

Use Niche Sites to Deliver Specialized Content to Targeted Audiences

By [l3ahb3tan](#) • December 20, 2009

Slicing and dicing local content targeted at a specific audience can make for a rich community, especially if the topic attracts passionate members who don't hesitate to chime in online about it.

For media companies with a sound footprint in their markets, launching a microsite that doesn't tout the long-established legacy news brand might require the heavy lifting marketing of a startup. But a separately branded niche site can work to broaden a media brand's online footprint.

"On a niche basis, you're capturing [users] you might not have captured otherwise. That's really what it's about," said Robert Passikoff, founder and president of [Brand Keys Inc.](#)

Spacer Spacer

One of the 10 strategic imperatives outlined in 2006 by the [Newspaper Association of America's NAA Board Committee on Industrial Development](#) [PDF] was to "build robust new product/business development capabilities to grow new revenue streams." Among the recommendations to achieve this goal is to develop products to reach niche audiences.

Specialized sites provide people with the sense of novelty they don't get from a large, established site, and they provide them with a certain amount of coverage on a category of topics, Passikoff said. "I think it's an example of segmentation strategy exposing itself to the Internet," he said.

Looking at loyalty metrics with categories will help with tactics. "You have to know your audience -- what they expect and what they believe," he said.

Steeler Nation

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's Steeler Nation is aimed at fans of the NFL team. Jonathan Bieda, new product development coordinator for new media at the Post-Gazette, said Steeler Nation was launched as a niche site two years ago so it would have a clear home and wouldn't compete with news content. Before the niche site, a different version existed on post-gazette.com.

Steeler Nation has headlines of Post-Gazette stories about the team, videos, games, user-submitted photos, forums, fight song mp3s submitted by fans, player trading cards and downloadable cheer cards and wallpaper.

Leading up to the 2009 Super Bowl, site managers kept amping the site up with content and fell into a rhythm of uploading content that they continue to maintain. They try to add two to three new things to the site a week before each game.

One person spends between 12-18 hours a week updating Steeler Nation. A majority of the content is created in-house, and Bieda builds the Flash-based games.

The Post-Gazette launched its first iPhone app on Dec. 10. The app can locate the nearest Steelers clubs and bars anywhere in the country. The listings come directly from a Steeler Nation database, and iPhone users can use the app to add new bars and clubs to the database.

Any content tagged with the keyword "Steelers" in the Post-Gazette's main database is directly fed to the app and is updated each time it's opened.

Pat Scanlon, director of interactive media at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, said smart phone delivery is certainly a direction for the newspaper.

Scanlon said the Post-Gazette's content must be portable and meet consumers wherever they want it, and the newspaper needs to give the audience the ability to contribute to and hold the conversation wherever that community wants to have it.

Promotion

Steeler Nation's momentum early on was largely viral, but Super Bowl XLIII didn't hurt. Bieda said they did a lot of word-of-mouth marketing when the niche site launched, such as sending out cheer cards to local Steelers-related blogs.

"I think the user base embraced it and got the word out about the site," he said. "The Super Bowl really got it out in the public eye."

Steeler Nation regularly runs contests that aim to reach new users and foster engagement. For example, one contest called on users to submit fight songs, which people voted on. The best ones became a permanent fixture on the site.

"There are no contests we run that don't have some form of user-generated content," Bieda said.

Scanlon added that contests are the best mechanism for the Post-Gazette to attract new people to Steeler Nation. The site is hardly ever promoted in the Post-Gazette newspaper. Steeler Nation is occasionally promoted in house ads on the newspaper's Web site, which varies depending on how many house promos are running.

Why it works

Scanlon said there would have been no negative implications if Steeler Nation had been launched on post-gazette.com rather than as a microsite. "Between the Post-Gazette site and Steeler Nation, we reach 89 percent of all Steeler fans anywhere," he said.

In Allegheny County, where Pittsburgh is located, 81 percent of residents read the newspaper; of that, 92 percent read the Post-Gazette, Scanlon said. He said post-gazette.com gets 3.3 million unique visitors and more than 45 million page views per month. Steeler Nation averages about 150,000 page views per month over the course of the year.

Cincy MomsLikeMe.com

Originally launched about three years ago as cincyMOMS.com, the site is a local online moms community from Cincinnati.com. (IndyStar.com also launched IndyMoms.com at that time, said Maria Schneider, lifestyle digital content manager at Cincinnati.com.)

CincyMOMS.com became Cincy MomsLikeMe.com in October 2008 when Gannett rolled out its national MomsLikeMe.com network of sites. IndyMoms.com then became Indy MomsLikeMe.com. Schneider said 80 MomsLikeMe.com sites were built in 80 cities where Gannett has a news presence.

Cincy MomsLikeMe.com is community site driven by discussion forums. Members can set up profile pages, send private messages to other members, create new groups and discussions, vote in polls, submit events, upload photos and view members' recent activity.

"There have been tight-knit relationships that have formed," Schneider said. "From a sponsor and advertiser perspective, I know it's a very valuable demographic."

Schneider is currently running the site, but she plans to hire a full-time employee to manage it. Cincy MomsLikeMe.com has five paid part-time guides.

She said she wants to find Cincy MomsLikeMe.com members to blog for Cincinnati.com's Locals on Living section. That section page has a promo box for the moms site with a blurb and links to discussion forums and events.

Schneider said she's getting ready to bring in the Cincinnati Enquirer's food columnist and education reporter for weekly live chats on Cincy MomsLikeMe.com. She's also exploring the idea of inviting political candidates to have online discussions with site members.

Promotion

Schneider said Cincy MomsLikeMe.com holds a lot of contests, promotions and giveaways. A module has been running on Cincinnati.com promoting Cincy MomsLikeMe.com's "12 Days of Christmas Gab & Grab."

She said having a presence on the Cincinnati.com homepage every day has been important to the promotion of the niche site. Cincinnati.com gets about 40 million page views a month. The Cincinnati Enquirer's marketing department also promotes Cincy MomsLikeMe.com in the newspaper.

Why it works

When cincyMOMS.com started three years ago, Schneider said, social networking sites like Facebook hadn't become popular with this demographic. So all along, moms have taken to the site as their own.

She said Cincy MomsLikeMe.com gets 1 million page views a month, and it and Indy

MomsLikeMe.com continue to be the highest traffic leaders in the MomsLikeMe.com network.

"I think branding it separately was a really smart move," she said. "It definitely has its own look and feel."