

Anatomy of a Viral Video

A Case Study with *The Journal News*

With the Chartbeat Publishing Video Dashboard, *The Journal News* can monitor the performance of its videos in real time. Informed by key audience metrics (“play rate,” “average engagement,” and “ad drop-off”), the staff was able to achieve the holy grail of online publishing: a globally viral video.

HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY

It all started on Tumblr, when Chelsea Blaney posted a yearbook photo of her two best friends, Bradley Taylor and Dylan Meehan, who had just won Carmel High School’s “cutest couple” superlative. Blaney, then a graduating senior, wrote on her blog: *“First time in my school history a same-sex couple has even been able to run for this category, not to mention winning it. So proud of them, and my school.”* In just three days, Chelsea Blaney’s post was shared on Tumblr more than 100,000 times.

SPREADING LIKE WILDFIRE

The Journal News, based in nearby White Plains, New York, immediately went out to interview the handsome high schoolers. The Gannett-owned newspaper published a two-and-a-half-minute video, which was shot and produced just hours before the couple’s senior prom. In the videotaped interview, Taylor and Meehan—looking dapper in tuxedos and coordinating vests and ties—reacted to the whirlwind of publicity while posing for photos.

“The video started catching on right away,” says Jill Mercadante, multimedia editor. Almost as quickly as Blaney’s Tumblr post took off, visitors were flocking to *The Journal News* website (www.lohud.com) to watch the duo’s pre-prom video interview. “We couldn’t believe the traffic,” says Mercadante, who used the Chartbeat Publishing Video Dashboard to monitor audience metrics, such as “play rate,” “average engagement,” and “ad drop-off.”

Takeaways

- Make sure the title and description of the video are optimized for SEO.
- Give the video a boost by giving it a more prominent homepage position.
- Bring in more viewers by promoting the video on social media channels.
- Pay attention to audience reaction and look for new angles for follow-up stories.
- Try to learn what made the video successful, so you can replicate its success.

THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Many would've been satisfied with the video's initial traffic numbers. But Mercadante knew the video's initial success was just the tip of the iceberg, and that there was more the team could do to increase viewership. After noticing the first swell of traffic in the Chartbeat Publishing Video Dashboard, the staff made sure the video was easy to find; they optimized the title and description for SEO, and they bumped the teaser higher on the homepage.

At first, the traffic was organic; visitors discovered the video through *The Journal News* website. With social media promotion, international LGBT blogs began picking it up. Soon after, so were Gothamist, BuzzFeed, and Gawker. Then, says Mercadante, came the big guys: "The Huffington Post, CNN, and Fox News were all external traffic drivers." They also made sure *USA Today*, Gannett's flagship, put the video in front of a national audience.

Without the visibility provided by the Chartbeat Publishing Video Dashboard, says Mercadante, the staff wouldn't have known where their hit video was being embedded nor would they have known which other publishers were driving the most traffic. And that, she says, is something no other analytics service could offer: "Chartbeat showed us where our video's traffic was coming from, even if it was from a website halfway around the world."

NUDGING AND NURTURING

Though the recipe for a viral video is difficult to pin down, there are small things publishers can do to increase their probability of success. *The Journal News* mined a local story from Tumblr, which already proved with 100,000 shares that it could command an audience's attention. The video piggybacked on that social success and there was a little bit of good fortune, says Mercadante, but simple actions catapulted the video into the stratosphere.

"We knew our video had the right stuff," she says, "but we didn't just sit back and cross our fingers. We discovered a rare opportunity and produced a great video, but we had to nudge and nurture it along the way." Even today, a global audience continues to keep the "cutest couple" video firmly planted atop *The Journal News*'s all-time "most-watched" list.

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