

Ads as Content: MyHouzz as Case Study

Erin Copple Smith, Austin College

As audiences cord-cut, advertisers have sought to reinvent the traditional 30-second spot into something that works better in the age of streaming, including the development of branded entertainment more similar to content than advertisement. The *My Houzz* series, available on YouTube and sponsored by Houzz.com, is one example of this trend.

Due to increasing cord-cutting and a move toward over-the-top viewing, marketing forecasts for 2018 and beyond predict a rise in American ad spending, but a drop in spending on TV ads.¹ This in and of itself is not news, but as spending on traditional TV ads drops, spending on content marketing is rising. One forecast indicates a 15% growth in content marketing industry in 2018, “making content marketing the fastest-growing segment in the fast-growing field of ‘branded entertainment’.”² Branded entertainment—a type of content marketing focused on developing advertisements that closely resemble other content forms while delivering clear and targeted messaging about a product—is one way that advertisers have taken advantage of online distribution platforms to get their ads to their target markets.

Begun in 2015 with two “seasons” airing in 2017 and 2018, *My Houzz* enlists celebrities from Mila Kunis to Gordon Ramsay to make over a friend or family member’s home, using the Houzz website. Episodes are roughly 20 minutes in length, mimicking a traditional TV episode, and closely resemble the kinds of home makeover shows available on channels like HGTV. Each begins with a celebrity describing the makeover recipient, looking at the existing space, brainstorming ideas, and enlisting expert designers and contractors to ultimately redesign the space with an often tear-filled reveal at the end. Utilizing a format that audiences are already very familiar with attracts existing home design audiences who may be looking for content to fill the void left by cord-cutting, a key advantage of content marketing in this space. Similar series on television follow the same structure and format, including montages of designers shopping in home stores and discussing various design elements, which makes the

¹ Corey McNair, “US Ad Spending: Facebook & Google to Capture over One-Quarter of the Market”, eMarketer.com, 18 April 2018, www.emarketer.com/content/us-ad-spending; “US TV Ad Spending to Fall in 2018: Digital Video Continues Double-Digit Growth; OTT Spend Rises”, eMarketer.com, 28 March 2018, www.emarketer.com/content/us-tv-ad-spending-to-fall-in-2018

² Rachel Haberman, “Branded Entertainment Growing Twice as Fast as Advertising Spend, Study Finds,” Skyword.com, 23 April 2018, www.skyword.com/contentstandard/creativity/branded-entertainment-growing-twice-as-fast-as-advertising-spend-study-finds/

insertion of the features of Houzz.com feel relatively natural rather than like an ad. Each episode of *My Houzz* highlights various elements of the site including the ability to search for design professionals by zip code (with access to user reviews and ratings), the “Look Alike” feature that allows you to shop directly through Houzz for various fixtures and furniture pieces, and the “Design Dilemma” section of the site that allows you to poll Houzz.com members to get their input on design decisions like “Should we mount the TV above the fireplace?”

In bypassing traditional TV outlets, Houzz needs to find a way to let audiences know the series exists and to entice them to watch. Using celebrities is a clever (if not original) way to draw audiences in the digital age. Featured celebrities hype their episode on social media. A recent episode featuring Tony Hawk generated this tweet: “Pulled off a surprise remodel for my dear friend Kerry and her family (in honor of Ray Underhill) on the latest My @houzz,” and included a link to the YouTube video of the episode.³ And audiences searching YouTube for videos of a favorite celebrity are likely to come across episodes. As one comment on the Gordon Ramsay video indicates: “I’ll click any videos with Gordon Ramsay in it”.⁴ And of course fans of each star are likely to watch even if they’re not interested in the product. One comment on the Kristen Bell episode exclaims, “I know this is a plug for Houzz and I totally can’t afford to shop on their site, but I’m a huge fan of Kristen Bell and couldn’t resist watching.”⁵ Moreover, featuring a celebrity means that each episode becomes a news item both nationally and locally. Articles about various episodes have appeared in outlets including *People*, *The Today Show*, the *Green Bay Press Gazette*, and the *San Diego Union Tribune*, providing free marketing for the series.

The advantage of content marketing is that by providing content audiences want (whether that’s a home design show, access to a favorite celebrity, or both) is that those audiences are enticed to watch a long-form advertisement (and often several—I watched all 10 episodes of *My Houzz* and enjoyed them all) by choice, improving brand recognition and recall. As such, *My Houzz* provides an intriguing example of what TV advertisements may become.

³ @tonyhawk. *Twitter*, 17 July 2018, 10:41am, twitter.com/tonyhawk/status/1019275811021471744

⁴ Sumar AE. Comment on “My Houzz: Gordon Ramsay’s Surprise Renovation.” YouTube, 30 January 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=8h7cnLWQKtM&t=1s.

⁵ Jim-Rhonda Lancaster. Comment on “MyHouzz: Kristen Bell’s Surprise Renovation for her Sister.” YouTube, 7 March 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvgqJOWGQfU&lc=UghiAlmOuVCQengCoAEC .