



orange

Issue Eighteen

STRATEGY • CONTENT • CREATIVITY

orange

What Does a 'Next Normal' World Look Like?

We started work on this **orange** in your hands before “social distancing” upended how we work and live. This issue was edited and designed as our entire agency worked from home this spring and summer. And it’s now finding its way to you in better times, I hope. From all of us to you: our continued best wishes for your personal and professional health, strength and creativity.

This year also marks our 25th year of serving up thought leadership content for incredible clients. One of the ways I am spending this season of social distancing is to celebrate how far we’ve come—and study what’s ahead. For all of us, the path forward looks different than it did a few months back. “Our era will be defined by a fundamental schism: the period before COVID-19 and the new normal that will emerge in the post-viral era: the ‘next normal,’” wrote McKinsey & Co. early into the pandemic.

As you read this, we’ve reached a pivotal moment: It’s time to stop thinking about what the Next Normal looks like, and start living it. What does that mean for our industry? Our feature “Closer Than We Appear” (page 20) dissects why audience-first matters more than ever and why content marketing will be more powerful than ever as audience behavior shifts.

Another trend we explore started pre-COVID-19, and I predict we’ll see even more of it: the desire to produce content in physical form, handcrafted with care and beauty. Yep, magazines are here to stay. “Anyone who tells you print is dead, or print is dying, they don’t know what they are talking about,” Samir Husni, director of the Magazine Innovation Center at the University of Mississippi School of Journalism, tells us in “Print Is Primal” (page 28).

SEO for content marketing is evolving, always, and we look at seven ways it’s changing our best practices (page 36). We take a look at ways startups are using content to attract funding and fans (page 52), and we ask *Non-Obvious* author and trends guru Rohit Bhargava to predict the top content marketing opportunities for associations, B2B and financial services.

Buckle up. Let’s get ready for the Next Normal, together.



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Ready to take your content marketing to the next level?
Contact **Erin Slater**, SVP, business development
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#Microinfluencers

Industry insiders share their POVs on the marketing strategy that's driving results in social media.

By Kristina Rodriguez and Christina Huynh

Bigger doesn't always mean better—especially in the case of microinfluencers. So what do 1,000-to-10,000-follower accounts offer brands? Better engagement, higher ROI and lower spend are just the beginning.



“A campaign with 100 microinfluencers might perform better than one with two major names.”

Ertan Anadol, founder and CEO, Tanke

“Microinfluencers can drive towards wide reach as well as access to niche audiences.”

Kamiu Lee, adviser, Activate



“Influencers bridge the gap between traditional concepts of what a brand can be and personal connections customers crave.”

Alicia Tillman, CMO, SAP



“BRANDS MUST BE CAUTIOUS NOT TO VIOLATE THE AUTHENTICITY THAT MAKES INFLUENCERS APPEALING TO FOLLOWERS.”

Raja Rajamannar, CMO, Mastercard



“AS AUTHENTICITY REMAINS TOP OF MIND FOR CONSUMERS, THE NEED FOR INFLUENCER MARKETING WILL ONLY CONTINUE TO GROW.”

Alicia Tillman, CMO, SAP

“New standards need to be set up for influencer marketing to help regulate how microinfluencers can make impactful lives online in a fair way.”

Melanie Mohr, CEO, YEAY

“People are more likely to make a purchase based on a recommendation. It's no wonder influencer marketing is a \$6.5 billion industry.”

Lary Kim, CEO, MobileMonkey and founder, WordStream

“Food microinfluencers garner nearly 2x the average monthly unique visitors on blogs than all other verticals.”

Rohit Vashisht, CEO, Whiz.ai

“SOME STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT MILLENNIALS TRUST AND PURCHASE FROM BRANDS ENDORSED BY SMALLER, LESS KNOWN INFLUENCERS.”

Pratik Dholakiya, founder, The 20 Media HQ

“Microinfluencers are not too ‘big’ in the social sphere to be clouded by fame, but they're influential enough to make a difference for your brand in a specific market.”

Keon Georgés, CEO and founder, Georgés Enterprise International

“A microinfluencer community of brand ambassadors who are motivated to share content is more trustworthy than traditional advertising.”

Michalis A. Michael, CEO, DigitalMR

“INSTEAD OF THINKING OF INFLUENCERS AS AN ATTENTION, AWARENESS AND ACQUISITION PLAY ... FRAME IT AS A COLLABORATION.”

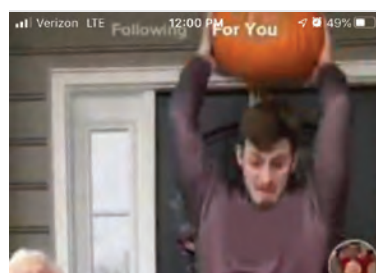
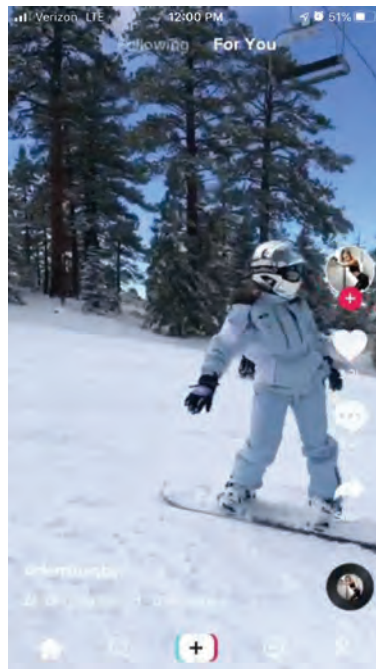
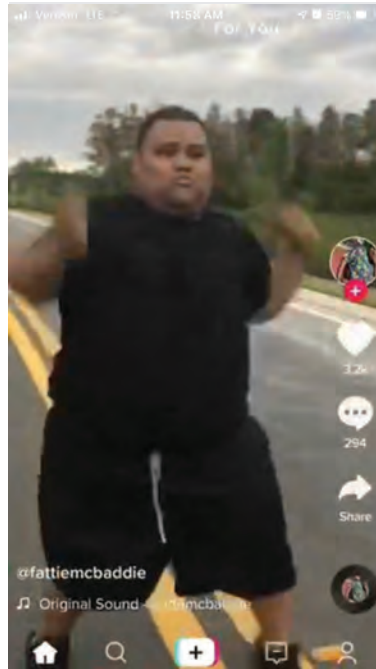
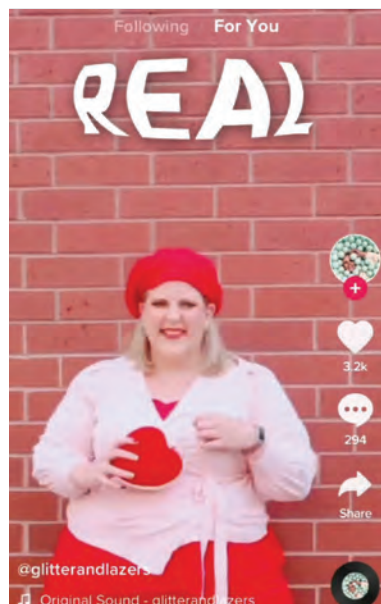
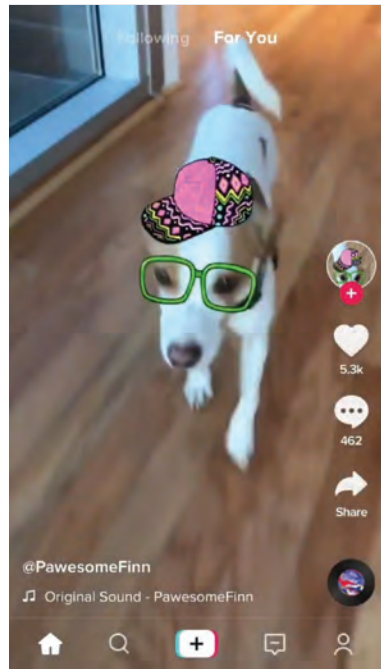
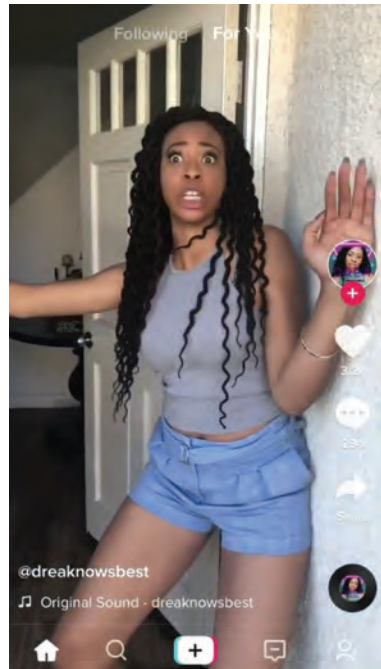
Aaron Orendorff, former editor-in-chief, Shopify Plus

The TikTok Takeover

Maybe in the future, everyone will have 15 seconds of fame—just look at the short-form videos on TikTok. Backed by Chinese corporation ByteDance, this platform has reached more than 1 billion global downloads since 2017. In 2019, U.S. consumers spent 85 million hours on the platform, up 466% year over year to surpass Amazon Prime Video, among other services. As a platform that generates constantly trending content, TikTok is reshaping the world of social media.

What sets TikTok apart? On the surface, users create loop videos with special effects for challenges, lip syncs and dances. Yet, a deep dive reveals that TikTok is more than a video-sharing outlet—it's a phenomenon powered by artificial intelligence. TikTok doesn't just rely on user behavior to learn their habits. It analyzes content watched to create a personalized feed. Bloomberg reports, "The app can get to know you so well it feels like it's reading your mind." Addictively so. Unsurprisingly, the average user spends 52 minutes on TikTok per day.

While Gen Z forms 60% of TikTok's U.S. audience, the explosive growth of this platform has made it an app for all ages. And brands are taking note. Consider Chipotle with its #GuacDance challenge. The promotion received 430 million video starts, helping Chipotle's avocado requests jump 68% on National Avocado Day in 2019 (July 31, obvs). "When you can do something that engages your customers in a way they think is ... culturally relevant, people will flock to your brand," Chipotle CMO Chris Brandt told *Forbes*. The outcome of Chipotle's campaign inspired other industries to hook up with TikTok. In September, the NFL signed a two-year content partnership. Results came in fast: A TikTok of San Francisco 49er Marquise Goodwin scoring a touchdown received 2 million "likes" that day.



"TIKTOK IS MORE THAN A VIDEO-SHARING OUTLET—IT'S A PHENOMENON POWERED BY ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE."



THE AVERAGE USER SPENDS 52 MINUTES ON TIKTOK PER DAY.

Left Page: @dreaknowsbest, @fattiemcbaddie, @demibagby via TikTok; Right Page: Queensbury/ iStock/Getty Images

Still, the tremendous popularity of TikTok hasn't been without controversy. Following an investigation into how it handled young users' data, TikTok released a series of safety videos. "This campaign ... demonstrates our commitment to originality, as we educate our community to stay safe," TikTok U.K. Director of Global Public Policy Elizabeth Kanter told *The Drum*. Additionally, the platform has combated censorship allegations by working with lawmakers to review its content moderation policy.

As marketers scramble to leverage this hot app, the potential of TikTok seems to overshadow its problems. So what's the key to reaching audiences?

- Upload unique videos
- Embrace filters and musical overlays
- Work with influencers
- Launch hashtag challenges
- Host brand takeovers
- Take advantage of branded lenses

The possibilities don't end here—TikTok has new features in the works. A major change includes a grid-style layout, allowing users to search videos quicker. Fans aren't the only priority—TikTok plans to attract brands by displaying video download statistics. TikTok will also roll out a self-serve ad model to make it easier for marketers to buy ads. "Their self-serve platform is a good start," PMG Social Director Carly Carson told *Digiday*, adding, "But we would love to see more advanced targeting opportunities."

Sources: HubSpot, App Annie, Bloomberg, *The Drum*, *Entrepreneur*, *Business Insider*, *TechCrunch*, *Mobile Marketer*, *Digiday*

Still Relevant for Marketing in This Upside-Down Time

“If we anticipate consumer needs, we can shape the nonlinear journey and deliver more valuable and personal experiences. That means ripping up quite a bit of the traditional marketing playbook and learning to anticipate individual intent at scale.”

—Shyam Venugopal, vice president, global media and data strategy, PepsiCo, 2019

Bot Friends Forever?



In today's fast-paced world populated with increasingly impatient consumers, companies are on the hunt for ways to improve productivity without sacrificing service quality. Chatbots are increasingly being turned to for chatty support. And as technology advances, chatbots are predicted to save businesses both time and money.

Reports show chatbots are estimated to save businesses \$8 billion annually by 2022. Breaking that number down further, chatbots could recoup more than four minutes per customer interaction for banking providers. **That translates to about 50 to 70 cents each time a chatbot handles a customer inquiry.**

On top of quick response times, chatbots can now more closely mimic human conversation and language, making them able to meet more complex customer needs. Bots are looking like a sure bet for service-focused brands seeking virtual solutions.

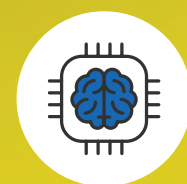
Sources: Forbes, Deloitte

Coins: JamesBrey/E+/Getty Images; Phone: Tero Vesalainen/Stock/Getty Images Plus; Brain: Just_Super/Stock/Getty Images Plus; Icons: Yuriy Bucharskiy/Stock/Getty Images Plus

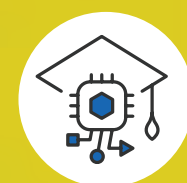
Not All AI Is Created Equal

“Artificial intelligence” (AI) and “machine learning” are often used interchangeably. And, if you're plugged into tech trends, then you've also likely heard “deep learning” as well. But there's a difference.

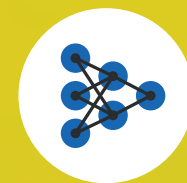
To separate the three terms, you first have to understand what they have in common: algorithms. Simply put, algorithms are rules used when analyzing data and performing calculations, which then lead to a specific outcome.



Artificial intelligence is when a machine uses algorithms to mimic the functions of a human brain.



Machine learning comes within those AI functions. When a machine is able to take datasets and improve upon the algorithms, it is effectively learning from the outcomes.



Deep learning goes a step further, adding layers to the process. It's when a computer takes in a large set of data in order to answer a question, finds patterns within that data and then generates several more questions.

Before you explore how to leverage these technologies—beginning with if you even should—grasping the differences is essential.

Source: Data Science Central



LinkedIn Exceeds Expectations

More users means more opportunities for audience engagement, right? That's why content marketers should stay logged in to LinkedIn, says a recent report revealing a better-than-expected 8.8% boost in monthly users on the platform during 2019. This growth is expected to continue, though at a slower rate, in the years to come.

Keep your eye on LinkedIn as it continues to build its user base and add features, offering brands more ways to target audiences, inspire engagement and increase ad performance.

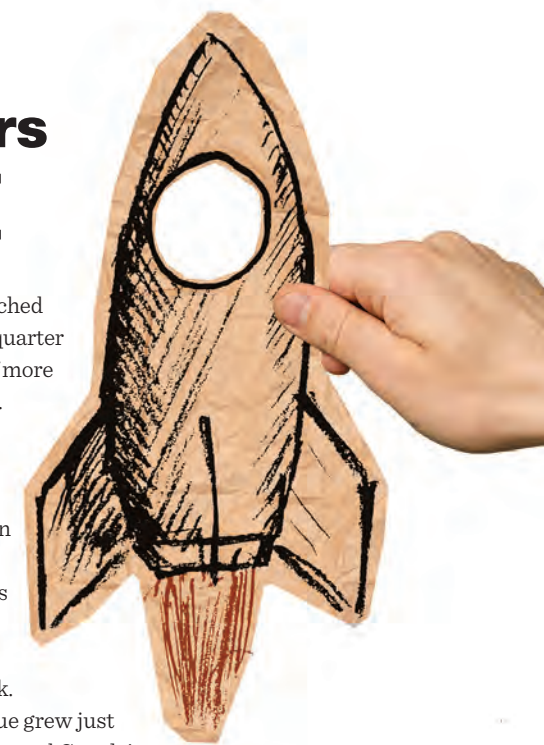
Source: eMarketer

Amazon Conquers Another Frontier

Amazon ad revenue reached \$3.6 billion in the third quarter of 2019, a growth rate of more than 45% year over year. Although ad giants like Google and Facebook still control the digital market with \$33.9 billion and \$17.4 billion in ad revenue, respectively (as of Q3 2019), marketers should take notice of Amazon's relative uptick.

Facebook's ad revenue grew just 28% in the same quarter, and Google's trailed behind at 17%.

Sources: Search Engine Land, CNBC



Rocket: Warchi/Stock/Getty Images



Lights! Camera! Stream!

Video has held the engagement content crown for years, and livestreaming has only brought brands even closer to consumers. Streaming tutorials and product-heavy content programs are common on brand sites, but interaction is key to truly connecting with end users and revealing a brand's human side.

Ready to take it one streaming step further? Make viewers part of the conversation by answering questions, addressing comments and asking them questions in return. Bonus: Seeking out their feedback provides free marketing research!

Source: Forbes

Jakob Owens/Unsplash

Paper planes: Eonereri/Getty Images; Phone: Alexey Yarkin/Stock/Getty Images Plus

Define That Term

Quick! Q: What does the "QR" in QR code stand for? **A:** *Quick response.* The tracking system, which has seen a resurgence in publishing due to beefed-up phone tech scanning, was trademarked in 1994 by the Japanese auto industry. The now-familiar blotchy 2D bar code was developed as a machine-readable way to manage the progress of car parts on the assembly line. For more on QR codes, see page 16

HABIT FORMING

WHAT'S THE KING OF CONVERSION METRICS? **HABITUAL READERS**—MEASURED AS RETURNING VISITORS—IS THE MOST IMPORTANT METRIC CONTENT MARKETERS SHOULD TRACK TO MEASURE DRIVING CONVERSIONS.

Source: Parse.ly, 2019

Contributing editors: Beth Gaston, Christina Huynh, Angela Pagán, Zoe Zuidema

Refresher: WTF Is Blockchain, Again?

Blockchain and bitcoin are buzzy, sexy terms your finserv clients need to know more about. And at this point, it's safe to say they are here to stay. Blockchain is a digital ledger that tracks orders and payments and records data about the assets (tangible or financial) being transferred. Once transactions occur, they're permanently recorded and cannot be altered. The benefits of blockchain are transparency, efficiency and accessibility.

Here's how it all works:



First, there's **tokenization**. Blockchain breaks assets into smaller tokens, which can be bought individually.

Next comes the **transaction**. When a buyer and seller agree on the terms of a token purchase, the transaction is recorded and creates a **block** of data (blocks and tokens replace paperwork).

The result is **blockchain**: Individual blocks are added to strings of transactions, becoming an unalterable record of tokens as they change hands.

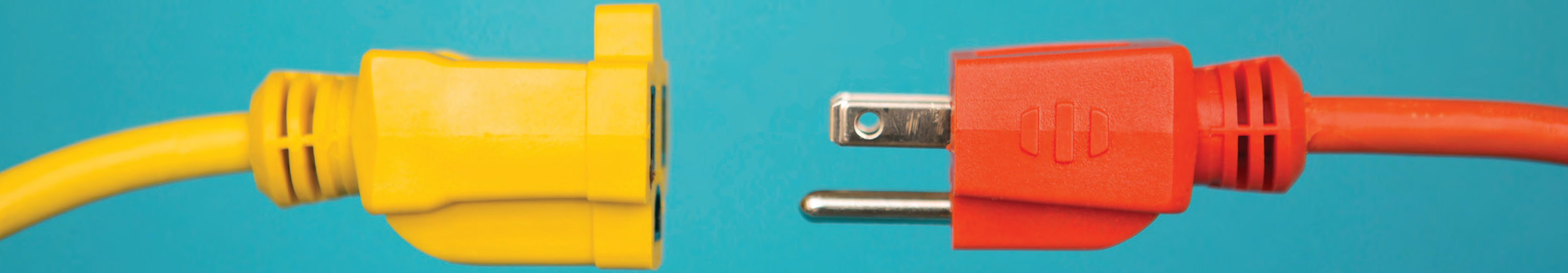
Err on the side of explaining. Make sure your clients understand the benefits of the technology and how it can have an impact on their investing strategy.



CHANGE IS GOOD

"If you don't like what is being said, change the conversation."

—Don Draper (played by, who else?: Jon Hamm)
Mad Men, S3, Ep2
 ("Love Among the Ruins")



Mind the

Gap

Innovative ways associations are helping talent develop new skills

By Chris Blöse

If you've been involved in staffing discussions in the past five years, chances are you've heard the phrase "skills gap."

Even before COVID-19, a whopping 83% of U.S. talent development professionals report a skills gap in their organization, according to the Association for Talent Development (ATD). ATD's findings focus a great deal on soft skills that are missing as employees rise in the ranks, from critical thinking and problem solving to effective management.

But even beyond these general skills, specific industries see needs based on how fast their worlds are changing. The Society for Human Resource Management notes that STEM-related fields are among those most affected by this gap.

Take manufacturing, for instance. Deloitte has estimated 2.4 million jobs in this field could go unfilled between 2018 and 2028, for an economic impact of \$2.5 trillion.

So how do associations working in the manufacturing space respond? For the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME), step one has been rethinking its approach to learning and development for the professionals it serves. Arin Ceglia, the society's director of learning and development, says ASME has identified priority areas such as additive manufacturing (think 3D printing at the scale of manufacturing) and industrial automation, areas in which skills education hasn't always kept pace with the fast pace of technology.

But ASME's emphasis on technology doesn't just focus on engineering itself. According to Ceglia, learning technology and *how* education is delivered matters most in addressing the skills gap.

Rethinking Learning & Development

"There used to be (and perhaps still remains) a misconception that you could not replace face-to-face learning



A WHOPPING
83%
OF U.S. TALENT DEVELOPMENT
PROFESSIONALS REPORT A SKILLS GAP.

with online learning,” Ceglia says. “However, cognitive scientists and instructional design experts have learned a lot about adult learning and learning modalities since the beginnings of online learning.”

Associations are wise to keep up with these lessons, since not all solutions will come in the form of the classic certification or on-site course. ASME, for example, is designing courses both for individuals and companies that place an emphasis on portability and what Ceglia calls “stackability.” The learning can be paced according to a specific student or company’s needs. They make use of blended learning, with a mix of online and as appropriate, in-person offerings. They place an emphasis on the practical, even down to the level of proprietary checklists designed to improve manufacturing results.

“We are adding courses that contribute to this knowledge base with a focus on new and advancing engineering technology, including additive manufacturing and industrial automation,” Ceglia says. “These courses fulfill a need to deliver this information faster, smarter and in a more convenient way.”

Interestingly, Ceglia notes that this approach to learning also has a heavy emphasis on critical thinking skills, so ASME is addressing soft skills challenges as well as specific industry needs. It also provides new, detailed ways to measure learner progress in these hard and soft skills, which help supervisors know where to focus future investment.

The Content Connection

Rethinking course offerings is one thing. Letting members and, maybe more important, prospects know your association is on top of the skills gap is a separate but connected need.

Offering comprehensive resources and proprietary research is one highly effective approach. For instance, the Project Management Institute (PMI) has incorporated the talent/skills gap into its recurring research on job growth. And rather than being a one-time report, this information makes its way into PMI’s full editorial planning, from

its flagship print magazine to social and digital content.

In ASME’s case, the focus of new content has been on boosting thought leadership in high-priority technology areas and in crafting storytelling that lets its audience know about the organization’s new approach to professional learning and development.

The former is a full-funnel program called ASME Essentials, with a strong emphasis on practical content that can help mechanical engineers on the job. The latter is content such as Ceglia’s POV posts and how-to videos for the people who might choose a learning program for their company, such as human resources professionals and other leaders.

The strategy and tactics for each of these examples differs, but the underlying message is common. And it’s one professional association’s commitment to repeat as often as possible in this era of free information and expertise: *We have the knowledge you need to navigate your industry.*

Win-win for associations and staff.

smartstock/Stock/Getty Images Plus

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To learn how your organization can benefit, scan this QR code to watch a video on how TLI works—and how this award-winning index will elevate your thought leadership results.

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CONTENT LEADERSHIP



Track Star

Modern ways to tackle print's age-old problem: how to measure reader engagement

By Amy Winter

Content makers have forever sought ways to show that people really do read their print products—and prove their ROI. Magazines have tried to prove it with business reply cards (BRCs) for decades, but response rates over the years have been abysmal.

The solution seems apparent in the digital age: Apply online measurement tactics to offline content. From QR codes to vanity URLs, trackable links can show exactly how many print readers make their way to the pub's online experience.

Easier said than done. Just as with old-school BRCs, readers have to initiate that response, which, let's be honest, is asking a lot.

As digital brands with mammoth followings—think Facebook, Airbnb and Uber—invest in print magazines, will we see a reenergized push to tap digital tactics to measure print's success? And what's new in the landscape?

Gary/Alvis/Getty Images

The Comeback Kid: QR codes

Those Rorschach-like QR codes first came to mass market in the U.S. at a time when few people even had smartphones (hello, 2000s), WiFi speeds were slow, websites weren't optimized for mobile and you had to download an app, also super-slow, to scan the code. No wonder QR (short for quick response) codes got such a bad rap.

Apple's 2017 iOS 11 update changed the game, allowing iPhone users to scan QR codes using their built-in camera—no third-party app required. The latest Android devices also have built-in QR code functionality.

QR codes have since taken off across industries, especially in retail. By 2022, an estimated 5.3 billion QR code coupons will have been redeemed by smartphones, up from about 1.3 billion in 2017, according to Juniper Research. In 2020, an estimated 11 million U.S. households will scan a QR code, up from 9.8 million in 2018, according to Statista.

Looks like the QR is newly in play and here to stay. With their everyday familiarity in retail locations and publishing products, QR codes could be just what your own print program needs.

The Always-Improver: Near-Field Communication (NFC)

If you use Apple Pay or Google Pay, you've experienced this technology with its "tap to pay" feature. NFC allows devices to transmit data and communicate with each other over a short range. As of 2018, iPhones are natively able to use this technology for purposes other than payments, and most Android phones are equipped with it as well.

NFC tags include a small chip, usually embedded within a sticker for print purposes. The sticker includes whatever data you want to be transmitted to another NFC-enabled device, such as a smartphone or tablet. Much like a QR code, once readers tap the sticker with their mobile device, they are automatically taken to a digital experience.

The Great Debate: QR vs. NFC

While NFC tags are more expensive than QR codes, they are faster and more secure (referring to the very slight risk that a QR code, say, has information secretly hidden within it linking to malware). Also, NFC tags can be embedded in print mate-

rial, meaning there are no unsightly designs, simply a call to "tap here for more." That said, QR codes today can be customized and no longer have to be only black and white.

Both technologies can be used for an expansive list of CTAs to draw in readers, all of which can be tracked. Now you can tally the number of readers who came to these digital experiences through your print pub.

A few ways to do this:

- Link readers to high-value related content on your website.
- Create a 3D experience using augmented reality.
- Direct readers to a promotion or to sign up for something valuable.

Bottom line: With QR code technology reemerging and NFC in the picture, it's now easier than ever to track reader engagement.

But the question remains: Will a significant number of print readers take the time to use QR and/or NFC tags, establishing them as the new industry standard and fulfilling marketers' dream of print engagement metrics?

"That's the thing; there is no expert right now," says Kristie Amella, Imagination's print production manager. "Everybody is trying different tactics, different software programs, creating new things to see what flies."

The answer, for now, to QR vs. NFC seems to be: TBD.



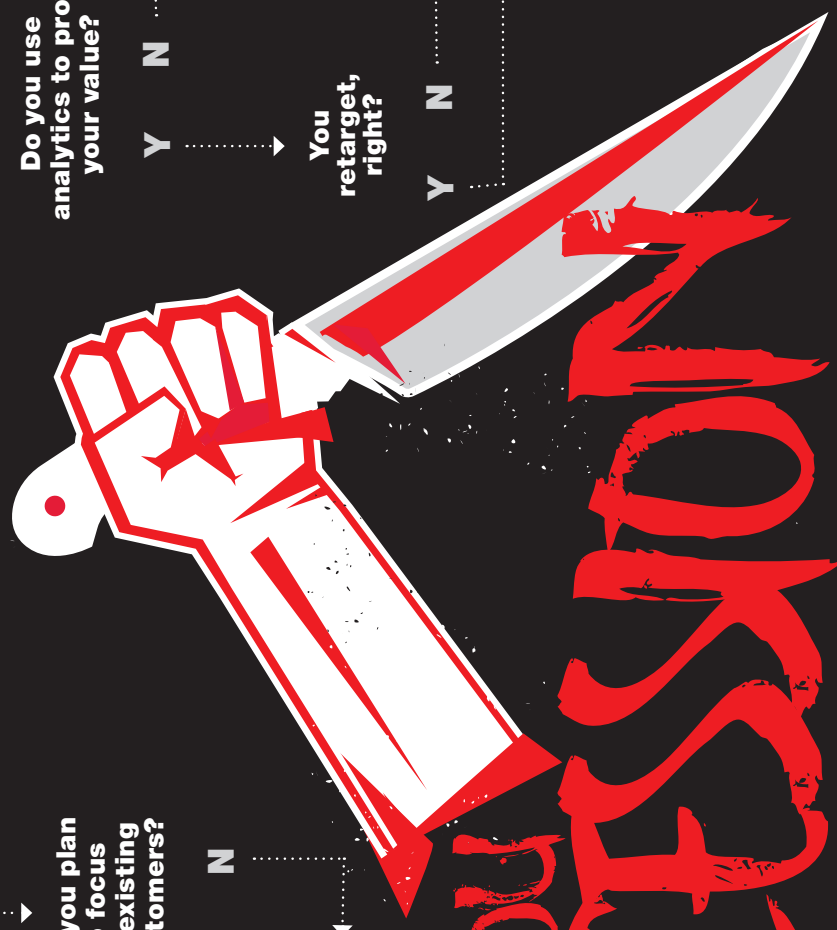
Scan this QR code for more on how digital brands are leveraging print

Is your company struggling financially?

I don't think you read that right.

Is the CEO or CFO calling the shots?

Why the heck not? Get going.



ARE YOU REFLECTION?

PROOF?

The knee-jerk reaction is to **SLASH MARKETING.**
The knee-jerk reaction is wrong.

By Matthew Duke Wright

So you want a strategy for the downturn?

Y N

Do the Powers That Be insist you cut all marketing?

Y N

But they do want to trim expenses?

Y N

Do you use analytics to prove your value?

Y N

Consider starting now.

Have you analyzed how your audience behaves in a recession?

Y N

Great plan.

You retarget, right?

Y N

Good. Test, test, test—and optimize.

You're kidding?

Y N

They've made a huge mistake.

By going dark?

Y N

Do you have a lead-gen program?

Y N

Start one now.

Focus on those.

Do you know your high-ROI channels?

Y N

Do you have a social and email program at least?

Y N

Welcome to the 21st century.

Nice! You'll get better results.

Create lower-funnel content.

Is your product or service essential?

Y N

Focus on your core audiences.

Have your competitors cut their advertising?

Y N



Closer Than We Appear

In a time of distance, content has the power to connect—but it requires a new way of thinking

By Simona Covel

Illustrations by Scherry Van Kirk



SITTING IN MY HOME OFFICE ONE Tuesday morning in May, I picked up the phone to find my daughter's ophthalmologist on the other end. The clinic was closed and we had missed her six-month check-up. Did I want to schedule a telemedicine visit? I scoffed. How could a physician diagnose a 3-year-old's eyesight from the other side of a screen?

Easy, he said, and pointed me to an online guide to measuring children's visual acuity. One article and one printable chart download later, I was on the way to updating my toddler's glasses prescription.

Routine medical care is not the only practice that has changed dramatically in recent months as in-person interaction has been drastically curtailed. I'm not just talking about the obvious shifts, like schooling via Google Classroom and team meetings via Zoom. I'm thinking of all of us who are administering eye exams at home, or using an online video to guide us through coloring our hair, or maybe tuning in for a daily or weekly industry strategy update filmed from an executive's basement.

What do all of these examples have in common? They're all content. In the past few months, as the earth shifted under our feet—medically, socially and economically—content quietly became essential. Suddenly, everyone was connecting via content, from restaurants posting and chatting about their "secret" recipes to business leaders publishing updates from their living rooms to athletic brands dispensing tips on how to stay in shape indoors.

Those of us who traffic in content marketing every single day have long delivered earnest speeches about the power of content for all kinds of businesses and organizations. Content marketing, we've extolled to anyone who cared to listen, has the power to connect, teach, educate—when it's deployed strategically. Recent months have made that stance widespread and have, just maybe, rendered content mandatory. Content is suddenly the glue that holds us together. When in-person life has all but stopped, content is a means of connecting, learning and doing.

The big question: What will happen next? As life begins to inch back toward the way it was—not normal, but maybe

something resembling normal-ish, with people shopping in stores, and dining in restaurants, and working from someplace that's not their couch—where does that leave content marketing? Will people file away their stylized Zoom backgrounds, pull their proper buttoned pants back on, and go back to the way we were before?

I don't think so.

The world has changed. The way we approach our health, personal care, shopping and workplace. The way we manage our money. Just about every aspect of life has been touched by the specter of coronavirus.

Content is suddenly the glue that holds us together. When in-person life has all but stopped, content is a means of connecting, learning and doing.

But as we emerge from the crisis and take stock of the state of business, where we've landed could prove beneficial for the practice of content marketing. Content marketing's advantage over other marketing disciplines has always been its customer value. Advertising is shiny and attention-getting, but also expensive and often hard to measure. PR can be worthwhile, but it's also expensive and time consuming. Content, at its core, is created with your audiences' needs first. It delivers what your customers and prospects are looking for. When done right, content is inherently valuable.

That's always been our advantage as content marketers; it's the secret sauce

that has fueled content marketing's rapid ascent. It's also what will make us essential as companies of every stripe feel their way through a changed business environment.

The harder part is knowing what our audiences will need in the coming months—what has really changed about the way we work and play. I'm talking about shaking off the crisis, which demands minute-to-minute thinking and shifts, and transitioning into the so-called New Normal—or something at least normal-ish.

Things will change. But how much, and in what direction? Here are a few things that I think will make a huge difference in how we communicate to our audiences.

Behaviors will change.

Even as businesses reopen, anxiety will remain high. There will be fear: Fear of a second (or third) wave of disease, fear of getting too close to other people, fear of being in packed public spaces. There will be other kinds of fears, too: fear that our lives will never feel quite like they did before and that our once-robust economy will take years to regain its momentum.

That means that behaviors aren't just going to snap back to the way they were in our pre-corona consciousness. Commuters will be reluctant to cram into a crowded rush hour train, for example, opting to work from home half the time—and eating into their podcast listening hour. Airline travel is likely to be depressed for months, if not years, reducing the volumes of travelers who stop in the airport newsstand. Conferences and conventions will be a shell of their former selves, possibly transitioning to hybrid models that include options for both in-person and online participation.

The content we produce has to work for consumers in all of these situations. If much of your industry is working from home, should you change the cadence or length of your podcast? If your conference-goers are moving online, how can those streamed sessions be sliced into other content types to be consumed across a variety of media? And what's the substitute for good old-fashioned in-person networking? All of us should be rethinking how we connect with our audiences.

We're in a new economy.

So here we are. We've emerged from an unprecedented public health crisis into a certain economic recession. After a nearly decade-long boom time, this is a shock for everyone, from the CEO of a global manufacturing company who has seen total supply chain upheaval to the high school student who suddenly is having trouble nailing down a part-time job.

This means you can't talk to your audiences the same way you did six months or a year ago. When people are stressed about money, when jobs are uncertain, when the safety net for individuals and businesses looks like Swiss cheese, you will likely need to rethink your content plan.

This has obvious implications for financial services companies, for example: "How to save for that dream vacation" may sound pretty tone deaf for a good long time. Americans will have new, urgent concerns: making ends meet, borrowing more, working longer and changing careers. But financial services companies aren't the only ones who should be thinking about this. When consumers have less disposable income, all sorts of businesses are affected, from carmakers to higher education institutions. When career paths are up in the air, the role of professional associations shifts. When businesses tighten their belts, the impact ricochets across B2B providers.

So dust off that old content strategy and give it a hard look. Have your audiences' concerns, needs and habits shifted? Do your personas need some rethinking to account for a new state of mind? The answers are most likely yes, which means you have work to do.

Audience-first matters more than ever.

Just because content marketing is poised to perform well coming out of this crisis doesn't mean that we're exempt from the widespread hand-wringing currently afflicting marketers around the world. And it certainly doesn't mean the sudden rush of content companies have put out already has been done well.

The expectations of brands changed during this crisis, and what we produce every day shouldn't go back to normal,

either. In April, PR giant Edelman asked consumers around the world what they thought brands should be doing as COVID spread and how they should be communicating. An astonishing 90% of respondents said brands should be willing to accept substantial financial losses to ensure the security of the public. The respondents promised to punish those that didn't adhere to those new standards: 71% said companies that placed profits before people would lose their trust forever.

Content marketing's advantage over other marketing disciplines has always been its value. ... It delivers what your customers and prospects are looking for.

Forever is a long time, and Edelman asked the question at a moment of peak tension. Even so, there's a lot to learn from the answer. First of all, the content we produce should start in one place: what our audience needs. Most of us would say we do that already, but how true is it, really? How often do your calendars or storylines get tweaked by a partner in another part of your organization? How often are they "realigned" to a product launch or high-priority offering, dulling the helpful intent along the way?

No one is saying that sales can't be the end goal here. What we are saying is that your content better not be a thinly veiled

sales pitch. Not today. Advertising is for pitches. Content marketing, especially now, is your chance to connect and gain customer love—and you do that by being genuinely helpful.

Think back to when the COVID crisis started. As we hunkered down at home, with just our screens to keep us company, marketing's existential crisis immediately revealed itself. How many emails did you get from companies declaring they were there for you, signed by the CEO? Did you care about any of those dozens of messages filling your inbox? Likely not. But a few probably stood out. Maybe it was the message talking about a new e-commerce feature on a company's website, or information on how to access a needed product in a contactless way.

Put simply, the stuff that stood out, and continues to stand out, was helpful. That will continue to be true as your customers and prospects adapt to new ways of going about their daily work and personal life. Consider where your organizational priorities overlap with customer need. Start there—and don't venture far.

Perfection is out of style.

Think of it this way: We've been liberated. Freed from the tyranny of perceived perfection. Our kids run through the background of our Zoom calls, a CEO shoots an iPhone video from home. I don't know about you, but as of this writing, I haven't washed my hair in a week. When we talk to our colleagues and our clients under these circumstances, we see that they're not just human, they're flawed—in a good way. That's more than OK. It's endearing, and appealing.

For a few years we've seen some of the most successful content marketing humanize executives and others "behind the curtain." Think of Dollar Shave Club's relatable CEO and during our recent lockdown, Goldman Sachs' five-to-seven-minute videos—shot at home—with some of its most senior industry thinkers.

This ethos isn't going to go away as offices reopen. Expect to see more people dressing down. Expect freer conversations about when we're working from home, and less sheepishness when a dog barks or a baby cries.



That has meaningful implications for the work we create. Perfection is so sought. Instead, the focus is on connecting in a real way. So as we inch tentatively back into our offices and studios, and printing presses fire back up, don't be so quick to demand polished perfection. Make sure any influencers you work with get the message, too: Leave those just-so backdrops behind. Embrace the quickly shot video and the last-minute blog post (as long as it's edited, of course). Your customers have.

That goes for a polished, perfected point of view, too. If there's one thing this crisis taught us, it's that answers aren't always there for the taking. If your customers are looking for guidance, give them as much as you can. If that information is incomplete, or evolving, just tell them. Don't pretend you have all of the answers. None of us does.

Practical changes will win the day.

Let's all cheer for the end of the boring, slide-driven webinar. New ways to deliver content have been born of this crisis, and I for one am thrilled. Roundtable videos shot via webcam? Why not? Way cheaper and logistically simpler than waiting months to get three or four high-powered executives together in a room. Hybrid model conferences that cater to those who would rather join remotely? Yes, please. It's cheaper and more inclusive.

Now it's time to take these new or evolved formats and apply them not just to crisis communications but to your ongoing content plans. Where does it make sense to transition a three-part live-action video series to a series of seven or eight quickly shot, lightly edited video posts? Can a planned live roundtable be reimaged as an online event with complementary content created before and after?

As we all consume more digital content, there's also an opportunity to get more mileage from everything you create. If leaders are making quickly shot videos or webinars, turn that content into written pieces and social posts. Use excerpts from a timely podcast episode as an audio clip on your homepage or in your social feeds.

McKinsey calls this kind of quick, flexible thinking embracing a startup

mentality. When it comes to reimagining certain aspects of your business, just get something out there, McKinsey suggests, rather than waiting for the typical slog through multiple levels of approvals. Whether you're talking about pivoting a content type or a revenue driver, this model prioritizes action over research and testing over analysis. That kind of agility will allow you to be in lockstep as your customers' needs and priorities shift in a changing environment.

That may be a tall order for organizational cultures with multiweek or even multimonth publishing cycles weighed down by committees and review rounds. Set the expectation from the beginning

Have your audiences' concerns, needs and habits shifted? The answers are most likely yes, which means you have work to do.

that things are changing: Moving to a more real-time model requires making some process—and mindset—changes upfront. Return to that startup model: agile thinking that incorporates daily standup check-ins, periodic sprint reviews and weekly updates to top leadership. If you don't have the organizational infrastructure to execute quickly, all of the great ideas in the world will get you nowhere.

Purpose connects.

This pandemic has changed so many things about the way we consume, connect and do business. It will also, with every passing day, separate the innovative thinkers from those who keep doing what they've always done.

Is anything staying the same? Yes, lots. Humans, by nature, are optimistic. We also have short memories. After the tragedy of Sept. 11, 2001, pundits shouted from the rooftops that we'd reached "the end of irony." The world had become too sad, they said, too serious for the shallow and the inane. How wrong they were! Irony returned with a vengeance—and it didn't take long.

Adapting isn't about overreacting and trying to transform what your organization is. The Onion shouldn't stop trying to be funny. If you weren't a purpose-driven company before, you can't become one overnight. But you can lean in to what drives you as an organization. For a financial services company, that may be helping people make the best possible financial decisions they can to meet their (potentially revised) goals. For a professional association, that may be connecting professionals to resources they need to launch and sustain a career. A tech company is likely focused on harnessing the power of technology to help people live and work better. In each of those cases, the goalposts have moved. Our audiences need us to help guide them through this new world of living and working. Not to pretend we're someone we're not—quite the contrary. To get closer than ever to the core of what drives us.

More than anything, content marketing after this crisis is about getting closer to our audience and being there for them in a way that's more authentic than ever. I'm an optimist, but I'd like to believe that we'll come out of this crisis better content marketers: more tuned in to our audiences, less mired by the process, more in touch with what really matters.

None of us could have imagined this crisis would derail our plans, from the executive delivering speeches from his living room to my daughter's ophthalmologist. Content is helping us get through this crisis, and it can continue to deliver as we stumble out of our home offices into a post-COVID world.

Like my toddler daughter, grinning madly in her newly updated glasses, I'd like to believe we can all come out of this with something closer to 20/20 vision. ■





Print Is

In an increasingly digital age, associations and brands are connecting with consumers through an anachronistic technology that is newly relevant: print words on a page

By Adam Wren

Prima



The executives at the email marketing company Mailchimp made a surprising purchase this March: They bought a magazine – an actual, living and breathing magazine title. The Atlanta-based company acquired the 7-year-old London media company *Courier*, which tells the stories of modern small businesses and entrepreneurs.

Shari Whitebear

A brand buying a print magazine in 2020 is, to be certain, a head-turning transaction. Print, conventional wisdom holds, is dying—if not dead. Digital content marketing is the best, most effective way to reach consumers. But take a deeper look at the nexus of Mailchimp’s customer base and *Courier’s* audience—as well as similar moves by other savvy digital brands of late—and the move makes more sense.

Mailchimp got more than a magazine. More than 12 million businesses use Mailchimp. Fifty-three percent of its paid users live outside of the U.S. *Courier*, meanwhile, has a reach of 100,000 readers in 26 countries. Its April/May issue slings a cover package about how to “Make It in Food!”—from opening an urban winery to learning coffee shop economics to launching a cookware brand.

The overlap in audience interest is hard to miss. “We share so much in common with [*Courier*—their values, their deep empathy for their audience and their desire to enable their audience’s success,” says Mark DiCristina, vice president of brand at Mailchimp Studios. “We’re excited to help fuel their growth and make *Courier* more widely available to creators and entrepreneurs around the world.”

“You put out a beautifully produced magazine that’s targeted to your audience’s needs, they are going to engage with that and pass it on to their friends and colleagues. It’s become awfully crowded online. It’s hard to break through the clutter.”

—Joe Pulizzi, former CEO of the Content Marketing Institute



Brands from Airbnb to Staples are launching print mags to build a physical brand with readers and customers.

In addition to a like-minded audience, the purchase gives Mailchimp access to precious first-party data, says Joe Pulizzi, former CEO of the Content Marketing Institute. “They just bought an audience, and they have a lot of information now about that audience,” Pulizzi says.

Mailchimp is just the latest in an increasing number of companies providing their customers with a physical manifestation of their digital brand through a print pub. At least 10 brands launched hold-in-your-hand magazines in recent years, according to an analysis by *Ad Age*. These include: the stylish *Sandwich* launched in fall 2019 by Unilever for its condiments line, Sir Kensington’s; the quarterly *Grow*, by Facebook in the U.K. and Ireland for business leaders, launched in 2018; the legendary golf company Callaway’s *Pivot* (with a \$10 cover price); *Meter*, from running brand Tracksmith; and *Uncommon Path*, from the outdoor gear co-op giant REI.



Print is happening.

“A print outlet provides a vehicle for longer brand storytelling and for creating a relationship with a consumer outside of the transaction,” says Megan O’Grady, senior vice president, account management for HearstMade at Hearst, which publishes the REI title. “As part of a modern marketing mix, print can enhance a brand’s ability to connect and provide value.”

Even the office supply company Staples launched its own print publication last year: *Staples Worklife*™, published by Imagination, is distributed to companies that purchase supplies and office furniture from the company.

Why are zeitgeisty brands extending to print? “You put out a beautifully produced magazine that’s targeted to your audience’s needs, they are going to engage with that and pass it on to their friends and colleagues,” Pulizzi says. “It’s become awfully crowded online. It’s hard to break through the clutter.”

Increasingly, brands see a print magazine as the method required to do so.

At first blush, a print renaissance in an increasingly digital world seems counterintuitive. In recent years, a number of A-list, consumer-facing

publications have gone digital, reduced frequency or shuttered altogether. Among them: *ESPN The Magazine*, *Glamour*, *Coastal Living*, and *Rolling Stone*. What’s more, for U.S. magazine publishers, revenue has declined precipitously from \$46 billion in 2007 to \$28 billion in 2017, the most recent year on record. “Eventually, they’ll become like sailboats,” Kurt Andersen, the former editor of *New York* and one of the luminaries of the magazine world, told *The New York Times* in

Charisse Kenion



Alli Yahya



Callaway and REI are among brands aiming to reach millions of readers through a print product.

2017. “They don’t need to exist anymore. But people will still love them and make them and buy them.”

But that trend belies another one: More magazines are setting sail, launched from the shore now by associations, B2B and B2C brands. “Anyone who tells you print is dead, or print is dying, they don’t know what they are talking about,” says Samir Husni, the director of the Magazine Innovation Center at the University of Mississippi School of Journalism. “The business model for print has died, and we’ve yet to come up with a new business model.” In that vacuum, Husni says, C-suite leaders are taking a new look at the power of print to connect with audiences. The question they’re asking: “Am I really a 360 brand if I don’t have a print extension?” Husni says. “That print extension is completing the circle.”

Husni’s advice to associations and brands considering a print magazine: Focus on your audience first. “Fall in love with your audience before you fall in love with your platform,” he says. “And once you fall in love with your audience, then you are going to provide those three “ships” that every member of your audience wants: ownership, membership and showmanship.” The showmanship aspect—that tactile experience of leaning back in your chair

and thumbing through the pages of a beautifully produced print product—is difficult to replicate.

For Staples, a magazine is helping the company connect with its audience in deep ways. “Put simply, our business customers are looking for ways to improve their work lives. They told us they want solutions to be more productive and connected at work,” says Marshall Warkentin, Staples’ chief marketing officer. “At Staples, we’re uniquely positioned to bring together solutions to millions of working professionals and to bring a sense of community to work. We’re here to better work lives, whether in an office or anywhere else — that’s why we’re introducing *Staples Worklife*.”

Is print working?

When Airbnb famously launched its high-profile new magazine in 2017, it started with just four issues a year and an audience of 350,000 subscribers. But the product took off. In 2019, the mag increased its frequency to six issues and has an audience of 1 million; REI’s last print run was 750,000. In addition to its distribution to Airbnb hosts, the magazine is available at airport newsstands and bookstores in select markets, and each copy is read by an average of four people.

“In the digital world, everything is immediate, transactional and fleeting,” O’Grady, of Hearst, tells **orange**. “We are guided by the need for instant gratification. Our attention spans are challenged because we are inundated with messages that our brains cannot always process effectively. The power of print is in its permanence and in immersion. Print is a ‘lean-back’ experience, one where the reader can truly savor the content, generally, uninterrupted. For brands, this provides an incredible opportunity to spend quality time with their audience. The longer, tactile format facilitates bigger and deeper mes-

saging and is a natural vehicle for brand storytelling.”

REI has tested the success of its magazine with both co-op members and nonmembers. The brand hopes to reach all 18 million co-op members soon. The first step in that direction, O’Grady says, is making a digital product available this season.

For his part, Husni likes to tell industry connections a story about birth. “If you’ve ever watched a baby being born, they are born with their fist tight,” he says. “They want to grab everything. They want to own everything from the minute they are born. That sense of ownership doesn’t thrive on virtual ownership. That sense of membership, that sense of belonging—that there are another million or 300,000 people who are part of that community that all have that one thing in common, at the same moment, at the same mailbox, are getting the exact same magazine, the exact same message.”

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—Megan O’Grady, senior vice president, account management for HearstMade at Hearst Magazine



Mag Milestones

Are these three print pubs from cool brands on your radar, content marketers?

Sandwich, launched in fall 2019 by Unilever, the parent of Hellmann’s mayo, for its premium brand of condiments, Sir Kensington’s. Each edgy-design print issue goes deep on the “history, taxonomy and anatomy” of one specific sammy. First up: the BLT. The pub “just might be the [*New York Times Magazine*] of culinary publications. Featuring thought-provoking and playful pieces, elaborate illustrations and beautifully shot photographs, making the \$15 price tag seem all the more worth it,” wrote *Campaign Magazine*.

Grow, launched by Facebook in the U.K. and Ireland in 2018, is a quarterly pub for business leaders. “*Grow* by Facebook is a business marketing program that shares thought leadership content directly with our clients through an annual event, as well as print and online marketing channels,” Leila Woodington, Facebook’s head of business marketing for Northern Europe, said. “We do not sell any advertising or charge for any of the events or content as this is purely intended for marketing communications purposes.”

Meter, a pub from the Wellesley, Massachusetts-based running brand Tracksmith, takes a “long-form look at the hidden side of running culture and at the athletes that make running the greatest sport in the world.” The broadsheet, which launched in 2017, is published quarterly, used at Tracksmith events and available for purchase online. —Adam Wren

Now more than ever, in the age of the novel coronavirus, in an era of what Husni calls “isolated connectivity,” that experience is a powerful one. “We are more connected than ever before,” he says. “Yet at the same time, we are more isolated than ever before. And then comes social distancing, and we’re really, really isolated. Yet I can connect with anybody. So, the question becomes: How can I do something that shows that my brand is not just a virtual brand? That’s where print plays a big role. That’s why companies are deciding that, maybe with a magazine or a newsletter that I can mail, that people can get their hands on, then maybe they’ll feel that we are a real brand—not just something virtual, not just something in the air. The magazine becomes something like a membership card.”

Print, in other words, is primal. ■



QUESTIONS

Truths About SEO

Is Google search so semantically smart that marketers no longer need to optimize content? Not even close. What you need to know about SEO now

By Linda Formichelli

Gage Walker

SEO sometimes still gets a bad rap.

Many marketers think the practice of search engine optimization is no longer relevant, thanks to Google's innate ability to just know the difference between good and bad content. Others still think it's just a fancy term for keyword stuffing, otherwise known as manipulating search rankings by cramming relevant and sometimes irrelevant words and phrases onto a page. And yet another contingent considers it something like cheating, an unscrupulous way to draw traffic to your website.

Is there even a tidbit of truth to any of these views? Actually, yes. Google is becoming more and more intuitive, constantly. Keyword stuffing is a thing. Unscrupulous SEO tactics, and people who engage in them, do exist.

But overall, the idea that these things define SEO is a misconception—one that can lead to missed opportunities for content marketers. “When you don't optimize your site, you're making it hard for people to find your content in Google. This reduces the ROI on every piece of content you put on your website,” says Heather Lloyd-Martin, CEO of the SEO and content marketing consulting firm SuccessWorks.

Have these SEO untruths influenced your content marketing strategy? It's not too late to double back. Here are seven things you need to know about content marketing and SEO to get the most return from your content.

1 Black hat SEO will hurt you.

Dodgy SEO tactics like buying links, keyword stuffing and cloaking—where the search engine is presented with content that's different from what the user sees—have been around as long as SEO itself, which is at least as long as Google has been around. And there will probably always be people who choose to use them. Reputable companies and websites, however, need to steer clear. “Google is good at recognizing black hat tactics,” says Pax Roberts, SEO manager at Imagination. “Using them will damage your credibility.”

Instead, experts recommend focusing on methods that are not only proven but also honest, like excellent content, keyword tracking and quality backlinking. “White hat strategies do take time, but they're more sustainable in the long run,” Roberts says.

2 Keywords are, well, key—still.

Speaking of keywords, don't let anyone convince you that they're passé—or worse, that they're automatically synonymous with the black hat practice of keyword stuffing. The reality is that keywords matter a lot, not only to the major search engines, but if your site has its own search application, they matter there too, says JP Sherman, manager of search and findability at Red Hat, an open-source software company recently acquired by IBM. He says



María Tenova

“I like to say that SEO is now more about search experience optimization than search engine optimization.”

—JP Sherman, manager of search and findability, Red Hat

it’s all about using words in your content to capture the purpose of that content to match the intent of the user and the keywords the user employs to try to find that information. “Keywords are very important because they are the vehicle through which intent is expressed,” Sherman says, explaining that Google is getting better and better at query structure that has an implied intent—rather than looking at the query as just “a bag of words.”

What’s more, keyword tracking is an effective way to monitor the ROI on your SEO strategy. “I start tracking those keywords we’re targeting for a client, and then I tell them, ‘Hey, at the end of this month, you got \$12,000 in free traffic from this one article we optimized from these three keywords,’” says Roberts. There are numerous tools, some paid and some free, to help content marketers monitor and manage keywords and determine their effectiveness.

No matter how good your keywords are, though, they’ll be useless if the content that surrounds them is bad. Keywords need to be incorporated into content that is meaningful and relevant to users. “If you don’t answer a searcher’s query with the right keywords, your website is not going to be ranking,” says Violette Moussavi, SEO and digital marketing manager for Greendropship, a dropshipping supplier of natural and organic groceries, supplements and body care products. “But it has to be natural, not forced.”

3 SEO constantly changes, and your tactics should, too.

Maybe you’ve got your SEO protocol totally dialed in right now. Great. But savvy content marketers need to make sure they’re evolving right along with SEO’s shifts. Otherwise, you might start to drop in rankings because you aren’t aware, for example, that Google recently started indexing podcasts, or that it’s now prioritizing featured snippets, or that last summer it implemented a “site diversity update” that limits the number of page-one organic rankings for the same website.

“Google is constantly changing its algorithms,” says Roberts, pointing out that in 2018 alone the search engine implemented 3,200 changes and engaged in more than 650,000 experiments. Follow the official Google Webmaster Central Blog to keep track of updates Google is making that could impact your SEO—and then put those updates into play if you want to keep (or get) higher rankings. “SEO isn’t a one-and-done thing,” Roberts says. “Your content will depreciate over time, because one of the ranking factors is timeliness. Google doesn’t want to show articles from 2003. They want to show things that are timely.”

4 Good content isn’t good forever.

Roberts urges content marketers to perform regular audits to make sure that SEO updates are still working in your favor and users are finding value in your content. The process can be tedious—as any set of how-to instructions will show you—but is well worth the time spent.

What should you evaluate in a content audit? Roberts suggests looking at:

- Reads per page
- Length of time spent on a page
- Number of conversions per page
- Number of social shares

Katya Austin

- Whether your sourcing is up to date
 - How well the tone of the content reflects your brand
 - How fresh the format is (for example, maybe it’s time to add some numbered lists or bullet points)
 - EAT (expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness)—for example, include an author bio to highlight industry expertise
- Once the audit is complete, you can use the information to adjust your methods and your content as needed. An audit can help determine whether it’s time to rewrite, delete or consolidate content, or even just update a fact or two.

It’s also extremely important to use the audit to make sure you are not competing with ... yourself. “When I start looking at potential clients’ keywords, the majority of the time I’ll find that they’re targeting the same keyword with seven different content pieces, causing keyword cannibalization,” Roberts says. This means all seven pieces risk a rankings drop and low organic traffic, because all pages are competing against each other for similar queries. An audit will show you if this is happening, so you can either reevaluate the main purpose of each individual piece of content or consolidate those seven pieces targeting the same queries to create one awesome piece of content on the link with the most search equity.

THE BEST SEO RESEARCH TOOLS

If you’re investing in SEO, you’ll want to also invest in at least one decent SEO tool, like SEMrush, Moz or SpyFu. “These tools give you a vast amount of information,” says Pax Roberts, Imagination’s SEO manager. “They also give you the ability to track keywords you want to be ranking for and see how you rank against competitors in the space.”



SEMrush—starts at \$99.95 per month



Moz—starts at \$129 per year for basic



SpyFu—starts at \$33 per month

Free tools are out there, as well, and can be good choices for those lacking the resources to invest in a paid version. Roberts’ zero-cost tools of choice? Search console tools like Google Search Console or Bing Webmaster. Other options include the free versions of SEMrush and Moz (MozBar), along with SEOquake and Chrome DevTools.

“SEO isn’t a one-and-done thing. Your content will depreciate over time, because one of the ranking factors is timeliness.”

—Pax Roberts, SEO manager, Imagination





Irina Drrde

Top SEO Driver? A+ Content

Search engine optimization is, undoubtedly, important to your website rankings. But when the rubber hits the road, nothing will ever beat the importance of good content when it comes to driving traffic to your website, says Heather Lloyd-Martin of SuccessWorks. In fact, a survey conducted by analytics firm Databox found that 75% of experts consider content the most important aspect of an SEO-friendly site. (Keywords ranked a fairly distant No. 2.)

“If you’re worrying about what Google wants and making all of your writing decisions based on that, you are going about things the wrong way,” Lloyd-Martin says. “At the end of the day, writing good content is all about your reader.”

5 Links do matter.

It’s not what you know, it’s whom you know. In real life, this old adage may or may not be true. But when it comes to SEO, whom you know does matter. That’s why it’s crucial to only link to sites with expertise, authority and trustworthiness—known as EAT by industry insiders. In return, those are the sites you want linking to yours. “Google is crawling your page, looking at the links and seeing what you’re attached to,” says Roberts. If your healthcare content is somehow linked up to an office supply store, for example, your expertise, authority and trustworthiness can take a hit because the connection doesn’t make sense.

On the flip side, if CNN links to your infographic, that’s a win for your own expertise, authority and trustworthiness. Links to author pages are also valuable, because they show the reader that the person writing the content is qualified to speak with authority on the topic at hand. Another good move: linking to articles on your own website. This encourages people to click around and read additional content, says Lloyd-Martin, but you should still be careful about the competing-with-yourself issue.

Of course, it isn’t always possible to control who or what is linking to your site. But it’s enormously helpful to at least be aware that backlinks are important, Lloyd-Martin says, and then to take steps to get them—using white hat tactics, of course. “When we reverse-engineer the elements of high-ranking pages, we find they tend to have high-quality backlinks,” she explains, adding that it’s not uncommon for those pages to become featured snippets.

6 Mobile and voice searches work differently.

Nearly 178 million people used mobile devices for internet searches in 2016, according to Statista, and that number is expected to surge to 211 million in 2020.

Desktop and mobile searches are not one and the same when it comes to SEO. In fact, a recent study by SEMrush found that only 13% of websites maintained the same position across platforms, and 30% of pages with first-page rankings on desktop dropped to at least position 10 on mobile. Content marketers who want to avoid that phenomenon need to create content that provides the type of information people are searching for on mobile devices, which often centers around dining, shopping, activities and general curiosity (How old is Danny DeVito? When does summer begin? What is Vegemite?).

Voice is still new but accounts for 20% of mobile queries, so optimizing for voice searches is important for savvy marketers. Here are three things you can do now to get voice ready.

First, know that optimizing your site for voice search goes back to the keyword analytics we discussed earlier. “The primary way to

incorporate voice search strategy into your business strategy would be to look at how users are searching your site,” says Sherman.

Next, start incorporating structured data—information strategically organized and positioned into your content, possibly in the form of a table, chart or list—into your website. That structured data can help you rank for featured snippets, and featured snippets typically rank higher in voice searches than other pieces of information. “Whenever you’re talking to a Google Assistant or an Alexa, they are reading the featured snippets,” says Roberts. Sherman adds that incorporating structured data is one of the most important things you can do to enhance how Google understands your website overall. (Bone up on the benefits and how-tos of marketing through Alexa online at imaginepub.com in a previous **orange** magazine article, “Content Marketing in the Age of Alexa.”)

Finally, Roberts suggests making an effort to target long tail keyword clusters. This can be accomplished by placing questions and their answers in your content. For example, “How do I peel a banana fast?” and “Who is the world’s tallest man?” are long tail keywords. “It’s how we talk,” Roberts says. “When you go to Alexa, you’re not going to say, ‘Alexa—search map, bus, now.’ No, you’re going to say, ‘Alexa, what time does the bus come to my address?’”

User experience is everything.

While all of these SEO tips and tricks are vital for anyone who wants their content to rank high in searches, none of it really matters unless the user experience is top-notch. “SEO has to be user-focused now,” says Moussavi. This means incorporating basics like good navigation, an aesthetically pleasing design, mobile-friendly features and speed into your content marketing plan.

Formatting your content for Google’s featured snippets is essential, too, Moussavi says. Questions in the heading, for example, tend to appeal to users, as do bullet points and numbered lists, since they’re easy on the eyes and can be read and absorbed quickly.

In terms of the content itself, it’s crucial to zero in on what the user wants to see on your site. Are they looking for information? Entertainment? Customer service? Find out, and then provide it. Moussavi also recommends working with other marketing channels within your company on overall brand-building, rather than allowing your content to live in a bubble. “You need to know your audience and provide content that will help them at every stage of the conversion funnel,” she says.

Sherman actually has his own term for all of this. “I think there has been a shift of perspective in the industry,” he says. “I like to say that SEO is now more about search experience optimization than search engine optimization.” ■

Keyword tracking is an effective way to monitor the ROI on your SEO strategy.

Elisa Michele



Education isn't enough. Regions Bank Head of Marketing Michele Elrod on thinking audience-first and the transition from talking to anticipating customers' needs and wants

By Simona Covel

Photography by Cary Norton

Personal Banker

Adozen or so years ago, in the wake of the financial crisis—an event that shook the banking industry to its core—Regions Bank marketers decided it was time to stop talking *at* customers and start talking *with* them, creating a conversation.

More than a decade later, Regions and many of its banking competitors have made huge strides in shifting their marketing mindset. Marketing messages stress making the most of your financial life; content hubs overflow with education about money management.

But the target continues to move. With banks merging and encroaching, nontraditional competitors looking for a slice (Google planning to launch a checking account!) and customers changing how they interact with financial institutions, Regions is on the cusp of another change. Talking to customers is no longer enough. Today, to win hearts and wallets, you need to understand your customers and respond to needs they may not even know they have.

It's a tall order. In her decades leading bank marketing, Regions Executive Vice President and Head of Marketing Michele Elrod has been in the trenches as the pace of change has accelerated—what it means to be a financial marketer has evolved from someone pushing messaging about product to truly understanding the audience. What's next? We asked Elrod her take on audience-first planning, the role of data and how to react when you're staring down a wholly new competitive set.

Q: You've said Regions can't talk "at" customers; you have to talk "with" them. How far along are you in that journey?

A: I said that at a time when the financial industry was being challenged as a whole, and confidence was at an all-time low. It was a wonderful "aha" moment. Where we landed was that information was going to be key. We had to have the content, had to involve customers in the conversation. We had to provide them what they were asking for: financial education and insights, to help them make financial decisions that help them in life. When you see the message from that vantage point, the way you communicate the message is very different. Prior to that, we marketed things and products and rates. That's what banks had to offer. After we moved our chair and looked from that vantage point, we started getting very serious about content and financial education. Our role is making sure that it's not just about the product, but that you understand why you want the product and how you're going to use it.

Q: You've noted that audience-first marketing is the next step in this journey. Can you talk about what that means to you and

“It's not about using the data to be creepy, but to develop that relationship. Marketing is not a blunt instrument, but a refined, data-driven program.”

—Michelle Elrod, Regions executive vice president and head of marketing

how it's different than the way you've approached marketing in the past?

A: In the past we'd start with, "What are we trying to achieve?" and then we'd look at, "Who's the audience?" Now, we start by understanding who our consumer is first, and then we decide what's the messaging, what's the communication?

It's not about the cross-sell or the lending message. Now it's, "Michele belongs to this segment, within this segment; this is how we should think about her and talk to her based on the cues she's giving us over time."

Q: How do you handle product partners who may be resistant to a shift that appears to put product second?

A: First, we have to be comfortable that we're using the right data. From there, we make sure that we have the right messages. Then we can work with the business groups to make sure they understand the strategy and educate on how it can help them in terms of retention and organic growth.

Will there be instances where the business group says, "I'm introducing the shiniest product in five years and we need to market it"? Sure. We're working through that plan. It's not unlike what we've done in the last five years when we've told people that we know you're comfortable having set [marketing] campaigns, but we're not going to do that anymore—we're gong to have an always-on approach. We did it little by little. They're all on board now. It's a matter of proving the concept; you have to prove that it produces results.

Q: Regions is facing a shifting competitive landscape in the coming year; how do you shift your approach as a result of that—or do you stay the course with your own brand priorities?





A: Staying in tune with where there are opportunities being created is more important now than ever: How am I going to get into that consideration set faster? It's a matter of understanding the very real competitive threat and having strategies. You can't be everything to everyone, so what about your brand gives you the advantage?

Sometimes those points are absolutely clear. For example: Regions' approach to wealth and commercial banking, and having a 360-degree view of every customer. We're serious when we say we bring the partners to the table. It makes a difference, and it's something customers often haven't had before from other providers.

That's unique, and so the ability to create messaging around it is unique. Other times may not be that differentiator. That's when you rely on the strength of the brand.

Q: How do you differentiate your marketing in an increasingly crowded marketplace, where competitors range from tech companies to big banks?

A: When it's robo-advising or digital banks, each one plays a different role in the life of the consumer. Perhaps there can be a role for each. I take into consideration the competitive set, but I also recognize our role and what we can provide. We are a traditional bank that uses technology very well, has great customer service and is a part of the communities we're in. I don't know of robo-advisors or digital banks who can say the same thing. That's what I have to rely on as an advantage when the product is at parity, for example.

Q: How do you balance a data-centered approach to marketing with the problem of too much data—or becoming too reactionary, which is something financial institutions can fall prey to?

A: We started by understanding customer data first. We made sure we had great access and the tools to use data in a nimble manner. Then we had to have the content to make the conversations more robust and rich.

Where we are now is starting to look at other types of data. What will help us understand consumers and prospects? We have used and evolved the data to suit the marketing strategy and the business objectives. We use data to help us optimize our media [spend] monthly, our digital [messaging] weekly, to understand performance and improve communication with customers and much more.

What we don't do is become paralyzed by all of that. We continuously test and learn. We take the best of our learning and implement that. We have a marketing department that does all of that with their agencies; we don't have to have layers of bureaucracy to understand how we have to shift messages or media or marketing performance.

Q: What's the single most important piece of data as far as you're concerned?

A: One of the things that was extremely important for us was to understand how many times someone came through our bank channels and to be able to understand the customer in that second. Then we'll talk about something that's relevant for them in real time. That's the foundation for everything we want to do from an outbound standpoint, too.

We spent the last two years building the models and foundation to be more relevant and real time with our customer in our inbound channels. We want to use that intelligence to have smarter outbound conversations. Some of the work we did on the inbound side pushed us to say: We now know we need to be even smarter when we push out marketing.

Q: When is it appropriate for you as a marketer to join that customer conversation?

A: We really want to understand what the customer is telling us and what's important to the customer, whether through cues they give us online, transactions they make or hand-raising in the digital ecosystem. We want to make sure to understand how to be part of that conversation.

All of us have had the experience of hand-raising in the digital arena and having others approach us. Most customers are willing to have conversations that are more relevant. It's not about using the data to be creepy, but to develop that relationship.

Marketing is not a blunt instrument, but a refined, data-driven program. ■

“Our role is making sure that it's not just about the product, but that you understand why you want the product and how you're going to use it.”

—Michelle Elrod



Start It Up

Great content marketing can mean the difference between success and failure for early-stage launches. Starting a business? Get your content plan cranking, founder!

By Michele Weldon

F

or the unicorns—those billion-dollar startup successes that become

household names—origin stories usually begin with answering an essential need. A way to sell your stuff (eBay). A way to share videos (YouTube). Their founder stories usually go on to play starring roles in their content strategies and help set the course for their future success with their initial public offering and bypassing the startup graveyard.

For regular ole startups, content marketing also tends to start small but becomes a defining part of launching the newbie brand and communicating value to its desired audience. Content can be make-or-break, which is why it tends to be a tier-one marketing commitment. But finding the right content approach can be a complex path of trial and error.

This path becomes increasingly complicated in the face of competition, as more and more startups vie for hotly contested funding dollars. Startups mean big business in the United States. Crunchbase reported that projected dollar volume in 2018 increased 55% over the previous year, with more than \$300 billion invested in equity funding rounds for startups.

“The idea of a startup is around a pain point people are having—and you have the answers. Find out the pain point and answer the questions through content,” says Shane Barker, content strategist, CEO of Shane Barker Consulting, co-founder of Attrock and University of California-Los Angeles adjunct instructor on personal branding.

“If you have a product or service that is genuinely useful and good—but people are not convinced—strong content can possibly make the difference,” says Sonia Simone, independent freelance content strategist and founding partner of Copyblogger Media, a content marketing startup launched in 2006.

The average survival rate for companies launched with fewer than 500 employees is 48% five years out, and 33% 10 years from launch, per the U.S. Small Business Administration. Startups fail for a bucket of reasons—some obvious such as personnel and funding—but among the top reasons, according to CB Insights, is failing to articulate a clear solution to target consumers.

Poor marketing was listed as eighth out of 20 reasons for startup missteps, with 14% placing blame on poor promotion and marketing.

Enter content marketing, which can address both of these challenges. First, demonstrate a need. Next, showcase how your new idea can address it

Not every startup has the trajectory of an Airbnb. But the content strategies of three different kinds of startups in associations, fintech and B2B offer some surprising insights into what works and why.



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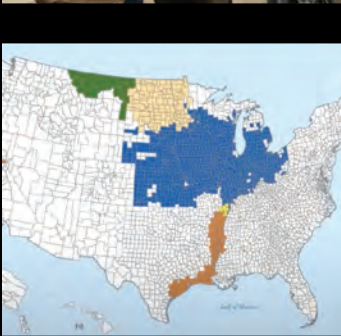
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HEAR DIRECTLY FROM MEMBERS

TRY IT OUT FOR YOURSELF

HEAR DIRECTLY FROM MEMBERS

TRY IT OUT FOR YOURSELF



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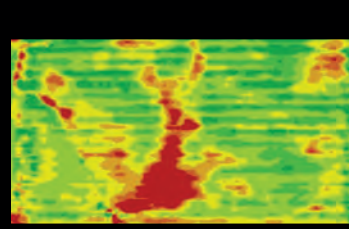
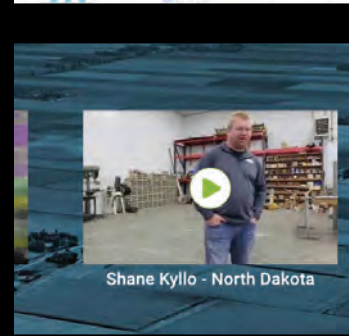
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Farmers Business Network

The Takeaway: Data Science Is Key

“There is such an appetite for our data science,” says Sally Krueger, head of brand and content at Farmers Business Network (FBN). Launched in 2014, Farmers Business Network has grown to more than 10,000 farmer members across the U.S. and Canada. In joining the independent farmer network, FBN members receive input price and performance transparency and comprehensive farm benchmarking and analytics based on more than 220 million acre-events of real-world precision agronomic data.

The FBN data science team generates analysis and produces in-depth reports that contribute to FBN digital decision tools, such as the FBN Seed Finder. This independently contributed data from member farmers gets anonymously aggregated and analyzed, then shared or reported on FBN’s podcast, mobile apps, the Emergence blog, and by emails and texts. Shareability is everything.

“It all comes back to: Are we helping farmers to be more profitable, take less risk, be more independent and work for the future?” Krueger asks.

FBN’s Emergence blog launched in 2016 and includes podcasts, farmer guest blogs, data reports, videos, webinars and links to live events including the Farmer2Farmer annual conference that recently attracted more than 4,000 attendees.

In one recent podcast, “Evaluating This Year’s Corn Crop Prior to Harvest,” FBN Head of Agronomy Darin Lickfeldt, Ph.D., spoke with Holly Thrasher, senior staff agronomist, on harvest prioritization, inspecting for nitrogen deficiencies and adjusting chemical program choices—topics all backed by solid data.

While storytelling about farmers connects all content, Krueger says, “and they touch just about everything we create,” the story told through data is paramount.

“They told us what they care about, and we give them the sort of thing they can’t find anywhere else,” Krueger says. The content team asks, “Will this piece of content be practically helpful to our farmers, and is this useful to make a meaningful decision that is actionable?”

She adds, “Our storytelling is as simple as working alongside farmers to create something meaningful for them. We keep an eye on who is subscribing to video, interactive, podcasts, a weekly digest subscription. Do they want to read a 500-word story or engage with a calculator for a survey?”

To get those answers, the content team and regional core members take farmer feedback from phone calls, texts, emails and social media. For farmers, deep attention to content is seasonal, but the hunger for the latest stats, prices and analytics independent of agriculture companies is constant, Krueger says.

“Where, how and when is just as important as what,” says Krueger, who says content success at FBN is measured by app engagement through feedback and survey responses. She adds, “We are growing quickly, and the content is important to us. Our content is about our core values. We are known as a young and disruptive brand, and that is interesting to a number of farmers who heard we were challenging the status quo.”

While tone, style and approach have been consistent, content “is very experimental because our farmers are. They have to swerve when something doesn’t go as planned. We try to do the same and are not afraid to try new things,” Krueger says. The future for FBN will have more video, podcasts, social media and interactive media, with the ultimate goal of saving the future of farming.



4 Startup-Content Tips From a Founder

Founded 13 years ago as a blogging startup for writers, Copyblogger Media has grown to be a content marketing firm helping its customers—including startups—strategize content to grow audience and revenue. While every business is different, Copyblogger co-founder Sonia Simone offers these four guidelines:

1. Start with text in a blog. Search engines find text easy to discover, and blogs help you get your message in order.
2. Use videos to explain the benefits of what you are offering. More visual products work better on Instagram and YouTube.
3. Turn to podcasts for a product or service that is idea-focused.
4. Create one amazing piece of content a month and promote it, rather than post so-so content more often.

Content can be make-or-break for startups, which is why it tends to be a tier-one marketing commitment. But finding the right content approach can be a complex path of trial and error.

CNote

The Takeaway: Short Stories and Visuals Increase Value

CNote co-founders Catherine Berman and Yuliya Tarasava knew they were answering a niche need when they won the 2017 Best Startup Pitch Company Award in the fintech category at the SXSW Accelerator Pitch Competition in 2017.

Today, with more than \$50 million in assets committed at the social impact investing firm, and more than 3,000 jobs created nationwide, CNote is dedicated to forming content aligned to two distinct pillars: informational (quantitative) and compelling (qualitative) content. This is done primarily through blogs, monthly newsletters and lots of experimentation, including a surprising new old-school avenue: printed graphic posters sent to potential investors.

“Educational and foundational is the quantitative piece,” says Mike Ivancie, director of growth and partnerships at CNote, which delivered the first high-yield impact product to be qualified through Reg A+ for mass market investment into community lenders at scale.

In this first content bucket are regularly published, immersive pieces, such as the eight-section text and graphic online guide to Sustainable Development Goals or the 17-part online Retail Impact Investing Options. CNote also produces quarterly-specific metrics around the impact of investors, but it uses discretion. “If we don’t think our content answers a question, helps solve a problem or is interesting to readers, we don’t publish it,” Ivancie says.

The second pillar of content is compelling borrower stories. “Telling this narrative is connecting to the emotional side. It is extremely valuable as far as acquisition and retention, in the form of credibility. This is the qualitative piece. Without these two working together, we are deficient in our content marketing,” Ivancie says.

“A big question in fintech is, ‘Are you doing what you say you are doing with my money?’ We have to deliver on our promise to our customers, financially and through our impact.” With both pillars of content, he says, CNote responds: “Here’s the individual human being, here is the outcome. And here are the aggregate statistics in the annual report. We paint a comprehensive picture.”

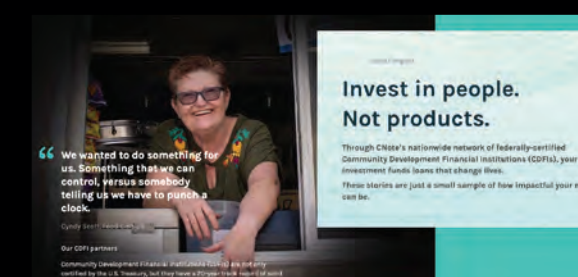
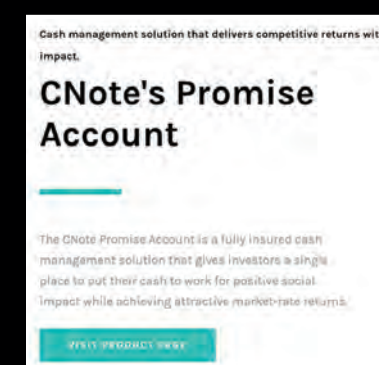
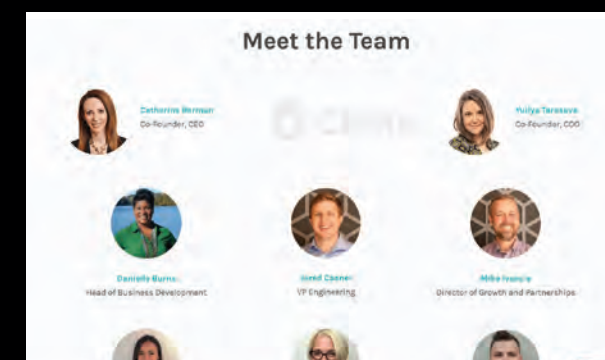
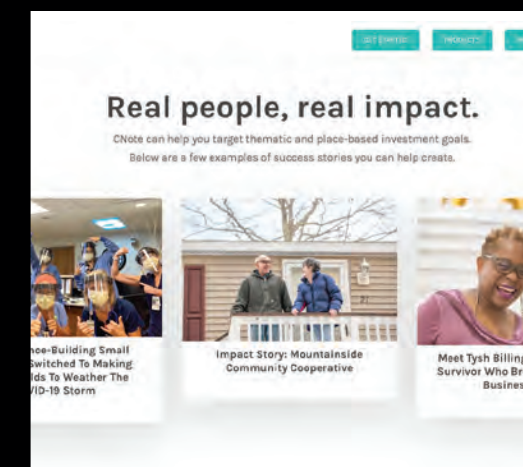
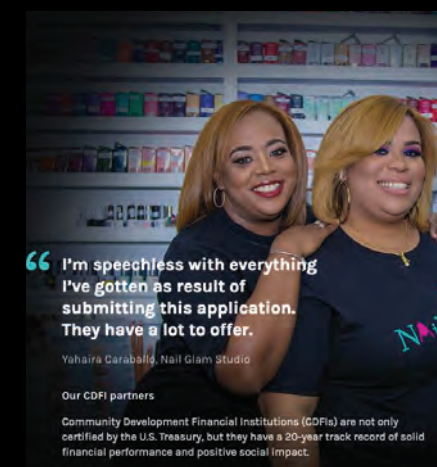
Impact is measured through the number of monthly searches for content and overall traffic growth, as well as email captures and inquiries. “But in many respects, the quality of the traffic (high-intent traffic) is more important than the volume of traffic. If your brand is ranking for core industry keywords that express high conversion intent, that’s probably going to drive more business outcomes than ranking for a more top-of-the-funnel search term that may or may not relate to your underlying goods or services,” Ivancie says.

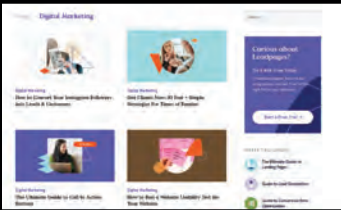
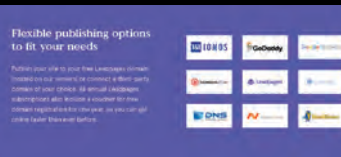
What’s most surprising in content at CNote are the new graphic posters promoting “Wisdom Fund: Invest in Equality,” designed for the initiative to secure small business loans for female entrepreneurs. They’re shared on social channels and sent as physical posters to investors.

“It’s a unique marketing outreach strategy,” Ivancie says. “With financial products, the challenge is it’s a really crowded space. You have to have a war chest or be really creative. As a challenger brand, we’re not going to outspend large financial institutions. But with something like these posters, we can convey the essence of our brand in a compelling and unique way that is more likely to get a potential partner interested and start a conversation.”

Because content for CNote is “a more relationship-based approach to selling,” Ivancie says, the sleekly designed posters physically sent to an individual investor “are extremely valuable as far as acquisition and retention.” Sent with a personal cover letter, “the poster is a unique marketing strategy, and there is value in trying something different. This is targeted and deliberate. We send them something valuable, interesting and thought provoking.”

For the content future at CNote, a new Change Makers series and a text Q&A with investors, Ivancie says, may eventually lead into podcasts. More complementary webinars and print-friendly PDF content around core topics are future content strategies, as are case studies and whitepapers that can serve as useful informational content and sales collateral.





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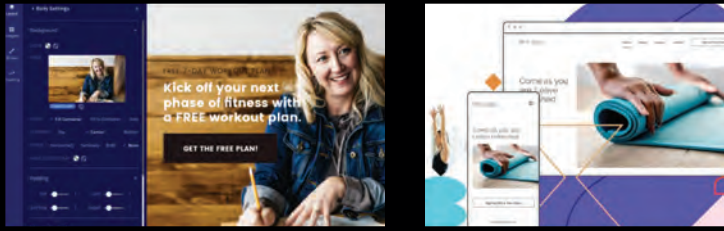
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The Takeaway: Drive Engagement—From Emails to E-books

Launched in 2012 in Minneapolis to serve small businesses' digital needs for lead gen through websites and blogs, Leadpages has grown to 400,000 businesses in its ecosystem, says Madeline Blasberg, director of marketing.

Named third out of 10 fastest-growing new and redesigned apps in 2018 by business app platform Zapier, Leadpages aligns its B2B content to specific stages of the customer journey, Blasberg says, moving from "awareness to consideration to decision to conversion. We match the format type to the audience's intent and level of buy-in," she says.

Delivered through email, first-touchpoint content is short. "People have information overload and are resource hoarders," Blasberg says. Short, interactive content like templates, checklists or resource guides works best here, she says, and is measured by open rates and downloads.

The next phase is in specific thematic buckets of content related to the customer's expressed interest. This level requires more engagement from the user and can be a webinar, a graphic 50-page e-book or links to longer multimedia customer stories, such as the story of photographer Greg Benz. A five-day email automation campaign was customized for real estate consultants.

Podcasts on the website are "both a lead generator and a way to further engage existing leads and customers and keep the conversation going," says Blasberg. The podcast is then repurposed into a blog article, social media stories with tips and resources, and (occasionally) paid ads.

"The most critical piece is we are constantly escalating the relationship, intensifying the buy-in, and moving our audience towards a sale and then ongoing success," Blasberg says. "We aim to fit the content theme and format to specific stages of customers' journeys from awareness to consideration to decision to conversion—so we can meet people where they are and move the relationship forward."

With a "singular focus on serving small business," Blasberg says, the content move for the future is aimed at a new product, a website builder. "That's a competitive space, and we are pivoting our strategy. We are letting our community tell the stories." This approach is driven by digestible chunks of content: two-minute videos of customers telling their origin stories, feature articles, podcasts and mini 200-word case studies. "We are leveraging storytelling as a powerful sales tool," Blasberg says.

No matter their mix of strategies and tactics, startups like Farmers Business Bureau, CNote and Leadpages are tapping content—and continually evolving their approach to it—to help them grow and drive returns on their business goals. They are experiencing the benefits of what winning founders have long known: Content marketing can play a make-or-buy role in turning a startup into a success—and, as its founders surely dream—the next unicorn. ■

Cut Up Your Content With Purpose

"Content marketing is a long-term play," says Shane Barker, content strategist and CEO of Shane Barker Consulting, co-founder of Attrack and a University of California-Los Angeles adjunct instructor on personal branding. "We all start at zero. If we could start at 20, that would be great." Think long term and hustle short



- term, day in, day out.
- Here are three more content-strategy quotables from Barker, who specializes in advising startups:
1. "Look at the competition and see where they are gaining traction. No reason to reinvent the wheel."
 2. "YouTube is the second-largest search engine. From a video, you can get audio for a podcast and break it out into a text blog post. Cut it up. Repurpose."
 3. "Create great content with a purpose. Do whatever is realistic, once a week or twice a month. If you have quality, original content, over time Google will reward you."

Glen Carrie



As
Imagination
celebrates its
first quarter
century, a
look back at
the evolution
of one agency
and content
marketing
itself



t was a quiet start for the custom publisher that would grow into a full-service content marketing agency and one day custom-craft omnichannel strategies, journalistically rigorous content, and audience-first approaches for Fortune 500 companies, international associations and hundreds of other clients. In the future there would be award-winning motion-graphic videos, interactive infographics, immersive landing pages, social media campaigns, magazines for digital startups and podcasts. There'd be bigger offices, shelves of Champagne bottles (each popped for a new client) and scores of talented staff.

But in those early days, a quarter century ago, it was just James Meyers, Doug Kelly and Rebecca Rolfes, a handful of card tables and the smell of Giordano's wafting up from below.

'An Interesting Opportunity'

Before Imagination, Meyers had built a successful career in the publishing industry in Chicago, working his way up to president of Macmillan Publishing by the early '90s. But after the company sold off the seven agencies he managed, he decided to set out on his own. At that time, a fellow board member for the Museum of Broadcast Communications was looking for a custom publisher. Did Meyers know of one?

"I thought that might sound like an interesting opportunity," Meyers says. So instead of a referral, he threw his own hat into the ring.

The client turned out to be American Airlines, and the company invited Meyers to present just two weeks later in Dallas. He called up Kelly, a designer he had worked with at his previous gig. After reminding Kelly who he was—they'd only met once before—Meyers convinced him to work on the pitch. Together, they created

the prototypes over nights and weekends—and landed the contract.

Winning the business, though, was just the beginning. Meyers quickly put out an ad: managing editor wanted.

"I went to the interview, and it was Jim," Rolfes says. "He was in a borrowed office. He had no office, he had no business cards, he had no phone number, he had nothing except the prototypes that Doug had made."

The lack of formality didn't dissuade Rolfes, who had just returned to Chicago from a nine-year stint in Europe, writing for various publications. It had the opposite effect: She accepted the scrappy startup job, deeming it "a dream come true."

Forging a Path

Meyers, Rolfes and Kelly spent the next year putting together that first issue of *Admiral* magazine while drumming up an eclectic series of other projects—

"I'm so glad that we saw the opportunity to expand beyond print, that we have always had this expansive, creative view of the possibilities and the endlessness of the possibilities, and that we refuse to box ourselves in."

—Rebecca Rolfes, co-founder, executive vice president and former content team head



Memories so old, they required a scanner: Small but mighty: 1st annual holiday party (1994); 3rd office location on Elston Avenue in Bucktown; company offsite (1998); 3rd anniversary party (1996); company bowling outing (1996)



Lindsay Henwood

The Birth— and Adolescence— of Content Marketing

The last 25 years have seen the rise of content, navigation of its hormonal teenage years and now the onset of maturity

In 1994, "content marketing" wasn't a thing. It wouldn't become one for a decade.

Yet custom publishers like Imagination were out there marketing content. As the '90s rolled into the new millennium, companies were innovating and experimenting with new ways to strategically address audience needs and deliver business ROI. But no one could have predicted the transformation that would occur over the next 25 years, as the internet revolutionized how we create, target and distribute content—nor the rapidly multiplying forms and shapes that content would take.

A quarter century ago, the custom media pioneers had no idea what was coming for them in the content marketing revolution.

Custom Is King

Imagination plunged into the custom publishing business in 1994, starting with print projects and then expanding into digital and multimedia over the decades. Custom media was a niche but a vital one for companies looking to provide value to their customers throughout a long sales cycle.

That said, it wasn't exactly a glamorous enterprise. "If you were looking for the content division in a large business enterprise, it was usually down in the basement in the corner by the furnace," says Joe Pulizzi, a custom media pioneer who went on to found the Content Marketing Institute. "I mean, there was not a lot of love going on back then for anybody in custom media and custom publishing."

But organizations like Penton Custom Media, where Pulizzi worked, and Imagination forged on with their work and continued to add capabilities. The industry as we know it was born.

"Content marketing initially took off because brands were looking for new ways to engage with their customers and draw them to their websites," says James Meyers, president, CEO and founder of Imagination.

"Whereas in a pre-internet world there were, say, nine ways to communicate with customers, there were suddenly 1,000," Pulizzi says.

"What happened when we came out of that in 2010, it was like everyone hit the reset button on their marketing programs and they were willing to try something new, so it was the perfect storm."

—Joe Pulizzi, content marketing expert and founder of Content Marketing Institute

25 Years of Content Marketing

Historic highlights for content marketing and Imagination

Timeline 1994-2020



1994

Imagination opens its doors. Its first job? A magazine for American Airlines

1994

Netscape launches its web browser, setting the stage for the rapid growth of the internet

1994

Apple debuts the Power Macintosh 8100, a fixture in Imagination's first office



1996

Xoom spams 6 million internet users with a spam email promoting the company's anti-spam tool—an early stunt in the history of email marketing



1998

Imagination wins the contract for a Motorola magazine, *Navigator*, that was eventually translated into Japanese and German

2003

Radio journalist Christopher Lydon begins recording a series of "audio blog posts" called Open Source about politics and technology, laying the groundwork for what we today call podcasts



2006

The first tweet is sent, ushering in a powerful new platform that changed not only content, but politics and the world at large

2006

Imagination launches its video production studio

2007

Joe Pulizzi pens his first blog for his new venture, which eventually became the Content Marketing Institute. The post title? "Why Content Marketing?"

2007

Debut of Red Bull Media House, which revolutionized branded content through magazines, digital content, documentaries and events





2007
The iPhone is unveiled, kicking off the eventual explosion of mobile content marketing

2007
American Express debuts OPEN Forum, an online resource center and networking site for small business owners, setting a benchmark for many finserve content hubs to come

2009
The first issue of Imagination's **orange** magazine is published, provocatively covering content marketing and debunking the "print is dead" mantra



2011
Imagination takes over social media management for a dozen General Mills brands, becoming the voice of household staples like Honey Nut Cheerios and Old El Paso

2012
Old Spice and Taco Bell get into a scuffle on Twitter, launching a trend that spawned many a sassy brand account and changed the rules of engagement online



2012
The New York Times publishes "Snow Fall," a multimedia feature that weaves interactive graphics and video footage with a long-form narrative, setting a new standard for digital journalism by traditional publishers and brands

2012
Facebook acquires Instagram for \$1 billion, continuing to evolve the social media landscape



2014
Airbnb launches a print magazine, *Pineapple*—a short-lived pub followed by a second print magazine foray two years later

2016
Imagination opens its Washington, D.C., office with a roster of association clients



2019
Imagination celebrates its 25th anniversary

2020
Imagination adds two global financial brands to its client roster

A Bust—and a Boom

Just as content's star began to rise, the 2007 recession hit, slashing marketing budgets. But as the country recovered, a new wave began.

"What happened when we came out of that in 2010, it was like everyone hit the reset button on their marketing programs and they were willing to try something new, so it was the perfect storm," Pulizzi says.

Google Trends documents an upward climb in interest in "content marketing" beginning in 2011. And it was no longer just self-styled content marketing agencies in the mix. The floodgates were open.

"Once-traditional agencies and PR firms started to see that brands were taking money out of their traditional advertising budgets and putting it into content marketing," Meyers says. "Suddenly, all of those agencies and those PR firms could also do content marketing."

This led to an explosion in the number of self-proclaimed content specialists. The landscape became crowded with firms competing in the content space, from native ad platforms to publishers to social marketing managers to content recommendation engines.

Growing Pains

"As everyone became a content marketer, the internet was awash in low-quality work put out by content farms and brands alike. Journalistic content was the exception, not the rule. And the amateur content felt, well, amateur," says Imagination co-founder Doug Kelly.

"Content just can't be thrown out there without it being crafted, without it being designed, without it being edited, without it being produced by people who know what they're doing," Kelly explains.

Not only was quality an issue, all too often, the content wasn't rooted in a strong business foundation. Without what Meyers dubs the "three-legged stool" of strategy, content creation and distribution, marketers had little chance of success.

"I think all three of those things are equally important, and I think without all three of them, the other two or the other one is not going to be effective," he says.

For Rebecca Rolfes, co-founder and executive vice president of Imagination and its former content lead, that strategic element is often missing. That's especially the case when making decisions around what format and approach to use. Back in the early days, the debate was often around whether to create a website for a brand. Today, it's about whether to dive into the hot content type of the moment.

"All of a sudden everybody's doing podcasts. OK, fine. But is a podcast right for your audience? Ask the more basic question. Just because you *can* doesn't mean you *should*," Rolfes says.

These questions are fundamental, because there's so much marketers can do today. The onus is on choosing the right channels and ignoring the rest.

"I'm telling people don't do all those things," Pulizzi says. "Pick one or two channels and be great at them instead of spreading yourself so thin and being mediocre at 10."

A Turning Tide

So much has changed throughout the explosive growth of content marketing over the last decade and since its evolution from custom media over the last quarter century.

"The increasing sophistication of data has been a transformational force in content marketing's evolution. But as important as analytics are in interpreting the results of your content program, you can't simply calculate a formula for content success," Meyers says.

That data has to be coupled with careful listening and idea after idea. Industry veterans know that the next hot thing will be cold soon enough. So what's Meyers' take on the future of content marketing?

"Everything goes in cycles. Things get more important or less important as years go by. But right now I think we're at the beginning of a cycle where there's a desire or a need to return to creativity."

"Everything goes in cycles. Things get more important or less important as years go by. But right now I think we're at the beginning of a cycle where there's a desire or a need to return to creativity."



Work hard, play hard. The Imagination culture and camaraderie are key to overall business success. Each new account is announced with a gong and toasted with Champagne; holiday party (2005); annual White Sox outing; Halloween party (2013, the design team as the Adobe Creative Suite)

"Content just can't be thrown out there without it being crafted, without it being designed, without it being edited, without it being produced by people who know what they're doing."

—Doug Kelly, co-founder and executive vice president, design & brand

among them the creation of a "Pog" game for the local zoo, in true '90s fashion.

After determining that financial services were an ideal match for custom publishing growth, Imagination acquired a Los Angeles-based firm, Baumer Financial Publishing. This led to work with Wells Fargo, a relationship that continues today—albeit in a more omnichannel approach across digital platforms.

From there, momentum built. E-Trade came on as a client a few years later, along with Motorola. Imagination cultivated relationships with not only finserve and tech firms, but also retail, B2B and association clients, such as the Project Management Institute and the National Federation of Independent Business. The staff grew and moved into a larger space, and then eventually an even larger one in Chicago's Fulton Market district. But one thing stayed the same: a strong belief in exploring different media types, platforms and expertise-driven subject matter formats.

"We decided early on that we didn't want to be tied to one certain vertical," Meyers says. "And our print beginning was just that—a beginning."

"We had always considered ourselves media agnostic. We don't care if it's print or digital or audio," Rolfes says. "The important thing? Landing on the best format for the material and the audience."

This proved critical as the custom publishing world forged into the digital world.

Expanding to New Horizons

As the new millennium dawned, Imagination began developing content-driven websites. A true internet

connection was secured, an upgrade from the screechy, slow dialup in the original office. At first, sites were simply a place to house print editorial, but it soon became clear that the web offered much more.

"We brought digital in because we were always looking at what's the next thing from a capability standpoint that would help strengthen our relationships," Kelly says.

That list of capabilities continued to grow over the years as Imagination moved into video production, social media management, podcasting and interactive content. Along with the new digital content types came paid media, SEO and a whole slate of advanced tech to target and measure content performance. And with this abundance of tools came an increasing awareness of the importance of strategically aligning with each client organization's business. This awareness has only grown as the agency's strategy practice has matured.

2020 and Beyond

Looking to the future, one thing is clear: Marketing trends will continue to evolve, just as they always have. Tech will disrupt and be disrupted. But the company's core values will last.

For Imagination, as the name implies, it always comes back to creatively addressing audience needs—no matter what it takes. To Rolfes, that's been a key lesson as Imagination has evolved over the past quarter century.

"I'm so glad that we saw the opportunity to expand beyond print, that we have always had this expansive, creative view of the possibilities and the endlessness of the possibilities, and that we refuse to box ourselves in," she says. ■



Back to the Future

Non-Obvious trends guru Rohit Bhargava analyzed the last decade to forecast 3 big content marketing opportunities for associations, B2B and financial services

By Kim Caviness



Pablo Garcia

Every year, Rohit Bhargava sifts through the zeitgeist—across verticals, B2B, B2C, B2B2C, audiences, formats, countries—and prognosticates the 15 trends that will shape culture and business. The former advertising exec (Ogilvy, Leo Burnett), current Georgetown University adjunct professor and *WSJ* bestselling author then publishes his findings in an annual update to his book series *Non-Obvious: How to Predict Trends and Win the Future*. (Which fans like me preorder and try to wait patiently for, as we plan our next-year program strategies.)

I caught up with Bhargava last fall as he was putting the final touches on this year's update, *Non-Obvious Megatrends: How to See What Others Miss and Predict the Future*, which is out now. Except this book is different, he said, excited. "The idea is that it's an anniversary, but it's also meant to look back at the past 10 years and what that can tell us about the next decade."

Bhargava's going for back-to-the-future marketing. Just in time, too! So: What does he think the last decade tells us about what will be new and *Non-Obvious* in the verticals Imagination prioritizes: financial services, associations and B2B?

Bhargava—who brands himself a "marketer, author, speaker, professor, nice guy" on his website—nicely put on his *Non-Obvious* glasses to peer into the past and future states of our big three. First up: associations.

Non-Obvious Opportunity: Associations

Bhargava lives in Washington, D.C. He *knows* associations and is a regular on their keynote circuit.

His hot take? Associations are missing the boat on a lucrative service members need. "The biggest mistake a lot of associations make is they focus on only two things," Bhargava says—training and lobbying.

"They forget that there's a third element, which is that everyone who's in professional services, or who's in anywhere, needs a way to stand up. They need *credibility*. The association should become, if they're smart, the body that grants that credibility through certification."

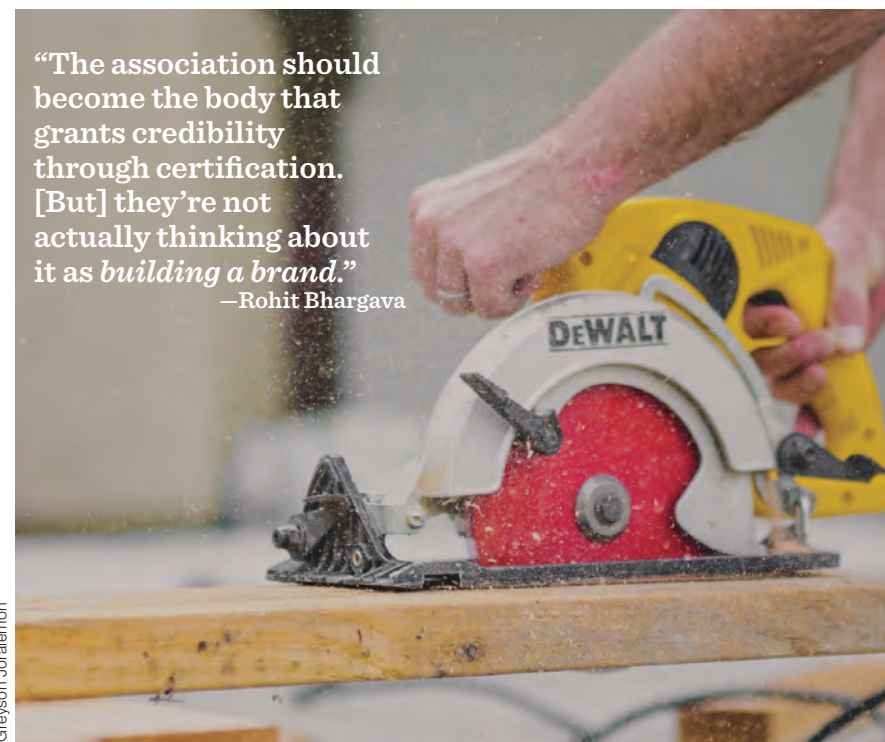
Bhargava is quick to point out that most associations have a certification program, somewhere. But it's hidden away online, underfunded and underloved. "They're not actually thinking about it as *building a brand*," says Bhargava. "The problem is the only way this becomes valuable is if you invest enough time as the association in building the brand of your certification."

Here's the hard part Bhargava identifies for associations about cert. programs: Brand—or expect nothing. "If it's not recognized in the marketplace and it's not recognized by consumers, then nobody cares. If they said, 'What do we need to do to make this certification more branded?' they'd change the way they did a lot of things. They'd change the design of it, because a lot of times they look awful. If you want a certification and a seal of approval, it needs to look correct. It needs to look impressive—otherwise, nobody cares."

2020 Non-Obvious To-Do: Associations

Caring means branding.

Put your vision, time, energy and money into making sure your certification program matters to your membership and their stakeholders. Upgrade the logo, training modules and marketing materials to be sophisticated, valuable and accessible in the right channels. This will attract the next generation of members, e.g., your future revenue stream. Then promote the heck out of it with a savvy content strategy and apply paid media to find and convert. You'll be glad you did: Certification brand value is something you can take to the bank.



Greyson Joralemon

"The association should become the body that grants credibility through certification. [But] they're not actually thinking about it as *building a brand*."
—Rohit Bhargava

Non-Obvious Opportunity: B2B

Bhargava is also a regular on the B2B keynote circuit (seriously: when does he have time to teach and write?). He's quite familiar with the long sales cycle of this vertical and the sales team challenge of relaying expertise without coming off like snake-oil-slinging, jargon-spewing know-it-alls.

Bhargava reports the following forehead slapper he is surprised to hear at just about every B2B conference. "Somebody will be done talking about something awesome. And someone will raise their hand and say, 'Well, I work for a B2B company, and none of this applies to me.'"

Wrong, wrong, wrong, says Bhargava. "A lot of people who work in B2B, they have this mentality/chip on their shoulder that says, 'Oh, that's a consumer thing. That's not useful for us. Talk to us about us.'"

These B2Bers are selling their audience short, he says. "It is an indication," says Bhargava, "of closed-minded thinking. What we forget, and what I try and teach people, is you're still marketing to people—and in fact you have a huge advantage."

Your transformative advantage is that you know what your target audience cares about. Because if they work in the same industry as you, you likely know their professional pain points and passions.

"Am I going to seriously sit there and read a 30-page magazine about a Snickers bar? No. I don't care. It doesn't matter to me. I either see it and I'm hungry and I buy it and I feel bad about myself, or I don't."

In B2B, you don't have that challenge because you know—exactly—what someone is interested in. "Your challenge is to create something that's worthy of their attention, that actually tells them something that they haven't heard before, right?" says Bhargava. "I love that challenge, because at least I know what they're interested in. I have no idea what a customer for a Snickers bar is interested in because they're interested in every-

thing. Their target audience is literally everybody, except people who have a peanut allergy. How would you market to that target audience?"

B2B lets you focus and win. *If you do it right—and don't think too narrowly,* Bhargava advises. He suggests the following mental exercise to visualize reaching your core and next-best audiences: "Imagine your target audience to be like an archery target, and every circle is your target. If you actually hit your target, somewhere on there, it includes your audience. But it includes other people, too. And the problem is, a lot of times, we think we only want to hit our audience and not anyone else. And so instead of thinking about it as the concentric circle, we think about it as, oh, our audience is over there on a totally different target. Which is not true."

The bottom line? Your B2B audience is bigger than you think. And they're human, just like you. Market to them that way.

2020 Non-Obvious To-Do: B2B

Relentlessly create high-value content about your audience's pain points and passions. Hit the topics at the center of your and their Venn diagram. Be relentlessly relevant, keep it real and don't compromise on quality. Ditch the whole "we're B2B, not B2C" thing. Shamelessly borrow engagement tactics and marketing ideas from B2C to hit the B2B marketing sweet spot.



Devin Avery



Tuesday Temptation

Non-Obvious Megatrends for 2020+
Bhargava's top 10 themes shaping the next decade:

- Amplified Identity
- Instant Knowledge
- Ungendering
- Revivalism
- Human Mode
- Attention Wealth
- Purposeful Profit
- Data Abundance
- Protective Tech
- Flux Commerce

Source: Rohit Bhargava, *Non-Obvious Megatrends: How to See What Others Miss and Predict the Future, 2020*

Non-Obvious Opportunity: Financial Services

Onto financial services. When Bhargava studies the marketing trends of the last decade—a rough one for banks—what does he see as a defining opportunity for finserv marketers, who are battle weary from consumer-trust, brand-differentiation and tech-upstart challenges?

We only have to look to the seventh megatrend in his just-released book in the chapter covering "Purposeful Profit." It's "definitely a theme I'm looking at: purpose and meaning," Bhargava says. And it's one that he's written about before lots.

Purpose has taken up residence in our wallets, Bhargava says. "It's this idea that we as people are increasingly seeing how we spend as a reflection of our own values and as a way of impacting the world in the positive direction that we wanted it to go.

"That's why you're seeing unthinkable things starting to happen now, like Walmart moving away from selling some of the guns, which you would have never thought would happen a couple years ago. It reflects a new business reality where companies are not only expected to do business in more ethical ways, but also they are finding that doing so pays off in tangible business results."

Purposeful profit started in retail and has more recently landed in finserv, partly as a reaction to Gen Z's distrust of banking and credit, thanks to mountain-sized college loans. Consumers' quest for purposeful spending will define the next decade's financial services.

This trend will have legs, Bhargava predicts. That said, it's one thing to frequent CVS to reward its historic decision to stop selling tobacco products in 2015 because you believe in its healthful mission. But it's a whole other to ask people to take the time off from work to go to their bank, fill out forms, reroute automatic payments, and transfer accounts and money.

"Is [purpose] the reason why people switch banks?" asks Bhargava. "Not yet—but I think that there's a huge aspect of that for the people who are *starting* banking relationships. Think how important the college audience has been for a long, long time for banks. Because they know once you get them at that age, that they tend to keep their accounts for decades afterwards."

Then, there's a second benefit for financial services: *hiring*. "Purpose increasingly matters from a recruitment point of view," says Bhargava. "That's always been a big challenge for banks because they're all trying to fight for the top talent. And now that top talent is saying, 'Hey, what do you believe? What do you stand for? And can I, as an individual, go to my friends and my family and my social network and say I'm working here and feel good about myself? Because if I can't, then I don't need to. I'm going to go somewhere else.'"

Fair warning, finserv. Find and communicate your purpose—or get left behind.

2020 Non-Obvious To-Do: Financial Services

Put your money where your purpose is. Purpose is how you ask for trust. Content is how you convert your ask by skillfully explaining the meaning of your purpose and why it benefits the end user. A purpose story told well drives consumer signups and attracts talent. "Sitting on the sidelines is not enough," writes Bhargava. "Now companies must work to earn consumers' trust through positive business models, ethical treatment of workers, charitable good deeds, socially responsible sourcing and a daily commitment to purpose along with profit." The takeaway: Dig deep, do the work and identify your purpose. Make it authentic. You can't claim to support a cause and not embed it in how you do business. It's worth the effort, he says. Financial institutions who do it well will be rewarded. ■

"Companies are not only expected to do business in more ethical ways, but also they are finding that doing so pays off in tangible business results."
—Rohit Bhargava

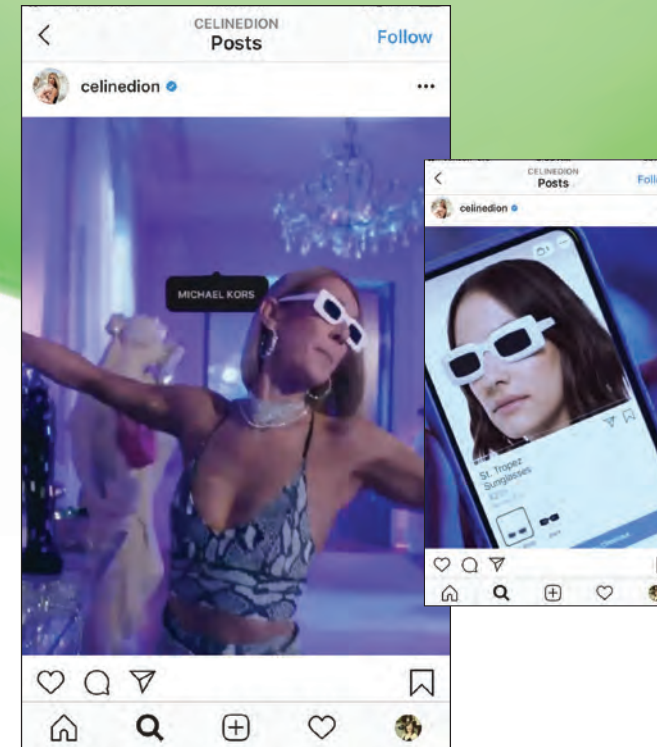
Vince Fleming

hit or miss

HIT OR MISS

Celine puts an iconic '90s ballad to a very modern use, and Lexus inspires wanderlust. Meanwhile, Peloton and Equinox send mixed fitness messages.
—Karina Corona

Left page: SchulteProductions/Getty Images; Right page: Pictfive/Stock/Getty Images Plus; datt: oim26250/Stock/Getty Images Plus



HIT WHEN YOU 'GRAM ME LIKE THAT

The category is: drama with a capital D. It's a moody, stormy night as Celine Dion—sporting a bob so sharp it would give you a papercut—scrolls through Instagram atop silk sheets in her four-poster bed. The piano begins to play, conjuring the words etched into our hearts.

The music begins to swell, and finally the Canadian chanteuse belts out the line we've been waiting for, and baby, baby, baby ... it's a hit. But is it an ad? A reboot? Just another day for Celine? Well, it's all three, and that's why it's such a great piece of content marketing.

Since its release on Dec. 4, the ad and homage to Dion's 1996 "It's All Coming Back to Me Now" music video has accumulated almost 2 million views on Instagram and almost 1 million on YouTube as of this magazine's printing.

It's so fun, so seamless, so seamlessly fun that you don't realize the 60-second ad is essentially a Pavlovian tutorial for the app's new in-platform shopping feature. As Dion struts through her chic mansion, tags for her Bershka stiletto heels, Michael Kors sunnies and Oscar de la Renta earrings pop up, just as they would in the app. And, just as you would in the app, you can now see something nice, click the post for details and purchase the nice item(s) without having to leave the app. Welcome to the future, folks!



FIRST MISS, THEN HIT TOP OF THE NAUGHTY LIST

If you didn't watch Peloton's cringey 2019 holiday ad, did you even 2019? Let me paint you a picture: Uncredited husband gives wife, whom we find out is named Grace from Boston, a Peloton bike. Yay! End of commercial. Just kidding—there's more.

The remainder of the 30-second ad consists of the wife documenting her yearlong Peloton journey one uncomfortable vlog recording at a time. So meta. By the end of the ad, Grace and Uncredited Husband are sitting in their monochromatic living room holding hands, watching—get this—an edited version of the very ad we just saw. WHAT. And the song of choice is a late '90s one-hit wonder, Tal Bachman's "She's So High." WHY.

The ad, named "The Gift That Gives Back," ends with Grace thanking Uncredited Husband for how much the Peloton bike "changed her," a sweet (maybe?) if potentially hubby-judgy ending to a very odd ad.

But what's even sweeter is that despite the sick burns from Twitter and bike-bashing think pieces, the ad was a low-key success. In its early days, Peloton's stock saw a dip, but the brand's earnings managed to pedal up. In its second quarterly earnings report since going public in September 2019, Peloton announced a year-over-year revenue increase of 77%, to \$466.3 million. In addition to revenue growth, connected fitness subscribers grew 96%, and total membership grew to more than 2 million.

In the end, the ad surely turned a profit and Grace from Boston landed a role in Ryan Reynolds' tongue-in-cheek Aviation Gin ad, "The Gift That Doesn't Give Back." Well played, Grace from Boston. Well played.

**G O
A N D
S E E**

Malcolm Gladwell



HIT
OPEN ROAD, OPEN MIND

In March, Lexus announced a partnership with bestselling author Malcolm Gladwell to shine a light on how the luxury car brand leverages learning from research on human behavior and processes to set the brand apart. TL;DR: Aspirational meets inspirational and together create a motivational content baby in the form of a six-part podcast series.

Inspired by the Japanese “genchi genbutsu”—which roughly translates to “go and see yourself”—“Go and See” follows Gladwell’s behind-the-scenes journey to the Lexus headquarters in Japan. The podcast is a firsthand look at the brand’s unconventional thinking and processes.

As every single person on the planet knows, content is king, and brands are swarming to integrate brand messaging through content—some successfully (Lexus, The Wing, A24) and some not so much (Facebook, McDonald’s).

Airing through Gladwell’s Revisionist History, this collaboration is the ideal content marketing recipe: one part excellent storytelling, one part brand awareness and a sprinkle of mutually large followings for ultimate audience reach. *Chef kiss*

The first episodes are available to stream now wherever you listen: so go—see!



MISS
OUR REFLECTION = A PERMANENT EYE ROLL

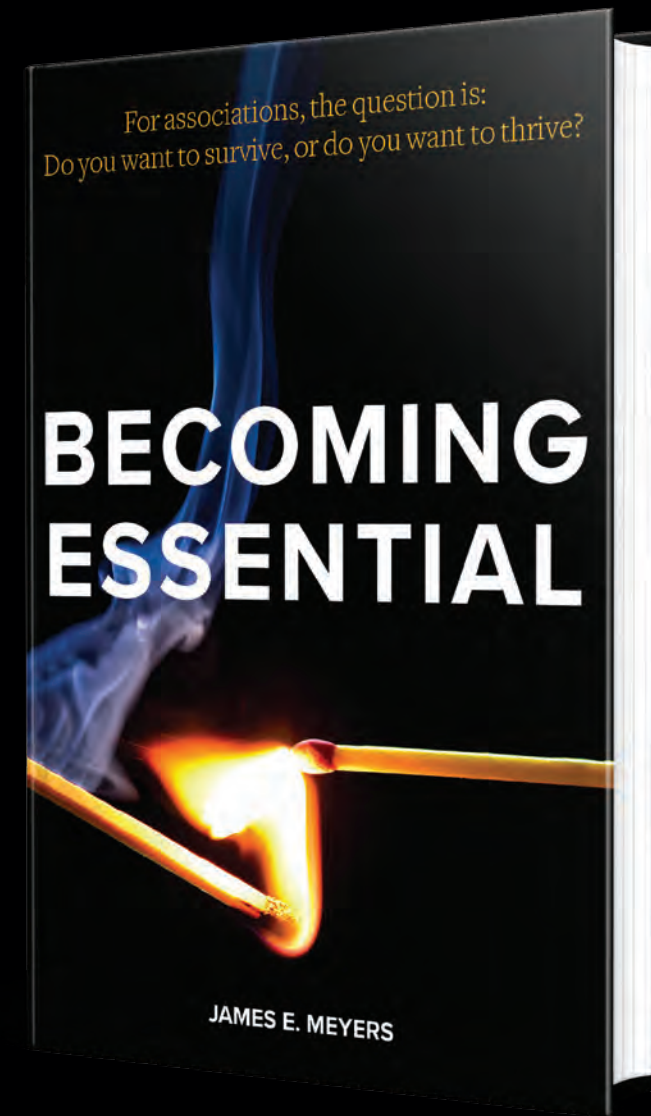
New season, new swimsuit, same problematic fitness ads.

With the pre-corona release of a nearly two-minute anthem video titled “The Most Selfless Act of All,” Equinox was here to preach that the best thing you can do for the world is be beautiful. Oh, and if you’re wondering, the year is 2020.

The spot starts off well enough: schoolchildren at a museum learning about Narcissus, a character in Greek mythology who fell in love with his own reflection. Spoiler: Narcissus’ story doesn’t end well. However, rather than learning about his (literally!) fatal flaw, the story takes a turn and presents him as a hero whose self-obsession was “a gift not just for him to treasure, but the gift that brought the whole world pleasure.” Ugh.

In an interview with *Ad Age*, Equinox’s Chief Marketing Officer Seth Solomons explained the goal of the campaign as: “If you are your best self, whatever self that is, you’re going to be your best for the world.” Huh. Maybe in theory. Unfortunately, the ad itself reads low on empowerment and high on better-you-learn-early-on-that-the-only-way-to-be-accepted-is-to-be-rail-thin-or-jacked.

Picsliver/Stock/Getty Images Plus



“In a world with a cacophony of supposed thought leaders competing for air, people are clamoring for authentic, authoritative voices that lead on issues.

Associations need to be that voice.”

James E. Meyers, Becoming Essential

Read More
becoming-essential.com

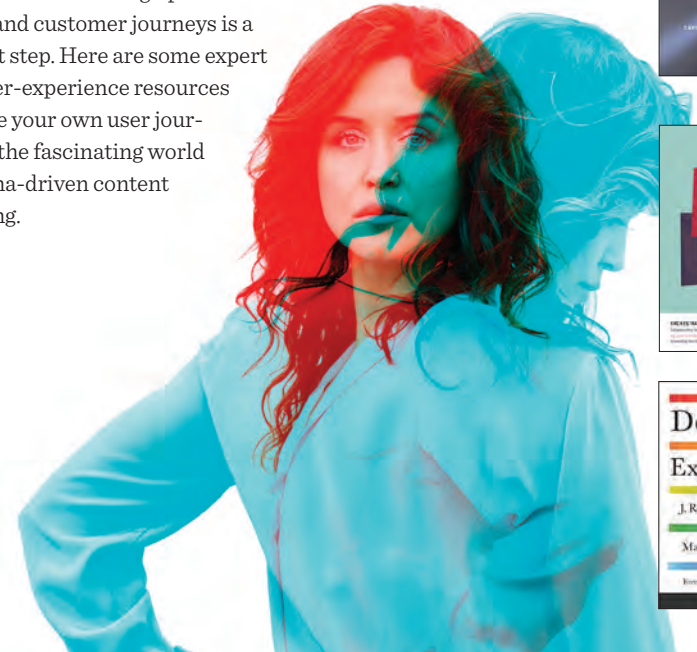
Persona Power

A roundup of books, podcasts, thought leaders and more to boost your audience-intel skills
—*Karina Corona*

In today's customer-obsessed world, marketers are faced with a double-edged sword when it comes to connecting with customers.

On one hand, creating an individualized and seamless experience is increasingly table stakes. But in a post-Cambridge Analytica world, get too personal too fast and you might end up creeping out your target audience and pushing them away.

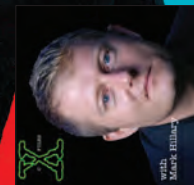
What to do? Working up audience profiles and customer journeys is a good first step. Here are some expert consumer-experience resources to inspire your own user journey into the fascinating world of persona-driven content marketing.



PODCASTS



The Intuitive Customer Podcast
Hosted by Colin Shaw, founder and CEO, Beyond Philosophy, and Ryan Hamilton, professor of marketing, Emory University's Goizueta Business School. How to improve customer experience, customer loyalty and your bottom line by embracing behavioral economics.



CX Files
Hosted by CX technology writer and analyst Mark Hillary. Each week, leading analysts, thinkers and practitioners focused on managing customer experience explore the future of CX, the important trends and what customers really expect from brands today.

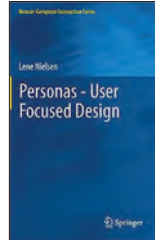


The Michelli Experience
Hosted by bestselling author and organizational psychologist Joseph Michelli. Q: What makes a repeat customer? A: Understanding their needs. Michelli offers insights and business success tips.



Experience This!
Hosted by Joey Coleman, chief experience composer at Design Symphony, and Dan Gingiss, a veteran of McDonald's, Humana and Discover. Inspiring examples of how to make your customers love you even more.

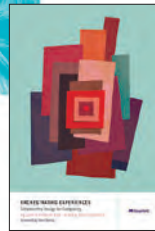
BOOKS



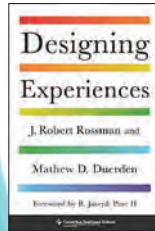
Personas—User Focused Design
By Lene Nielsen
Denmark's leading expert in the persona method outlines the step-by-step methodology of personas to clearly formulate how to turn this marketing tool's potential into reality.



Think Like a UX Researcher: How to Observe Users, Influence Design and Shape Business Strategy
By David Travis
Learn how to challenge preconceptions about UX research and how to develop a more strategic view of product design to optimize the user's experience.



Orchestrating Experiences: Collaborative Design for Complexity
By Chris Risdon and Patrick Quattlebaum
Orchestrating Experiences is a practical guide for designers and everyone struggling to create products and services in complex environments.



Designing Experiences
By J. Robert Rossman and Mathew D. Duerden
How to framework a vision of delivering experiences—from synthesizing fundamental theories and methods from multiple disciplines to laying out a process.

NEWSLETTERS

Alertbox
From Nielsen Norman Group
Articles about usability, design and UX research

MyCustomer
From Sift
Content to help you and your organization become more customer-centric, generate clients and create loyal advocates

Customer Experience Insight
From Catalyst Media Network
Customer experience news and best practices



HASHTAGS

- #Personas
- #CX
- #UX
- #CustomerJourney
- #CustomerExperience

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Brand + CX: Marketing's New Imperative
Forrester
What drives customers today? How are brands fulfilling expectations? Learn about the forces reshaping marketing and creativity today.

2020 Digital Trends
Adobe
Featuring insights and experiences from 12,000+ leaders, this report discusses the future of customer journey mapping, personalization and the integration of AI.

Capturing the ROI of CX
Forrester
Part webinar, part workshop, this report provides an achievable way to build a persuasive CX strategy and measure its ROI.

VIDEOS

Customer Journeys and Journey Mapping in UX Design
By Nielsen Norman Group
In this nine-video playlist, learn the process for capturing and communicating UX insights across complex interactions through journey mapping.

Smart, Empowered Customers and the Personalization Paradox
By Advertising Week

How can brands navigate personalization in the world of the discerning customer to deliver the experiences consumers want and expect? That is the question panelists Oded Benyo, president of email at Epsilon-Conversant; Ginger Conlon, editor-in-chief at MediaVillage; Nicole Perrin, principal analyst at eMarketer; and Dane Mathews, head of marketing activation and CRM at ConAgra, discuss in this 40-minute video.



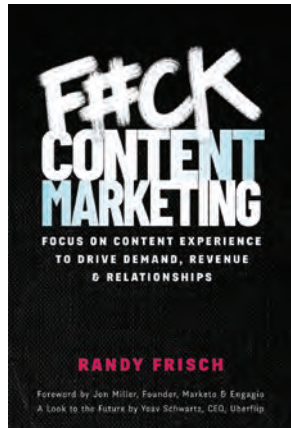
woman: tolgart/Stock/Getty Images Plus; kashtag: WhiteBarbie/Stock; camera lens: Nakhorn Yuangkratoke/EyeEm/Getty Images

- Aurora Harley**
@aurorarara
Senior user experience specialist at Nielsen Norman Group
- Jeriad Zoghby**
@jeriad
Global lead of digital marketplace services at Accenture Interactive
- Wendy Steidle**
@WendyInTech
Senior director of digital experience product management at Adobe
- Bruce Temkin**
@btemkin
Co-founder of CXPA.org and head of Qualtrics XM Institute
- Denise Lee Yohn**
@denisele
Author and brand leadership expert
- Ernan Roman**
@ernanroma
Author and president at ERDM Corp.
- Annette Franz**
@annettefran
CEO at CX Journey Inc.
- Tiffani Bova**
@Tiffani_B
Growth & innovation evangelist at Salesforce
- Sarah Gibbons**
@segibb
Chief designer at usability expert Nielsen Norman Group

THOUGHT LEADERS

Everybody's a Guru

Or thinks they are. We check out the recent crop of marketing books to see if they're a waste of time or must-reads —*Rebecca Rolfes*



F#ck Content Marketing

by Randy Frisch

On the one hand, I love that Frisch loves *The One to One Future* by Don Peppers and Martha Rogers (see below) because, for those of us who were here at the beginning of content marketing (before it was even called that), that's where it all started. On the other hand, sentences like "arming your organization to deliver personalized experiences that leverage your content to engage your audiences at scale" make me want to hurl. If you are ever in a room with someone who actually talks like that, check whether the batteries in their robot brain are low.

TAKEAWAY: The title is the only provocative thing about this book.

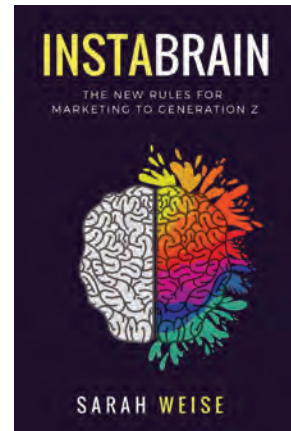


The One to One Future

by Don Peppers and Martha Rogers, Ph.D.

Way-back machine alert! Having dissed the last book, I needed to cleanse my palate and go back, way, way back, to the classic, the bible, the foundation of content marketing. Published in 1993, this book astonished everyone—and I do not use the word "astonished" lightly. They talked about one-to-one personalization before technology caught up. They said then, "We believe that customer trust is probably the next big thing in business competition." Today that would be the "only thing."

TAKEAWAY: Worth it, still worth it.

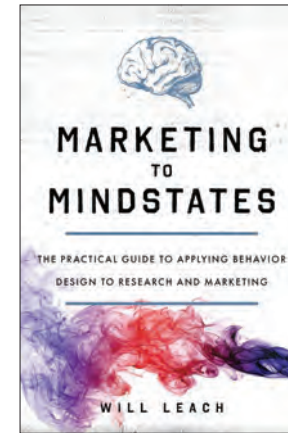


InstaBrain: The New Rules for Marketing to Generation Z

by Sarah Weise

Teenagers have us—that is, anyone over 24—outnumbered. They are now 40% of consumers and have \$44 billion of their own money to spend. If you're a B2B marketer, you might think the youth audience doesn't apply to you. And you'd be shortsighted, to say the least, says this book. This self-published tome reads like sitting through one of popular keynoter Weise's many, many speeches, but she does eventually get around to B2B. Gen Z is different: Don't think millennial short attention span, think extremely sophisticated social and digital content consumers who can plan a two-week vacation down to the wardrobe in under 10 minutes on a phone without ever opening a browser. You can't just say you're a leader; your content cred (design, media, platform, social) must *show* you are. Privacy, security and personalization are tells in everything you do.

TAKEAWAY: Extra points for realizing that her readers are older than Gen Z—otherwise this would have been Instagrammed instead of analog.



Marketing to Mindstates: The Practical Guide to Applying Behavior Design to Research and Marketing

by Will Leach

Humans make an average of 35,000 decisions a day, most of them unconsciously. That means that we aren't thinking about what we're doing a lot of the time. Which means that we aren't giving the weight you hoped we'd give to your marketing message. Which means that a lot of what you're doing is a waste of time. Sorry. Using behavioral economics and design, Leach walks from research to strategy to implementation on how to identify humans' defining mindstates and craft content that hits your customer with the right message at the right time.

TAKEAWAY: Great for B2C, less so for B2B.



Before You Write Your Masterpiece, Marketer

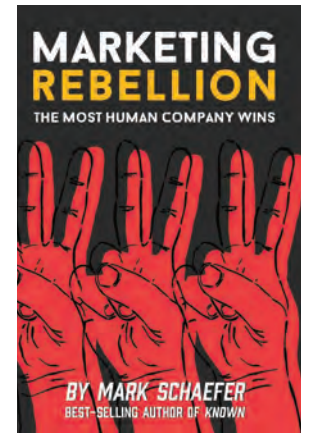
Keep the following self-book-publishing tough love in mind:

Dear Marketer Thinking About Writing a Book About—*what else?*—Marketing,

- A book written *and* published by you will be met with well-placed skepticism by the reading public. If it wasn't good enough for a publishing contract, you'd better explain why.
- Print design means good design. Low-res images are worse than no images. If you need the image, make it work hard, i.e., in focus and saturated enough to actually see.
- Grammar matters. Yes, still. Don't cite yourself as "the No. 1 bestselling author" of XYZ book. An author is not "No. 1," a *book* is. Side note: Since this stat can be fact-checked, you better have an actual "No. 1" before making that claim.

- Coining phrases might add flair, but more often they are too cute, too trite, trying too hard and just plain lame. Simple declarative sentences using standard English get the job done.
- Storytelling works, but you should not be the hero of every story you tell. We don't care that much about you.
- All marketers know how to communicate, but not all of them can (or should) write books.
- Please, please, please be sure that you have something new to say that hasn't already been said, often by more than a few people in their own self-published, badly designed, grammatically questionable, jargon-laden, war-story books.

Thank you. —*A Marketing Book Reader*



Marketing Rebellion: The Most Human Company Wins

by Mark Schaeffer

Do not misread this title. It is not the most *humane* company—the one with the best HR practices or the higher social purpose—it's the most *human*. Companies that act like people, that realize that "the practice of marketing is the intersection of all things human" will win. While marketers were looking for trends and responding to consumer demands, they failed to notice that "customers are now the marketers." Customers are marketing to each other because—wake-up call!—they don't trust marketing and haven't for a long time. There is a separate workbook that should help, but here is the human-centered marketing manifesto (somewhat shortened):

1. Stop doing what customers hate.
2. Technology should be invisible.
3. You can't "own" customers, a buyer's journey or a sales funnel.
4. Never intercept. Never interrupt. Earn the invitation.
5. Build trust in everything you do.
6. Be fans of your fans.
7. Be relentlessly honest.
8. Be "of" the customer community.
9. Marketing is about the customer's "why."
10. The most human company wins.

Personal Value

The CMO of wealth management startup Personal Capital on how AI is transforming financial services and a career lesson she learned the hard way

BY ADAM WREN



Porter Gale has spent much of the last few years figuring out how artificial intelligence can transform marketing. The former vice president of marketing for Virgin America, author of *Your Network Is Your Net Worth* and member of the Reddit board of directors spent three years helping to build an artificial intelligence (AI)-driven, real-time sourcing platform called Globality.

“Machine learning and artificial intelligence will continue to change the way companies do business over the next decade,” Gale told **orange**. “Location technologies, sensors, real-time responses, facial recognition, personalization of services and smart technology are just some of the advancements that will continue to evolve. And, advancements are not just being driven by the internet of things or devices that are connected to the internet. Advancements in computing power and globalization are changing the game, too.”

Last February, Gale left Globality to join the digital wealth management firm Personal Capital as CMO. Just seven months later, Gale relaunched the Silicon Valley-based brand, complete with new creative and messaging across the entire funnel, a new media strategy, local test markets, an internal training program, updated offices and more.

“I rebuilt the creative department and brought on other key hires,” she says. “Since relaunch, we’ve had three of our best months ever, and assets

under management grew by 57% in the past year. Net Promoter Scores improved and aided brand awareness growth by nearly 50%.”

Here, Gale offers insights on everything from how AI will transform personal financial services to her favorite career mistake. Hint: It has to do with knowing your worth—and sticking up for yourself.

How will AI change the personal financial services spaces over the next five to 10 years? What are you doing at Personal Capital to get ahead of that curve?

AI is changing the personal finance industry in several ways. First, AI can be used to incent positive financial behavior. For example, Personal Capital combined AI with positive “nudges” when we identified \$40 billion in underperforming deposits among our 2 million users. Some of our users were earning as low as 0.1% or even 0% on their cash accounts from big banks, where they could have been earning a higher interest rate with a Personal Capital Cash account. These underperforming bank accounts represented as much as \$500 million in lost interest income annually for our users. With in-product notifications and emails, Personal Capital helped over 20,000 people increase their interest rates by as much as 10 to 20 in a matter of just four months.

At Personal Capital, we are also using AI to understand which finan-

cial topics are of greatest interest to a particular client. Interests are discovered by looking at digital activity, and thus an advisor can provide more relevant and improved service levels. Lastly, AI also helps drive technology used by our portfolio management team to provide personalized recommendations and implementation.

What’s your approach to content at Personal Capital? How have you made Personal Capital more customer-focused?

At Personal Capital, we have a very robust content strategy that includes frequent blog posts, in-product content distribution, surveys and research, data analytics and more. Our content strategy is driven by our desire to serve and educate our customer and to help people find greater financial wellness along with better manage and build wealth so they can live their dreams. We also amplify our content distribution by posting on social channels and working with a variety of affiliate partners and publishers to help expand our reach.

What’s been your favorite mistake—the mistake you made that taught you the most?

A career mistake I made was not advocating for a higher salary early in my career. With my Midwestern upbringing, I brought a “Minnesota nice” approach to salary conversations when I should have been a stronger advocate for myself. For example, at one advertising agency I discovered a male peer of mine, with the same title, received a \$50,000 starting bonus. I didn’t receive a starting bonus, but I also didn’t ask for one. It’s important to always ask questions, to advocate and to know your true market value.



“MACHINE LEARNING AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE WILL CONTINUE TO CHANGE THE WAY COMPANIES DO BUSINESS OVER THE NEXT DECADE.”

“IT’S IMPORTANT TO ALWAYS ASK QUESTIONS, TO ADVOCATE AND TO KNOW YOUR TRUE MARKET VALUE.”
—Porter Gale, CMO, Personal Capital



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ARTICLE WITH STOREFRONTS CLOSED, MORE EMAILS ARE OPENED How to make the most out of your email comms right now



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