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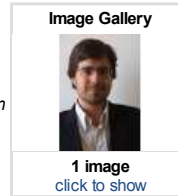
INTERVIEW: Populis founder on content farms and content creation

By Sarah Vizard

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Content farms are criticised for emphasising quantity over quality. However, while traditional publishing models struggle, content farms appear to be flourishing. Demand Media is the most high-profile company in the space, but Populis has a growing audience in Europe, in part because it offers content in a range of languages. The firm is already profitable, with its founder, Luca Ascani, saying it generated EUR58m (USD82.6m) in revenues last year and is on track to experience double-digit growth this year. Here he talks about content creation, the negative press around farms and how traditional news companies can learn from new content models.



How does Populis generate content?

We started the business from two concepts – what type of content there is online and how do users consume media online. You have three types of content online: breaking news, vertical content and the info practice – from the number of restaurants to how to tie a tie. We are very focused on the vertical content and for that reason we have around 500 vertical websites.

There are three levels of media consumption as well: the media that you receive when you go directly to a site, which is about 25% of media consumption; 60% is content on demand, so people are searching for something; and 15% is the media that you share through Facebook and Twitter etc.

Based on that we divided by two the production of content, so we have 40% of our content produced by 400 top bloggers. They decide what they want to write and the category they are covering and they are very big experts on a particular topic like cars. On the other side, 60% of our content production is content on demand-based. We analyse each month 22m different keywords and we have an algorithm that defines a topic based on that. When a topic is assigned we have a content market base with hundreds of people in each language that apply to write the article. We publish the article on our site and then we analyse the life of the article in terms of the quality – how many times it has been shared, how many readers it got – and this gives a quality element that is very important to us.

What distinguishes you from US content networks like Demand Media?

Well, that's completely different - they are more in the info practice. We are more related to what the Huffington Post is doing - with AOL strategy - to create strong sites vertical. Of course the content on demand is a part of our business, but it is always focused to produce vertical content and not info practice.

Do Demand Media's European expansion plans affect you?

At the moment this is a market that is based on data. So you need data to define the topics you want to create. It will be very tough on them to have this data, to have real data on French, German, Spanish. It's very important to understand that we are multi-language. This is a big barrier to entrance and we are in a unique place to do it - because you have to consider that most of the people online are not speaking English. Only 25% of them speaking are English, but the content online - about 60% - is in English, so there is a big opportunity to create content in other languages.




How do you respond to criticism of writing content on demand based on keywords?

We are coming from a position of quality, to just write another piece of information on number of phones or article with very low quality, that's something else. I realise this is a new type of journalist, but that's the type of content that we are creating.


How does Google's recent update to its algorithm affect Populis?

At the moment the update is only in US and UK. For the UK content we have no issue at the moment. For the type of content we are producing and the type of vertical position, I don't think it will be a big impact on us. But let's see.

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