

Vox experiments with YouTube memberships to deepen relationships with loyal fans

Started in March 2014, Vox is an online American publisher that specializes in explanatory journalism, aiming to make important issues clear and comprehensible.

OPPORTUNITY

Vox wanted to deepen their relationship with fans and explore different revenue models for sustaining digital video operations. Through YouTube's channel membership program they saw an opportunity to experiment with non-ads monetization and find ways for loyal fans to directly support their digital video journalism.

APPROACH

Having never run a subscription membership program before, Vox spent time researching programs and reorganizing teams prior to launch. Post launch, they focused on building paid member numbers and membership retention, tweaking the program as they went.

Laying the groundwork: As a first step, Vox ran a survey to learn more about potential members and their motivations, the findings of which would influence branding, editorial, pricing, and launch plans. They reprioritized responsibilities of key video and audience team members to staff the program, and formed a leadership working group who were responsible for the big, strategic decisions about the program. In addition, they set goals around growth, subscriber numbers, and revenue.

Launching the membership program: They launched with a dedicated introductory video and post-roll membership campaign, which explained to consumers the purpose of the membership program — namely, to support quality journalism. After 30 days, they conducted a review by analyzing YouTube metrics, administering another survey, hosting a Member Advisory Board meeting, and conducting retrospectives with staff.

Building the audience: They ran a 'blitz' campaign to try and convert loyal Vox.com readers to Vox Video Lab members — they embedded a sidebar in every published story for a week, which linked to the launch video and encouraged sign up. The production team created a series of stock end cards that could be attached to new videos, which further encouraged public support for the program. They also established weekly cross-functional membership check-in meetings, where the team could discuss metrics and results, and set goals for the week ahead.

Tweaking the program: Taking a data-driven approach meant that Vox could adjust the program as needed in its early stages. They restructured the team so it was more cross-functional, and worked with internal analytics teams to reevaluate financial goals. They also created talking points that hosts could use at the end of their videos to encourage joining the program — the highest spike in new members since launch came after one of Vox's biggest stars invited their fans to join. Vox also created a members-only playlist to aggregate all of the exclusive content that only members could watch.

Retaining members: The first few months after launch were focused on attracting new members, but by mid-year they shifted their focus to retention. They wanted to show members the value they provided to the program, so they created several members-only Community posts on the impact of their videos (e.g., a Vox explainer video was used by protestors during a summer demonstration at the Hong Kong airport). However, they found that new member numbers dipped during this period, and they realized they needed to implement concurrent campaigns to attract and retain audiences to keep growing. They ran a new email membership drive that coincided with a new season of their show, Vox Borders.

RESULTS

While Vox succeeded in increasing brand loyalty and deepening relationships with their biggest fans, they ultimately weren't able to reach their ambitious subscriber goals or drive enough revenue to fund more video projects through the member-funded model. This project represented one of the first forays into YouTube channel memberships for a major news organization, and has driven a lot of learnings — not only for the Vox team around what it takes to set up and run a subscription offering, but also for the YouTube team about the product improvements required to make this a viable path for news media brands (e.g., analytics, communications, and an international offering). The Vox team plans to continue offering memberships, but will refocus the program on helping their biggest fans support their journalism.

LEARNINGS

Support for journalism comes first, perks second: Overwhelmingly, members joined the program to support Vox and the creation of more YouTube channel content — the perks were a secondary motivation. While Vox initially treated the Video Lab like another product offering (a money-for-content exchange), they recognize that members were really after the satisfaction of supporting a program that aligned with their values. Members are there for a feeling, so lean into the messaging that appeals to the values and identities of those audiences. Vox found that messaging from recognizable Vox personalities was far more effective than if it came from the brand.

Listen to your members: Vox ran a potential member survey prior to launch to inform their offering, and then another one month after launch to get feedback from early members. They also held weekly working sessions where the team looked at metrics and uncovered areas for improvement. Based on these insights, they could tweak their program as needed.

Get the right teams in place: Running a membership program can be a challenging endeavor — but having the right workflows, strategies, and staff in place will help ease the burden. For example, Vox had a membership project manager to ensure all teams were aligned, and that programming was coordinated across editorial and sponsorship schedules. They also had a leadership working group, who were in charge of strategic decision-making, as well as cross-functional teams who met often to chart progress.

“ Through this program our members got a peek into our production process, the chance to chat live with their favorite hosts, join quarterly advisory network calls, and interact with our team in a safer, more intimate space than main channel comments. Most importantly, according to our members, it gave superfans a way to support our journalism. ”