From Measuring Everything to Seeking Knowledge
As marketers work toward deeper connections with consumers, they are shifting their focus away from rough proxies for consumer impact and seeking knowledge over numbers with their branded content programs.

By Fara Warner

Simon Kelly, founder of StoryWorldwide, uses this anecdote from his travels through airports for how measurement can fail to tell you anything about the very thing you think you are measuring.

“The last few times I’ve flown through New York, I’ve noticed a device when leaving the men’s room that asks you to push a button to tell them about your experience,” he says. “I laugh every time because I realize that there is someone whose job it is to use this data to improve those metrics. But you don’t know why someone pushed the happy face or a sad face. You don’t know the ‘why’ of their experience.”

Measuring the effectiveness of branded content may seem to have little to do with a survey of airport bathrooms. But they have a lot in common. The measurement tools the industry uses today remain rough proxies for what a consumer really feels or thinks about the content they consume. Just as it’s hard to determine what a “smile” means versus a “frown” when it comes to happiness about a bathroom, so to is it hard to know the true consumer emotion behind the measurements commonly used to measure the effectiveness of branded content. Do impressions, page views, click throughs, time spent, scroll depth, social shares, likes, thumbs up, search results, video views, to name just a few, equate to anything other than tracking website actions, a quick thumb tap made while scrolling on a mobile device, or the power of a paid media buy to boost those numbers to look good? Do they even come close to telling marketers if branded content has done its job: whether it is raising brand awareness or moving product off of shelves?

The fact that the 10 measurements listed above do little to truly measure what marketers want to know--but are still the currency of the industry today--reveals a significant challenge for branded content. Even as branded content has become mainstream for many advertisers, there is no standardization for measurements. Moreover, the marketers interviewed for this white paper voice an even greater concern: they don't trust the measurements they are receiving because everyone involved has a motive for making those numbers look good.

"I would theorize that we have leaned too hard on engagement metrics because that's what the platforms have emphasized," says Kirstin Falk, [1] managing director of brand storytelling and innovation at Charles Schwab. "The platforms emphasize it as a way to build ad revenue, but I've begun to question just because someone engages with your content has it changed their perception of your brand? It's unknown whether when someone 'likes' your content that they feel deeply about your brand."

In this white paper, we'll explore three areas in the measurement of branded content that are top of mind with marketers. Importantly, we'll highlight the call to action to standardize measurement for branded content.

- Standardizing or at least reaching consensus on what metrics matter.
- The emerging measurement tools that seek to track customer emotions
- Finding ways to turn the data we do have into actionable knowledge before, during and after campaigns.

Why talk about standardizing measurement now?

[1] Interview with Kirstin Falk, May 23, 2019

There's never been a more important time to focus on measurement standards for branded content. By 2020, Polar predicts that global spending on branded content will hit $13.4 billion, almost double the $7 billion it was predicted to hit in 2018. While still just a sliver of the more than $700 billion in global ad spending, branded content has matured into a key marketing tool for many companies and an important revenue generator for publishers and platforms. Yet even as the sector matured, the tools used to monitor the success of branded content remain rough proxies for true engagement.

It's not just growth that's driving the need for standardization. Branded content is quickly moving beyond its traditional roots. While media companies are still an important part of creating and distributing such content, there's been a marked increase in brands creating their own content and then distributing it through many publishers or pushing it out on platforms such as Google, Facebook and Twitter. Standardizing metrics across publishers and platforms, including their own brand sites, is virtually impossible today particularly with the "walled gardens" controlling so much data. But standardization across platforms will be critical if marketers want to prove the worth of investing in their own content studios.

New creative partners and distribution platforms also are entering the space. Instead of using publishers or agencies as a clearinghouse for creatives, brands are working directly with writers, filmmakers, documentary producers, podcasters, and influencers to create content that seeks to be almost the antithesis of advertising. It's meant to be authentic and journalistic in its approach as opposed to scripted and tightly controlled. As brands seek creative work that more deeply engages audiences--and isn't adequately measured with existing tools--they will seek new measurement tools. Without standardization there will be an even greater proliferation of metrics instead of a focus on a core set of tools that track true consumer engagement.

In distribution, brands are testing the power of their branded content on non-ad supported streaming providers such as Amazon Prime, Netflix, Hulu, and YouTube and many others. According to Nielsen, two-thirds of U.S. households have streaming devices connected to their televisions. David Hohman of Nielsen writes "it is also abundantly clear that we have reached a watershed moment when it comes to current and future viewing behavior." Streaming networks will continue to have a vast appetite for content and a growing audience that marketers must reach. If traditional publishers, in particular, are going to prove their worth against these new players, their metrics will need to stand up against the measurement tools already employed by the likes of Amazon and Netflix.

With new players coming from both the creative and distribution side, it is time for standards--or at the very least consensus--on metrics if we are truly to understand and then capitalize what we believe is the power of branded content to engage consumers more deeply than traditional advertising.

"The advertisers have the dollar leverage to force change," Hohman says.[2] "Nielsen has developed the capability in order to address the need, but the industry needs to decide what they want to transact on. Ultimately, we need a consortium of advertisers, agencies, platforms, publishers and measurement companies driving the market. It won't be all players, but the stakeholders who can move markets and then everyone else will have to get on board or be left behind."

So what measurements should we keep? Which ones should we discard?

What is clear from the research and interviews: no one is happy with the existing set of measurement tools in use today. "Measurement has become a distraction because we have so many things we can measure," says

[2] Interview with David Hohman, May 24, 2019

Abby Klanecky,[3] chief marketing officer at consulting firm A.T. Kearney, whose comments mirror every marketer interviewed.

Marketers interviewed were clear that many of the metrics we rely on are more noise than signal. Even executives from measurement firms agreed that the sheer number of metrics available make it difficult to determine which ones show that branded content really works and which do little more than distract. The common refrain seemed to be “just because you can measure it doesn’t mean you should measure it.”

As we move toward a consensus and then standards, there are clear signals on what we shouldn’t measure (or diminish in terms of importance): ***impressions.*** Every marketer interviewed said without hesitation that the measurement is highly questionable because of how easy it is to buy impressions.

Marc Battaglia,[4] executive creative director for Marriott International, put it this way: “We really tried to downplay views because that has become the heroin of the industry. We have people in our own company that deem a program a success because of how many people saw it. But if three million people watch something and no one comments on it, that's a failure. I’d rather have 200,000 people watching and have engagements that are through the roof.”

Others are disdainful of website analytics masquerading for real engagement. Pageviews, time spent, and even scroll depth were questioned because what they measure is a consumer’s website actions, not whether the consumer has taken in the message from the brand. Pageviews and video views, in particular, are considered particularly problematic because every publisher and platform measure them differently. Comparisons across platforms are virtually impossible,

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[3] Interview with Abby Klanecky, May 6, 2019
[4] Interview with Marc Battaglia, May, 24, 2019

especially as the “walled garden” platforms continue to control vast amounts of data with little advancement on transparency.

Marketers and measurement firm executives alike don’t see the need to continue depending on traditional tools used to measure advertising to measure branded content. “Display advertising metrics are super binary,” says Andrew Bolton[5], SVP of Global Partnerships at Knotch. “Did you see the ad, didn’t you see it. Did you click, didn’t you click. Content is much more multi-variant because there is a value exchange with the consumer. Did the content provide what it was supposed to--provide utility, entertain and create an emotional connection?”

Put even more succinctly from Battaglia: “The more honesty that we all have with each other and the business right now, the better. We’ve been using advertising metrics and they're just not telling us anything. They're not effective.”

We are starting to see a consensus forming that has been discussed widely for several years by marketers. Impressions and website analytic measurements are only proxies for engagement. So for a start on standards, marketers could demand that those metrics be reduced in importance.

On the positive side for measurement, marketers truly value those metrics that at least signal the important concept of “emotion” that Bolton points out. Like Battaglia, most marketers interviewed were more interested in comments on content and social shares than traditional engagement metrics. For them, social platform actions are better signals of engagement. “We tend to look at shares more than anything,” says A.T. Kearney’s Klanecky. “We see them as a signal of the storytelling resonance. What handles are they happening on? Are they sharing within their companies?

[5] Interview with Andrew Bolton, May 22, 2019

It’s that degree of engagement that we value over eyeballs, which is what you generally get back from publishing companies.”

Klanecky continues: “I don't trust a lot of the numbers. The numbers are still oriented toward media company sales goals. You end up having a mismatch between the emotional connection and resonance you're building with your audience. This is the question we are trying to get at and instead we get numbers that are all about reach.”

Klanecky pointed out that for her product, consulting services, there’s only about 1,000 people--the world’s top CEOs--that she needs to reach. So focus is critical. But marketers working on mass consumer brands echoed her sentiments. Making an emotional connection with a real person was more important than a data point in a spreadsheet.

“If we're not connecting on an emotional level or shifting your perception after you've seen the story, then we failed,” says Marriott’s Battaglia. “It's time to rethink what these new measurements need to be and what's the most important thing to measure, which is a consumer connecting emotionally to the brand. Then how do you measure that?

Can we measure human emotion?

As marketers seek to shift their dependence off engagement metrics, they face a challenge in finding measurements to replace them. While social listening can signal emotional connection, it doesn’t measure it as finely as many marketers would like. “We are trying to connect with consumers in an emotional way and ultimately build relationships with them and not all of that will be measured,” says Schwab’s Falk.

Measurement firms--some new, some well-established--have seen this growing need among marketers and are moving ahead with measurements that seek to measure human emotion.

At Kantar, which owns Millward-Brown known for its brand lift surveys, the focus for measuring branded content is via live real-time surveys that can be tested before content is published. “We have a dynamic live experience that exposes people to content within context,” says Heather O’ Shea[6], Kantar’s executive vice president of advertising and media effectiveness. “We create interactive experiences that enable surveys to be conducted before media goes live,and provide feedback to clients before campaigns are launched.” Kantar created these live real-time experiences two years ago when client feedback revealed a strong desire to connect branded content experiences to true brand performance indicators such as awareness.”

“The learnings from our “test before launch” solution, Context Lab, have opened up a conversation about what really works in branded content,” O’Shea says. “When content tells a really great story, when it drives emotion, when it connects the brand in a meaningful and relevant way, it performs much better.” That may seem obvious because connecting emotionally with consumers has been the promise of branded content. But if that promise of driving emotion is now paying off for branded content, then using digital action-based metrics to measure no longer makes sense.

What does seem to make sense is neuroscience. “Neuroscience shows us that attention and emotion are the two things that are going to drive long-term memory,” Nielsen’s Hohman says, which leads to the cognitive ability to recall not only the brand, but the way that it was used and how they felt about it and all of those sorts of things. “It really goes back to the way that humans learned to survive. It's fight or flight, right? It's that instant recognition: is this person friend or foe?,” he says.

That same reflex plays out today in how we make purchasing decisions. Called “system one” thinking, or perhaps what we often think of as gut

[6] Interview with Heather O’Shea, May 24, 2019

reaction, the concept is well-known among behavioral scientists, and increasingly among marketers and measurement firms. But measuring this quick emotional response that humans have been hard-wired to do for more than 50,000 years has not necessarily been easy for marketers. Traditionally, emotion has to be measured after the fact in focus groups where “system two” thinking, the rational brain, kicks in and explains the logic behind emotions. Focus groups can be limited as well by sample size. And even larger statistically relevant surveys may not be representative of the general population.

But through the use of larger datasets and mobile technology, we may be getting closer to measuring what stories--because most often they are stories that grab us--connect on that deep emotional level and which do not.

Simon Kelly of StoryWorldwide has begun working with a U.K.-based analytics firm that measures system one thinking to determine if an idea will elicit emotion with consumers. Unlike Kantar’s pre-campaign live testing, StoryScore, as Kelly has named it, tests ideas, including competitors, not campaigns that are already built. The approach is very different from what Kelly says the advertising industry has focused on for the past 50 years. “Remember Aristotle’s three creative modes: pathos, logos, ethos? Well, advertising has ignored pathos, or emotion. Instead it’s all based on logos--or data--with perhaps if you’re lucky a bit about what the brand stands for--or ethos.”

Kelly contends that it is “pathos” or emotion that really drives engagement. Working with System One, the U.K. company takes its name from the science, Kelly has created StoryScore to measure the effectiveness of storytelling as a way of tapping into human’s “system one” thinking. While Kelly is just rolling out StoryScore for its clients, System One has used the concept for the past 20 years to measure emotions and show how effective they are in determining if ideas for campaigns will work or not. They have an online panel of 500,000 people who have four seconds to respond after they are delivered the story. They categorize them into nine different emotions--such as surprise, anger, happiness--to determine what is driving the system one thinking.

In 20 years of testing, Kelly says only 5 percent of the 40,000 stories the company has tested have been “five star” ideas, meaning they are ideas that are ahead of the market and will breakthrough with audiences. Three and four stars reveal stories that will resonate but aren’t necessarily breakthrough. One star, Kelly says, and you should just forget the idea. Kelly says the small number of five-star ideas reveals that measuring “system one” thinking works unlike metrics that are meant to make the measurement company or the marketer look good, especially those created after the campaign is over. “Why on earth would you risk everything and then analyze what happens after the fact, when it’s already too late to do anything?,” Kelly asks. “Why risk that when, when you don't have to? When you can actually predict whether it's going to work or not with a very high degree of confidence.”

Of course testing ideas before even creating a campaign would require a sea change in the way much of branded content is created today. Notably the RFP process for publishers would have to be abolished unless marketers were willing to test submitted ideas for emotional responses before they made a decision on who was winning the business. Even outside of the publisher studio model, marketers would need to add in enough time to an already lengthy branded content process to test ideas they receive from their own teams, their agencies and creatives with whom they want to work.

Until and if that ever happens, other measurement firms such as Knotch and Swayable are creating tools that seek to measure emotional resonance with existing campaigns in real-time. Knotch is known for holistic content measurement which includes a one-question survey tool that asks a question that seeks to measure the emotional connection the consumer has with the content. “It’s not just how many people saw content and how long did they spend with it, but did it do the job that it was supposed to do?,” Bolton says. By merging data from that single question with other data sets such as engagement, behavior, and demographics, Knotch seeks to provide clients with actionable data that’s designed around content. “We want to measure content in a way that is designed for content instead of repurposing another metric that doesn't necessarily apply to it,” he says. “For content, we have to be able to show an attitudinal or emotional impact. Was there a change in awareness or even likelihood to purchase?”

As with Knotch, Swayable’s entry into the measurement space comes with stated goal of leading a major shift in how the industry measures branded content and importantly what it learns from those measurements “In general, there has been little or no transparency around content’s impact,” says James Slezak,[7] Swayable’s CEO and co-founder.

With Swayable’s technology, Slezak says a client can have a brand lift study completed in under 24 hours, with respondents coming from panel of four million potential respondents through partnerships Swayable has established to access top apps in the iOS and Android app stores. The client delivers the creative to Swayable and determines what questions they want answered in the tool from how a narrative is resonating with a specific demographic to determining if brand attributes such as trust and safety are coming through in the creative. “Clients are saying now I’ve got some real data on how my segmentation and storytelling is performing with real people, thousands of them,” Slezak says. “And if it is working or not and how to improve it”

In Slezak’s view, the next two to three years are going to be pivotal in the way that the industry looks at data and measurement. “I think the demand and requirement to have this kind of insight is going to be pervasive.”

[7] Interview with James Slezak, May 21, 2019

What do we now with the data we do have?

The future holds significant challenges when it comes to measuring branded content. But even as the industry works toward standards and finding new ways of measuring emotion (and proving those measurements are indeed more valid than traditional measurements) there's still the real-time need to prove the value of branded content through the measurement tools we do have.

Here are three insights from marketers on how to use the data available to create successful branded content programs.

Measure branded content against your company's goals (yes, it's possible).

As branded content took off in the past decade, it was all too easy to disconnect it from both the overall brand strategy and a company's often-clearly stated goals. The vast amount of data from so-called engagement metrics helped with that disconnect. Pageviews were up, impressions were in the millions, people were sharing the content, it was trending on Twitter, all must be well with the branded content program even if that engagement never tracked back to products bought or services used.

But the days of experimentation are coming to a close. Branded content is expensive and time-consuming to produce and therefore companies are expecting it do far more than ever before. "I think one of the biggest mistakes brands are making is that they're kind of doing branded content as one-offs," says Lee Nadler,[8] former marketing executive with MINI USA and founder and president of Sherpa Marketing. "You can't just do one or two pieces for a very short window of time because these things become like little drops in an ocean. I think fewer, bigger narratives told over

[8] Interview with Lee Nadler, May 16, 2019

multiple channels, multiple partners, multiple platforms are going to be much more effective than the one that lasts for a few weeks, hits a certain amount of impressions and then goes away."

Marriott, a perennial favorite in highlighting its branded content creativity, is a good example of thinking long term and closely linking branded content with company goals. Here's an example. Last year, Battaglia and his team began to see a trend of solo women travelers from its loyalty database of 120 million members. The trend also was making its way into the zeitgeist with trending Google searches and publications writing "how to" articles and narratives about women traveling alone. The team soon was moving forward with a film about a woman traveling alone. "As the storytelling group for the company, our mission is not to put heads in beds, we do however look at how do we extend that connection into the actual commerce of the company," he says.

The studio still creates the "hero film" that stays true to the goal of connecting to audiences. Then, online that film will have moments pulled out to inform editorial content. From there, readers can easily book hotels in the cities or countries featured. Marriott also can build experiences featured in the film that members can bid on with their loyalty points. "We build a whole ecosystem outside the film that meets the commerce needs," Battaglia says. "But we're very sacred about not jamming everything into the actual film. The film can't check off 90 things because then it's just a glorified commercial."

Create a data chain, measure it, own it.

As we've noted, not all measurements are created equal and partners will promote the data that makes them look good. So creating a data chain and owning it is critical for marketers. The chain can include proxies for engagement such as impressions and pageviews. But importantly it has to include social metrics, real-life interactions such as focus groups and surveys, and possibly new measurements around emotions, linked to a company's core goals. "Sophisticated clients are the ones that are willing to invest enough time and effort to pull that data chain together," says Nigel Hollis,[9] Kantar's executive vice president and chief global analyst. "They can confidently say if I do this and see this change, that's good. They can rest easy that they are having a future positive effect on whatever the goal is."

Kevin Brown,[10] chief marketing officer at Sleep Number, is very clear about his data chain: "The metrics need to be all connected through the entire customer relationship." For Sleep Number that means being able to track a customer from a customer's first interaction with the brand whether it's branded content, a search query or a video view on YouTube, Brown says. "We can track them all the way to the store. Now, I know you are considering the brand and capture you as a lead. Once you decide on your Sleep Number bed, you become a lifelong customer and member of our InnerCircle," he says, referring to Sleep Number's Insider loyalty program.

Brown's data chain begins with a clear focus on what matters in engagement metrics. For him, it's only three: shares, comments and completed views of videos. Then those need to be measured across all platforms where the content lives. So for instance, Sleep Number's NFL partnership and the effectiveness of that content must be tracked across all their partner platforms, including the NFL players association, the professional trainers association, and even to the players individual platforms on Instagram or Facebook. "It's the integration of that data that's critical and no I do not outsource those metrics. I have to own measurement," Brown says.

But the data chain doesn't stop with engagement. "We have to see action. So that's a consumer who is researching the product online and getting to

[9] Interview with Nigel Hollis, May 16, 2019
[10] Interview with Kevin Brown, May 31, 2019

our store to find her sleep number setting," he says, because once that's happened Brown and his team can keep tracking her through the next critical links in the data chain. While some marketers may not expect action to happen from branded content, Brown does, because that brings consumers into the next big data links in the chain for Sleep Number: purchase, repeat purchases and referrals.

By connecting engagement metrics with a customer data system, Sleep Number is able to watch as a customer moves through to purchase. But where some companies would stop there, particularly for a big-ticket item, Sleep Number knows through its data chain that many people purchase their next Sleep Number bed within a year of buying their first one. Connecting the consumer who has purchased a bed through the Insider program is critical to supporting repeat business and it makes it easier to sell products such as pillows and temperature-balancing sheets. Finally, measuring referrals is critical because more than 40 percent of sales come from Insider repeat purchases who tell their friends--and are rewarded for doing so through the Insider program. The data chain now loops all the way back to Sleep Number's overall message: that better sleep improves lives. You bought the bed, your sleep improved, you tell that story to a friend and then that story leads back to them engaging with the brand. And the data chain begins again with another consumer.

While Brown considers his three engagement metrics to be important early links in the chain, he considers post-campaign measurement absolutely unnecessary. "The consumer is moving so fast and the choices for content are nearly limitless that I would say anyone who is not managing in real time or near real time, you're already you're way behind."

Connect with real people (particularly to persuade the C-Suite)

One of the obvious challenges for marketers is connecting measurements to real people. But most of the marketers interviewed considered it critical to helping them plan their marketing and persuading the C-Suite of branded content's importance. "You can be sitting there with 900 spreadsheets and all these pie charts, but everything gets back to true human reaction," says Marriott's Battaglia. He says being able to tell his top management how the team interacted with a single consumer is more valuable than showing them vast amounts of data.

Adding in measurements that come from direct consumer interaction also have a high value for marketers in leading their marketing plans, more so than traditional engagement metrics. Both Schwab and A.T. Kearney executives employ customer surveys to connect with consumers. Falk uses a survey-based tool that surveys consumers about Schwab everyday. For Klanecky, a client advocacy survey the company conducted in 2018 was "the single most helpful thing I did last year to help inform my programming, including branded content," she says. The quantitative survey of 300 CEOs, CFOs and COOs who worked with A.T. Kearney were followed by with 30 to 40 interviews. "We're simply not getting that degree of depth from other measurements," she says.

While companies today have massive amounts of customer and website data at their disposal, they struggle to derive value from it, says Salima Nathoo, former Senior Director of Customer Intelligence at The Wall Street Journal. "Behavioral data allows us to understand the how and the what—that is, *how* customers are interacting with your brand, *what* channels they're coming from, and *what* that customer journey looks like," she says. "But you also want to understand the why or the human-side of their decision making and typically this is missing from measurement data. Without understanding the *why*, you're making assumptions about your customers and that can be misleading for brands."

Nathoo recommends that brands conduct or ask for qualitative research—be it focus groups or in-depth conversations with customers—to unpack those key moments of truth even before developing ideas for branded content. “Knowing how to emotionally connect and build trust with your customers is paramount for branded content,” she says. Then using quantitative surveys to measure human behavior at scale. Nathoo says: “Brands need a triangulated approach: a combination of measurement data as well as qualitative and quantitative findings to provide a comprehensive narrative or a holistic big picture of our customers needs, motivations and their perceptions of the campaign and brand.”

Five questions to ask about how you measure content--right now.

Not every marketer will be able to overhaul their measurement strategies to shift from proxies for engagement to true engagement. But there are steps you can take right now to determine if the measurement tools you are using are doing what you need them to and set a plan for change if necessary. Here are five questions to ask yourself, your team, your agency and the publishers and platforms you are working with to get to better measurement of branded content.

What’s the source of my data and is it statistically significant? It’s a good idea to do a deep dive into your data sources on a quarterly basis--at least. Are they still relevant? Are they statistically significant? Where are they coming from?

Do I own this data? Too many brands rely on reports from agency, platforms and publishers. Owning a report is not the same as owning the data. A move toward ownership of data is a good first step in creating a more robust measurement plan for branded content.

Can I measure my goal? Don’t rely on proxies for measurement. Instead, determine what the goal of your branded content is and then look for the measurement tools that help you determine if you have Too often proxies are offered up that have nothing to do with what you want to measure.

How fast can I turn around data? Real-time actionable data is critical. Waiting for weekly reports or post-campaign surveys means that you can't make the changes necessary for your branded content to work better when it's in the market.

Can I show this data to my CEO? If your data gets straight into the weeds, that's a tell that the data isn't answering the key questions the CEO wants answered. While fancy spreadsheets and lots of numbers may feel like it tells a story--or covers all the bases--good data can be summed up in a few bullet points that reveal what worked, what didn't and what changes you are going to make.