

Stern experiments with content formats to drive engagement with younger viewers

Stern.de is a German-language website owned by publisher Gruner + Jahr. It was founded in 1995 as an accompaniment to the Stern print magazine and covers news, politics, sports, and entertainment.

OPPORTUNITY

Stern wanted to explore how digital video could help reach a younger news audience. It saw an opportunity to test formats that were in keeping with the brand's essence and approach to journalism, but would appeal to younger viewers.

APPROACH

Stern invested in a dedicated production studio and new equipment, as well as hiring and training several show hosts that joined the core team of editors, visual producers and business specialists. Then, it experimented with different digital video formats to see what would resonate best with a younger audience.

Setting up a cross-functional core team: First, Stern set up a task force of experts to focus on digital video content, visualization, data, and monetization. This multi-disciplinary team brought different skills to the table, allowing them to drive different aspects of the project forward simultaneously. The editorial team was also an important part of this task force.

Creating a digital video studio: Stern found a unique filming location by using an existing space on the roof of their iconic building and renovating it to fit the purpose of digital video production. It then fitted out the studio with new equipment.

Using a data-driven approach to ideation: The task force implemented an ideation process to generate ideas, challenge assumptions, and think outside the box about digital video. The process involved researching digital video best practices that worked well for other brands, but also iterating, optimizing and testing their own ideas. For instance, while the team initially wanted to live stream episodes, they quickly realized that the main format they wanted to use was better suited to video on demand (VOD).

Deciding on a new format: The first format the team tested was a weekly debate series covering socio-political topics (and other subjects) relevant to a younger audience. The team launched the show "DISKUTHEK" as VOD with a live stream discussion after each episode was first aired. Rather than create a new channel for the series, Stern used its existing YouTube channel so it could tap into the 100K+ existing subscribers.

Integrating fact-checking: The team added fact checking and background information as in-video overlays for each episode. While people are debating live, the overlays provide fact-checking information and give further insight on specific subjects, and also drive more audience engagement with the content.

Using insights: The show has an ongoing testing and review process to see how it can be continually improved. For example, the first episodes were 15-20 minutes long, but Stern soon saw that audiences wanted more content so it published bonus material and changed the video length to 30-60 minutes. In addition, the Stern team often looks at audience insights via YouTube analytics so they can better understand and reach their audience, and ultimately attract more subscribers to increase growth and revenue.

Building a new brand: With "DISKUTHEK" the team created a new brand aimed at young people. While it had its own visual identity and tone, it was very much in keeping with the overall Stern brand.

RESULTS

The Stern team successfully created an innovative digital video format, unlike anything available in the German TV and video space, that helped them engage younger news audiences and expand their brand.

- **Created a youth-focused digital video brand** that complements the overall Stern brand.
- **30% increase in channel subscriptions** within eight months.
- **9M+ views and 70K+ comments** on the series after eleven months.
- **1M views** of the first "DISKUTHEK" episode within eight months.
- Generated positive press coverage resulting in **100+ media mentions**.

LEARNINGS

Build a multi-disciplinary task force and stay flexible: Building a team of cross-functional experts will better help you achieve your overall objectives. Stern set up a vibrant and diverse team of skilled people from different disciplines who were able to explore and tackle the project step by step, from every angle. Stern also implemented an agile way of working that helped remove bottlenecks and increase efficiency.

Lean into the platform while staying authentic: News audiences want video content that is authentic, so focus on that rather than perfecting every tiny detail of your production. However, it's important that publishers remain true to their own brand essence, rather than try to imitate what they think a young audience will want.

Test and learn, then scale: Keep exploring ways to improve your content and challenging it to perform better. Data gives you the ability to refine your digital video ideas successfully and make changes as needed. For example, Stern initially assumed that a regular publication day and time was crucial for video success, but it learned that most users just find the videos through search or suggested content, rather than logging on at a specific time.

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We wanted to explore the potential of news videos to appeal to a younger audience, but in a way that still fits the Stern brand and essence.

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