

Developing a content marketing strategy

Marc Keating
Head of DigitalIAS b2b Marketing

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Introduction

New social media channels and Web 2.0 tools and technologies have breathed new life into the role of content marketing. In today's modern world, content consumption has moved from the printed word to all forms of interactive content, including podcasts, e-books, Web TV episodes, whitepaper downloads, animation and blogs. Now the prospect or consumer pulls your content based on its ability to educate and engage, which means your brand is becoming ever more virtual and a provider of on-demand content experiences.

To meet the needs and expectations of your target markets your content strategy has to identify the segmented needs of each audience, their preferred way of consuming your content and the channels they use to source and receive information at different stages of the research and purchasing timeline.

With more and more content living outside the boundaries of the traditional Web site, content not only has to work within the channel it's placed, it also has to be considered as part of a connected user journey that directs users to engage further with the brand. Therefore content can't be planned in isolation; it has to integrate with the wider creative and marketing strategy.

This whitepaper explores the latest techniques for content marketing, looking at everything from a Tweet to a whitepaper, developing a strategic plan, successful content creation, channel integration and the pitfalls to avoid.

Setting objectives

Understanding your target audiences

If content is king, then context is queen. With all forms of content, it has to be relevant to its intended target audience if it's going to be viewed, engaged with and add value to the brand experience. For content to be relevant it has to help the prospect or customer with a problem and/or task at a specific point in their research and purchasing journey or conversion funnel.

Before creating your content strategy you must review all your target audiences, the point that they will be involved in the purchasing process (researching, reviewing, short listing, evaluation, etc) and their specific issues and needs at each stage of the process. This will help you identify the different wants and needs of the various stakeholders in the DMU (decision making unit), enabling you to plot out the types of content that will be relevant to your audiences at each stage. At this stage you should also identify content that already exists within the organisation (brochures, case studies, datasheets, etc) that can be repurposed and the gaps where content needs to be produced.

As you define your audiences you should determine the types and formats of content that are going to be the most relevant to each of them. For example, if you're trying to communicate a technical issue, an animated video might be a more effective at delivering the message clearly and concisely than a whitepaper. For audiences that are on the move, a downloadable audio podcast might be more useful than printed content. Content format is not only important from a relevancy point of view but also from a distribution perspective in terms of the social channels, where the content will finally reside.

While evaluating your different target audiences you also need to identify the touch-points that they will be using at each stage to source and receive information as this will help define the distribution strategy for your content and any barriers (connectivity, browsers, etc) to access that need to be addressed.

Setting content marketing goals and KPIs

With an outline of your content plan segmented by audience, you can start to think about what you're trying to achieve with each item of content, i.e.: brand awareness, customer retention/loyalty, lead generation, customer acquisition, Web site traffic, thought leadership, sales, lead nurturing.

It helps to consider the conversion funnel again and each stage of the research and purchasing journey your prospects and customers will go through. Review what your goals are at each stage. To get prospects to enter the funnel you need to generate awareness in the market, so consider content formats that are effective at promoting thought leadership and advice on relevant topic areas that prospects will be actively searching for information and advice on. Blogs and whitepapers are both effective content formats to achieve this as both can be SEO optimised with relevant keywords, enhancing your chances of being discovered through Google and other search engines. Whitepapers are also multidimensional content assets as they can be distributed on e-mail, shared within social media channels (LinkedIn whitepapers, Scribd, etc) and snippets from the whitepaper can be Tweeted with the objective of driving traffic to the download.

As prospects become aware of your brand, they are more likely to explore your Web site to discover detailed content to help them during their research phase. It helps at this stage if you can start to identify the lead by persuading the prospect to register for premium content assets, such as Webinars, Podcasts, Web TV episodes or more detailed whitepapers. By identifying the prospect and their requirements you can start to nurture the lead through the use of more targeted, personalised content and triggered e-mails that keep the prospect engaged during what could be a long purchasing timeline.

As the prospect will probably need to influence other stakeholders within the DMU, make it easy for them to share content through 'forward to a colleague' e-mail features or formats that can be easily downloaded and digested.

Remember that not every prospect will want to register for content, so get a balance between freely available content (freemium) and registration only content (premium). Dedicated landing pages that promote the benefits of premium content over the freemium content can help increase conversions.

Developing a content marketing strategy

Your content strategy planning needs to balance both static and dynamic content types. Static content types are content assets that describe your products, services and solutions and will probably only be created and updated once every few years. These will usually include brochures, datasheets, technical information, etc, and will typically be the backbone of your content strategy and your information provision to prospects and customers. Although these types of content will be useful to prospects during the final discovery and evaluation stages of the purchase process, they are not the types of content that are going to get prospects engaged and excited in the early stages of the research process. This is where you need dynamic content that can be created on a regular basis, promoted mainly through social media channels and designed to pull prospects through to your Web site.

As social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc, will form the primary distribution channels for your content strategy you have to ensure that you have a sustained plan if you want to build an ongoing presence and dialogue that prospects using these channels will engage with and continue to follow. This requires the development of a content plan and distribution schedule with activity broken down with quarterly, monthly, weekly and daily activity streams. The plan will typically describe who in the organisation is going to create the required content, the content format (blog, video, whitepaper, etc), the content theme (thought leadership, educational, case study, etc), the channel where the content will reside (Slideshare, Scribd, YouTube, Web site, etc), and the channel that will be used to promote and market the content (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc).

Having a structured plan will enable you to plan resource for both content creation and distribution, while also enabling you to align your content planning activities against other brand communication and campaigns. Always build contingency into your plan so your strategy can adapt and react to changes in the social media space, including new topic discussions, competitor activity and market trends. Using social media monitoring tools like Radian6, Google Insights or the Google Keyword generator, can provide a good snapshot of the trends and conversations taking place in the on-line space.

Integration with existing marketing activity

Creative and brand integration

As discussed in the previous chapter, your content strategy has to be aligned against other brand and campaign activity to ensure it is fully integrated into the wider marketing activity of the business. To standout in a crowded content market you have to ensure that your content is creatively engaging. As most content will be discovered outside of the brand Web site through search or social media we are now asking prospects to spend time engaging with the brand, which means that we have to give users a reason to visit and deliver something of value.

'Playtime' is fast becoming the new 'Airtime', which means the time that the user spends engaging with content and Web tools, can be more powerful than them being exposed to a one-off 30 second 'Push' advert. Creative engagement with content can range from the use of the channel that's going to house the content or the format of the content asset itself. The more engaging, interactive and creative prospects find your content the bigger the chance your content will be shared/posted across social channels and/or forwarded to other stakeholders in the DMU, which ultimately increases its opportunity to be found.

The need for creativity within content now means that campaign creative now has to be multidimensional and capable of working as a big campaign idea, but also capable of being integrated with the social Web and working at the lowest level i.e. as a whitepaper or a video.

Channel integration

As more and more research into your brand and services is now being conducted outside of the brand Web site you have to ensure that your content can be found within the social channels that prospects are using to gain knowledge and ask questions.

This means that when you come to plan your content strategy, you have to consider content formats that are going to enable you to gain exposure through the primary channels used by the B2B purchaser including YouTube, Twitter, Slideshare, Scribd and LinkedIn. Covering all the bases not only increases your chances of being found within search but it also provides the prospect with a range of content formats to consume your information, for example, a user might prefer to watch a quick YouTube video or skip through some slides on Slideshare than spending time downloading and reading a detailed whitepaper.

The recent move by Google to include a social search function that enables the user to filter searches by blogs, forum posts, tweets and videos, also means that there is more chance that users will choose to filter by these options to experience multimedia content instead of the standard search results. The more content you have within these options increases your brand's digital footprint and chances of being discovered. A social search strategy requires the same approach as on-page search optimisation, meaning that you have to consider the keywords users will use as part of their research journey to ensure your content is not only optimised within the channel it's posted, but also within Google itself.

Once your content has been posted within its relevant channel (YouTube, Slideshare, etc) you now have to consider how you're going to promote it. The beauty of social content formats is that you can use elements of content across multiple channels. For example if you've created a blog post on your Web site, a range of snippets from the blog, i.e.: a quote, statistic, sound-byte, can be re-purposed and posted as a Tweet, Facebook update and/or LinkedIn update. The topic of the blog can also be used as a discussion within a LinkedIn group, which would contain a link to the blog for users looking for more information. The same approach within LinkedIn can be used for promoting whitepapers, which can be linked to Web site landing pages designed to capture data and the promote premium content versions.

Resource allocation and content creation

Creating your content

The biggest challenge with content marketing is actually creating the content itself. You need to make the decision of how much is going to be developed in house vs how much external support you require. The answer to this question will depend on the types of content you need to create and the format.

If content is going to be posted within the social space such as blogs and forums it's imperative that the voice of the brand comes from individuals within your business, to ensure your brand remains authentic and trustworthy. If this is the route you plan to adopt you have to set out the guidelines and rules for engagement and define the tone of voice for content that is going to be created by your internal team. A content and social media etiquette policy can prove a useful tool to guide employees through the minefield of content creation and social media engagement.

Typically the role of the agency in content marketing is to provide creative support either in message communication or the development of engaging content experiences, which could include a viral video, content asset or widget added to the brand Web site as part of a campaign.

With some content formats you have to define the level of quality that is appropriate to the channel, for example creating a video that can be placed on YouTube can now be created with a creative imagination, a graphics package and a £100 camera. In some cases a low budget video production is enough to do the job and can be just as effective as a fully edited, scripted production. If video is going to be one of your primary communication tools, turning an office into a full time production hub could be a good move and a first step to creating a more professional and polished creation. Taking the low budget approach enables you to invest more budget in the production of more videos, which means that you have the opportunity to command more space in the channels you would distribute your content.

Creating the right team

To support a content marketing strategy you have to dedicate enough time and resource to not only create the content in the first place but also to manage and handle feedback from users that engage with the content, which could be both positive and negative. This requires dedication from the business and an agreed "service level agreement" that ensures guaranteed response times for content feedback and response management from different teams within your organisation. It's important to consider the different touch-points that your content strategy could impact on within the business, so consider developing a multidimensional team that includes representatives from marketing, sales, technical, R&D, support and HR.

In many cases the impact of content marketing and social media requires organisations to think differently about the structures of their internal departments as never before has marketing impacted on so many different disciplines within the business. The role of the marketing professional is changing to reflect this, with many now being responsible for content production, social media management, distribution and social media monitoring and tracking. As content is becoming the new "Oil" of the information age, the organisations that know how to extract content, package it and distribute will be the ones that flourish in the information economy.

Making your internal knowledge experts the face of your content and social marketing strategy is another tactic worth considering as it demonstrates to the market that you have domain experts and real people capable of delivering the products and services you're communicating to the market. This builds trust with potential prospects and promotes an authentic tone of voice. Taking this approach has to be managed with caution though - a well promoted expert from your organisation can always be easily snapped up by the competition, meaning that the market credibility and awareness that's been achieved can be lost overnight.

Communicating the strategy

A content marketing strategy that's supported by digital content assets such as blogs, whitepapers and videos is not only going to put a demand on the marketing teams but also the wider team within the business that will be generating and contributing to your content strategy.

Not everyone in the business will see the value of social content formats and channels such as blogs, YouTube, LinkedIn, as they are so new to some individuals and not always associated with usage from the business community. You need to build a business case for your content strategy that demonstrates how your target audiences are switching their consumption of media and the need for the brand to have a presence among the new emerging channels that could be utilised by prospects to discover the brand. Demonstrating this with the use of statistics, competitor activity and examples of relevant discussions will help you sell the social and content marketing dream. Be clear to outline the overall content plan, the related timings and the expectations, roles and responsibilities of everybody within your team.

Content roll out

When you're ready to roll out your content marketing strategy and distribute your content across the various channels in which it will reside, you have to consider how you will track and monitor the spaces where your content has been published and promoted. In some cases this can be quite a challenge if you're promoting content across multiple groups, blog posts and forums. Keeping a content audit of every place that you have distributed and/or seeded your content will help you to remember your content trail, enabling you to track comments and engagement levels. Using bit.ly links and Google Campaign tracking codes will also enable you to manage and monitor click-throughs and traffic volumes from each of the channels where your content has been placed.

Troubleshooting and factors to consider

Reputation management

Once your content has been pushed into the social space it's there for the world to see and if you are starting and engaging in discussions you have to remember that your conversations are taking place in front of a live audience. The positive benefit of this is that you can be seen to be leading the debate and the authority of your market. This means that you need to have a structured and responsive approach to managing comments and feedback generated surrounding your content.

You will need to consider how you will respond to both positive and negative comments, who will manage the process and how quickly you will aim to respond. You also have to consider how you manage discussions and conversations that take place outside of the domains that you have posted your content within. Often your content can be re-shared by users within other social networks you're not aware of such as Digg, Technorati, etc, or embedded within individual blogs and forums. That is why using social media monitoring tools, such as Radian6, are such a vital tool when it comes to monitoring your brand perception in the wider social space and controlling where your content is being shared and commented on.

Planning for the long term

The most important part of a content marketing strategy is that it has to be sustained. As you use content to increase blog views, Twitter followers, Facebook friends, LinkedIn group members and overall Web site traffic and engagement, you are building a dialogue with that user, prospect or customer. If you get your content strategy right and deliver content that is relevant to your target audiences they will clamber to pull more and more content from your brand and you will have proved that the shift from outbound to inbound marketing is the way to conquer your market and increase leads and conversions. Once you've built momentum don't stop! The more content you create and the more you share it the bigger the engagement tsunami will become.

Summary

The 10 key points to take away from this whitepaper:

- Understand your target audiences and their specific wants and needs, so you can define their key content requirements at different stages of the purchasing timeline
- Set goals for what you want to achieve with each item of content and measure effectiveness with clear KPIs
- Develop a content plan that outlines who is going to create the content, the channel you're going to place it in and how you're going to promote it
- Utilise a range of different content formats, i.e. blogs, whitepapers, videos, etc, to ensure you can deliver prospects and customer with a choice of how they can engage with your brand
- The more engaging you make your content the more chance you have of it being discovered and shared. Think of creative ways you can present and deliver your content and messages
- Consider how you can leverage content for lead generation and ensure you get a balance between freely available content and registration only content
- Integrate your content strategy with both off-line and on-line channels to ensure maximum exposure
- Create a multifunctional team, that touches all parts of the organisation from HR to Sales and ensure you communicate your plan and what's expected from each contributor
- Create a plan and process for how you're going to manage both positive and negative comments and feedback
- Create a content strategy that can be sustained long term. You don't want to build a dedicated following only to loose them through a lack of content engagement

Marc Keating | Head of Digital, IAS b2b Marketing

Marc leads the development of digital strategies and innovations at IAS b2b Marketing, including the development of award winning Web sites, contact strategies and digital marketing campaigns for the world's leading B2B brands. During his time at IAS he has also pioneered the development of DialogManager a powerful technology platform comprising a range of custom built B2B marketing tools, which is shaping a new way of communication in the B2B sector.

Marc joined IAS three years ago following the acquisition of his digital marketing agency by Media Square plc. Prior to that Marc worked at IDG, where he was responsible for the creation and launch of "The Web" magazine, the first Internet news-stand magazine launched in the UK. He also founded the organisation's UK Web division, which delivered projects for Granada Television and LWT.

IAS b2b Marketing
Clarence Mill, Clarence Road
Bollington, Cheshire SK10 5JZ

T: +44 (0) 1625 578 578
E: info@iasb2b.com
W: www.iasb2b.com

ias
b2b marketing