagement of its instruction audience, *Golf Digest* was able to launch Golf Digest Schools, an online subscription-based programme that gives users access to hundreds of video lessons for every part of their golf game. Based on site surveys, instructional newsletters and the overall performance of instruction content (both video and articles), *Golf Digest* saw there was appetite for a video-on-demand, consumer revenue product. Launched in 2018, Golf Digest Schools has seen double-digit growth over the past two years and is continuing to invest in the business.

Golf Digest has been the authority in golf instruction for decades. Building on its strong brand recognition and loyal audience, it developed Golf Digest SELECT, a digital storefront that features collaborations with leading golf brands. By collaborating with selected golf brands, *Golf Digest* is able to create unique, branded products that users can wear/use both on and off the golf course.

It is absolutely necessary to be nimble and willing to pivot strategies based on analysis of what is currently working and not working. Equally important is diversifying traffic to protect against any negative, unforeseen (but very realistic) algorithm changes. While audience segmentation, lifetime value models and lookalike audiences are all extremely important to any brand's growth strategy, *Golf Digest* identified the methodologies outlined above key areas of the business to focus on and optimise. Once this foundation was built, *Golf Digest* was able to get more value out of additional audience segmentation.

CONCLUSION

Every piece of video or written content produced should serve a purpose to a particular audience, whether for a distribution channel or onsite. If an audience cannot be identified, the content should not be created. It is also critical to have equal parts science and art in the overall content strategy. This creative approach serves not only to fulfil a brand's mission statement but also its audience growth strategy.

Documentation is the key to successfully developing and executing an audience development strategy. More importantly, the success of a strategy is determined by the ability to measure, analyse and test against audiences. With a keen understanding of the audiences on Golf Digest.com, the marketing and audience development team continues to efficiently and effectively deliver great content to the right eyes at the right time.

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