

Passnotes

Best Practice in PR and Marketing



THE HENLEY GROUP INTERNATIONAL

Marketing Contentment: Getting the best from content marketing

In recent years, content marketing has become all the rage. The internet is awash with tips on getting the most from content marketing, and advice on integrating it with SEO activity, tying it to inbound marketing, or using it as a lead generation tool are only a search term away. Given the buzz around the subject, it would seem that content marketing is very “now”. In fact, it’s been around for years.

Consider the world-famous Michelin Guide, first introduced in 1900. The Guide provided French motorists with useful information such as practical help on car repairs and maps of the newly emerging road network. It helpfully listed car mechanics, hotels and petrol stations. The broader aim, of course, was to stimulate interest in motoring - driving demand for cars and, in so doing, selling more tyres. Another much-quoted example of early content marketing is *The Furrow*, a magazine for farmers that agricultural equipment manufacturer John Deere started publishing in 1895. It’s still produced today.

CLEARING UP THE CONFUSION

So while content marketing isn't particularly new, there does seem to be a lot of confusion about what it is, and how it is best used.

This white paper provides a basic overview of content marketing and shows how it has grown in importance. It also reveals how content marketing can help business-to-business organisations build a presence in 'paid', 'owned' and 'earned' media.

For some marketers, content is simply the 'stuff' that their marketing departments create and send out the door. This narrow definition sees it purely in terms of the marketing collateral produced to aid the sales process.

However, some confusion is caused because it is incorrectly conflated with online activity. When asked, some marketers explain content marketing from an online perspective - in terms of their experiences with SEO, inbound marketing, or social media. The conversation soon turns to clicks, page views, and the latest social media platform.

Yet in its broadest sense, content marketing works online and offline, in digital and in print. It works in person, and on video. It's an approach, not a particular activity or set of tools.

CONTENT MARKETING

Is the term given to the development of valuable and stimulating content, which is then shared with targeted audiences - with the aim of building sales and developing customer loyalty.

ADDING VALUE TO MARKETING

The key word in the above definition is 'valuable'. Content marketing works best when something of intrinsic value is shared. Indeed, Content Marketers seek to generate and share materials that audiences will actively seek out and enjoy consuming. In turn, this means the resulting marketing messages are more personal and relevant to consumers, and the brand engages with them on a deeper level. In this respect it can be seen as a reaction to the 'one to many' mass-media advertising better associated with TV advertising, although that would be to deny its usefulness with mainstream media.

A content marketing approach might involve sharing tips and tricks to get the best out of a product or service. Examples include the recipe cards that supermarkets give to shoppers, or the driving tuition days which car manufacturers offer loyal buyers. Done well, it develops a conversation with the consumer, builds loyalty, and guides them along a defined sales process.

In a business-to-business environment, content marketing might involve sharing commercial insight such as market information or industry research. It might include producing white papers on business trends, or delivering opinion-based presentations at industry events.

Indeed, when looked at through the lens of content marketing, even the dullest of sales and marketing collateral can take on a new and vibrant hue. Technical documentation can be transformed from a reluctant necessity into stimulating content that provides added value and builds customer loyalty, for example.

TYPICAL CONTENT MARKETING ACTIVITIES

White papers – Sharing experience, technical expertise or industry insight

Infographics – Presenting market research, data and statistics that tell a story

Case Studies – Outlining customer experience and demonstrating best practice

Videos – Featuring case studies, practical 'how to' advice and product overviews
Blog posts – Establishing a stance, initiating debates and sharing opinions

Webinars / Webcasts – Providing market insight, learning and training

DEVELOPMENTS IN CONTENT MARKETING

Clearly, content marketing has moved on since the early efforts of Michelin and John Deere, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the way that the content is now delivered to the target audience.

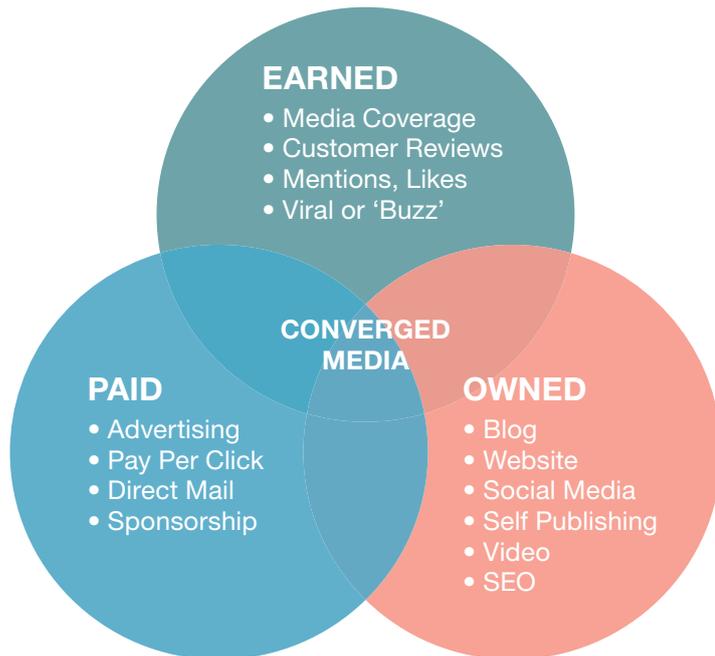
The emergence and availability of technology such as digital media production software, CRM systems and large-scale social media platforms such as YouTube, allow marketers to produce their own content and get it directly to the target audience with great effect. This has transformed the generation and use of marketing content.

Another, more recent development in content marketing, is its growing role in supporting other digital marketing channels. It serves up valuable content for social media channels such as Twitter or LinkedIn. It supports SEO efforts by generating inbound website traffic from clicks, and builds a better profile on search engines that place greater value on websites loaded with regularly updated, useful content.

It has also found a place in broader, so-called 'inbound marketing' strategies, where the objective is to invite the customer into the organisation. Here, it's used to draw prospects in through online and social media activity, while the marketing process is automated to provide tailored content at different stages of the buying cycle.

CONTENT MARKETING AND THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Crucially, content marketing lends itself to use across all three of the so-called 'paid', 'owned' and 'earned' types of media. For those unfamiliar with the terms, these describe the three types of media that marketing activity typically targets through a range of activities. Each has specific advantages and disadvantages, yet differs in how it is obtained. A fourth type of media – social, or shared media - is often now included alongside these, but for the purposes of this paper it is subsumed into the three existing categories.



USING CONTENT MARKETING WITH PAID, OWNED AND EARNED MEDIA

Content marketing can underpin efforts to gain paid media, and can be used to augment traditional advertising, direct mail and sponsorship activity. However, it has perhaps found a more natural home amongst those seeking owned media, and who use content marketing as the engine to drive blogs, social media, white papers and video channels, amongst other disciplines.

Examples of owned media gained through content marketing include the customer magazines published by supermarkets, and which build a closer and unmediated relationship with the consumer. Others have pushed the notion of owned media even further. Hotel chain Marriott makes and distributes its own films, in an example of a drive by marketers towards 'branded content'. Its first feature, a heist story set in its Los Angeles hotel, has attracted over 5 million views on YouTube.

Content Marketing has great potential when used to secure earned media, also, although this gets more complicated. Earned media is, quite rightly, valued more highly than paid or owned media: a 2013 Nielsen study found that earned media is most trusted, and most likely to stimulate the consumer to action. Whether it takes the form of a word of mouth recommendation or online review, a letter to a newspaper, or editorial in an influential trade publication, earned media is valuable because a third party makes the case of the product or service. Social media likes, comments and mentions fall into this category also.

Employing a content marketing strategy to gain earned media places greater demands on the quality of the content itself. Central to achieving earned media is the successful negotiation of a selection, or editorial, process that allows the content to be picked up, featured and commented upon - or rejected as being old news, of insufficient interest, or too commercial in nature. Independent online reviewers can't be bought or bullied into positive comments.

Crucially, this reinforces the need for traditional media relations skills amongst marketers. Knowing what is a good story, and how it fits with a media outlet's interests, or appeals to a blog's readers, is key. Selling in that story requires skill, and the content developed to support that pitch has to be of the highest quality.

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Of course, using content marketing to gain paid and owned media is not without challenge either. Issues of authority and authorship surround the use of content marketing to generate paid and owned media.

For example, does the creator of a white paper on the state of the market have the authority to merit the reader's attention? Are its arguments drawn from genuine business experience, and do they add to the reader's understanding of the issues? This poses further challenges to organisations that lack brand awareness, or seek to enter new sectors without a track record. Engaging content on its own cannot compensate for a lack of brand awareness.

Finally, consider the content provided to customers as a stream of nourishing information. If that flow is interrupted or the value diluted, any traction gained can soon be lost. There is no machine that will automatically spew out content - or, at least, not the type of content which customers and prospects will attach any value to.

Successful content marketing requires organisations to dedicate considerable time and energy if it is to deliver a return on investment. It makes sense to find an external partner if internal resources aren't up to the task.

GETTING THE BEST FROM CONTENT MARKETING

1. SEGMENT AUDIENCES

Segment and prioritise your audience and identify what makes them tick. This allows for the personalisation of messages that will resonate with the intended audience.

2. DESIGN A CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

Develop a plan that aligns content marketing activity to a specific sales push such as a product launch or sector focus. Put sales resources and metrics in place from the outset

3. GET THE SYSTEMS RIGHT

Ensure that platforms such as social media channels are in place and allow for easy sharing of content. Make the website easy to use and ensure content is easily found. Setup website analytics, SEO, and a clear process for handling leads.

4. PROVIDE VALUE

Identify the areas where you have authority. Consider what it is that you do best, how this may be of interest to your audience, and how content to support it can provide real value and generate interest.

5. KEEP THE MESSAGE TIGHT

High quality content relies on consistent, nuanced, well-presented, persuasive and engaging copy, audio and images. It needs to support key business messages, and touch on customer needs and desires.

6. MERCHANDISE CONTENT

Once a subject is developed, re-package it and re-use the content across additional channels and in different formats. This takes it to the widest possible audience while allowing the comparison of the effectiveness of the marketing channels amongst different target audiences.

7. ENCOURAGE INTERACTION

Ensure that interactivity is built into the very fibre of the content from the outset. It must allow for easy sharing and commenting. This encourages the audience to interact with your content and drives earned media opportunities.

8. CHOOSE PARTNERS WISELY

PR is the best placed of all the marketing disciplines to handle content generation. PR departments and agencies have the messaging, communications and technical skills that the consistent and timely delivery of engaging content requires.

Copies of other Passnotes, the Henley Group's guides to best practice in PR and marketing, can be downloaded at www.henley.co.uk



The Henley Group is a specialist PR agency with over thirty years' experience helping mainly B2B organisations realise their PR and marketing goals. Client experience includes work for some of the best known technology and industrial brands, as well as high-tech start-ups, not-for-profits and businesses seeking to secure a foothold in the UK.

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