

The Atlantic experiments with content formats to help grow YouTube subscriber base

The Atlantic is an American multi-platform publisher established in 1857 that covers culture, politics, and thought leadership topics.

OPPORTUNITY

The Atlantic wanted to better engage new digital audiences via YouTube. They saw an opportunity to experiment with format and publication schedule to find what drives habitual viewing, with the aim of increasing engagement, loyalty, and sustainable YouTube channel growth.

APPROACH

The Atlantic invested in technical and production capabilities so they could develop industry-leading content. Then, they tested a recurring series format, and used audience insights and community management to help grow subscriber numbers.

Setting up the digital newsroom and team: The Atlantic hired a new team of digital video specialists (including a community manager) and purchased equipment (including cameras, lighting kits, and video servers).

Building a data-driven digital video strategy: They created a 'YouTube task force' (editorial leads, community manager, and insights strategists) to more easily share findings around retention, click-through rate (CTR), engagement, and traffic sources. The team met weekly to review analytics, qualitative feedback from the community, and new developments in YouTube best practices (e.g., how to craft titles, thumbnails, and create highly retentive videos). They could then make recommendations around new workflows and processes (e.g., customized messaging in hosted end slates to increase episode cross-linking, and increased investment in Community posts).

Testing and learning the way to better content: Next, The Atlantic started to iterate on format, topic, tone, and approach, and test how an episodic series might drive retention and growth. The series was initially published biweekly, then later scheduled for weekly release. The Atlantic adopted YouTube best practices around driving engagement (e.g., via a cohesive thumbnail strategy for the series), and used tools such as Community posts and pinned comments to encourage regular engagement.

Scaling learnings: They worked closely with analytics and channel managers to apply early data insights to forthcoming episodes (e.g., updating thumbnails when early CTR was low). They experimented with announcing episodes before they were published via Community posts. They also honed the verbal call to action at the end of videos (which improved retention and end screen element CTR), and got better and faster at launching themed playlists so viewers had more opportunities to discover related content. In addition, they experimented with the comments section (e.g., running ask-me-anything style discussions, which helped increase engagement).

Promoting across channels: They began to embed episodes in thematically related articles from The Atlantic's archives. They also began working more closely with website editors to achieve better placements for the series across TheAtlantic.com. Finally, they packaged the series to take to market with the goal of generating an ongoing sustainable business model. The new packaging resulted in a couple of supported episodes, and they will continue to work on attracting a larger sponsor for 2020.

RESULTS

By testing different formats and approaches to content, The Atlantic learned how to better drive engagement and grow subscriber numbers.

- **Median subscribers and 'positive engagements'** (defined as likes + shares + comments - dislikes) for the series were 3X the median of other content published at a similar time.
- **Median views from subscribers** within seven days of launch were 2X median of non-series content.
- **Median views per episode** of the new series, *Idea File*, showed a 162% increase vs. previous writer-focused series

LEARNINGS

Test and learn, then scale: Having an initial period of experimentation before the launch of new content was critical in driving long-term success for The Atlantic. They took two months to develop prototypes of episodes for their initial series, so were able to uncover production pain points and test concepts with audiences. They also created and implemented workflow structures that would keep them on deadline.

Create an engagement web around your content: Some of the biggest gains in audience engagement for The Atlantic came through carefully curated and themed playlists, and calls to action to watch them then subscribe. They developed a curation strategy evocative of a spider's web, making as many relevant connections as possible and presenting them in an enticing way to the audience.

With YouTube, it's all about community: Community posts and pinned comments help encourage audience participation. Within 24-48 hours of publishing a video, The Atlantic would put together a Community post, sometimes with a GIF and discussion question and other times with a poll asking the audience to engage with the video's central thesis. GIF posts drove the most traffic to the video, but polls drove the most audience participation.

Build a team around your video goals: Creating a hyper-focused, goals-driven task force pays off. Then, everyone on the digital video team is working toward the same end goals, and is concerned with both the creative production side, and the audience and analytics angle.