

ADCOMMUNICATIONS

Owned media: The rise of content marketing



There has been a fundamental shift in marketing in the last decade. In the past, brand owners relied heavily on third party media owners – publishers and broadcasters - to carry their messages to their target audiences via paid **advertising** and **PR**.

Both disciplines are still fundamental to an **integrated marketing** strategy. Today, brand owners have an opportunity to engage with their customers and prospects using media they themselves own: customer publications (printed and online); branded content-led tools for consumption via the web, mobile tablets and phones; educational resources; and interactive ‘media’ such as webinars and live events.

The umbrella term for all this is ‘content marketing’, and its effectiveness means that it’s taking the business world by storm.

Why the change?

Consumers are hungry for content that addresses their needs and concerns, and offers engagement, information or entertainment. Time-poor, marketing savvy consumers are increasingly impatient and unreceptive to ‘broadcast’ marketing messages. The mantra is ‘what’s in it for me?’

The Internet is a key driver. Company **websites and microsites** are front-line, where they offer ready-made, brand-controlled platforms for online delivery of content. The benefit is that the brand owner can use cost effective communication such as **PR, social media and direct marketing** to drive target audiences straight to this content, complementing the material they distribute via conventional media outlets.

In fact, good content is now the key differentiator for most brand web sites – if content is of high quality, well curated and frequently refreshed, it offers a compelling reason for customers to revisit the site. Without good content, web sites remain static, functional and uninviting. What is more, the delivery of fresh content creates momentum for social media, giving communicators a valid reason to reach out to their audience and invite their engagement.

The other major change has been the relative ease with which brand owners can now acquire, manipulate and manage digital customer and prospect data, enabling them to carefully segment their stakeholder audiences and address them with tailored, targeted content.

How does it apply in B2B?

In the B2B world, effective content marketing means giving customers and prospects information which is going to help them do one of the following:

- understand a complex business or technology issue
- overcome a commercial or technical challenge
- grow their business or improve profitability
- develop a new revenue stream
- build competitive advantage
- increase their credibility with peers and prospects

What's the benefit?

As a B2B brand, you have a real opportunity to build customer engagement if you provide content that goes beyond the product spec, and informs or inspires your customer. There is growing evidence to prove that customers engage happily and deeply with branded content, provided that it is valuable and relevant.

More importantly, that engagement has tangible business outcomes for you. Content marketing is an effective way of:

- establishing thought leadership
- generating leads
- supporting direct product sales
- cross selling value added services
- improving customer retention

What's more, content created for one platform – a customer magazine for example – can be easily repurposed for delivery via other channels. This approach, as well as delivering good return on marketing investment, ensures consistent branding and messaging, and optimises campaign integration.

Content marketing is not product collateral – rather, it engages the user with product-neutral information or inspiration that taps into industry issues and themes. Your 'content' might consist of assets that already exist within your business, which you now choose to make openly available, or to publish to a specific audience. Or there may be a need to create fresh content specifically to support the key messages that you want to convey to your customers.

Either way, don't overlook the importance of content in your marketing plans. Here are a few examples of the type of content-led assets that an agency such as AD Communications can create for you, on its own or in tandem with expert creative agencies who can deliver the all-important visual elements of some of these initiatives:

Case studies

Customer case studies have always been a cornerstone of good B2B marketing, used as sales tools or published via third party media. They can be instrumental in a content marketing campaign, for example within a **customer magazine**, or delivered as **video** case studies via your web site or **microsite**. To work, they have to offer value and interest: that means a full focus on the customer's business and what they have achieved, without dwelling heavily on the features and benefits of your product, or waxing lyrical about how brilliant your service is. In a visual world good creative photography or videography is a must to support case studies.

White papers

A white paper is an authoritative or educational guide that is designed to help your target audience understand a complex technology or business issue in order to make informed decisions or solve a problem. A white paper may cover the benefits of a particular technology, product or methodology, present research findings, or even list a set of questions or tips about a certain business issue. A white paper is written from a neutral standpoint to present the arguments in favour of a certain technology or model, without overtly promoting a particular product. Depending on the topic and target audience, it may be heavily technical, or more commercially orientated, for example exploring the potential of a particular vertical market or innovative business model.

Customer magazines

Well designed customer magazines with high quality branded content are a way of provoking a deeper level of engagement from your customers and prospects. The magazine format has a 'lean-back' quality which means that the content is consumed and digested in a different way from content delivered online. Readers spend an average of 25 minutes with a customer magazine, and one in four people return to a customer magazine 3 or 4 times. Customer magazines do more than inform; they inspire, making them one of the most effective content marketing tools in terms of promoting sales, cross-sales and recommendation. Companies that have customer magazines as part of their marketing mix enjoy **an average 8% sales uplift**, and increase brand loyalty by a third. Nearly half of readers act or respond after reading, dwarfing response rates from other media where 3% constitutes extreme success. (Source: Content Marketing Association)

Educational publications

If your mission is to educate your target audience on a business or technical issue, or to influence them in a particular direction, then content marketing provides many options. Moving beyond the customer magazine, you can create engaging educational content in lots of physical (as opposed to digital) formats. Examples might include mini-guides, books, glossaries, multi-part dossiers, part works (serialised educational publications), pocket media such as Z-cards, swatches, etc. The options are limited only by the nature of your content, and the scope of your creativity.

Research-led content

Branded content is all the more credible if it is founded on meaningful independent research. Quantitative or qualitative research findings can be used to create compelling content for delivery across multiple platforms – through customer magazines, online, and via live events, as well as providing material for use in conventional PR and direct marketing. The process of gathering the research can itself contribute to your customer engagement activity, if you promote the research initiative via PR, advertising, direct marketing and social media. If you are undertaking research within your customer base, consider creating a virtuous circle and making the anonymous findings available exclusively to the participants, provided that the outcomes will deliver a business benefit for them. Research can be conducted and analysed in house, via a professional communications agency, via a low-cost online service such as Survey Monkey, and – for more complex, in-depth or qualitative research - via a specialist research business.

Content led events

Good content stimulates engagement, that is, a level of interaction between brand and customer which simply did not exist in the days when marketing was dominated by one-way broadcast media. What better way to engage with customers and prospects than to build a live event concept around your content? Consider delivering really valuable content face to face, via a conference, summit, open house, round table or seminar. The case for this is all the more compelling if you want to create an open forum for questions or debate, build credibility for company spokespeople or involve third parties such as technology partners or distributors. And an interactive event can increase the longevity of your content, for example, giving you the opportunity to populate an event specific **social media** feed, to capture presentations and interviews on **video** for later web streaming, to undertake audience **research**, or to capture feedback and comments to populate a **blog**.

Digital content

As a B2B brand owner, if your customers are active on the Internet, then there is scope for you to engage them with digital content provided that it is relevant and adds value in the context of your business and theirs. For example, a regular **blog** on your website could function as part of an educational or thought leadership campaign, and invite engagement with your customers. You may create a **video** to illustrate the operation of a piece of equipment, or an **animation** to explain a particularly challenging technological principle. Content such as a **podcast** or video could help you deliver your CEO's keynote presentation to a global audience. An **ebook** may help you to explain a complex principle or educate customers about where your product fits. If your customers are users of tablets or smartphones, a branded **mobile app** may be a good interactive vehicle for your content.

Webcasts, webinars

Webcasts and webinars – and they are two different things - take the concept of digital content one step further by inviting live engagement with your customer or prospect. A **webcast** is the online equivalent of broadcasting a presentation, so it's generally not interactive but can be a worthwhile method for delivering educational or thought leadership content. The **webinar** is a more interactive format, recreating a presentation, lecture, workshop or seminar in the online environment. Webinars are collaborative, so they could promote active participation by means of voting or a Q&A. Both formats can be promoted via conventional and social media and/or direct marketing, and can be a useful mechanism for lead capture.

Why use your communications agency for content creation?

Your communications agency has many of the attributes that are required for creating great branded content:

- They understand your business, your brand, your messages and your products.
- They have been instrumental in developing your story, so they can tell it best, regardless of the platform.
- They know your brand's tone of voice, and how to use it for different media.
- They are experienced communicators, with a talent for expressing information in a way that will resonate with your audiences.
- They understand how information is consumed, and what will make it engaging.
- The other communications materials they create for you will give them a natural starting point, and a minimal learning curve.
- They're accustomed to working with creative agencies – content marketing is a natural extension.
- They can help you to promote your content via PR and social media as part of a fully integrated communications approach.

For case studies and examples of content we've created for clients, and to find out how content marketing could fit into your marketing strategy, contact Helen Tolino at htolino@adcomms.co.uk or call her on + 44 (0) 1372 464470.

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