

Six Best Practices for Creating a Content Marketing Strategy

Content marketing is the linchpin of demand creation – the link between brand awareness and lead generation. Done well, it builds familiarity, affinity and trust with prospective and current customers by providing information that resonates – in the right format, through the right channel, at the right time.

According to a recent Econsultancy study, search queries for the term have more than doubled in the past two years, supporting the notion that content marketing is being seen as its own discipline. This places new emphasis on content creation and quality. It also spotlights a very real need for organizations to rethink their go-to-market plans by adding content to their marketing mix, or refining an existing strategy.

But a content marketing strategy doesn't create itself. It's the result of clear intention, careful planning, and focused execution. As Carmen Hill, social media and content strategist at Babcock & Jenkins, puts it, "Whether it's a targeted campaign or a comprehensive program, you need to plant a strong foundation of content that attracts prospects at every stage of the buyer's journey, seeding awareness and nurturing ongoing interest."

Which begs the question: How does a company get started?

These **six best practices** can help you develop and deploy effective strategies for content marketing across all channels and buying cycles.

Best Practices Checklist

1. Get Stakeholder Support
2. Understand Your Audience
3. Identify the Right Content Formula
4. Create an Editorial Calendar
5. Get Maximum Mileage Out of Your Content
6. Develop a Process for Measuring and Reporting

1: Get Stakeholder Support

Content marketing is not a short-term affair; it's a long-term commitment that requires continual collaboration and engagement to succeed. This means you'll most likely need to sell the idea to the executive team, as well as other key people or departments within your organization.

According to Ardath Albee of Marketing Interactions, "You need executive backing to fund and source a content strategy. You also need the support to ensure there is enough commitment to see a content marketing strategy through."

One effective technique for getting internal buy-in begins with not talking about content marketing at all. (At least not initially.) Instead, focus on your stakeholders' goals and pain points, even their bonus systems – those areas that affect their own success. Then introduce content marketing as a valuable way for them to get better results.

2: Understand Your Audience

Content marketing isn't about selling. It's about educating, entertaining, or otherwise delighting your readers in order to earn their trust over time.

To be successful, you need to understand who your audience is – and what they want and need from you – in order to gauge how much viable content you already have and what content you'll need to create. There are two key activities here, both of which require stakeholder commitment and participation to be most effective:

- **Develop customer personas.** This is an effective way to uncover who your target customers are, which helps identify what topics your content should be covering. Start by asking yourself and your sales stakeholders these questions:
 - a. Who are our ideal prospects and customers?
 - b. How do they go about making a buying decision?
 - c. What are their questions? Pain points? Objections?
 - d. What gaps in information are they lacking that my content can fill?
- **Map your content to the buyer's journey.** By assigning content to the most appropriate buying stage, you not only make the best use of existing content, you also discover gaps that need to be filled. Typical steps include:
 - a. Map your sales cycle to the buying cycle, doing this by persona if it makes sense. A typical buying cycle is: need, learn, evaluate, negotiate, purchase, implement, advocate. A shortened version may be: awareness, interest, consideration, purchase intent.
 - b. Set up a spreadsheet that helps you visualize and track your mapping process. This does not need to be complex. It can be as simple as simply listing the buying cycle phases in the top row.
 - c. Audit and evaluate your existing content – tools, case studies, solution briefs, white papers, videos, demos, webinars, etc. – based on which persona it addresses, which questions it answers, and which stage of the buying process it will serve.

- d. Create your content matrix by adding each asset – title and link – into the appropriate spreadsheet location. Focus on creating a sequential flow where each content asset “continues the conversation” by building on the previous content.

3: Identify the Right Content Formula

Content marketing is about helping your current and future customers solve an issue that's important to them. To do this, your content needs to facilitate conversations among influencers, stakeholders, and decision makers, giving them the confidence to take the next step. If it doesn't, your content marketing strategy will fail. (Or at the very least under-achieve its goal.)

These three steps will help you uncover the optimum content formula:

- **Create content your customers want.** Many organizations make the mistake of investing heavily in pushing marketing messages that are important to the company, rather than providing information that's important to the customer. When planning content, always take a customer-centric approach to best ensure you create something of value for your readers.
 - **Develop an array of content to deploy across multiple channels and devices.** Take the time to understand which channels and formats your customers prefer, and then diversify how and where you publish your content to extend your reach. In addition to printed (or PDF'd) content, consider other formats such as HTML-based articles, blogs, social media sites, webinars and videos.
- Given the steep adoption rates of tablets and smartphones, make deciding what you will optimize for mobile part of your strategy.
- **Don't just create content, curate it.** There's enormous value in not only creating original content, but in curating “best of” content from across the Web. By showcasing and sharing relevant content from other thought leaders – from magazines, blogs, research, etc. – you demonstrate independence and credibility, which can increase customer affinity and loyalty.

Taking a Customer-Centric Approach

To identify the depth and breadth of content that will resonate with your audience segments, it's essential to focus on what they want. Which means you have to do some research to find out what's already out there... and what's missing.

Here are some key elements to get you started.

- **Study your website analytics.** Your visitors offer a wealth of clues about their needs and interests. Uncover it by looking at keyword performance, internal search data, user behaviour and bounce rates.
- **Investigate the social web.** This includes blogs, forums, and the ever-increasing networking channels your audience is interacting with. A variety of listening tools – many are free – can help you collect data about the conversations and topics people are discussing as they relate to your company's products and services.
- **Get your hands on industry research.** In the age of big data, research studies are being published more frequently than in the past, with many of them at low or no cost. Relevant research results can provide insights into your industry, as well as your competitors.
- **Survey your customers.** Ask your current customers specific questions about what they're interested in when evaluating whatever it is that you sell, what features are important, what their favorite websites are, what information piques their interest or breaks the deal.

Aggregating and reviewing this information will give you a good understanding of what your customers and prospects want and need.

4. Create an Editorial Calendar

Every good content marketing program begins with a carefully planned, proactive editorial calendar. It's the execution plan for integrating content into a cohesive story that you want your audience to see. You probably won't follow it verbatim, but if it exists up front you'll be far more consistent and successful at publishing the content you need and generating the results you want.

Your editorial calendar should:

- Enumerate your customer-centric themes, aligning content with appropriate buying cycle phases and audience personas.
- Provide a tentative outline of when different pieces of content will publish, on what platform, and via which syndication and social channels.
- Clearly articulate cadence; that is, the date each piece of content will be developed and distributed. Publishing your content in a consistent, timely fashion is critical.

Additionally, since social promotion and content go hand-in-hand, be sure to map social campaigns to your editorial calendar. Work with your social team during the calendaring process to align the respective publishing schedules and help drive traffic to your website. Include social and share links in your various content – papers, webpages, emails, blogs, etc. – whenever appropriate.

5: Get Maximum Mileage Out of Your Content

Developing the volume of content necessary to fuel a content program is a challenge. Try using the Rule of 5 – use one piece of content in five distinct ways. Five may not always be the optimal number, the goal is to extend the life of your content by using it in multiple ways, offering it in multiple formats, and distributing it everywhere.

Plan to break long content up into smaller pieces and different formats. For example, after putting time and energy into a fantastic webinar, convert it into a video and publish it on YouTube. Post the presentation deck on SlideShare. Make a PDF of the transcribed audio track available. Break the transcript into a short series of blog posts. Create a Q&A from the session.

Have a robust white paper? Extract two main ideas and create short articles. Take two more ideas and create blog posts. Promote them all through social media channels. Link them to each other, inviting readers on an information journey with your brand. Use the articles in lead-nurture campaigns.

Maximize the visibility of your content and brand by including social and share links in your various content pieces – papers, web pages, emails, blogs, etc. – whenever and wherever appropriate. And don't forget about search engine optimization. Use keywords and metadata to make your content findable by the people you've created it for.

By planning your content for scalability, you'll reduce resource overhead while increasing visibility and providing value to your audience.

6: Develop a Process for Measuring and Reporting

Decreasing costs and increasing profit margins are as important as increasing sales and revenue. An effective content marketing program can do both. Make sure you track that and measure it over time.

A recommended method is to develop Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that are tied to the business value of your content marketing program. Take a look at everything you'll need to execute the strategy you've created.

- Do you have enough resources?
- Do you have the capabilities – in-house or outsourced – to effectively execute?
- Do you have enough budget?
- What else is on your plate or in development that may affect program deployment?
- Have expectations been set – and bought into – among stakeholders?
- What are the leading indicators of success?
The lagging indicators?
- How can the program's financial impact be measured?
- How can we compare the financial impact relative to other programs that may be more costly?

Plan SEO-Friendly Content

The business success of a search engine company is completely dependent on satisfying the human searcher. As a result, the search engines are constantly leapfrogging each other to deliver better results, creating an ever-shifting landscape that can leave marketers frustrated. Google, for example, typically makes between 500-600 algorithm changes per year. While most are inconsequential, a few are major enough to impact your SEO efforts.

Here are five tips to ensure your content serves both the search engines and your visitors:

- 1. Target one keyword per page.** Pick the single word or phrase that your article or webpage can be found by. It's difficult to optimize a page for more than one keyword, so select something that will resonate with your audience.
- 2. Include the keyword in your copy.** Visitors who come to your page from a search engine expect to see the words they searched for in your copy. Use each keyword phrase three to four times within your copy – more if it makes sense and still sounds natural.
- 3. Use the exact term.** Search engines are very good at interpreting a searcher's intent, but they still rank pages that exactly match a searcher's query higher than a page that has all the right words – but in a different order.
- 4. Optimize, but don't overdo it.** You are writing for real people, not search engines, so you want your writing to have relevance to your audience while also sounding natural and authentic. Never sacrifice the user experience in order to meet an SEO goal.
- 5. Establish a minimum page length.** Page length should be dictated by the message you want to communicate, not an arbitrary limit. Longer copy provides a better opportunity for keyword placement that reads well and allows you to provide more information to your visitors. A minimum of 300 words is a good target, but make certain it's all quality content, not obvious filler.



Conclusion: Driving Results

Good content marketing establishes long-term, trusted relationships with current and future customers by regularly delivering high-quality, relevant, and valuable information. In addition, it can bolster your SEO and brand positioning.

By leveraging these best practices, you can create an effective content marketing strategy or fine-tune the one you already have in place. The company that does this best will break through the noise and drive real results.

About Act-On Software

Act-On Software's cloud-based marketing automation platform is the foundation of successful marketing campaigns everywhere – from small, simple and direct, to complex globally implemented programs.

Act-On's technology features an Instant-On™ database for accelerated campaign implementation; an easy, highly intuitive user interface; and a comprehensive, feature-rich solution set. This includes a best-in-class email engine with one-click integration to leading web conferencing and CRM solutions; tools for website visitor tracking, lead scoring, lead nurturing and social media prospecting; design tools for web forms, landing pages and emails; and more.

Act-On is headquartered in Beaverton, Oregon, with offices in Roseville and San Mateo, California, and Bangalore, India.

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