

# **Content Marketing: Using it effectively for Brand Strategy and Customer Relationship Management**

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## **Abstract**

Content is continuously produced by both companies and the public in form of reviews, comments, and status updates, in avenues such as; websites, social media, product review boards, message boards, blogs, emails, video presentations, slideshows, podcasts, online groups, articles, press releases and testimonials. Unfortunately, this is what makes content marketing a double edged sword – positive or negative – depending on the experiences customers have had with the company and its products and services. If users post positive messages about the company, it shows that the company is doing something right. Conversely, if the messages are negative, they could water down and cause irreparable damage to the company's reputation and image. Hence, companies need to take these messages seriously because they shape the perceptions of consumers towards brands. This review paper utilises meta-synthesis to explore content marketing, and explain how both the internet and social media have influenced the creation of appropriate content for company products and services. The paper provides valuable lessons and key success factors that can enable companies to develop and utilise both their own content and that generated by customers, to grow their brands and create increased traffic and business to themselves.

**Key Words:** Content Marketing; Social Media, Website, and the Internet

## **INTRODUCTION**

Content marketing involves publishing content that empowers, engages, educates and connects readers (Mcpheat, 2011a). However, with the advent of the internet and social media that empower customers to create and share their own content (Smith et al., 2012; LeeFlang et al., 2014; Erdoğan & Cicek, 2012), companies no longer have control over their brand marketing messages (Chen & Xie, 2008). This creates uncertainty for existing and upcoming brands.

This review paper utilises meta-synthesis (Cronin et al., 2008) to explore content marketing, and explain how both the internet and social media have influenced the creation of appropriate content for company products and services. The paper provides valuable lessons and key success factors that can enable companies to develop and utilise both their own content and that generated by customers, to grow their brands and create increased traffic and business to themselves.

## **MEANING OF CONTENT MARKETING**

Content marketing according to Mcpheat (2011a) means "... publishing content that empowers, engages, educates and connects readers" (p.10). Brennan and Croft (2012) define content marketing as the process of delivering interesting business-related content to customers and other stakeholders through social media in order to become an influential hub in the social network. Brennan and Croft (2012)'s definition of content marketing ropes in social media – which is the subject of chapter 4 below. Content marketing increases a company's visibility and

saleability. To be regarded as ‘real’ content marketing, the message should “focus on attracting or retaining the target customer audience; be a source of compelling, useful, and/or entertaining information; and be consistently delivered” (Pulizzi, 2013, p. 16).

Marketing content according to Gagnon (2014), serves a number of objectives, including: (a) informing the public about the unique knowledge, processes, and skills possessed by the company; (b) addressing the needs of the prospects by showing how the company’s products and services solve their problems; and (c) positioning the company as a unique and preferred player in the market, over and above its competitors. Content can be presented as text, visual or video (Mcpheat, 2011a; Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Text enables the company to provide clear and accurate information, which can be put out in both online and offline media. Visual messages provide a lasting impression for readers especially those who do not have time to read written text. Audio is usually combined with either text or visual. Audio can also be used on its own in form of; podcasts, music, radio and recorded speech. Content falls into any one or a combination of any of the following appeals; logs (facts), pathos (emotion) and ethos (credibility) (Mcpheat, 2011a).

There are five pillars of content marketing, according to Mcpheat (2011a). These pillars are summarised in Figure 1 below.

<b>Pillars of Content Marketing</b>				
<b>Pillar 1: Editorial-based</b>	<b>Pillar 2: Marketing-based</b>	<b>Pillar 3: Behaviour-driven</b>	<b>Pillar 4: Multi-platform</b>	<b>Pillar 5: Targeted</b>
The content should tell an interesting and relevant story which can inform, educate and entertain readers	The content should aim at achieving specific marketing objectives	The content should influence the behaviour of the readers	The content should be published in a variety of media, including; print, digital, audio, video and events	The content should be targeted at a particular audience

Figure 1: The Five Pillars of Content Marketing

Source: adapted from Mcpheat (2011a)

Not all content necessarily originates from within the company. It could also come from the public (Mcpheat, 2011a). The public and the company could both post content in form of reviews, comments, and status updates, in avenues such as; websites, social media, product review boards, message boards, blogs, emails, video presentations, slideshows, podcasts, online groups, articles, press releases and testimonials (Mcpheat, 2011a). Companies should use the same media that are used by the public because they need to know where to find their customers.

Content posted by the public is referred to as user-generated content (Smith et al., 2012). Through user-generated content, customers express their views and seek information about products, services and organisations, and also use these forums to communicate with other members of the public. Because of this, content could have a double edged effect – positive or negative – depending on the experiences customers have had with a company’s product or service. Therefore, if users post positive messages about the company, it shows that the

company is doing something right. Conversely, if the messages are negative, companies need to take these into consideration and make appropriate adjustments (Mcpheat, 2011a).

Comparing user-generated content to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), Smith et al. (2012) warn that companies need to take user-generated content seriously because it shapes the perceptions of consumers towards brands. To that end, some authors such as Chen and Xie (2008) and Brennan and Croft (2012) suggest that companies should provide two types of information to their customers; company generated information about its products and services, and consumer created information – that is posted on the company's platforms – consisting of user reviews, perceptions and experiences. However, care should be taken to ensure that user-generated information does not water down what is generated by the company – especially if it is negative or inaccurate – since people tend to believe the public more than companies (Mcpheat, 2011a; Leeflang et al., 2014).

### **How the Internet Facilitates Content Marketing**

The Internet is now one of the most significant channels for exchange of goods and services (Leeflang et al., 2014). The internet has become an increasingly important channel for marketers because it can be used in three main ways: (a) to provide information on the company's products and services; (b) receive and process orders which can be delivered through other physical means; and (c) as a delivery channel for products such as books, magazines, software, and music (Filo & Funk, 2005; Palmer & Eriksen, 1999; Rahimnia & Hassanzadeh, 2013).

Three key features distinguish the World Wide Web from other marketing media; interactivity, flow, experiential and goal-directed behaviours (Donna & Novak, 1997). These key features call for a paradigm shift in conventional marketing approaches (Donna & Novak, 1997; Hoffman & Novak, 1996). In addition, the World Wide Web is essentially a 'many-to-many' communication channel as opposed to say advertising which is a 'one-to-many' channel originating from the company (Donna & Novak, 1997). With the World Wide Web, consumers interact with each other and with the firm, using the web as the medium (Scott, 2007). With regard to flow, customers can learn and explore, and may have positive experiences which will leave a lasting impression in their minds about the brand, and will likely return to the company's website. In terms of behaviour, consumers could either search for specific information of interest or just engage in non-directed exploration (Donna & Novak, 1997, Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

Because of its interactivity, the rate at which consumers are creating content has reached alarming proportions. For example, in 2013, 32 billion searches on Google occurred every month, while it was estimated that 115 million people in the United States alone created online content at least once a month (Leeflang et al., 2014). This means that companies can no longer have control over their brand marketing messages (Leeflang et al., 2014; Chen & Xie, 2008). As such, with increasing customer knowledge, insight and empowerment from blogs, product reviews, discussion groups, product reviews and ratings, customers are keen to make informed purchase decisions. The implication for companies is that they should ensure that the information that features on their content is that which resonates with consumers and drives their interest towards a company's products and services (Baltes, 2015). The internet can be used to create product or service images that can influence customer attitudes and behaviours towards brand loyalty (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). To do this, companies need to determine their customers' information and motivational needs and use these to shape their content (Baltes, 2015).

Most consumers according to Donna and Novak (1997), initially start with non-directed exploration. As they get to understand the web better, they now go on to search for specific information of interest. Hence, for the company, the content which the consumers find during their exploratory search should motivate them to come back to look for specific information or buy the product or service. Unfortunately, as Scott (2007) argues, most websites are still focussed more on selling to the customer rather than building relationships with them. Using the internet, customers can influence each other, affecting what others buy, including when and how much they can buy (Rahimnia & Hassanzadeh, 2013). According to Rahimnia and Hassanzadeh (2013), studies have shown that the content of a company's website has a great influence on consumers' shopping patterns. Customers' perceptions on companies who transact over the internet are shaped by their interaction with these companies' websites.

### **The Influence of Social Media on Content Marketing**

Social media include web-based platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Stumbleupon, Youtube, FriendFeed, WhatsApp, WeChat and LinkedIn. These tools possess Web 2.0 attributes – participatory, collaborative, and facilitate knowledge sharing and empower users (Erdoğan & Cicek, 2012). The growing influence of social media can be seen for example, from the fact that in 2013, a total of 50 million Tweets happened on one day (Leeflang et al., 2014). In 2011 alone, companies spent about USD 4.3 billion to invest in social media marketing (Leeflang et al., 2014). Advocating for investment in social media by companies, Smith et al. (2012) opine that users, on their self-generated content, mention brands for several reasons; as status symbols, as a basis for voicing opinions and complaints, simply stating their interest in particular brands, or sharing their perceptions or experiences about different brands. Hence, this presents opportunities for marketers to respond to these comments by confirming / commending, clarifying, providing additional information or giving a link where such information can be obtained. By so doing, Smith et al. (2012) suggest that marketers are able to stimulate increased engagement with consumers. With the use of mobile smart phones going into billions, Leeflang et al. (2014) predict that social media and mobile applications will be the largest growth areas for companies that are intent on developing their digital strategies in the next 2–4 years.

The rise of social media is threatening to erode the advantages of customer relationship management (CRM), according to Malthouse et al. (2013). Previously, CRM was premised on the fact that the company was the major player, gathering information about its customers and using it to sell, up-sell and cross-sell to its otherwise indifferent customers (Malthouse et al., 2013; Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Scott, 2007). With the emergence of social media, customers now hold more power because they have more information about the company and its competitors, from their own research and from the views and experiences of other customers (Huotari et al., 2015).

Traditionally, CRM was premised on customer value in terms of their buyer behaviour. However, with the advent of social media, customers have now become knowledge bases and referral points for other potential clients (Malthouse et al., 2013). Indeed, customers, through their positive user-generated content, can actually serve as a company's free 'sales assistants' to help other potential clients to make choices around products or services that suit their needs (Chen & Xie, 2008; Ho & Dempsey, 2010). Users are able to describe products and service attributes from the perspective of usage conditions and user-friendliness, which most people identify with. As such, Malthouse et al. (2013) suggest that social media, by virtue of its

interactivity, poses both a threat and opportunity for companies to establish close and lasting relationships with their customers. On one hand, social media encourages companies to listen to and engage with its customers, and by so doing, act more responsively and thus forge closer ties with them. On the other hand, the company has no control over the self-generated content that customers and the general public post on social media, which could potentially have a damaging effect on its reputation (Leeflang et al., 2014; Chen & Xie, 2008).

Explaining the rising influence of social media as a key tool for consumer marketing, Brennan and Croft (2012) note that companies like Coca Cola direct their audiences not to their website – what is considered a traditional practice – but rather to their Facebook page; [www.facebook.com/cocacola](http://www.facebook.com/cocacola). Consequently, Brennan and Croft (2012) posit that social media has influenced three key trends in today's business-to-business marketing: (a) marketing taking the role of information handling; (b) marketing becoming relationship-based; and (c) marketing driving the market rather than being driven by the market. To that end, social marketing is therefore an important component in the design of the business-to-business branding strategy (Brennan & Croft, 2012; Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

Relatedly, Bauer et al. (2005) argue that with the increasing use of mobile phones particularly for short messaging service (sms), companies are increasingly using phones as a medium for sending content to customers. The mobile phone can be used to send direct and personalised information to individual customers. Its interactive nature facilitates dialogue between the company and its customers (Valos et al., 2010). The positioning technologies can also be used to locate the exact location of customers so that information about products and services within their vicinity can be transmitted to them. Bauer et al. (2005), however, warn that the success of mobile marketing depends to a large extent on its acceptance by customers. If it is construed as intrusion or spam, it is likely to be rejected by customers. Valos et al. (2010) argues that personalisation can solve this problem of acceptance. Their argument is that when customers complete their online profiles, companies can use this information to create personalised content for clients.

### **Critical Success Factors for Content Marketing**

The foregoing sections have raised fundamental issues around content marketing and the influence of both the internet and social media. This section is devoted to drawing key lessons and recommendations on how companies can effectively develop and implement their content marketing strategies, while making better use of the internet and social media platforms to their advantage.

Because content marketing should utilise a variety of platforms, content should not be limited to only online media. The company should also create off-line content (Mcpheat, 2011a). Offline programmes such as direct marketing, commercials, promotions, billboards, and print media, which should all draw attention to the company's website should be utilised – a concept referred to as integrated marketing communications (Valos et al., 2010). The key to content marketing is honesty and trustworthiness, as both the company and the users try to create content, especially because customers have the tendency of trusting other users more than what the company itself says, because of the 'spin' associated with marketing (Mcpheat, 2011a). Mcpheat (2011a) also advises that content should be able to convince customers that what the company is offering them is worth their time and/or money. Similarly, content should educate customers about the value and benefits of a company's products and services. It should inspire trust and confidence between the company and its customers. In addition, there should be interconnectivity between the tools used so that the reader can locate the firm. Content should also entertain the readers by containing enticing visuals. Care should be taken,

however, to ensure that the entertainment is appropriate to the audience. Search engine optimisation (SEO) – which uses key words and searchability – helps the company to build content around it, because it is based on understanding how customers search for information.

*Box 1: Key Considerations for Successful Content Marketing*

- there is no need to keep changing content as long as it is still relevant and valuable;
- utilise multiple internet tools that can draw readers to your website;
- provide updates on all the tools that are being used so as to keep readers using different media up-to-date and also to reinforce the message;
- know what your readers want and give them content that suits their needs.

Companies should not only seek to understand their customers but also environment in which they interact. This can be done through periodic online consumer research. As companies get to know their customers, they move from simply satisfying customer needs to actually working together to develop the market (Donna & Novak, 1997; Hoffman & Novak, 1996).

A company's website can be a key marketing tool if it contains right information about its products and services; if this information is well organised and stored appropriately; if the information can be easily retrieved by customers; and if it is displayed conveniently and attractively (Rahimnia & Hassanzadeh, 2013). Thus, a quality website is one which has an attractive visual appearance, which facilitates easy navigation and quick downloading of documents, and is interactive and responsive (Rahimnia & Hassanzadeh, 2013; Huizingh, 2000).

A combination of tools such as video, photographs, forums, audio, podcasts, should be used to create a web-based interactive medium where messages can be communicated to customers in order to enhance their loyalty (Mcpheat, 2011b; Valos et al., 2010). For internet marketing to be successful, companies need to know their customers and markets well enough in order to determine the most appropriate marketing mix. To have a successful internet advertising campaign, Mcpheat (2011b) advises that each product or segment should be featured at a time in order to help generate sufficient interest. Hence, it means that several and different campaigns should be developed and implemented over a long period of time.

*Box 2: Key Consideration for Designing a Suitable Website for Content Marketing*

- the domain and site names – easy to locate and recall;
- a reliable host with adequate capacity;
- whether the website will be managed internally or externally;
- the layout of the site;
- the goals that should be achieved from the website – whether information provision, interactive, transaction processing or product / service delivery

Malthouse et al. (2013) advise that companies should develop social media CRM strategies that stretch customer value beyond buyer behaviour to taking advantage of customers as knowledge bases and referral points for other potential clients (Chen & Xie, 2008; Ho & Dempsey, 2010). In a similar vein, Smith et al. (2012) add that the proactive social media strategy should enable companies to purposefully and regularly create content on social media, initiate and maintain contact with customers and perhaps designate particular employees to talk to, listen, and respond to what customers post on social media. In addition to a creative social media strategy, organisations need to foster a culture where employees are interested, utilise and are responsive to social media – where it becomes an integral part of company communications and engagement (Huotari et al, 2015). Secondly, companies need to build the capacity of employees especially on social media marketing analytics – where they are able to retrieve, analyse and make correct sense of user-generated content (Malthouse et al., 2013). Thirdly, organisations need to build operational systems where social media can be interwoven into company and CRM processes. Indeed, “successful acquisition, analysis and deployment of information is the key to marketing success” (Brennan & Croft, 2012, p. 7).

Leeflang et al. (2014) identify three main challenges for the modern day digital marketer: (a) the need to create and influence customer insight; (b) the ability to create and sustain a strong brand that can fit within the social media environment; and (c) the ability to assess the effectiveness of digital marketing. To that end, Leeflang et al. (2014) advise that companies should take advantage of the following opportunities to deal with these challenges: (a) developing actionable metrics that can help assess the effectiveness of the digital strategy; (b) building capacity in digital marketing analytics; and (c) aligning the organisation structure to address digital challenges. Developing the technical capacity to follow customers on their journey as they go through information acquisition, evaluation and purchase decision making is key to obtaining customer insight (Leeflang et al., 2014). This customer insight will be a key input into customer segmentation and development of appropriate marketing and brand strategies. Mcpheat (2011b) recommends a four-step process to planning an online marketing strategy. This four-step process is summarised in Figure 2 below.

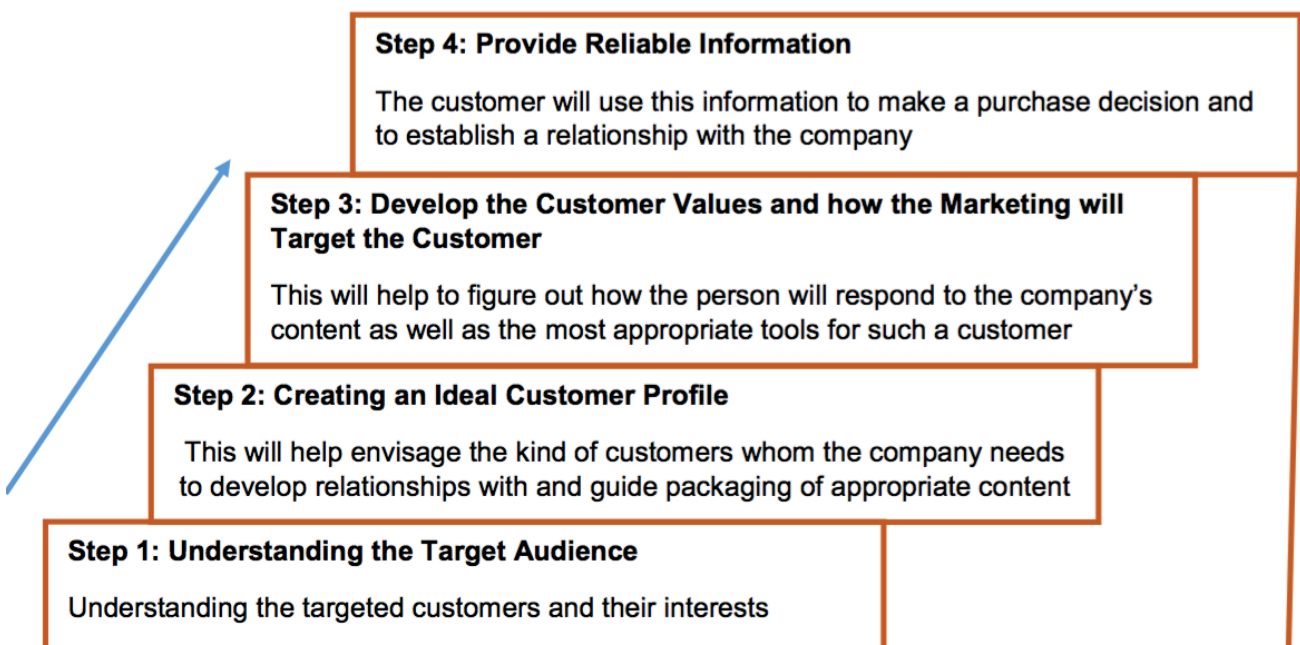


Figure 2: Steps for Planning and Online Marketing Strategy



Companies can build on online surveys, online consumer reviews and traces left by customers from surfing, to develop customised content that can be used to attract and develop long-term relationships with customers (Ansari & Mela, 2003; Chen & Xie, 2008). Through data gathered about customers, companies can generate customised permission-based emails highlighting specific information about products and services that could be of interest to these clients (Malthouse et al., 2013).

### CONCLUSION

This paper has explored content marketing and explained how both the internet and social media have influenced the creation of appropriate content for company products and services. The paper provides valuable lessons and key success factors that can enable companies to develop and utilise both their own content and that generated by customers to grow their brands and create increased traffic and business to themselves.

From the foregoing discussion, the paper makes the following key recommendations:

- content should not be limited to only online media, but should also include off-line content;
- content marketing should be governed by honesty and trustworthiness;
- there should be interconnectivity between the tools used for content marketing so that the reader can easily locate the company;
- as companies get to know their customers, they should move from simply satisfying customer needs to actually working together to develop the market;
- a website that facilitates content marketing is one which has an attractive visual appearance, which enables easy navigation and quick downloading of documents, and is interactive and responsive;
- companies should develop proactive social media strategies that stretch customer value beyond buyer behaviour to actually taking advantage of customers as knowledge bases and referral points for other potential clients;
- organisations need to foster a culture where employees are interested, utilise and are responsive to social media;
- companies need to build the capacity of employees especially on social media marketing analytics, so that they can retrieve, analyse and make correct sense of user-generated content; and
- organisations need to build operational systems where social media can be interwoven into company and CRM processes.



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