



Put a price on your content: measuring the value of content and branded content

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The content marketing tidal wave

Content is big business. Across all media channels, organisations are embracing content as a means of communicating, connecting and building relationships with their audiences. Content can be instructional, entertaining, informative or persuasive. Content can take all forms, emerge through all channels and advance all business goals. Well-executed content marketing campaigns can achieve multiple goals simultaneously, generating a direct return while boosting brand awareness and perception metrics.

“Nine out of 10 B2B marketers are using content marketing to grow their businesses.” (Marketing Profs & Junta42, 2010, p. 4)

But big questions remain. How effective is content as a marketing tool? Can the effectiveness of content marketing be evaluated? How should content be produced, and curated? Does content provide a solid return on investment (ROI)?

This white paper is an exploration of the content landscape and an attempt to answer two key questions:

1. What are the challenges of marketing with content?
2. How can organisations measure the ROI of content marketing?

Part 1: The content landscape

Content is everywhere. We're immersed in content – from the moment we wake to the second we sleep – and businesses are looking to content as a long-term solution to common marketing challenges.

“59% of marketers are increasing their content marketing spending in 2010, compared to 56% in 2009 and 42% in 2008. Content is now the engine that makes marketing go.” (Content Marketing Institute)

Marketing with content and branded content

Content seems to be the next big thing. And as with any trend, it's wise to have reservations and to look for evidence before jumping in. So let's consider the perceived benefits of content and consider why so many organisations are investing in content.

What is content, anyway?

'Content' as a term is vague enough to mean many things to many people. For our purposes 'content' means the words, pictures, audio, video, art or experience that is offered to an audience. Content may be freely given, supplemented with ads or paid for by the user.

'Content marketing' can mean using content to attract or retain customers. For example, a travel company might offer destination guides to people trying to choose their next holiday. A technology company might offer free content to users to encourage uptake of a content player. A shoe brand might create content to inspire and entertain people, while creating positive associations to the brand.

Content marketing can be overt or discrete. Content can lead users directly to a goal, or it can exist purely to generate buzz and positive publicity. So content can mean many things and take many forms, but in all cases something of value (the content) is provided, or given, to achieve some organisational goal.

Content as a marketing tool – why bother?

If content is often given away, how can an organisation measure the benefit? And if the content is distributed freely, not part of a sales funnel or transaction, how can the return be assessed?

“Enthusiasm for content marketing is high; however, marketers are still unsure about the effectiveness and impact of individual tactics, distribution channels, and measurement techniques.”
(Marketing Profs & Junta42, 2010, p. 4)

Content is everywhere. It’s abundant and freely shared by digital means. So why pay for it? Why invest in it? Why not scrape together some low-quality content and get marketing?

Well, there are, ostensibly, many reasons to invest in content. Your content can help customers choose. Content can inform and persuade, converting an uncertain prospect into a loyal customer. Content can reassure doubters and convince sceptics. Content can charm your audiences, building emotional connections with the people that matter.

Content can be the catalyst for conversations about your brand and content can turn your website into a hub of information and entertainment. Content can keep people stuck to your website and it can give them a reason to return. Content can improve your web traffic and send your brand into the hands of new audiences.

Quality content engenders loyalty to a site (Online Publishers Association, 2010)

Organisations are using content to gently reach out to consumers, bypassing the tried and tired brand message approach, which has so wearied consumers and corporate buyers alike. The new paradigm prefers brand building – the long-term campaign to build trust and positive brand associations – over short-term advertising, up-selling and promotions.

Research suggests that content works, that content is a vital ingredient in the marketing mix. People want clear information; they want to buy from companies they trust. People want information to help them choose. Buyers are “short on time, yet **content hungry**... thoughtful, yet pragmatic. Buyers are looking for both visionary thought leadership and realistic solutions” (Julie Schwartz, 2011)



Content marketing can work for many types of organisation. While leisure brands and travel firms have obvious connections to exciting content, more workaday items like business software and security equipment can be marketed, in part, with content.

Audiences spend almost 40% of their online time with content of some sort (Online Publishers Association, 2010)

The case for quality content

Done badly, content can be your undoing. There's no denying that content can be complex, time-consuming and costly. Planning a content strategy, producing and editing content, managing the content lifecycle and curating a body of content all require resources and long-term organisational commitment.

At best, poor-quality or mismanaged content can give users a bad experience of your brand. At worst, bad content can offend, annoy or generate bad publicity. Inaccurate or misleading content can even result in litigation.

Poor quality, poorly-considered and incomplete content is the most common cause of abandoned sales online. (Nielsen, 2011) Users aren't just looking for products online, they're looking for *information* about products. Without clear content to help them make decisions, your users are likely to fail in their quest to buy.

On the other hand, research shows that buyers respond positively to clear, informative content that helps them choose. Research into business IT buying decisions found that 30% of respondents were more likely to buy from the business that helps them clarify their needs and suggest solutions. (Julie Schwartz, 2011)

So while the gold rush towards content marketing continues apace, it's essential that organisations consider their responsibilities as publishers.

Done right, content can:

- Help users decide
- Drive traffic to your website
- Give people something to share online
- Encourage users to spend longer on your site – which makes them more likely to convert
- Justify sign-up
- Demonstrate your authority on a subject
- Reward users
- Enhance your brand
- Develop knowledge internally
- Last longer than traditional advertising
- Improve your website’s search engine performance
- Be the catalyst for interactions with your brand (e.g. comments, votes, shares)
- Build trust among new audiences

Methods for producing content

Content commonly takes the form of words, pictures, videos or audio assets. And all those types of content are time-consuming and costly to produce. That’s why any organisation embarking on content marketing must be able to assess the potential returns, and they must have a strategy in place that informs the creation and deployment of content. Before you build, you must plan.

Writing words, making movies

However you decide to *market* with content, you’ll have to navigate the many options for *producing* content. Will you outsource the production, or corral a team of freelancers? Do you have resources in-house, or will you build a permanent team of staff to manage the task? Will you create original content, or licence branded content?

“the largest challenge is “producing the kind of content that engages prospects and customers” (36% of respondents). One fifth say that “producing enough content” (21%) and “budget to produce content” (19%) are their greatest challenge in content marketing.” (Julie Schwartz, 2011)

Pros and cons of different content production methods:

	Pros	Cons
In-house content creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create precisely the content you want • Have complete control over quantity and quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time-consuming and slow time to market • May be costly to acquire additional resources and train / equip etc • Demands new skills and responsibilities
Branded or licensed content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High quality content available almost immediately • May be more affordable than creating original content • Benefit from positive brand associations • Management and curation may be handled by licensor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less direct control • Content you want may not exist
Out-sourced content creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible – produce the content your organisation needs • Speed – external agencies or freelancers may be a fast way to produce content • Choose the best producers to get the best quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependent on third party • Quality must be carefully controlled to avoid damaging brand associations

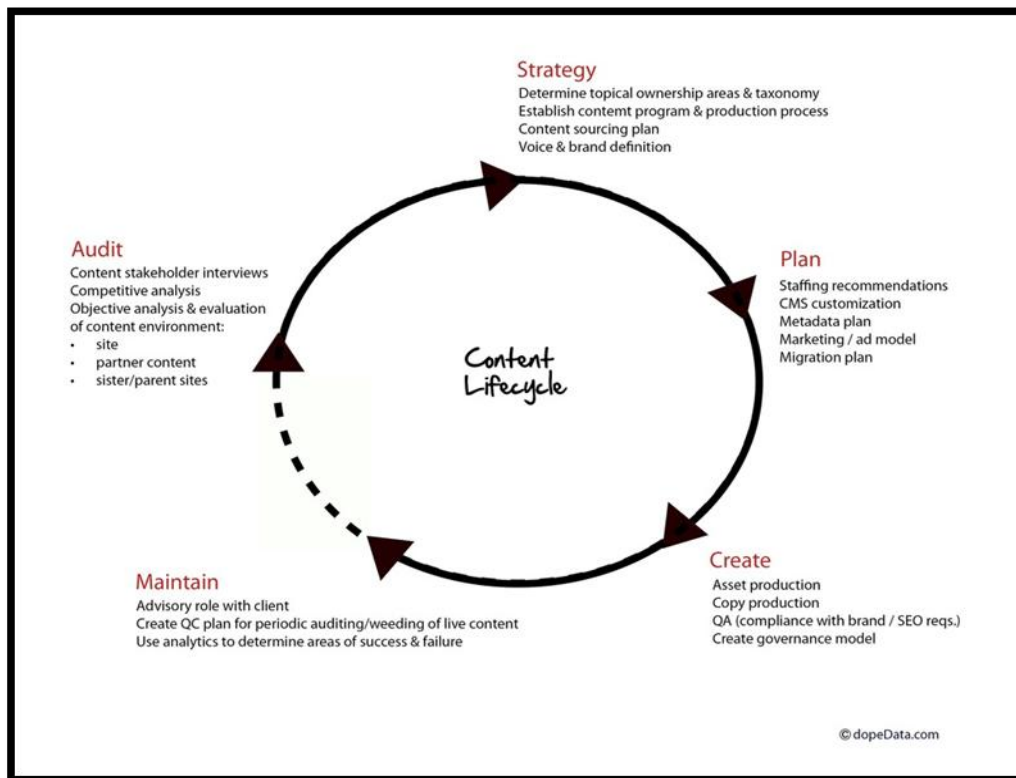
Creating content (and becoming a publisher)

However you source your organisation’s content, you will need to deal with the issues of content creation and curation.

Content marketing involves an entire lifecycle – from conception to creation, through to maintenance and eventual retirement. Content requires planning, management and a strategy. Who will take on these roles? Do you need additional resources to fulfil these functions? Strategists, managers, content producers, editors and designers will all have a job to do – but do you want to hire them?

The average company distributes content 403.8 times per year — more than daily (Custom Content Council, 2011)

The diagram below hints at the multi-faceted challenges of managing an entire content lifecycle. Without proper management, content will not only fail to attract and retain customers, it will actively dissuade and deter customers.



Branded and licensed content

Whether you create content in-house, manage a team of freelancers or engage an agency, you become liable for an entire content lifecycle. An alternative method to achieve the content you need is to use branded or licensed content.

By licensing existing content you can leap-frog many of the content creation stages. The content you choose might undergo customisation to fit your purpose, but the hard graft of generating material has already been done. Content has been written or produced, edited, reviewed, checked for accuracy, maintained and managed for you.

Licensing content from a trusted brand has a secondary benefit, in that users will not only value the content more, they will also trust the content and feel a greater warmth towards, and appreciation of, your organisation.

“People don’t even mind that branded content is selling to them, because they value the information they receive in return.” (GfK Group, 2011)

A key consideration when investing in content is striking a balance between quality and cost. However, it’s reasonable to assume that the best content gets shared, gets noticed and gets people talking.

Part 2: Measuring the ROI of content and branded content

A common concern for marketers embarking on a programme of content marketing is: how do you measure the effectiveness of content marketing? What is the return on investment (ROI) of content? Notions like ‘brand building’ and other ephemeral concepts sound great – but what do they mean in cash terms? What is the financial benefit to a brand of increasing the loyalty of their customers? Is the investment in content a wise one?

“Most people understand that content has value. Big value. They just can’t prove or measure the ROI. And, therefore, they have no concept of how much content is worth.” (Rach, 2009)

Content marketing, much like social media marketing, instinctively feels right, and the signs are positive, but cold hard facts and concrete ROI are often illusive.

The value of content *is* measurable. The results may be imperfect, but they are indicative, providing enough truth to warrant their collection. The key to evaluating the success of content marketing is to reduce uncertainty – to demonstrate whether the investment is worthwhile.

Measuring ROI

Firstly, any measurement must define *what* is being measured. Is success defined by actions (clicks, shares, tweets, downloads, sign-ups, views etc) or by changes in sentiment? Are you hoping to build your brand status or generate interactions?

Content campaigns that seek to enhance user's feelings towards a brand (sentiment) can be assessed and valued. Formal user feedback sessions and casual sentiment analysis can both provide a gauge to the effectiveness of these campaigns.

Once you've defined what you will measure, and what it should achieve, you must attach values to the goals. If improved content leads directly to more conversions, or indirectly to better brand perceptions, what is that worth? If an investment in content leads to improved brand awareness, what is that worth? If people share your content because it's great, what is that worth? What is the value of a re-tweet, for example?

Online interactions can be easily tracked with web analytics programs, and values assigned to them. The crucial step isn't setting up the analytics; it's interpreting the data and translating the stats into meaningful information. It's also important that data isn't viewed in isolation, but compared to benchmarks. If your website traffic increases following a content campaign, how *much* has it increased? And what is that increase worth? How does the value of the increase in traffic compare to the cost of the campaign? And what other value does the content campaign provide? Is the only benefit the additional web traffic? Or is there value in less tangible increases, such as increases in awareness of your brand, or increases in positive sentiment? These intangible factors are no less valuable than clicks and tweets, but it's essential that you attribute a value to them, and consider how positive perceptions and raised awareness are drivers of future sales.

Measuring the ROI of branded content

The UK's BCMA (Branded Content Marketing Association) have developed a new methodology to specifically measure the ROI and performance of branded content. Their branded content evaluation system (Bces) uses distracted exposure techniques to subtly expose consumers to branded content within a mix of material.

Bces aims to determine:

1. How your branded content campaign is performing against key brand metrics, allowing you to determine the ROI
2. Which elements of the campaign are performing the most strongly in meeting the campaign objectives
3. What you could do differently to support the campaign more strongly to optimise its ROI (Branded Content Marketing Association, 2009)

“Across a wide range of advertising metrics, branded content sites outscored Internet industry norms 41 out of 43 times.” (Online Publishers Association, 2008)

The BCMA have also produced a list of ‘golden rules’ (Pointlogic) that pertain to marketing with branded content. They are:

1. Reactions to branded content are more positive than to traditional advertising.
2. Original and interesting branded content can impact positively on your brand.
3. Branded content can have a strong synergy with traditional advertising.
4. The promotion of branded content can itself have a powerful impact on a brand.
5. Combined campaigns can be informative and emotive.
6. Branded content helps you to stand out from your competitors.
7. Branded content is powerful – and with web support is even more powerful.

“Branded content sites are particularly effective at improving two of the most difficult metrics to impact: brand favorability and purchase intent. When it comes to brand favorability, branded content sites provide a 29% improvement over average online advertising performance in MarketNorms.” (Improving Ad Performance Online: The Impact of Advertising on Branded Content Sites, 2008)

Summary

Content is proved as an effective marketing tool, one that carries many secondary benefits. Key challenges for organisations wanting to adopt content marketing include content production, content curation and ROI measurement.

The ROI of content marketing might initially seem elusive, but with a clear strategy in place organisations can seek and find clear evidence of success.



This White Paper has been commissioned by the DK & Rough Guides Content Solutions Team. For more information on digital and creative content solutions, please contact:

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