Key Considerations:

Digital Product Launch

Introduction

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To uncover best practices as they relate to digital content creation, curation, distribution, and product launch, BSD hosted a convening at Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center, from May 10–May 14, 2016. This convening was comprised of experts across digital publishing, online community management, and product development.

This report provides an overview of the guiding principles specific to launching a new digital product, creating and curating digital content, branding, and engaging an advisory board that were surfaced during the convening. »
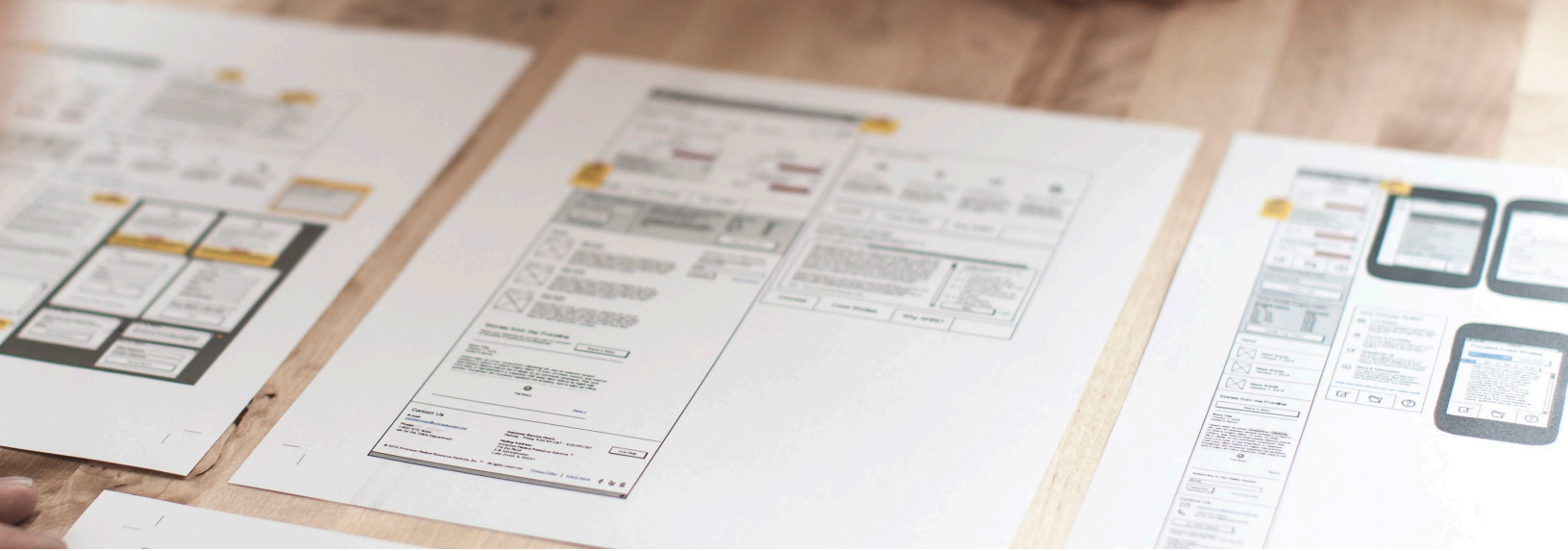
Product Launch

Key Considerations

Bellagio attendees noted the following important, overarching considerations when launching a new digital product.

Prioritize specific functions and features for launch. When launching something brand new, consider what your overarching goals and value proposition are for the user. These should guide which features and functions you need for launch, versus those that are nice to have, as well as which you might save for later (i.e., year 2 and beyond).

Case in point: Nieman Journalism Lab tested content through existing social channels and an email newsletter to see what was resonating pre-launch and then used that information to determine which content to feature.

Seed the community. When launching a product with a community or networking component it's wise to leverage existing networks to join, participate in, and promote the product. This can be partner sites, current or past employees, and/or friends and family, etc.

Eliminate barriers to entry. While a more detailed sign up process can be a useful tool for collecting information about users, especially with regard to their contact and content preferences, this type of sign up process can also frustrate users and inhibit them from actually interacting with the product as intended.

To that end, attendees recommended collecting the minimal amount of information to ensure an experience feels personalized and provides a rich "logged out" experience. As traffic increases over time, behavioral data–gleaned through site analytics–may be used to help further implicitly

personalize the experience in lieu of users specifying their preferences.

How content is organized is just as important as the content itself. Topics or filters that do not feel intuitive or useful for users can keep them from engaging with the right content. Robust user testing prior to launch, as well as monitoring and reporting on user behavior post launch, can help to inform the product's taxonomy and ensure a positive user experience.

Generate buzz. There are many different ways to generate excitement for a new product, largely dependent on your budget and channel preferences of the target audience(s). Considerations like who your audience pays attention to, where they already spend time online, and how the product will fit into their day-to-day are all important.

Hooking users with a new or especially engaging technology like a stand out app or mobile functionality (e.g., text, GPS, camera, hand/finger gestures, etc.) may also serve to build buzz and excitement around a new product.

Launch Strategy
At launch, products are often most concerned with acquiring new users, which is predicated on generating awareness for the

product. Setting clear targets for who and how many when it comes to user acquisition is an important first step. From there, you can develop a successful channel strategy, considering integration across digital - including social media, search, email, and any owned channels – as well as traditional marketing – including PR, events, and paid advertising (should your budget allow).

Within each of these channels, you'll also want to consider cadence; for example, what needs to happen pre-launch, during launch, and post-launch and the specific tactics associated with each phase of launch. These tactics may be channel-specific or multi-channel.

Case Example: Nearcircles
Nearcircles is a social app for neighborhoods to help them solve local challenges. More specifically, Nearcircles allows users to do the following:

· Raise a local issue in places with broken government/services

· Meet with other immigrants

· Form a Neighborhood Watch group

· Make money by offering oneself for hire for odd jobs

At launch, Nearcircles' biggest objectives were to 1) scale across countries, 2) have at least 500

users, and 3) to rapidly grow the network post launch. To help achieve those objectives, Nearcircles had to keep users highly engaged from day one. To do so, they employed the following tactics:

· Hired local news agents to start seeding content

· Used a really simple CMS to make it easy for contributors to submit content

· Found initial audience through Facebook and Google ads

· Gave TEDx free access in exchange for promotion/exposure

· Simplified the experience for users at first by only allowing them to speak to those in their neighborhoods, then expanded to allow them to speak with anyone in the world

· Partnered with local organizations to provide users with the added value of feeling like they had the ear of these local organizations

Tracking platform analytics was also an important element of Nearcircles' launch strategy. For example, they kept a close watch on where people were leaving the site so that they could improve those experiences moving forward. They also reactivated users through incentives (e.g., badges were awarded to people who contributed most). Finally, in advance of launch, Nearcircles

developed a three-year roadmap, including user goals, plans for which new territories/markets to enter, and ideas for new features to add.

Staffing

When considering the best way to staff a new product, the first consideration should be what unique roles and functions you need to launch and sustain the product. This is largely predicated on the core functionality as well as the content.

To help prioritize your staffing resources, it's important to also consider which roles and responsibilities are necessary pre-launch, during launch, and post-launch. Assuming that a product has publishing and knowledge sharing functionality, we identified the following departments and associated roles/responsibilities.

Editorial

· **Managing Editor/Editor-in-Chief**
Responsible for the editorial vision of the product and for managing all content contributors, including curators and community managers.

· **Content Curators (3–5)**
Responsible for sourcing, tagging, and organizing content.

· **Community Manager**
Responsible for moderating and mediating discussions.

Marketing/Communications

· **Communications/Marketing Director**
Responsible for all promotion of the product, including PR, paid media, SEO, and partnerships.

Technology

· **CTO/CIO**
Responsible for tracking and reporting on product analytics and making recommendations for optimizations.

Content

Launching a new digital product with a publishing focus is ambitious at any time, but the current digital landscape is particularly tricky to navigate, as even formerly blue-chip sites and services (e.g., Twitter) are struggling to remain relevant.

Digital Publishing Trends

· **It's a time of uncertainty for online journalism**
Even well established media outlets including the New York Times and Guardian are struggling to achieve profitability, and have recently closed their R&D labs. Meanwhile, upstarts like Al Jazeera are pulling out of the U.S. and trimming staff. The message: Any new content platform/product should keep costs under control and be willing to spend some time finding an audience.

· **Publishing is actually flourishing —but not for publishers**
As mainstream, mass-audience sites struggle, smaller, niche publications are thriving by super-serving specific audiences with content they can't find anywhere else.

· **Virtual reality (VR) is hot**
Many organizations and publishers see immersive, 360-degree video as a way to build engagement among users, but so far—beyond novelty value—it's uncertain how to best leverage this technology.

· **Display ads are over**
Frustrated with low return on investments in traditional display ad inventory (and the popularity of ad-blocking software), marketers are pushing publishers to integrate "native advertising" or "sponsored content," i.e., paid-for promotional content, into their editorial. While the long-term viability of this approach is unclear, for now innovative marketers are finding larger audiences by creating "advertorial" content that provides utility to customers while promoting their products and services.

· **(Quality) content is king**
The surest way to reach a large audience is to invest in quality content. The better your content is, the more it will be shared on social media and, consequently, the higher it will be ranked in Google search results.

· **Everyone is using Slack**
The productivity tool/instant messaging app has exploded in popularity to the extent that the New York Times has begun using it to communicate breaking news to readers. The lesson: Always be open to exploring new platforms as a way to disseminate content.

· **Don't be afraid to hack platforms**
Innovative publishers are using Instagram—traditionally used for posting images with short captions—as a platform for longform storytelling, serialized in posts spread over the course of several days.

· **Consider publishing on third-party sites**
Posting your content on Medium.com and other social news sites is a great way to reach new audiences, but growing popularity has lowered overall quality of content.

· **More than half of all video watched online is on mobile**
But content is still being created for TV audiences. When creating content, optimize for small screens and short attention spans.

· **You should be on YouTube**
The social video platform has evolved into a Netflix-like viewing experience with its ability to recommend related content.

· **Email is alive and well**
Newsletters—in various formats —are still hot. See the recent launch of Lena Dunham's "Lenny Letter," and the popularity of theSkimm and Nowness.

Digital Publishing Principles

Regardless of subject matter, there are established best practices to promote consumption and sharing:

· Be transparent and own your point of view. Require contributors to disclose any associations that might be perceived as compromising or conflicts of interest.

Five Digital Platforms to Watch

Quartz's news app (qz.com)
Headlines presented as an interactive IM conversation.

Rappler
Community-curated news.

NewsDeeply
A network of single-topic sites.

TedEd
The conference's education site allows people to teach and take classes.

Nuzzel
Newsletter "digests" of the most popular posts from people you follow on Twitter.

· Think about when and where users will consume content and create content appropriately, e.g., send newsletters with brief content blurbs in the morning when users are on the go; promote longer-form, immersive storytelling after hours.

· Be as timely as possible. Being the first publisher to address a topic will improve your search ranking and establish your site as the first place to look for breaking news.

· Enlisting trusted sources to contribute is a great way to boost credibility.

· Personalize content to the extent possible to optimize the utility of users sessions.

· Keep the UX of the site simple, to promote frictionless consumption.

· When you can't be timely, be comprehensive. "Evergreen" content that delves deep into an issue has lasting value and will drive traffic to your site indefinitely.

Turning Users into Contributors

When launching a site that will be largely composed of user-created and -contributed content, it's imperative to find ways to motivate contributors (aside from monetary compensation, which may not be possible) to build a critical mass of content. Options include:

· Offer free promotion of their work via your and your partner sites' social channels

· Make it easy to contribute, (e.g., allow contributors to dictate their stories over the phone [for an "as told to" piece]) or offer to ghostwrite content based on notes or an interview

· Make them feel they are having a positive impact through their contribution

· Present them with a clear value proposition

We did identify some potential challenges and solutions associated with this type of user-created and -contributed content submission/product process, which are further described in the table on the right.

Partnerships

Forming relationships with the right partners, especially at launch, is essential. Look for partners whose values, mission, and agenda align with yours. Ideally, these partners would:

· Contribute or curate content

· Market/promote the product through their owned channels

· Provide technology, e.g., access to their CMS or video production equipment

· Distribute product content through their owned channels

To ensure participation from partners, it's important to make clear the value of being associated with your site. When pitching potential partners:

· Be able to share a carefully considered business plan and financing model for the product

· Make use of personal connections, having in-person conversations

· Provide a clear depiction of the product's reach and audience

· Have concise statements around the product's branding, mission, and positioning

Challenges associated with content submission/production	Potential Solutions
Demonstrating impact	Show contributors who they are reaching and how their contributions matter (site analytics, qualitative feedback from readers, etc.) Send alerts when users interact with contributors' content
Creating a sense of urgency	Partner with a respected news outlet Frame as advocacy/movement building Make users feel like they will be left out if they don't contribute
Differentiating the experience	Offer professional development opportunities/resources (e.g., help contributors source photos, provide writing coaching, etc.) Incorporate storytelling Feature unlikely contributors Integrate with existing platforms, like Google Hangouts and Facebook Live Limit the number of articles each day, or have an expiration date on articles Use design to stand out from competitors
Self-promotion	Outline community rules to warn users that any content that crosses the line from knowledge-sharing into self-promotion will be redacted by the editorial staff Require users contributing on behalf of companies/organizations to register as individuals and disclose their affiliation
Controlling the quality	Provide training materials, such as videos and guides Provide an editor to polish user-submitted content

Branding

The name needs to be easy to say and highly memorable, but it also has to evoke the spirit of the product itself. Whether you are using a completely obvious and descriptive name (think American Airlines), a coined name that is completely made up (think Kinect), or one that is more arbitrary or suggestive (think Medium), it should open up an emotional dialog with the user.

An arbitrary name is easier to trademark or secure domain names for, but there's a higher cost associated with building equity around this type of name. On the flip side, descriptive names have good SEO and allow you to tell your story easily, but they can be harder to find domain names for and trademark. Suggestive names work well when you foresee your product evolving over time.

The Brand

It's important to realize that the strongest brands are most often defined by the people who love them, and not by the organizations who build them. This is especially true for products where community serves as the prime driver of success. With this in mind, there are some guardrails that can be erected and best practices to follow to help steer brand identity, perception, and experience towards a common and consistent vision.

Naming

A strong name and logo are the hardest working brand elements you have. Not only do these seemingly surface assets enjoy the highest visibility, but they are the single most impressionable introduction to your product, and often the first entrypoint.

Brand Architecture

When launching a new product that is associated with an existing brand, it's important to consider

how closely you want to make that connection. There are obvious benefits to remaining closely connected to the existing brand –the master brand approach –including communication efficiencies, economies of scale, cost savings, and access to any existing brand equity.

At the same time, there may be aspects of the existing brand that do not align with your product; in which case, distancing your product from the brand may make more sense either through a lose endorsement or an entirely invisible architecture.

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Case in point: Nieman Journalism Lab–a part of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University dedicated to investigating future models to support quality journalism–made

a conscious decision not to have Harvard in the name, because they didn't want to come off as an academic center, despite Harvard's brand equity.

Visual Identity

The visual identity–consisting of the logo, patterns, typography, and photography–also needs to do more than cover the basics. Yes, the name needs to be recognizable, unique, easily reproducible, and highly visible. It needs to work well and adapt to different use cases, especially when being used on-screen in complex UIs, or within other

brand worlds entirely (like Twitter or Facebook). But it also must support the emotional dialog begun by the naming. Whether it's represented by a graphic mark, a typographic lockup (or both),

the logo needs to capture the appropriate level of excitement, be a pleasure to look at and work with, and be ownable by the community.

Perception & Experience

Even if the naming and visual identity are perfect, it's what people feel and say about your product that will define the brand.

If the product is lacking, there is no level of graphic or linguistic genius that will be able to stop underwhelmed or angry users from branding the product as a failure, or having a negative perception of the brand as a whole.

The flip side to this is that in the age of digital, the definition of perfection itself has changed. User attitudes around speed of launch, beta testing periods, and minimum viable products have gotten much more sophisticated, and much more forgiving.

If your product fills a specific niche or desire in a legitimate and compelling way (think: Slack when it launched), and if the product experience is smooth and transparent about its limitations (think: adding beta to the name or logo like Google often does) the brand perception will still be overwhelmingly positive.

Advisory Committee

1

Be clear about the expectations up front, especially with regard to the types of decisions you want advisors to make and the time commitment involved (i.e., be sure you're not asking people to do things they don't know how or want to do)

2

Refresh the Advisory Committee, as turnover is important to getting fresh perspectives, particularly as the product evolves/matures

3

Don't call it a "Board," as that suggests strategy and governance responsibilities; rather call it something like an "Advisory Committee" or "Advisory Council"

One final element to consider when launching a new product is ensuring that you regularly solicit outside, expert opinions. An easy and cost-effective way to do this is by forming an Advisory Committee.

The formation of this type of group is something we discussed during our convening, as many of our attendees have served in an advisory capacity for other organizations and therefore had useful perspectives on how to successfully form and engage such a group.

4

Consider having single-topic advisory committees (e.g., community management, technology, etc.), so that advisors can weigh in on the one or two things they feel most expert in