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Introduction

What is content marketing? Creating and sharing content to promote your product or service. Yawn, that was boring.

Perhaps a little wordy, but how about this: content marketing is the art and science of engaging your potential buyers in a conversation long before they say hello, so they're more likely to buy from you.

Wait, isn't that social marketing? It is that too, but either way it's about a conversation.

Content marketing is not new, but the way B2B and B2C buyers evaluate their needs, understand the possibilities and select with whom to do business is radically different. The combination of the web, mobile and social means buyers look for information from, depending on what study you read, 6, 8 or even 11 sources before they ever formally "talk " to you.

"We're entering an era of reciprocity. We now have to engage people in a way that's useful or helpful to their lives ... To put it another way: How can we exchange value instead of just sending a message?"

Jim Lecinski. Winning the Zero Moment of Truth. Zook, 2011.

They're trying to get a handle on how to understand the needs they have, what others think about various approaches, what's hot and what's not, what the risks are, and where to buy the product or service.

Just to make things more complicated, the kinds of information buyers seek change as they progress through the buying cycle.

One of the big challenges in this model is that content marketing requires ... content. And because there's so much of it now, we realize that content marketing means content managing.

Creating, maintaining, and, yes, managing all of that content is hard work. So how do you organize your marketing organization - and tools - to get the best results and not get swamped? What content do you create? How do you create content that matters? How do you manage all this content without duplicate effort and lost documents?

Here are 6 essential steps to doing the hard work of content marketing.

1. Start with your audience

While it's the first rule in sales and marketing, we all know how easy it is to start "talking" before we understand to whom we're speaking, and what they care about.

Tactics to consider are:

- Think of the individuals you're trying to reach not as leads or potential customers, but as an audience, a readership.
- Find out what they're interested in. The Internet, search analysis and social media make this easier than ever, but don't forget to just ask them too.
- Write it down. Make sure you really understand who your audience is and what they want by forcing the team to put it in writing. This can also make sure your marketing teammates and sales team are on the same page.
- Make it interesting. Now you know how to make your content relevant, so the challenge is to make it useful and credible.
- Talk like a real person. Unless you're marketing to quantum physicists, it shouldn't sound like you're writing about quantum physics. Most of what we do in business isn't that complicated, it just sounds that way. Be authoritative, but stop the jargon and 6-syllable words.

2. Create a Plan

To make sure you are getting the right content to the right buyers, have a plan. Think of it like an editorial calendar for a publication so you have clear expectations on the who, what and when of the content to feed your marketing machine.

Tactics to consider are:

- Imagine what you could do. Starting with your audiences, initiatives and buying phases, create a grid of possible content.
- Catalog existing pieces. Some may need revision, but others may be "perennials" - those valuable pieces that people will always want to read.
- Build a strong foundation. Based on marketing objectives, identify core content pieces to create a foundation for your content marketing initiatives. Often these are thought leadership pieces based on custom research or models, or the standard sales collateral that will be everywhere.
- Source it. Who in your organization can be a subject matter expert and who help those experts polish finished pieces? We've often found that the more strategic professional services consultants have great insights, and of course product management, marketing and executives are often good sources. Look at internal vs. external resources as subject matter experts or writers. Don't forget 3rd party sources such as analyst firms and brand name consultants as great ways to get authoritative, independent material.

From working through all this you now have a schedule. Six things to track in your schedule:

1. Type of content. Video, white paper, FAQ, byline article, blog post, podcast, webinar
2. Owner. Someone has to own it when it will be complete. You will have nurture, web campaigns that rely on the content
3. Title. Spend time on this because your title really matters.
4. Buying stage. Early, middle or late state; or education, awareness, consideration
5. Buyer segment. Job title, role, geography
6. Overall campaign. Grouping around a specific marketing campaign, theme or category

3. Work to the plan

Make the content. This is when a little inspiration turns into magic with a lot of perspiration.

Tactics to consider are:

- Make time. Set aside bi-weekly (or whatever frequency makes sense for you) time slots to work on content
- Create a workspace. Have a central, easily accessible library of in-process materials. Make sure everyone involved, including your agencies, can access the appropriate materials.
- Organize. Organize your work-in-progress using the information in your schedule like type of content, status, due date and owner.
- Automate it. The less time you spend chasing content, the more time you can spend creating compelling content. Use technology to drive collaboration and review cycles, so getting the best input and sign-offs is a snap.
- Track it. Create a dashboard of what's in process, what's due to kick-off soon, what's overdue, who is a roadblock. Don't forget to also have a view of what's been completed!

4. Don't Forget the Sales Team

Your sales team will want to use all this great content, too. The key here is to make it easy. Easy for them to find the right content, and easy for them to use it.

Tactics to consider are:

- Give it a home. Create a sales library, a single place where the sales team knows where to go, and where the most current content is always available.
- Make it self-service. Give the sales team easy ways to search for, browse and use the most powerful content for the segment and stage. If you really want to make it easy, you can even suggest relevant content for an opportunity within your CRM.
- Don't forget partners. Channel, services and marketing partners have the same needs as your sales team, plus current logos, latest approved advertising, co-op program materials.
- Track it. You have great analytics for online marketing, don't forget to monitor which content the sales team uses most and uses least. Some times it take marketing of your marketing collateral.

5. Reuse, re-imagine

One of the best ways to create content is to start from something you already have. White papers can be leveraged into web copy, blog posts, guest articles and more, so you can get great leverage from your investment in useful and relevant content.

Three tactics to use:

1. What's hot, what's not. Between your marketing platform, web analytics and sales/marketing library, you can quickly see which content is engaging your audience, so you can double down on the content that is already working for you. One simple test for thought leadership programs is what content causes your audience to come back for more.
2. Back to the plan. The plan described earlier is an easy tool to quickly see where you can extend core content pieces.
3. It's all relative. Use your plan and content library to keep track of your "content extensions" so you have a clear view of what is impacted when you need to make updates and changes.

6. Keep it Fresh

With markets, best practices, your product or service and even branding elements changing all the time, your content will probably need regular reviews. Some content by its nature, such as a "What's New Guide", may only be relevant until the next release.

Tactics to consider:

- Best if consumed by. Make sure your core content is tagged with a reminder to review it or with an expiration date. Content libraries can help you by making content "disappear" on the right date, and also remind you of when some regular review cycle.
- Have an owner. Where possible, it's easiest to have the decision to review, rewrite or retire content done by the original owner as they have the most context of the content's continued accuracy.
- Back to the plan. If you decide to rewrite content, make sure your plan captures this. Don't forget the related content.

Conclusion

Creating engaging content does not happen by accident. Yes, it takes a good understanding of your audience, good ideas, and good writing. But it also requires content management. Being able to quickly and easily find stuff, update stuff, ensure you're working with most current content, sharing it in review cycles, and then organizing it in one place. And you thought it was

all about being creative!

With a little bit of process, some easy metrics and some easy to use technology, you can increase your chance of success, spend more time on the story than the administration, and put your marketing team in a position to be great content marketers. And content managers.

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