

Advance tests a new digital video format to tell stories that engage local audiences

Advance Local is an American media company that manages 10 regional news organizations around the country. They publish across newspapers, websites, YouTube, and social media platforms.

OPPORTUNITY

Advance wanted to introduce a new format for local video storytelling. They saw an opportunity to experiment within a single market (Michigan) so that, in the future, they could use those learnings to scale to other regions around the country.

APPROACH

Advance taught their Michigan newsroom (MLive) how to tell video stories efficiently and effectively, using YouTube best practices. Then, they created and tested a new deep-dive documentary format to see if it resonated with their audiences.

Training the newsroom: Advance educated the MLive team on how to efficiently create deep-dive, documentary style programming. Productions like this are often seen as too costly and resource intensive, but the team focused on how they could tell high-quality stories on a tight budget.

Setting up the team for success: New equipment and staff were needed to undertake the project, so Advance purchased a new camera kit, lights, and other necessary gear, and hired a freelance editor and graphic artist.

Laying the foundation: Six topics were chosen (based on perceptions of what the MLive audience would respond to) and were assigned to different reporters. The scriptwriters, host, and field producers held a workshop to brainstorm ideas and critique first drafts. Video staff from another Advance newsroom (AL.com), who had experience creating similar projects, were invited to work intensively with the team for three days, sharing tips for writing and production planning. In addition, the field producer from MLive spent a week in Chicago shadowing the AL.com video team as they filmed an episode of a series in a similar format.

Creating and testing the series: The team finalized scripts to ensure a consistent brand voice. A lean crew spent four days in the field for each episode, then footage was sent back to the studio to be edited. Graphics and a call to action (visit mlive.com) were added to each video, and trailers were created. The episodes were uploaded to YouTube every week, with a varied release on social platforms.

Looking to the future: Advance plan to use the skills gained through this project to further grow their video storytelling operations, whether as an adjunct to traditional long-form journalism, or as standalone stories in a serialized format.

“ We learned a host of new skills, from scriptwriting, to story running, to wide-scale project planning, and we had to refine and optimize the way we promoted and presented the content. In short, we developed new storytelling and production muscles.

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RESULTS

Advance successfully experimented with a new digital video format, taking it from concept to launch. The MLive team also strengthened their video storytelling skills in scriptwriting, story running, wide-scale project planning, promotion, and presentation.

- **They learned how to plan and produce** high-quality videos with lean budgets and resources.
- **They engaged new audiences** with their deep-dive documentary format.
- **Over 4K views** for five of the six videos they produced, with one video exceeding 12K views.

LEARNINGS

It is possible to tell high-quality stories on a budget:

You can tell great digital video stories without a huge team or budget. It's important to be scrappy and focus on the things that matter (e.g., editing, graphics) without being weighed down by small details that don't move the needle. For Advance, creating and testing a six-part documentary series sounded like a daunting (and expensive!) task, but the team was surprised by how they could handle production with an extremely small crew and still get a fantastic finished product.

Pace your production so you can test and learn:

It's important to have a production schedule that aligns with audience expectations, performance optimization, and how much your content creators/producers can deliver over a sustained period of time. Advance did back-to-back episode production, which was taxing on the production team and hampered the wider organization's ability to incorporate other video work into the schedule. Additionally, releasing all six episodes after post-production on the series was locked limited their ability to test and grow — there were no opportunities to apply learnings about what worked for the audience (and what didn't) from early episodes to later ones.

Listen to your audience: Advance used this opportunity to create content about the topics their audiences were most interested in. They were keen to find content that would resonate with their local viewers, but also have a wider appeal. For example, their “Nestle Waters” video is about Flint, MI, but has broader appeal to the rest of the state.