



24

ESSENTIAL LEARNINGS FROM NATIVE AD STUDIOS AROUND THE WORLD

Hacks to a Successful Native Ad Studio



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Foreword

Publishers around the world have long been getting on board the native advertising train and have set up in-house native ad studios. According to a survey from INMA and Native Advertising Institute, 35% of the surveyed publishers had established an in-house studio in 2017, up from 33% in 2016.

But how do you set up a successful native ad studio?

Throughout 2017 and the beginning of 2018, the Native Advertising Institute interviewed directors of these studios around the world - from India to Sweden - and asked them to share their most important learnings. This ebook is a compilation of their most important learnings for you to implement in your daily work with native advertising.

Which skills do you need for your native ad studio? Can you say no to clients? How do you make sure

that sales and creatives are aligned? Should the editorial part of the business get involved? What kind of content should you create? And how do you best work with your clients?

24 native ad studios have answered these exact questions and here is your ultimate guide to either setting up a native ad studio or improving your existing studio.

Each page has a “read full interview” button which links to the original interview, where you can dive deeper into each native ad studio to be inspired and to learn from their experiences.

We are continuing our series of native ad studio interviews on the blog. If you would like your native ad studio to be featured, do not hesitate to contact us at [hello\(at\)nativeadvertisinginstitute\(dot\)com](mailto:hello@nativeadvertisinginstitute.com).

Have strict guidelines and work closely with brands

“At The Irish Times Content Studio, we have grown rapidly over two years and a number of strategies underpinned that growth:

Strict guidelines

We developed and signed up to strict editorial guidelines. These were agreed between editorial and commercial to ensure that editorial standards would be upheld and that The Irish Times brand itself would be protected – this was a crucial goal. These guidelines weren’t a recommendation – we had to stick to them and violating them would damage internal relationships, publishing opportunities and visibility on the homepage. Staff on both sides of the business monitor that the guidelines are being upheld and this works.

Label everything

We label our brand content as sponsored at every opportunity across all our platforms, including social. We want our readers to know that what they are consuming is paid for and by whom. It never pays to hide sponsorship and, besides, we’re proud to work with our brand partners and are happy to communicate that.

Separate editorial staff

All content ideas – either at pitch stage or once in production – are led and developed by experienced editorial staff, but they are a separate team from normal editorial. They work in the same space but there is no crossover between teams. This is crucial to ensure trust in what The Irish Times does overall.

Work as closely as possible with brands

There are a lot of links in the relationship between brands and publishers – sales agents, media agencies, PR companies. We try as much as possible to have a direct editorial connection with brands. We keep everyone in the loop and let each of the actors do their respective jobs but to tell a story properly we need to talk directly with the brands themselves. A lot of time can be wasted and key messages lost otherwise. We’ve built trust with agencies and this works well for all involved.”

Fact: The Irish Times Content Studio was founded in 2016.



Read the full interview

Gary Quinn,
Editor of The Irish Times
Content Studio, Ireland



Anna Arvidsson, *Head of Bonnier News Brand Studio, part of Bonnier News Sales, Sweden*

Spend a day in the newsroom

“Recruit skills that are better than your own and dare to become an advisory partner. Don’t be afraid to tell the customer that the story they want to write won’t give them the same effects as the story YOU want to write. You know your readers, they don’t. To generate the best idea, we have different methods and workshops, sometimes together with the editorial department.

Practice on the editorial department’s gathering of insights and analyse and implement it so that your native product becomes true native. With that said, we believe in being data informed, not data driven.

Last but not least, spend a day in the newsroom. Gather insights, learn the editorial approach and implement on your commercial editorial, so that your native product becomes true native.”

Fact: Bonnier News Brand Studio was founded in 2013.

**Read the
full interview**



Anna Arvidsson,
Head of Bonnier News Brand
Studio, part of Bonnier News
Sales, Sweden



Atle Bersvendsen, *Head of Adresseavisen Brand Studio, Norway*

Get a dedicated sales force

“Though we use our existing sales staff for selling native advertising and content marketing, I do worry that it will be a challenge for them in the future to sell all the different commercial products that we are going to offer. My advice is to have a dedicated sales force if possible.

Regarding the ethical issues, it's of vital importance to maintain a good dialogue with the editorial side. I think it's an advantage that I'm a trained journalist and that's also a selling point when we contact clients. We are not copywriters. We are content producers with journalistic backgrounds who are working with angles, storytelling and case stories.

Fact: Adresseavisen Brand Studio was founded in 2016.

**Read the
full interview**



Atle Bersvendsen,
Head of Adresseavisen
Brand Studio, Norway



The important first meeting

“If there is one thing I have learned, that can really make a difference when working with native advertising, it is what I guess you would call “your first meeting content”.

I have had the pleasure of working with native advertising on both the corporate side and the media side. This has given me the unique experience of being in several pitching situations in the role of both ‘the media’ and ‘the one with the strategic need and the budget’ – aka the customer.

And what has become clear to me is that as media, the more you can be specific when it comes to a range of things, the bigger the chance of closing a campaign deal (and ending up with some native content that is actually really great). So my advice to any media having a first meeting with a potential customer (company) is the following:

- Always bring both a creative person and a salesperson. Make a clear agreement about who talks about what.
- Make sure to ask as much in advance about what the company would like to get out of native advertising. If you manage to get an answer, prepare some very specific ideas and show, on a slide, what they would actually look like in the editorial environment.

- Talking about being specific: be just as specific as you can! Don’t ask the customer “What do you think could be a great story to tell”, because they don’t always know. Ask about KPIs and then pitch in stories that could help reach them.
- Show loads of stuff that others did. Because as the ‘head of branding/marketing’ – whatever, it works to see that others did it and what they did. And it works well in kickstarting the story development. So make sure to ask some of your prior customers if you can use their stories and campaign performance (numbers!) as a case to show new customers.
- And just be aware everybody loves numbers. As a creative and a journalist it might drive you a little nuts sometimes -- but that’s just the name of the game. Find them, bring them and know what to say about them.”

Fact: Børsen Creative was founded in 2017



Stine Bjerre,
Head of Creative at
Børsen Creative, Denmark



Focus on the audience

“Content can be long, it can be short, it can be expensive, it can be cheap, it can be branded, it can be unbranded, it can be mass or it can be niche, it can be custom or it can be time-tested.

Content can be many things, but the only thing it must be is good. Focus on quality. Focus on the audience. Make the kind of content you'd want to spend time with. Otherwise, what's the point?

There is a rule that we have to relearn all the time. REMEMBER WHO THE CONTENT IS FOR. As marketers, we often project our own tastes onto the creative work or we become more focused on what the brand manager wants than we are on what the audience wants. It doesn't matter what we think about the content if no one's going to spend time with it, so spend more time listening to your audience than anyone else.”

Fact: Vox Creative was founded in 2014.

**Read the
full interview**



Armando Turco,
General Manager of Vox
Creative, Vox Media's branded
content studio, USA



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Kaveri Jain, *Then Head of HT Brand Studio and Digital Marketing Lead, part of Hindustan Times Media Group, India*

Hire young people from diverse backgrounds

“Treat your readers with respect. The reader has become smarter than before and that should be the key consideration while creating branded content.

Hire young people and from diverse backgrounds (especially for creative roles). I can't emphasise that enough. Their appetite for information and ability to think beyond the obvious is what a studio needs. And as digital natives, they understand the medium better.

Don't block or kill creativity by getting bogged down with the volume of briefs or partner expectations. There will come a time when you may have to turn someone down to ensure that quantity doesn't take precedence over quality.”

Fact: HT Brand Studio was founded in 2015

**Read the
full interview**



Kaveri Jain,
then Head of HT Brand Studio
and Digital Marketing Lead,
part of Hindustan Times
Media Group, India



Never stop learning

“Rather than focusing on mistakes, we always keep an important lesson in mind: Never stop learning. If you stop learning in this space, you will quickly be passed by. From content types to storytelling tactics and delivery mechanisms, there is always more to learn.

Also, don't open a coffee shop next to Starbucks. Know what you know and know what you don't know.”

Fact: The Foundry was founded in 2015

**Read the
full interview**



Christopher Hercik,
Chief Creative Officer at the
Foundry, Meredith Corporation
(then Time Inc.), USA



Start with the publisher

“Everything has to start with the publisher of your media company when you decide to create a content studio. We work in the area between the editorial and the commercial side, and you can never align their interest without the back-up of top-management. This is a company exercise that everybody has to take really seriously.

Besides this, you have to make sure that you convince the customers that it's in their best interest to not mislead the readers when it comes to native advertising — that would be the fastest way to ruin the trustworthiness of your publication.”

Fact: Content Connections is a semi-independent commercial publisher inside the company Mediahuis.

**Read the
full interview**



Thomas Buytaert,
Head of Editorial Project at
Content Connections, Belgium



Jukka Hurme, *then Creative Producer at Alma Media Solutions,
the native ad studio of Alma Media, Finland*

Say ‘no’ to clients

“Native advertising is a process of trial and error but, generally, it’s important to underline that native advertising is not just a new word for traditional advertising. It should be measured differently.

As media companies, we should probably tell the clients ‘no’ more often. We need to guide them about this new type of advertising and what it takes, but it’s a delicate matter to turn away clients who want to buy advertising.”

Fact: Alma Media Solutions was founded in 2014.

Read the
full interview



Jukka Hurme,
then Creative Producer at Alma
Media Solutions, the native ad
studio of Alma Media, Finland



Ronald Viin, *then Advertising Director at Ajakirkade Kirjastus AS, Estonia*

Give readers tools to solve issues

“Publishers have done advertorials since the 20th century. It’s basically just advertising in the form of an article. Native advertising, and especially content marketing, has to be something completely different.

It’s about raising awareness and giving the readers tools to solve issues. It’s not about promoting products. If publishers don’t keep that in mind, it’s just a matter of time before the value and price of native will be demolished.

And then, of course, you have to measure the effect of native advertising — otherwise, you will never convince advertisers to invest.”

Fact: The content studio was founded in 2016.

**Read the
full interview**



Ronald Viin,
then Advertising Director
at Ajakirkade Kirjastus AS,
Estonia



Annie Granatstein, *Head of WP BrandStudio at The Washington Post, USA*

Hire the right staff

“Look for ways to connect your studio with newsroom insights, innovations and technology.

You should hire staff who understand your publication’s DNA and you need to hire staff who understand how to effectively blend journalism and advertising.

Moreover, you need to always prioritise the story, which should be a marriage of a brand’s goals and your audience’s interests. And then tailor the content for each of the platforms your audience is on.”

Fact: The WP BrandStudio was founded in 2014.

**Read the
full interview**



Annie Granatstein,
Head of WP BrandStudio at
The Washington Post, USA



Christine Sandejas, *Group Publisher at Summit Media, the Philippines.*

Find the right business model

“I think it’s crucial to find the business model that fits your company’s goals and capabilities. Finding that formula requires continuous evaluation and iteration of team processes, the brand’s go-to market strategies, business models, and even organisational structures to ensure that you harness the emerging trends and dynamic algorithms of the digital marketing industry.

Liquidation or implementation while we educate our clients about native advertising is as important as closing the contracts. We have to ensure that concepts and headlines are data-informed to help convince clients to trust us.”

Fact: The brand studio, StoryLabs, was founded in 2015.

**Read the
full interview**



Christine Sandejas,
Group Publisher at Summit
Media, the Philippines



Build relationships and make a plan

“Relationships are critical. We are like an agency and if our clients don’t win, we don’t win. Building the relationship with our clients, understanding their needs and goals and collaborating with them is essential.

Some of our larger clients will call us to kick ideas around for some of their internal content projects that we’re not even involved in. That’s a level of trust that comes with repeated successful campaigns and relationship.

Make a plan that works for your company. All companies are different with different systems, processes and cultures. After about a month on the job, I made a list of the 33 things that needed to be done to create a successful content studio, from reporting to pricing to operations to resources to sales education.

It was our two-page roadmap to success. I’m satisfied with 27 of them. Still, have some work to do. So, I’d say learn from industry best practices but build a plan that plays to your organisation’s unique strengths.

It’s also tempting to use amplification to drive big page views to your branded content, but I’ve found that focusing on our audience and driving it to our branded content best serves the client. We do employ amplification, but it’s a small part of the equation. Quick and easy never works in life. I’d prefer to have a strong foundation to our program that isn’t reliant on paid efforts.”

Fact: The Business Journals Content Studio was founded in 2016.

**Read the
full interview**



Tom Needham,
Executive Director, Branded
Content at The Business
Journals, USA





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Have a team with diverse expertise

“Have a team that is diverse in its expertise and strengths. We have a sales and advertising expert on the team, a savvy account manager who helps us interface with our clients efficiently and effectively. We have an expert in content marketing, and one who holds up the design end, both in print and digital. I bring the scientific knowledge and the experience in science journalism. Together, we cover all the critical aspects of creating branded content.

The other thing is to make sure that the team has access to resources. We are so lucky to have access to C&EN’s resources, such as the fabulous and talented production and creative teams who work closely together with us to pull off C&EN BrandLab pieces. Finally, our bosses have been wonderful about giving us the room to experiment.

I was a journalist and a managing editor of a magazine before I became the executive editor of a native ad studio. Some people may see this career change as an abrupt shift. I certainly did at first, but now I’ve come to see it as a less drastic shift.

Yes, a native advertising studio tells stories on the behalf of paying clients. But the ultimate goal of native advertising and editorial is the same: To give readers a great story. Branded or not, a good story is a good story.

This means we must pay attention to the same details as journalists: narrative arc, plot, dialogue, and other parts that go into a story. As a native ad studio, we must heed the needs of our clients in creating branded-content pieces, but we must also think of our readers and how they experience the piece. A good story satisfies both the client and the readers.”

Fact: The C&EN BrandLab was founded in 2017.



Read the full interview

Rajendrani Mukhopadhyay,
Executive Editor at C&EN
BrandLab, USA



Richard Pattinson, *Senior Vice President at BBC StoryWorks, UK*

Think about what differentiates you

“Think about what it is that you can bring to the marketplace, which is not an uncrowded one. Think about what differentiates you from the competition.

And then I would say: Absolutely go for it! If you get it right, this is a great space to be in, and I’m as proud of the content that I’ve created in the last two years within BBC StoryWorks as I am with the editorial content that I’d done in my years before that.

Just understand what it is you are doing best and what it is that you can bring to the market. And really get the most out of those partnerships in terms of what your partners bring to it.

Also, truly engaging brand storytelling has an emotional impact on the audience, and this has a corresponding impact for the brand itself. Using data to understand this can have a valuable impact on driving campaign effectiveness.”

Fact: BBC StoryWorks was founded in 2015.

**Read the
full interview**



Richard Pattinson,
Senior Vice President at BBC
StoryWorks, UK



Tap into the news stream and the advertising agencies

“Keep an eye on the news stream to see where you can relate a brand with a certain news agenda. This way, you can create content that isn’t always generic and timeless, but instead timely and relevant right here and now.

Another important learning is to build relations, especially with the advertising agencies. They can be really great partners on a campaign as they have a good, natural eye for native, and they have a lot of resources you can use. This is especially an advantage if your team is small.

A few more learnings would be:

- Keep a strict separation between the editorial and the commercial side of your publication
- Focus more on time spent than just traffic. It’s all about making people engaged with the content.
- Make sure to disclose properly. If the content is good, people will read it even if it’s sponsored.”

Fact: Politiken started offering native advertising solutions in 2012.



Line Prasz,
Commercial Editor & Head of
Politiken Native, Denmark



Pete Wootton, *Managing Director of Digital at Dennis Publishing, UK*

Let the editorial team do native and find the right KPIs

“You get native advertising right by making sure that your normal editorial team work on the content. It’s quite controversial and I know there’s this idea of Church and State for a lot of publishers where they try and keep the commercial editorial team and the normal editorial team separate. But the way to produce the best possible quality content - particularly in the vertical markets we work in - is to get the people who normally write this stuff to do it for the commercial teams as well.

KPIs in native advertising also need a lot of thinking about. Clearly, normal KPIs are going to be an element of any sort of native campaign; CTRs, page views, view through rates of video, maybe some social metrics about social amplification.

But for big campaigns, we try and look at other metrics more aligned with the real purpose of the campaign. It should be about trying to make people feel differently about a brand. Just because somebody has consumed a video it doesn’t mean they feel differently about a brand.”

Fact: Dennis Publishing started offering native advertising in 2014.

Read the full interview



Pete Wootton,
Managing Director of Digital
at Dennis Publishing, UK



Lindsay Harrison, *Creative Content Lead for Mashable Brand X, USA*

Get out of your comfort zone

“Being nimble is critical, from brainstorming out of the box content executions to collaborating with other teams — from product to social to editorial — to come up with solutions that ensure we can execute the big ideas we’re pitching in a way that will seamlessly connect with Mashable’s audience of entertainment, culture and tech superfans.

It’s about getting comfortable outside your comfort zone, where you’re often coming up with creative ideas you’ve never tried before, but can nonetheless deliver because you’ve got insights to back them up and great teams to help bring the concepts to life.”

Fact: Mashable Brand X was launched in 2013.

**Read the
full interview**



Lindsay Harrison,
Creative Content Lead
for Mashable Brand X, USA



Camilla Kjems, *Editor in Chief at Femina, Aller Media, Denmark*

Convince clients to tell real stories

“The biggest challenge, when I work with brands, is that still a lot of brands don’t have the courage to go true native. They still want to have the logo be very dominant in the piece.

They want to tell specific things and sometimes we need to tell them, “Well, maybe it’s interesting for you that you produced your product in a very special place in Thailand, but the audience doesn’t care about that.”

So you have to get the advertiser to see that these kinds of stories are not interesting for the target group. They think it’s interesting but the audience doesn’t.

A part of the work is to convince and to inform the brand that we know which stories convince the user, or fascinate the user. They have to rely on us.

We always want what’s the best for the brand, but we know how to communicate. Sometimes it’s not the way that they think it should be, so we have to make them trust us that we make the best solutions, the most capturing solutions for the users.”

Fact: Femina started doing native advertising in 2014.

**Read the
full interview**



Camilla Kjems,
Editor in Chief at Femina,
Aller Media, Denmark



Hugo McCafferty, *Native Editor at Storyplus at Independent News & Media, Ireland*

Care for native as you care for editorial

“The quality of the people and the talent will inform the quality of your work, which brands will react to. Make sure that you take the same care for native advertising as for editorial content.

Our team consists of a core team of three managers, three designers, two videographers and all in all 10-12 freelancers. The team is growing because of the demand. It’s impossible to speak of an ideal size, but I think it’s important to have a team with different strengths and skills.”

Fact: StoryPlus was launched in 2015.

Read the
full interview



Hugo McCafferty,
Native Editor at Storyplus
at Independent News
& Media, Ireland



Kim Robertz, *Head of Sales and Native Advertising, Ebner Media Group, Germany*

Make the editorial team and the sales team collaborate

“There has to be a strong collaboration between the editorial team and the sales team. Because when you are talking about native advertising, you are talking about storytelling and as a publisher it is our everyday business to tell the most relevant and trustful stories. The same goes for native advertising, we have to tell great stories.

If the sales team doesn't understand the true asset of good content and what native and relevant content is about, and if they don't know the importance of dwelling times, then they will never be in the position to sell native right.

And the other way around. The editorial team needs to gain insights into the everyday sales work, which is about hard figures, money, and convincing brands and advertising partners to spend their money on our platforms instead of others.

Therefore, it's best to combine the two worlds and to educate them. They need to get insights into each other's world, that's when you come up with ideas that will go crazy on the market.

At Ebner, we set up an internal company blog where we share best practices and educate staff on our strategy. We also set up a webinar academy from employees to employees where we're communicating the best practices and learnings. It's all about education, both when it comes to your internal staff but also when it comes to the brands you're working with.”

Fact: Ebner Media Group started doing native in 2016.

Read the full interview



Kim Robertz,
Head of Sales and Native Advertising, Ebner Media Group, Germany



Luigi Santini, *Head of Native Advertising at RCS Mediagroup, Italy*

Aim for quality

“For the survival of a Content Studio it’s important that staff growth goes hand in hand with increased revenues.

The right compromise between internal structure and external resources must be found. It’s important to have, internally, the creative direction and the supervision on content quality and, externally, choose the most suitable resources for the realisation of a specific piece of content. In this way it is possible to achieve greater freshness and variety of treatment, while reducing the fixed costs.

For the survival of native advertising, as an additional source of revenue for publishers, it is important to focus on quality. This means producing native advertising content of the same level, or higher, than the editorial one. Bad content is a waste of time for readers and a missed opportunity for publishers and brands.”

Fact: The RCS Studio was founded in 2015.

**Read the
full interview**



Luigi Santini,
Head of Native Advertising
at RCS Mediagroup, Italy



Raquel Bubar, *T Brand Studio, New York Times, UK*

Take risks

“It’s easy to fall into a place where you churn out content quickly that a brand asks for in their RFP, but it’s much harder to advise your clients on the right story to tell – whether or not it fits with their original brief. We are constantly pushing brands to think beyond their primary communication materials and pursue content that will truly resonate with their target audience.

It’s all about getting the client to talk about a story that’s greater than themselves. Beyond their products or services. How can we make them think about their larger goals and values that impact society? It can be risky, but that’s where the real story lies.”

Fact: T Brand Studio was founded in 2014.

**Read the
full interview**



Raquel Bubar,
T Brand Studio, New York
Times, UK



Be honest and brave

“It’s very important to be honest with the client before making a campaign. Both in terms of KPIs and the content itself. You have to be brave enough to tell the client if something is or isn’t a good idea and to tell them how something can become a great idea.

Therefore, you have to educate the brand, you have to be brave, and you have to build some courage at the brand. You have to convince them to let go a little, so they won’t be so focused on the brand, but more focused on telling great stories.”

Fact: Benjamin Native was founded in 2017.

**Read the
full interview**



Christel Rex,
Bureau Chief,
Benjamin Native,
Denmark



Maria Rossen,
Creative Director,
Benjamin Native,
Denmark





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