

Eight

Successful YouTube Channels

We decided to dedicate an entire chapter to making videos specifically on YouTube because of the impact this type of video is having on the world today. At no other time in history has the distribution of videos been quite as easy. No longer do you have to pitch your idea or finished video to a few executives at a TV station. Every single person can become a distributor for their own videos. However, if you want a large number of people to see your videos, which should be the goal, there is still a lot to learn about this new media.

You may also notice that we titled this chapter how to make a successful *channel* on YouTube, not just how to make a good video. YouTube is a great place to showcase all of the work you do. Building an audience and keeping them is key. A successful channel has a few easy-to-identify traits. Let's start by taking a look at what sets YouTube apart from other media.

The Big Differences

Like any other media, you need to understand what YouTube is and what it's not. You need to understand how

your films are being watched so that you can make the best possible film for that venue.

Theatrical movies are very different from YouTube. At a movie, you pay money, sit down, and are more or less bound to your seat for 90 minutes or more. These sorts of movies can gradually build in tension. The payoff can wait until the very end because of the length and style of the format.

Television is closer to YouTube. The viewer is sitting around a television with a remote control in hand, ready to change it if they're not engaged with the program. The TV model is to keep viewers engaged with content for about 10 minutes then leave them with a cliffhanger every time they cut to commercial. They want viewers to watch the commercials; that's what makes the network their money.

YouTube is an even more fragile environment than television. On the web, most people aren't even deliberately sitting down to watch a video. They're usually taken to the videos by chance or in between things they may be working on. The chance someone will quickly click away from your video is high. Because of that, you have to immediately begin with something highly engaging just to keep them watching. It's an entirely different model of filmmaking. Snaring viewers in the first five seconds to keep them watching is only part of the challenge.

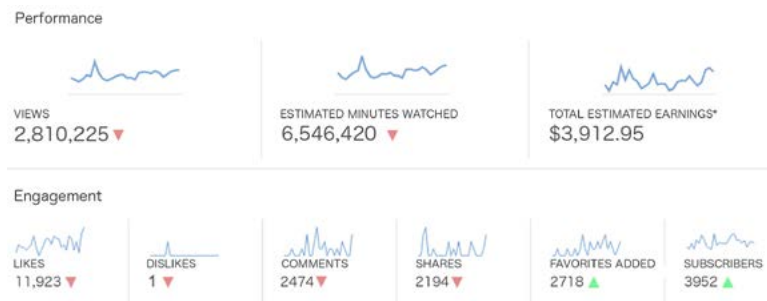
YouTube puts the success of your channel into the hands (or clicks) of your audience. No longer are you having to convince one person if your show is good enough to fund. Now you're actually having to convince every single person to follow your show. In some ways, this is

extremely scary. If your show is a flop, who's to blame?

On the other hand, YouTube is a wonderful media through which you can interact with your audience. Everyone who watches your video is essentially voting whether or not they like your show. They do this directly by “liking” the video or by watching all of it (you can see this information through YouTube analytics). YouTube integrates the analytics of how videos are being watched into a neat little algorithm. The full details of this algorithm are a mystery to us (they change all the time), but doing your best to figure it out really is the key to making it in this new genre.

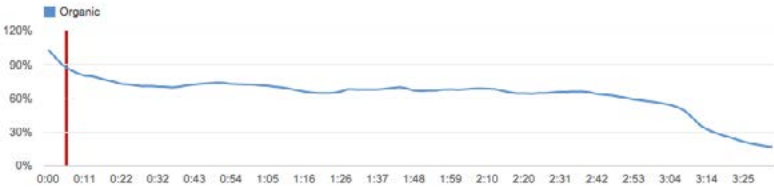
Beating the Algorithm

The YouTube algorithm is likely a lot like the Google Search algorithm. It takes into account how the video is watched - entirely, partially, etc. We were able to get in contact with a YouTube partner specialist to help fill us in on how it works. The first thing she explained is that you should look at your YouTube analytics as a way to see how people watch any of your videos. It gives you options like this:



While there are a lot of important factors, some of the most important are audience retention and total amount of time someone watches your video.

Audience retention is a way of calculating how long someone watches your video. It's generally shown as a percentage of time maybe in a graph like this:



This graph is one of our three minute videos. You can see that a lot of people dropped out at the very beginning. But when we got them engaged, they stayed with us for most of the video. The sharp decline at the end is when we put up the credits and the “subscribe for more” slates. This is pretty good looking retention curve.

Total View Time is different though. Even though the average retention here is 65%, our video is only a bit over three minutes. If a similar hour long video had an average of 65%, the algorithm would favor that video tremendously. The longer you can keep viewers watching, the better!

Learning the Tricks

These are details YouTube keeps track of, but there are other things you can do to make a channel successful. Here are the top three tricks:

- 1. Start watching and subscribing to other channels.**

This may sound obvious, but you wouldn't believe the number of people I've talked to who

want to be successful on YouTube and do not subscribe or even watch many videos on YouTube. Interact and see what works for the people you like. It's even helpful to watch some popular channels you *dislike* to see what makes them successful. Here are two we like: [BrainCraft](#) and [TheCuriousEngineer](#).

2. Study YouTube's best practices.

YouTube has a whole training site dedicated to training content creators. They call it the [Creator Playbook](#). A Google search for "YouTube best practices" or "YouTube creator playbook" will pull it up. They even have playbooks designed specifically for science YouTubers. It is a must read for anyone getting into it.

3. Make your own, and see what works.

There is no better teacher than starting your own channel and seeing what works. With every video, you'll start to see what works and what doesn't.

The 6 Biggest Things to Do Within Your Video

If creating a strong channel is your goal, you have to start with making great videos. Remember, these videos need to be made specifically for this audience: the person with mouse in hand, ready to click away. Here are six keys to creating a good video on YouTube.

1. Start with a bang.

Put your best, most engaging work right at the beginning. You want to keep your viewers as long as possible, and pulling them into the show in the first five seconds is key!

2. Keep drawing the audience along.

Remember, one of the keys to the algorithm is total view time. That means that you have to write the content in a way that keeps your viewers wanting more. Maybe you pull them in with a crafty title, such as “Why Protect Elephants?” The rest of the video should be spent taking them on a journey through your topic. But save the answer to your title question for the end of the video.

3. Use silence carefully.

There are few film venues where jump cuts (abrupt transition cuts in editing) are the norm. On YouTube, jump cuts are an accepted style. One reason for this is in an effort to chop up dialogue so information is transmitted as fast as possible. Silence can also be effective, but use it sparingly for dramatic effect.

4. Use annotations at the end to link to more videos.

YouTube was the first big video streaming site to allow you to click on selected places in your video that take you to other links. You can add your own text bubbles or encourage people to go to external websites. The idea is brilliant and a great way to direct user traffic where you want it to go.

5. Ask people to subscribe.

YouTube is a relatively new medium for videos, and many people aren't familiar with subscribing to channels. Because of that, it's important to tell people how to subscribe to your videos. It's a call to action you should put at the end of your videos. You want to make it as easy as possible for people to find you and follow you. Ask them

to subscribe and give them a text box (perhaps saying “Subscribe”) to click on.

6. Engage with the audience and encourage them to write comments.

The more people interact by writing comments, the better you do in the algorithm. Plus, it’s always nice to see what people like about your video. A great technique to drive comments is to simply ask the viewers questions at the end. If you’re doing a video about protecting elephants, ask them to leave their solutions to the elephant problem in the comment section. This gives you a great opportunity interact with your audience and share ideas as you reply to their comments.

Making a Plan for Success

Just like any successful business, having a successful YouTube channel should start with a plan. You’re playing the role of a network executive here, and you have to think long term. Here are six steps you should add to your plan.

1. Figure out your target audience.

Who are you trying to target? Is it mushroom enthusiasts or sports fans? What age range are you targeting? Will your demographic have a mix of males and females, or will it be slanted to one gender? All of these are important to ask.

If you’re new to making videos, we suggest making videos that you and your friends would watch. First time YouTubers sometimes make videos for a group they’re not really a part of, and the result is a video that is confusing and does not draw the target audience. If your peer

group isn't going to watch the videos, it's going to be hard to build an audience.

2. Let your audience guide you.

After you've passed a certain threshold of viewers, the people watching will start to tell you what they want. This may be directly in the comments or indirectly through the ones you see they're watching the longest. For instance, our most popular videos are ones with a strong conservation slant, so we continue gearing our efforts to please this audience.

3. Make a release schedule.

This step relates to human psychology. If you have a release plan and stick to it, people know when to expect your content. For example, if they know to look for a new video every Tuesday at noon, they can reliably look forward to making it part of their week. This garners anticipation trust between you and your viewers. The most successful channels release a video every week.

4. Team up or partner with other YouTubers.

YouTube is currently set up to favor those creators who have teamed up with other popular (massive views) YouTubers. There are two reasons for this.

First, if a popular YouTuber physically likes your video, it comes up in a *lot* of feeds. Second, teaming up to create videos and showing up in other creators' videos is way to acquire subscribers that may have never seen your content!

5. Make videos that have social media sharing appeal.

You want to make videos that people want to immediately share it after they've watched them.

One great way to boost sharing on social media is to make videos centered around particular current events or calendar events. Making a Valentine's Day themed video that is released on the holiday could make it more likely that people will share it through their social networks. While topical "tent pole programming" like this may have a short shelf-life, it can be a useful tool to draw in previously untapped audience.

6. Start learning from your successes (and failures).

Once you hear what people want, listen to them. The bigger your channel, the more people will be sharing what they want. If you're not reading comments, you can learn a lot from the YouTube Analytics. Remember, YouTube is a lot like any other media. You have learn the game and play it well.

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