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How Canadian Art expanded the power of niche to build its audience

• **Jessica Patterson**

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 [@jesspatterson](#)



Despite the challenges magazines face today, one Canadian magazine has rediscovered the power of being a niche publication.

In late 2015, Canada's leading art magazine **Canadian Art**, changed their approach to audience and editorial, and reassessed processes and analytics underlying their efforts, according to **Leah Sandals**, managing online editor at Canadian Art.



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Audience appeal

“We knew exhibition reviews were the stock in trade of the art field in terms of coverage. It’s been that way for decades,” she explained.

Their audience wanted to read those types of content in their magazine in print, but not online. At the same time they wanted the things that online did well - news, explainers, lists, video and audio.

Advantages of being a niche magazine meant Canadian Art knew its audience and history of its field better than more mainstream media, and the existing audience was highly engaged.

But, they discovered the language they used was full of jargon only accessible to an insider audience, the formats and approaches they used were somewhat stale and not prioritized for the online environment.

“I think a lot of niche media whether they’re covering construction or the art industry or what have you, there are tropes you might be used to slotting your coverage into. In art, it’s the exhibition review,” Sandals said.

So, they dug deeper into niche content in new ways. They applied what Sandals called ‘mainstream media’ strategies to better serve their niche audience online and they brought their niche knowledge to a wider audience. And in doing so, they found more readers in the process.

NEWS



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BY CÉCILIE MORGAN-FEIR AND LEAH SANDALS



Experimentation

In 2016, Canadian Art embarked on a strategy to look at how social and political issues were playing out

within their niche, to focus on news, in formats and on platforms their readers wanted content on, Sandals said.

“We started to experiment with the basic mainstream media strategy focusing on news and think pieces, video, things that do best online, also looked how can we use the deep expertise and rich creativity in the art field and highlight the way it links to very current social and political issues,” she said.

Publishing news daily gave Canadian Art the opportunity to reflect shifts that happen quickly in culture.

Our approach: How about letting print do what print does best, and web do what web does best? And being open to crossovers in between?

Using in-depth knowledge of their niche; adding new voices

One advantage Canadian Art had as a niche publication, was an in-depth knowledge of the field and exclusive access to sources that mainstream media sources may not have had. “It was about niche media using their depth of sources and their depth of knowledge to speak to wider political issues,” Sandals said. “It can be a really effective strategy.”

They made sure to provide news reportage that their niche audience needed but couldn’t consistently find anywhere else — especially where funding and relevant policy changes were concerned.

Another strategy that worked for Canadian Art to better serve their audience was following the funding in their niche, Sandals said. This helped their audience better parse policy and funding changes in the industry.

“One of the big stories we’ve done in recent years (and continue to do) is an article right away after the Federal budget comes out, a list of things artists and art organisations need to know about the budget, which is a huge omnibus document which is extremely difficult to parse,” Sandals said. “So, that’s a kind of service we as an art niche can provide, to the audience what the need-to-know material is, that’s really high-value information for people in your niche.”

They brought on a variety of new voices to their website and looked into new editorial formats. Canadian Art began embracing thorny issues and the think piece, to open a dialogue about current events and social and political issues.

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3:46

The other part of Canadian Art's process was to bring the publication's depth of knowledge in their niche to a wider audience. The strategy here looked for experts in the field.

"Find experts who can also bring knowledge to a wider audience, people who can connect with sources to reflect on the way politics, the way experts in your field can say things or shed new light on politics that people outside of your niche are experiencing," Sandals said.

Discovering an expert in the field who is a great writer, or is willing to be edited, to do a column about their research in progress. "There are so many people doing really interesting research, but so often that research is only published in academic journals that have small audiences and the language in them is extremely restrictive to who can understand them," Sandals said.

For Canadian Art, the expert was **Richard William Hill, the Canada Research Chair of Indigenous Art at Emily Carr University of Art and Design**, who was working on a book about Indigenous art of the 1980 & 1990s. "We were lucky to connect to Richard William Hill, who blogged about his research in progress. It

has also allowed him to reach a much wider audience, people who can help with his research," Sandals said.



Was Indigenous Art Better in the 1980s and Early '90s?



This type of approach may allow you, as a publication, to cultivate new readers or experience audience growth, Sandals explained. “It’s about thinking a bit more widely, thinking beyond your usual boundaries of your niche, into how your realm crosses over into political and social issues that are happening in your nation or beyond your nation,” she said.

Canadian Art also reached a wider audience by delving deeper into their content by looking at ways **indigenous artists were satirising or playing with the logo** of a particular baseball team, she explained, adding that the matter is currently in front of a human rights tribunal in Ontario. “But we were able to show how artists have been working with that particular theme for a while.”

Canadian Art also looked at how their field connects to politics. One example comes from the Federal sphere in Canada, as Sandals outlined.

“Our managing editor Rosie Prata noticed a few years ago that Justin Trudeau had a tattoo that was actually appropriated from an artwork by Haida artist Robert Davidson,” Sandals said. “For one of our issues, she reached out to the artist and did **a kind of as-told-to story about how the artist feels** about his artwork being on the arm of the Prime Minister, and without explicit permission. And that was definitely one of the most popular stories on our website last year.”

FEATURES

Justin Trudeau's Tattoo: First Nations

Art on the PM

BY [unreadable]

BY [unreadable]



Last but not least, they also changed the language they were using. “Consciously change the language you’re using,” Sandals said, “and consciously choose to help readers who may be new to the material and give them entry points is important.”

Best practices

- Offer a cleanly designed, reliable, and simple newsletter — and promote it accordingly.
- Also cultivate social media
- Be willing to experiment, for good or ill
- Pay attention to your analytics—and the person who does your analytics
- Consider partnering with foundations or sponsors—when it makes sense—to delve deeper into your niche and find more readers
- Embrace different voices and points of view—a website, because it tends to be experienced in a fragmented way, does not have as much pressure to be uniform in tone as a print issue might.

Results

Canadian Art has gotten a lot of positive feedback in their quest to widen their audience, Sandals said. “Our newsletter subscriptions have gone up, our Facebook following, our Twitter and Instagram followings, all

have gone up. Pageviews have also gone up.”

The niche publication was also recognised at the Canadian Digital Publishing Awards, winning gold for general excellence in Digital Publishing: small publications category.

“We’ve never received an award of that stature before,” Sandals said. “I think that was strong recognition that we are reaching a wider audience. People not just in the arts sphere, but in a wider... sphere are finding our stories helpful and useful, thought-provoking and interesting.”

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