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The Content Marketing Revolution

BY ALEXANDER JUTKOWITZ

We are, at present, in the midst of a historic transformation for brands and companies everywhere — and it centers on content.

Nine out of ten organizations are now marketing with content — that is, going beyond the traditional sales pitches and instead enhancing brands by publishing (or passing along) relevant information, ideas, and entertainment that customers will value. The success of content marketing has radicalized the way companies communicate. For innovative brands, an award-winning Tumblr now carries serious clout; hashtag campaigns have become as compelling as taglines; and the Digiday Awards are as coveted as the Stevies. The content marketing revolution signals more than a mere marketing fad. It marks an important new chapter in the history of business communications: the era of corporate enlightenment.

The phenomenon of content marketing and brand publishing has unfolded rapidly because it responds to consumer preference. According to the Content Marketing Institute, 70% of people would rather learn about a company via an article than an ad. Even *The New York Times* admits that native advertisements can perform as well as the paper's own news content. Brand publishing allows companies to react in real time, provide increased transparency, and create a strong brand identity at a fraction of the price of traditional marketing tactics, and in less time.

Yet where brand publishing has had the most profound impact is in empowering organizations to create, facilitate, and leverage the ownership of ideas. That's largely because great sponsored content is born from a company's exchange of proprietary knowledge.

When it's done right, brand publishing encourages companies to mine internal resources and expertise in order to become intellectual agents. Today, large corporations are becoming their own media companies, news bureaus, research universities, and social networks.

The rise of in-house broadcast further illustrates this. Big brands are poaching top-talent journalists in droves and implementing the most successful aspects of the traditional media house. Former journalist Hamish McKenzie is now lead writer at Tesla, *USA Today*'s Michelle Kessler is now Editor-in-Chief at Qualcomm Spark, and Andreessen Horowitz lured Michael Copeland from *Wired*. Why? Because trained journalists and writers are in the best position to synthesize information, capture a reader's attention, and uphold a critical editorial standard. That means establishing an organizational complex that pairs great writers with better editors and incorporates a discerning chain of command, with a managing editor at the helm.

Yet, it would be misguided to assume that corporations are simply transplanting the traditional newsroom. Branded content is a brave new world and a brand's editorial team, regardless of how it's organized, must learn to live and breathe a company's bottom line while also being mindful of

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ABOUT THE **AUTHOR**

Alexander Jutkowitz is a vice chairman and the chief global strategist at Hill+Knowlton Strategies and managing partner for the agency's content subsidiary, Group SJR.

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the kinds of stories that appeal to readers. The editorial organization within a corporation has to be independent enough to form unique perspectives, but embedded enough to access exclusive information.

This kind of commitment to storytelling and editorial integrity, albeit shaped by sponsorship, is undoubtedly how content marketing has begun to encroach on the whole of marketing. Content, it seems, has miraculously given brands a greater purpose.

Brands are no longer merely peddling products; they're producing, unearthing, and distributing information. And because they do, the corporation becomes not just economically important to society, but intellectually essential as well.

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One of our most innovative clients, General Electric, is a pioneer in content marketing because the company is unafraid to transform internal knowledge about various subjects, from aircraft mechanics to wind turbines, into headline-worthy articles, viral GIFs, corporate microsites, and Tumblr followers. The result marks an evolution for the brand from a company that makes things to a company that produces ideas. Through content, GE establishes itself as a brand in possession of constant newsworthy knowledge.

Red Bull is proof of the extraordinary results great brand publishing can bring. The company's top-notch content resulted in the creation of an in-house content production arm, Red Bull Media House. Red Bull crafts content that isn't just compelling, but lucrative in its own right, launching an entirely new ideas-based business for the beverage company.

Unexpected brands like Equinox and Shutterstock use exclusive insight to give audiences useful and actionable content. Equinox's Q taps into the luxury gym's network for nutritional recipes, hotel room workouts, and fitness tips from personal trainers—no membership required. Shutterstock's website presents a tour de force of art, graphic design, and technology that is in parts entertaining, educational, informative, and cultured. That it's sponsored is an important afterthought—audiences will return to their site for the information, whether they buy stock images or not. Herein is the opportunity: via content, companies can evolve beyond the sum of their products.

Content, when it aligns with exemplary brand publishers of our time, gives companies a new opportunity that didn't necessarily exist in the last century. Conventional wisdom told brands to keep knowledge quiet, to put "trade secrets" under indefinite embargo and to let exclusive information gather dust in corporate archives. But with the advent of the Internet, social media, and the dispersal of knowledge in every direction, corporations are in the unique position to distribute the information they've gathered in exchange for audiences, readership, and brand loyalty.

The Age of Reason in the 17th century was defined by the promotion of ideas and intellect. Considered a revolution of human thought, the Enlightenment bore world-changing advances in the form of ideas, discovery, and invention. Like the philosophers and scientists who populated the salons of that era, corporations today can and should participate in the dynamic exchange of innovative ideas, unique knowledge, and expertise.

Of course, not all brands can—or should—be expected to cover scientific breakthroughs or economic theory, but every brand can do better than a contrived content marketing strategy. Ninety percent of B2C marketers use content in their strategy, but few brands recognize the real opportunity in doing so.

Content can be the means by which a brand shapes and impacts business and consumer landscapes; it can be a thoughtful investment in a company's legacy. Armed with quality content, corporations can become thought leaders, change agents, and experts. They can, in fact, become enlightened.