# Content Marketing 2.0

## Why content marketing is important

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Although obvious to marke 41's expert readers, it's worth re-stating the reasons. Content marketing is a strategy that aims to create and share valuable, relevant content that attracts and retains a target audience. By 2021 it will grow by 16% and be worth $413 billion, says Technavio, a research firm. More and more marketers are doing content because they hope that it's the antidote to the Adblockalypse. And content appeals because the prize is not just to reach an audience but remain with it - on the basis that people buy more from those they know and like.

### Strategy is not what it used to be

If you're over 30, you probably learned about strategy from gurus like Porter, Kotter and Ansoff. They advise organisations how to move systematically towards some ideal future state. Central to their thinking is the idea of the perfect strategy. Long before implementation starts, a plan is refined and perfected by the best in the firm, perhaps with the help of brilliant advisors from McKinsey or even a communications agency. And then it's sold to the employees

turning customer data into good insight. People think about their supper when they commute. They feel guilty about eating ready-made meals but have little time when they get home. Tesco used social media to reach them on their smartphones while on their way to work. The campaign ads showed 4-5 ingredients and a recipe which the customer could turn into an easy evening meal. When the right person sees branded content, it makes perfect sense to them.

### Content + data + systematic experimentation

Judging by the poor levels of engagement, much content marketing demonstrates the Perfect Strategy in practice: the plan which promises to deliver the desired future state, but quickly becomes obsolete if it does not adapt. Marketers like creating content because it is easy to manage. It is predictable and measurable, and there's a growing, reassuring consensus about what good content looks like. Witness, for example, all the talk about storytelling, especially by retired ad men. But

who will implement it. For all its virtues, this approach is under attack. It has been described as a "small science of imposed patterns " that relies too much on what has worked in the past, and leaves little room for originality after the strategy is set. Its critics question how well it is suited to the fluid and complex world they see today. The trouble is that even good strategy carries two dangers: the first is that it becomes obsolete when its assumptions are no longer valid. The second is false confidence - where the marketer can't see customer needs changing because she/he believes a little too much that strategies predict the future. Planning is valuable, of course, but only if it helps organisations to be competitive.

And yet the Perfect Strategy continues to seduce us. Is this also true in content marketing? Now seems a good moment to ask, because content is fast becoming the marketing strategy of choice.

## Content is not a strategy

Beckon.com reckons that spending on content marketing is up 300% vs a year ago, yet the level of customer disengagement (95%) is depressing and static. It is over 20 years ago that Bill Gates declared 'Content is King'. If it is supposed to find better, more loyal customers to increase sales and promote the brand, 95% disengagement suggests that marketers are currently failing. There are three likely reasons. First, brands are creating content which serves the brand strategy but fails to excite the customer. Second, content strategies can confuse quantity with quality. Marketers know they must fill their brand spaces, and content for 10¢ per word or less makes this possible for the budget-conscious, but it tends not to hold the interest of discerning customers for long. The third reason is the over-optimistic view that good content is enough, when in fact it is only half the battle. The other half is to get the right information to each individual when they want it. Tesco recently created a successful content campaign in the UK by this is not enough to sell stuff. Good content tells your customers you understand them; content plus data prove it. At this point the mantra of a start-up (Act, Measure, Adjust, Repeat) must replace the ideal of the Perfect Strategy. The task is to get content to the right person at the right time, and that requires marketers to learn as they go along. After all, today's successful plan to promote Tesco is tomorrow's dinosaur because channels and customer preferences will have changed.

Of course this newer, more iterative approach has its weaknesses too, mainly because it requires deep integration across the marketer's organisation. The customer loyalty systems that power content marketing depend on collaboration between departments which think very differently: marketing sees the world from the outside in; IT thinks from the inside out. When the chiefs (of marketing, technology and information) are in the same room, and when they really hear what each other needs, they can start to build a framework that matches their ambitions for the customer experience to the organisation's data model. This is easier said than done: the right solution emerges only when people and departments genuinely accept their interdependencies. But then no strategy can guarantee such co-operation because culture, as we know, eats strategy for breakfast.

## Concluding thought

Marketers must deliver the performance they predict. Unsurprisingly, therefore, they prefer to control as much as possible. But to meet their targets they need to be as nimble as their elusive customers, so the perfect, inflexible strategy is looking increasingly unsafe. It's time for marketers to think more like cheeky entrepreneurs, less like brand curators.

**by Jamie Priestley**