

NOS experiments with digital-first formats and forges strong connections with viewers

NOS (Nederlandse Omroep Stichting) is part of the Dutch public broadcast service. It reports on news, current affairs, sports, and national and international events through a wide array of platforms, including TV, online, social, radio, and more.

OPPORTUNITY

NOS wanted to grow its current and new audience segments, while staying true to its 'hard news' journalistic integrity and brand. It saw an opportunity to do this by testing different digital-first storytelling formats and audience engagement elements.

APPROACH

NOS put together a team who experimented with different formats to find what would resonate with audiences. Along the way, they used metrics to gauge success and decide which formats to continue creating into the future.

Setting up the team: NOS set up a multi-functional team of people who were excited about experimenting with digital-first content. This included a video maker, graphic designer, presenter, community manager, and producer. The team also hired a freelance YouTube creator to train them in channel and content best practices, and also help them uncover how NOS could retain its news brand and essence, yet still reach digital video audiences.

Brainstorming formats: The team wanted to create an interactive news series, but after extensive analysis of the channel they encountered a technical challenge — there wasn't a way of doing the type of interactivity they initially envisaged. The team then spent a significant amount of time brainstorming other types of content. They wanted to incorporate high quality production values, a great story line (related to news), as well as social (interactive) potential. They debated questions like: What is the role of news on YouTube? Should stories be hard hitting or more lightweight? What role should the audience have? What does the audience expect from a news organization like NOS?

Testing ideas: For each potential idea, they created a test video to see how it would work. Along the way, they learned a lot about digital video look and feel, and decided to use a more informal storytelling style than they used on other platforms, while still maintaining high journalistic standards.

Developing the series: The team landed on an idea to create a weekly series incorporating their foreign correspondents, called "Maar dan Anders" (which translates to 'same but different'). Episodes would cover a current event in the Netherlands and a similar event in another country. Footage was shot by the Dutch team and a foreign correspondent, then edited in the Netherlands. The team soon found the weekly turnaround too challenging, so changed to releasing an episode every two weeks.

Scaling production: Based on learnings from the first series, the team started work on a second series, "Behind the Headlines". This was focused around a known TV and radio presenter, and the episodes were extensions of previous work he'd done — they picked up where the radio or TV show had left off, finding answers to questions the audience still had. This series proved much easier to produce as it was all set in the Netherlands.

Driving engagement: The team focused on increasing audience engagement. They used Community posts to ask questions or solicit feedback, then incorporated audience suggestions into each series. They experimented with different calls to action within each video and asked viewers to react in the comments section. They also added polls in some videos, which proved very successful in engaging viewers.

Implementing learnings for ongoing growth: After running the shows for a while, the team analyzed the metrics of each (e.g., views, interactions, engagement, etc.) and found the second series was much more successful. They decided to stop the first series and focus all resources into "Behind the Headlines" to deliver even more growth.

RESULTS

Through an intensive test-and-learn process, NOS found the right content to engage digital video news audiences.

- **Upskilled the team's digital knowledge** by training all staff in digital video best practices, including how to use cards, end cards, and Community posts.
- **Produced and published two new digital series:** "Behind the Headlines", a long form (10+ minutes) deep-dive into different news topics; and "Maar dan Anders", which analyzed similar issues across different countries.
- **Over 50% increase in average view time** after publication of the first series, compared to the same period the previous year.

LEARNINGS

Keep testing until you find the right format: You might not find the right video format for your audiences straight away, so keep iterating until you do. NOS brainstormed many different ideas and created test videos for each. From that, they selected two series to experiment with, ultimately finding the one format that worked best.

Explore different ways to drive engagement: NOS tried many different tactics to deepen audience engagement. The team found success by asking questions and taking suggestions via Community posts. Videos with polls in them had more comments than those without, and thumbnail selection greatly impacted click-through rate (for example, an un-staged, close-up shot of the presenter worked well). NOS also linked content through other platforms (such as social media) and embedded videos into articles published on its website, both of which helped drive traffic to the channel and increase subscribers.

Be patient: It takes time to develop and produce great content and grow your audience — particularly if you're transitioning from traditional news media to multimedia. When the NOS team started the project they had to learn how to work outside of traditional media platforms. It took time for them to get up to speed on things like algorithms, direct viewer interactions, and driving growth. But they set goals accordingly, realizing there's no such thing as instant success.