

Usability Report: Vice.com

Persona

Meet Ryan. Ryan considers himself a sophisticated young man, interested in girls, fashion, music and humor, with a particular bent, and is looking for something that's not particularly mainstream or well-known. He'll go to specialized websites if he's looking for something specific, but if he wants to hear about a festival, or to see what's going on in other areas of the country, places he might want to visit someday, he's most likely to discover them on a general culture website.

He's got a good desk job, but one that leaves him some time to play around the Internet. He likes to read funny, insightful articles online, but he's looking for something more original and fun than on traditional websites. He gets his news from Google News and some apps on his phone, but what he's looking for is some funny pieces that don't just tell him the news, but are essays or descriptions on various things that would broadly be labeled "culture". He likes reading about lots of different things going on in the world, especially if he wouldn't otherwise know about it, and to him that encompasses everything from music and sports to news and fashion.

Although some people, especially older people, might call Ryan a hipster – because he dresses well and is interested in culture – he doesn't consider himself one. He's not a nerd either, at least compared to his friends, because his interests are broader. He's not particularly political, although he leans left on some issues. He's in favor of legalizing marijuana and supports abortion; he voted for Obama in 2008. Ryan, who is in his twenties, is interested in living his life, having fun, but being aware of the outside world. He's funny, cultured, a good conversationalist, and is always up for trying new things. He lives in a mid-sized city, although sometimes he thinks about moving to a larger one. He likes to travel, and has been abroad a few times.

Ryan doesn't like to be bored. On websites, he hates to be bombarded with ads or tons of social-networking options; although he's on Facebook and Twitter, he's not the type of guy to post incessantly, and he finds a lot of it a distraction. He owns a smartphone, but he's not obsessive about it, and he's not particularly interested in all the ins and outs of modern technology, like some of his friends. He doesn't know what to do with Google +, although he has an account. He casually plays video games and watches sports, but he's not a diehard fan, although he has friends who are. He doesn't have cable TV, but watches most of his shows through the computer. He's interested in watching more Internet-based work – he has friends who've dabbled in web video – and he'll occasionally check out some shows when he's home, surfing around.

Audience Analysis

Vice.com is actually a spinoff of a magazine focusing on investigative journalism, documentaries and culture, or so it says on its Facebook page (there is no about section on its website). There are about a dozen international versions, all accessible on the right hand side, and feature the same layout and similar content. Some of the articles reference American entertainment (Vince Gilligan, the creator of the American drama “Breaking Bad”); others have English headlines, but the articles are in a country's native language (Bulgarian, for example). According to Alexa, a majority of the site's users are college-educated men, between the ages of 18 and 34 who visit the site from school. Although I did not specify education in my sample, my assumption was that the man was college-educated, and his age falls within the listed demographic.

Alexa also features some user reviews of the site. While this cannot be considered representative, and those who comment do not give their own background, they consistently rank

Vice.com as being “easy to use” with “good content,” and 17 out of 18 users who reviewed the site gave it five stars (the other one gave it four). They like the site because it offers a perspective on a range of issues not seen on mainstream sites, with an original tone. It keeps readers informed and engaged: “Vice is great for everything from news to entertainment and sports. It's super funny but never dumb. Very clever and it blows mainstream sites away”; “Vice manages to hit the perfect mix of fascinating, investigative journalism and off-beat, entertaining stories. It's how I make my twitter account look smart”; “I love visiting this website because it is unique and there is no other entertainment and news source like VICE. It allows people to experience different kind of things that we cannot get anywhere else;” “Vice does a fantastic job reporting on important global social, political, cultural issues that go unnoticed and ignored by mainstream media outlets. They provide a refreshing, unique journalistic perspective, sincerity, and wit that is unfortunately absent from a lot of large news agencies whose focus is catering to what they perceive to be the tastes of the mainstream audience.”

Users spend around five minutes on the site, averaging out about three pageviews, although a significant portion only view one article – these are people, I suspect, who likely get a link to an article through Facebook, Twitter or Google, sites that often precede or follow visits to Vice.com. Five minutes indicate that users read at least one article, maybe more, take in a slideshow or a video, or a combination of all these things.

Quantcast’s data is broken down differently, and has estimates for household income and race and ethnicity. Here, males between the ages of 18 and 24 are also overrepresented, although users are considered to be more affluent, with household income to be over \$100,000. It is possible that many of these male users live with their parents, who make a hefty salary, or are college students. Education level is also different from Alexa’s analysis, with larger portions of

males without college degrees and those with graduate degrees represented. It's possible, again, that users could be in school while perusing the site. Hispanics, Asians and blacks all visit the site in larger than average numbers. According to Quantcast, Vice.com visitors are also likely to visit humor sites like FunnyOrDie and funny/snarky news and information sites like Gawker.

My persona was very accurate. The site is clearly geared for a young, adult audience, as there are profanities in headlines, and there is a Not Safe for Work section of the site, generally dedicated to articles about sex. But these aren't articles just for the sake of titillation, as they often explore subcultures and are treatises on one subject or another. Many of the articles are written by men, and there is an urbane, sophisticated tone to the writing. It doesn't deal with housekeeping, decoration, dating as a traditional topic, or beauty, hallmarks of women's magazines, which is why I made my persona a twentysomething man. The features on music, festivals, even sports are not about mainstream, big-name acts – Vice isn't going to publish items that are easily found elsewhere, and many of the articles are essays told in the first person. Even when a mainstream sports team is mentioned (the New York Mets), the essay is about how a diehard lost his love for the team; skateboarding seems to be the most popular sport mentioned.

The site's layout is simple but classy, echoing my persona of someone who wants clarity but good content, and because there are a lot of topics – there is a simple menu at the top – users can easily return to the site, or get a lot of information. Topics like fashion and travel get represented more than on similar sites, but they are targeted to a user who has taste and wants to get the scoop on something cool, often told in a style that is funny, entertaining and informative.