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Good native advertising isn't a secret

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Abstract   In this article, we develop an understanding of native advertising, a growing new form of online advertising, which we define as desired marketing communications that appear in-stream. Current forms of native advertising can be considered in terms of their secrecy: how aware a consumer is of a native advertisement's source and intent. Based on existing research, we argue that less secretive native advertising will be more successful in the long run, and illustrate this using several cases. Finally, we detail important considerations for those marketers looking to capitalize on native advertising.
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1. Going native: Ads aren't acting like ads anymore

Although not well understood, an important new form of online advertising attracting significant attention amongst practitioners has become known as 'native advertising.' The Interactive Advertising Bureau commissioned an exploratory report on native advertising (IAB, 2013), and leading media news sites such as Mashable (n.d.) and AdWeek (n.d.) feature dedicated pages on the topic. *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, and *The Huffington Post* all have established in-house studios devoted to developing native advertising content (Moses, 2014). Moreover, spending on native advertising in the U.S. is projected to hit $8.8 billion in 2018 (Sebastian, 2014).

While the advertising industry is embracing native advertising, it is also attracting its share of critics, many of whom view it as masking source attribution and deceiving consumers (Joel, 2013; Vega, 2013; Wasserman, 2013) by making the source of the message ambiguous or secret. In response to this source ambiguity and supposed secrecy, Google engineer Ian Webster wrote a software program that automatically identifies and labels what he believes are examples of native advertising (Perlberg, 2014). Growth in native advertising has aroused the interest of the Federal Trade Commission (2013a, b), which has responded by revising online disclosure guidelines as well as by conducting a workshop. In sum, there is growing tension between proponents of native advertisers and those who represent the interests of consumers. In particular, critics view keeping the true nature of an ad secret as a failure and not an advantageous or attractive feature, as can sometimes be the case in marketing (Hannah, Parent, Pitt, & Berthon, 2014).

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Given the growth and the opportunities this new format represents for brand-consumer communications, one would expect a clear understanding of native advertising to have emerged. This is not the case. While the term 'native advertising' is being used to describe various types of online marketing communications, there is little agreement on the term's definition or meaning. Repeated calls have been made for a clearer understanding of native advertising in order to facilitate reporting, formulate strategies, conduct research, and address growing ethical concerns (Borst, 2013; Federal Trade Commission, 2013b; IAB, 2013; Joel, 2013; Rothenberg, 2013; Vega, 2013). The lack of a clear definition "has caused confusion in the marketplace leading the industry to exert considerable time and energy debating whether or not various ad units are native rather than focusing on higher level discussions such as effectiveness and disclosure" (IAB, 2013, p. 2). In addition, without clear understanding of native advertising, providing managerially relevant advice and insight is difficult.

Our purpose is to clarify understanding of native advertising and its associated best practices. We define native advertising as desired marketing communications that appear in-stream. This is a unique form of online advertising in which (1) the consumer *gives permission* to the advertiser to communicate with them (i.e., the communication is desired) and (2) the ad format *minimizes disruption* to the user experience in which it is placed (i.e., it is in-stream).

2. What is native advertising?

At a general level, native advertising is a term used to describe a spectrum of new online advertising forms that share a focus on minimizing disruption to a consumer's online experience by appearing in-stream. One way disruption can be reduced is by optimizing placement to increase relevance for viewers. Another means of reducing viewer disruption is by crafting native advertisements that blend in with the surrounding content. This second approach is most similar to an advertising type commonly referred to as an advertorial. Advertorials are advertisements that are created to mirror surrounding content such that consumers view the advertorial not necessarily as an ad, but instead as they would the content the advertorial hopes to emulate (Kim, Pasadeos, & Barban, 2001).

The term native advertising likely stems from the convergence of advertorial concepts and the social media environment. Particularly during the advent and growth of social media, social media environments provided brands with the potential to develop a vast audience of consumers to message, all at a minimal cost. The catch is that consumers could choose to follow (or subscribe to) brands on social media as easily as they could also choose to unfollow (or unsubscribe) them. As a result, it was quickly discovered that overt sales and promotional messages were generally not the types of messages consumers wanted to view. As Jason Hill, GE's global head of media strategy, states: "Traditional digital advertising has become wallpaper. It doesn't improve anyone's experience on a site and readers, myself included, pretty much look past it" (Sebastian, 2014). Brands learned to adopt a subtler approach on social media, instead selecting more conversational and playful messaging that would not annoy consumers to the point of unfollowing or unsubscribing from a brand's social media presence. The essence of this approach—non-disruptive and invited brand content—can be seen as the very first form of native advertising.

While it would appear the initial aim of native advertising—that is, minimizing the annoyance of brand content on social media so as to maintain followers—is earnest, native advertising has since evolved to include other realms where consumers have little to no recourse should they disapprove of it. These include news sites such as *The New York Times* and websites such as BuzzFeed, the entire business model of which rests on paid content (Moses, 2014). On these sites, consumers are often unaware of a 'sneaky' secret: the content they are viewing is either created by, or at the behest of, an advertiser (Lazauskas, 2014).

A feature common to all forms of native advertising is the format of the communication. Some online marketing communications attempt to gain attention by standing out from the environment or the editorial content, in essence disrupting the consumer's online experience. Banner ads, for example, often try to attract consumers' attention via placement (e.g., top of the page) and animation. Such ads are interruptive, distracting, and largely unwanted. In contrast, native advertising formats are created to be consistent with the online experience a consumer is enjoying. When in this format, marketing communications are virtually indistinguishable from other online material, and are therefore non-disruptive to the user's online experience. Like many a good secret, the secret behind really good native advertising is that no one is really aware of it. Non-disruptive ads are concordant and consistent with a user's experience and in some cases are actually desired.

Figure 1. Consumer trust in forms of advertising
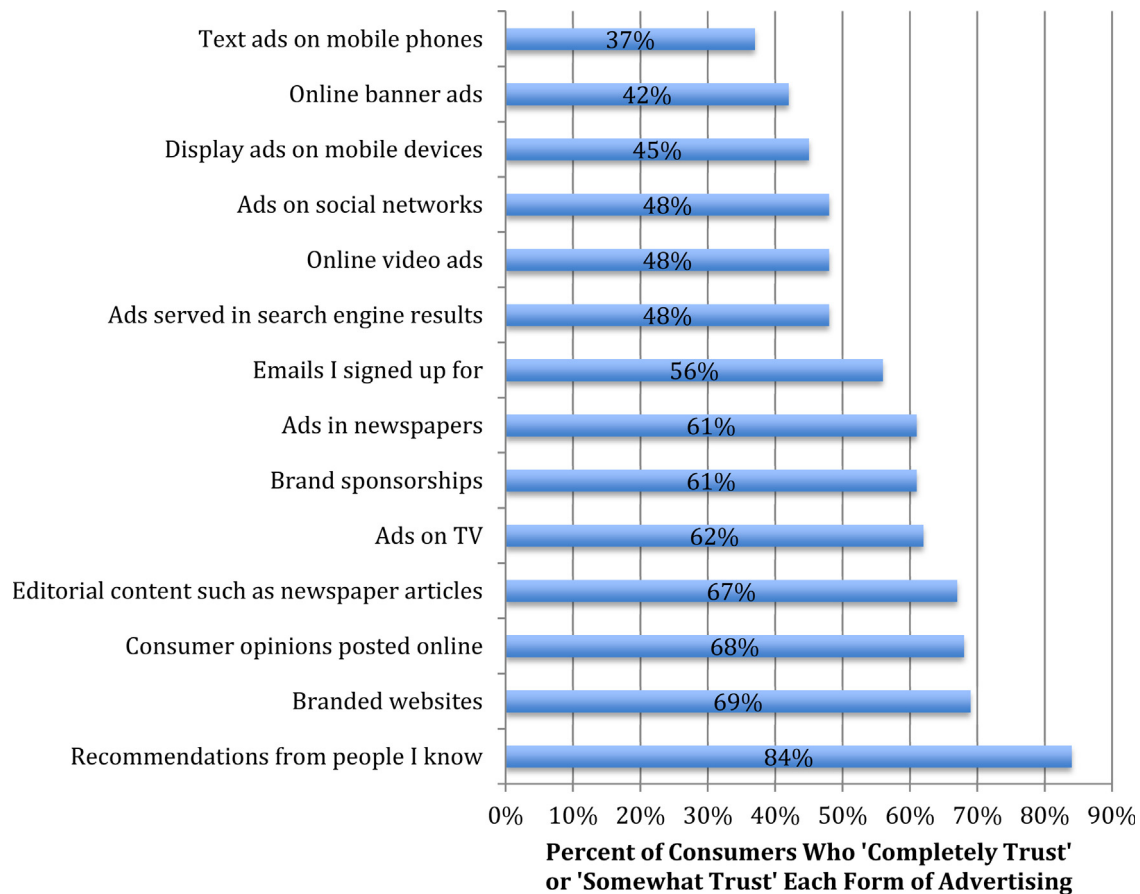
Source: Nielsen's 2013 *Global Survey of Trust in Advertising* (http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/newswire/2013/under-the-influence-consumer-trust-in-advertising.html)

The secrecy of a native advertisement can be considered in terms of both source disclosure and consumer invitation. Some native advertisements provide minimal or no source disclosure to consumers, possibly tricking consumers into viewing content that they believe is from a different source (e.g., from the publishers of the website). Or, such secrecy may simply mean that consumers are unaware what they are reading is a form of paid advertising. The lack of disclosure masks the advertiser's true intent to persuade and signals a desire to take advantage of consumers' higher levels of trust in non-advertising or editorial content (see Figure 1). Clearly, native advertisements that provide transparent source disclosure are less secretive than those that do not.

The secrecy of native advertisements can also be considered in terms of whether they are invited or uninvited on the part of consumers. Uninvited native advertisements appear outside of their typical location and without the consumer's permission to do so. Conversely, invited native advertisements

place control of appearance within the hands of consumers and provide clear means to rescind the invitation. Inviting refers to a consumer consenting, either explicitly or implicitly, to receiving communications from a brand. Explicit inviting refers to instances where a consumer has actively chosen to receive brand communications. This might be by friending, following, liking, or becoming a fan of a brand's social media presence or otherwise opting-in to receiving brand communications. Implicit inviting refers to situations where a consumer has not actively given a brand permission to appear in their feed, but a connection (e.g., a friend) of the consumer has. An implicit invitation is a function of the structure of social networks and occurs due to the implied trust consumers in these networks have with their connections. As a result, if a consumer's friend likes or comments on a posting by a restaurant, that posting will then be carried through to the consumer. Such communication has been found to be more effective than paid advertisements (Khang, Ki, & Ye, 2012). Regardless of whether consumers

give implicit or explicit invitation to a native advertisement, the ad is not secretive.

To summarize: While native advertising seeks to be non-disruptive to the consumer experience, it can vary in its degree of secrecy, assessed in terms of both source disclosure and consumer invitation. Fully disclosed and open native advertising has both clear source disclosure and is invited by consumers. Moderately secretive native ads can have either clear source disclosure or are invited by consumers, but not both. When done well, moderately secretive ads may tempt and intrigue consumers into investigating the ad further without producing negative effects. Highly secretive native ads have minimal or no source disclosure and are also uninvited by consumers. Higher levels of secrecy are likely to cause consumer deception, tricking consumers into false beliefs about the native ads, as well as either confusion or anger if the true intent of the content is realized (Lazauskas, 2014; Sebastian, 2014). In the next section we provide further explanation for this effect before turning to illustrate these outcomes through several cases.

3. No secrets: Good native advertising has nothing to hide

Native advertising exists along a spectrum, with more secretive forms lacking source attribution and/or consumer invitation. The best forms of native advertising are both invited by consumers and transparent about the source. When marketers are not transparent and consumers discover the secret source for themselves, they can become quite unhappy with the message and/or the media. While research on native advertising is still in its infancy, findings from the limited number of industry studies suggest concerns with native advertising's more secretive forms (Sebastian, 2014).

Industry research by the Interactive Advertising Bureau (Mane & Rubel, 2014) has explored consumer perceptions of in-feed sponsored content, a type of native advertising, and has found that current source disclosures are lacking and that consumers are not always able to readily discern native advertising content from traditional news content. Only 38% of respondents felt native advertising added value to their experience of browsing a website, bringing into question the impact native advertising may have on host sites.

A study by Contently (Lazauskas, 2014) found that 59% of respondents view news sites with sponsored content as less credible and 67% of respondents have felt deceived after discovering an article was sponsored by a brand. Given that consumers

have negative attitudes toward being deceived by such ads, these findings call into question the effectiveness of highly secretive native advertisements.

Overall, current research on native advertising suggests that consumers are not always aware of native advertising, despite disclosures. It is likely that lack of awareness on the part of consumers is driving native advertising's stronger performance as compared to display or banner advertising. For this reason, marketers may be motivated to keep native advertising secret, and to keep disclosures at a minimum. Such a strategy only works for those consumers who do not discover the true source and nature of a native advertisement; those consumers who become aware that content is actually advertising are likely to feel deceived. Misleading consumers is unlikely to be a successful long-term strategy for marketers or publishers.

At its core, good native advertising seems to be a delicate balance between providing consumers with clear source disclosure and offering content that meshes with and provides value similar to the context in which it is placed. In the next section we briefly detail several cases of native advertising, of differential secrecy and success.

4. Secretive vs. non-secretive native advertising: Three cases

4.1. Case #1: *The Atlantic* and Scientology—Strong secrecy

On January 14, 2013, *The Atlantic* magazine published an article on the Church of Scientology paid for by the same organization (Wemple, 2013). The only indication that the article was not editorial in nature was a small yellow banner labeling it as 'Sponsor Content.'

Backlash toward the article grew almost immediately, and the article was taken down less than 12 hours after it was posted (Wemple, 2013). The controversy surrounding *The Atlantic*'s Scientology advertisement is notable since it was one of the first instances of a more traditional news organization receiving a negative reaction for engaging in native advertising.

This case illustrates an example of strong secrecy in a native advertisement. While a disclosure was made, it was not conspicuous enough. Reactions would not have been so negative had readers been fully aware that the article was, in reality, an advertisement. Secrecy surrounding the source of this article was therefore its downfall.

4.2. Case #2: Reddit and Archer—Moderate secrecy

To promote the fifth season of the FX network's edgy animated television program *Archer,* the show used a similarly edgy venue: an online forum for sharing nude photos. Animated 'photos' featuring the show's characters in the buff were posted to r/GoneWild, a subforum of Reddit. The ads featured captions such as ''First time posting here, pretty nervous. . .'' along with creative usernames such as ''WamBamThankyaPam'' (Beltrone, 2014). The posts elicited a positive response from forum users and show viewers alike, many of whom are young, active users of social media (Feloni, 2014).

Consumers likely viewed the posts with a suspicion they were advertisements and were adequately intrigued enough to investigate them further. Upon full examination of the ads, it is highly unlikely that viewers would construe the posts as anything but ads. In this instance, the marketer was able to finesse secrecy in such a way as to intrigue and tantalize, but not to deceive. The positive response received was likely due to several factors. First, the approach was novel, so it likely benefited from viewer intrigue. Second, the posts were creative and revealed an underlying fragility to the show's characters. Finally, whoever constructed the ads paid careful attention to the style and tone of the forum, creating posts that would fit in with the surrounding content and respect users' digital space. In this case, a moderate amount of secrecy (implied source disclosure) did not harm viewers' attitudes about the message.

4.3. Case #3: Oreo on Facebook and Twitter—No secrecy

In our final case, we find that creativity, transparency, and a brand personality can lead to a classic brand developing a significant online following. Oreo created the highly successful 'Daily Twist' series whereby 100 different pieces of content were generated over a span of 100 days in order to celebrate the Oreo cookie's 100th birthday (Sacks, 2014). The campaign forced the brand's marketers to be agile, developing fresh content daily in an effort to stay relevant and resonate with followers. This spurred curiosity amongst consumers eager to see the next creation, resulting in Oreo building the fourth largest fan base amongst brands on Facebook (Socialbakers, 2015). Oreo illustrates the least secret form of native advertising. The content itself is readily understood to be an advertisement and consumers are able to opt in and out of Oreo's fan base at will. Oreo has succeeded not by tricking consumers into viewing its content, but instead by creating posts that are transparent, desired, and relevant.

5. What does native advertising mean for marketers?

Native advertisers must choose between an advertising model that is based on potentially deceiving consumers into viewing content or one in which consumer freedom and autonomy are respected. While secrecy may work in the short term, it is unlikely to be rewarded in the long term by consumers who feel hoodwinked. Marketers are urged to recognize that the Internet not only gives consumers the choice of what content they want to consume, but also the choice of what advertising they want to view and where they would like to see it.

At a very basic level, successful implementation of native advertising provides a firm with an interested group of online consumers that may be expensive or otherwise difficult to reach. As a result of the need to maintain an audience, firms are now forced to produce content that goes beyond advertisements. Just as a magazine or television channel intersperses editorial content with advertisements to create an overall package worth consuming, native advertisers are similarly being forced to develop a mixture of content worth following. In the ensuing subsections, we detail a series of considerations for marketers who seek to leverage native advertising.

5.1. Craft native communications with the 'Unlike' button in mind

In the traditional advertising model, consumers have little say in what ads they receive; the decision resides entirely with advertisers and media platform managers. Nonsecretive native advertising alters the power balance by offering consumers greater control over which brands they communicate with and on which social network platform they want the communications to take place. Consumers can choose, at any point, to unlike a brand. Native advertising success is limited by what consumers will tolerate seeing in their feeds. Providing communications that deceive or annoy will change consumers' affective reaction to the ad. Pushing sales promotions too often? Unfriended. Posting material that is irrelevant to a consumer? Unfriended. Content that's boring or repetitive? Unfriended. Simply posting too often? Unfriended.

Brands can no longer simply pay their way into commanding consumer attention. Rather, native

advertisers need to constantly earn the right to consumers' attention by continually offering interesting and relevant content.

5.2. Seek to connect rather than deceive

Recognizing the importance of not interrupting the online experience of consumers, marketers are increasingly creating native advertising content that mimics the style of its context and which becomes virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding content. These efforts at blurring the boundary between advertising and non-advertising content are often viewed by the general public with suspicion: consumers and critics see these types of ads as no more than thinly veiled attempts at deception (Lazauskas, 2014; Wasserman, 2013). While such practices may boost impressions in the short term, when discovered by consumers, they ultimately serve to erode trust in the brand and publisher alike.

Well-executed native advertising is antithetical to the idea of deception. By explicitly obtaining consumer permission to be advertised to or by clearly identifying to consumers its source and nature, native advertising is respectful while also being playful. This clarity and openness gives consumers control over the interaction, speaks volumes about the intention of the advertised brand, and lays the foundation for a trusting relationship. This is especially important on social networks, where transparency and free exchange of information reign supreme.

5.3. Keep in mind the friends a brand has yet to make

Consumer permission comes in two forms. Explicit permission stems from those consumers who have opted in to native communications by directly liking the brand, explicitly giving permission for the brand's content to be a part of their feed. It is a natural inclination to want to focus attention on this group. And yet they are only one small set of the brand's potential online audience.

Implicit permission lies in all of the friends of a brand's current followers. This group is, in many cases, several hundred times larger than a brand's fan base. Each person in this extended group has given implicit permission to receive brand messages when their friends engage with the brand's content in some way (e.g., through a like, a comment, a retweet). This puts the onus on brands to create content that consumers deem compelling enough to engage with. Effective native advertising beckons consumers to engage with it so as to share it with their networks, thus amplifying the reach of a brand's content.

5.4. Be nice, on average

Consumers evaluate the totality of costs and benefits that a brand's content offers them. Brands remain a part of the consumer's feed as long as consumers perceive the overall utility of a brand's postings to be positive, such that the positive ads reinforce their positive affective states and outweigh any postings that are an annoyance. From a purely utilitarian perspective, any extra effort spent creating and posting positive content beyond what is necessary to keep fans is wasted. For every couple of lighthearted positive mood-inducing posts, one with a more direct sales effort can be inserted. The exact ratio will depend on many factors, such as brand loyalty, product category, the consumer's motivation for liking the brand, and the target segment. Fine-tuning this balance between consumer goodwill and driving sales will be one of the key challenges facing native advertisers.

5.5. Since you're being treated like a friend, act like one

Native advertising represents the radical blending of brand and personal content in a single viewing experience. In many ways, native advertising represents the ultimate form of a consumer-brand relationship, with a consumer putting brand communications on equal footing with communication from friends. Since brands are now sharing experiences with consumers' friends, they too must act like friends. With some native advertising, consumers actively choose to connect with and follow a brand. They look forward to receiving updates from that brand. And they want to hear back from the brand. Brands that treat social media and social networks as simply an extension of their other advertising formats are not just missing out on a feature set of social media; rather, they are completely missing the point of the entire platform. With native advertising, a brand individually connects with each consumer, not a mass audience.

5.6. Being in on the secret or part of the inner circle doesn't mean receiving undivided attention

The rich and varied content environment in which native advertising is embedded means that brands face strong competition—content not only from rival brands, but also from consumers' friends who are each sharing a constant stream of photos

and updates. Uninteresting and disengaging ads will easily be drowned out in this cacophony of entertainment. Advertisers need to see themselves as more than just marketers of a particular brand: they are content providers that compete in a crowded marketplace. To create interesting, relevant, and engaging content, they first need to understand the different types of content people consume on various social network platforms, what value they derive from them, and their motivations for wanting to see branded content.

5.7. Your brand's personality is its invitation

Consumers follow brands that they believe will make a positive contribution toward the atmosphere of their social media presence. Brands that have a positive personality and are not afraid to engage in appropriate ways will be invited, and invited back. Have something to say. Ask questions. Respond. Brands must remember, however, to walk the fine line between being entertaining and being embarrassing. Brands should keep in mind that the party isn't all about them. Conversations can't always be about one individual: they involve give and take, coupled with genuine interest in the other party. Brands that can create and maintain positive moods for their 'hosts' and guests can hope to be invited back again and again.

5.8. You can't be relevant to everyone, so segment

Consumers extend native advertising invitations based on their interest in the brand, on the presumption that appropriate and relevant content will continue to be supplied. The ability to serve relevant content depends on the group of consumers that are members of a brand's social presence. The more similar members of a group are in some way, the easier it is for a brand to serve relevant and engaging content. If a group instead contains members who are interested in receiving vastly different types of content, the ability of that social media presence to hold their collective attention is weak.

An informed native advertising strategy involves careful segmentation of online consumers in terms of the types of content they wish to receive from a brand. Separate online presences should then be established to serve each segment. This approach results in consumers receiving a more relevant stream of information from the brand, thus maximizing the likelihood they'll choose to stay connected. Nike understands this principle, offering dozens of online presences for consumers to connect with. These include everything from an umbrella presence for the entire Nike brand, to sports-specific presences such as Nike Basketball and Nike Skateboarding, to country- and product-specific presences such as Nike Running France and Nike+ FuelBand. These different pages allow Nike to precisely map brand content to each segment.

6. Native advertising is here to stay

In this article we built understanding of native advertising by exploring existing research and illustrative case studies demonstrating varying degrees of secrecy. Native advertising represents desired marketing communications that appear in-stream. It is a distinct form of online advertising that is both permission- or disclosure-based and is non-disruptive to a consumer's experience. Effective native advertising does not principally rely on secrecy or deception.

As consumers have shifted their content consumption to online mediums, marketers have been largely unable to duplicate their previous success with offline advertising. The advent of native advertising provides brands with a means to serve relevant and desired information to a broad, receptive audience. Formulating a coherent native advertising strategy and nurturing native audiences is critical to the success of any brand competing for online attention. Marketers that rely on deceiving consumers may see short-term benefits, but are unlikely to be rewarded with lasting consumer relationships. Those which instead adopt permission-based and non-disruptive models may witness a qualitative strengthening of the relationships that consumers have with their brands. Those brands that are able to fulfill consumer needs without reliance on secrets will be rewarded with long-term loyalty.

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