

How data is informing decision-making for BH Media Group ▶ BY TARA MCMEEKIN CONTRIBUTING WRITER



In a world of constantly changing technology, newspaper companies are searching for the ability to leverage tech that

is already being used to do anything from inform advertising and content decisions to boosting user engagement and advertising revenue.

BH Media Group decided to try just that earlier this year, when it partnered with its content management system provider TownNews.com to implement the vendor's iQ program. The iQ program enables publishers that use TownNews.com's Blox CMS to collect data based on their website users' interests and browsing habits. Publishers can then use that data to deliver content recommendations, customization and targeted advertising.

"We began using the iQ program in January after moving to Google's DFP (DoubleClick for Publishers) ad serving engine," BH Media's Director of National Digital Wynn Christian told *News & Tech*.

In BH Media's case, the publisher is leveraging the iQ program to drive results in programmatic advertising. A small team from BH Media's advertising team meets twice a month with members of the TownNews.com team to gain data insights.

"We have rolled it out on the national digital side, and we're currently just looking through the programmatic lens at all of the ads placed on our sites that aren't sold by local teams," Christian said.

For example, if there were a nationwide or regional insurance company that's interested in reaching people who have shown an interest in purchasing a car, the iQ program helps them identify and maximize that segment.

"With the program we are able to get a better set of eyes on that audience," Christian added. "We've seen significant revenue lift — nearly 20 percent — from the iQ program."

Exploring audience interest

In addition to positive revenue-generation results,

Christian said the program has been another lever the publisher can use to gauge and explore audience interest beyond the content they're consuming on BH Media's websites.

For instance, if there is an audience segment that is interested in taxes, then TownNews.com's team provides feedback regarding what types of advertisements might be appropriate for that segment.

"We can see what specific audiences out there are doing beyond the data we usually look at, such as page views and categories of interest to them on our own sites," Wynn said. "This gives us a deeper level of understanding about our users."

In addition to insights provided by working with TownNews.com, Christian said the publisher can now measure and validate the approach it is taking internally to audience segments in programmatic advertising.

"We are able to gauge how well we are doing with particular segments and how that's impacting overall revenues," he said. "That goes back to which topics are getting the most traction on our site, and whether behaviors are seasonal, or perhaps centered around a particular piece of our audience."

Although iQ is currently limited to advertising at BH Media, Christian sees obvious benefits in extending the program to the news and content side of the business, thereby improving the overall user experience.

"From a content perspective, this positions us to know more about our users and makes it easier to deliver custom content, just as we do with advertising," he added.

Moving the ball forward

Christian said BH Media is pleased with TownNews.com's hands-on approach to helping publishers turn data into revenue.

"We have open communication and we are able to move the ball forward with every meeting," Christian said. "We take a look at our audience segments and discuss what we might tweak in the

months and weeks ahead."

From a tech perspective, BH Media and TownNews.com use the same data management platform to execute the bi-monthly meetings, which allows them to view four or five audience segments the publisher has identified and get stats across the company about how those segments are performing.

"The ultimate goal is for us to be able to make our own decisions, so it's been extremely valuable to have the feedback from TownNews.com, and to validate some of the decisions we're making about the segments."

TownNews.com said that 25 percent of the companies using the standard edition of its iQ program are actually covering their monthly Blox investment as a result of the revenue generated from using iQ. Building off that momentum, the vendor in April launched iQ Engage to make it easier for news and media companies of all sizes to leverage audience data to tailor content and boost page views and ad revenue. Engage enables sites that use Blox to serve up customized content recommendations based on individual behavior profiles. The goal is to get site visitors to browse deeper and increase a site's ad impressions and content consumption.

Lee Enterprises' Wisconsin State Journal site, Madison.com, was the pilot site for iQ Engage, adding the behavioral content recommendations block to its home page and most article pages.

"We've seen a significant jump in all key engagement metrics since our launch in February," Tim Kelley, who serves both as digital director for Madison.com and digital engagement director for Lee Enterprises, said in a statement. "Time spent per session has doubled and we're up to nearly six pages per visit, even at this early stage."

TownNews.com said iQ Engage users are also seeing a massive drop in bounce rate on their sites — down to as low as seven percent with recommendations versus 70 percent without.

In Madison.com's case, bounce rate has gone from 38 percent to 5 percent, Kelley said. ▲