Perfecting the content marketing mix in 2018: challenges, opportunities and solutions

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Foreword

More than 20 years after Bill Gates’ now-famous essay was published on the Microsoft website, content remains king. Ever prescient, he foresaw the future of the internet as “a marketplace of content” where organisations would compete – and fail.

This marketplace is inevitably becoming a more complex environment, with an ever-larger number of brands (and “experts”) broadcasting their messages each year, making it harder for a brand’s voice to be heard, and for consumers to find valuable information that’s genuinely relevant to them.

Marketing performance data analysed by data platform Beckon* shows that, although brands are spending up to 300 per cent more on content production year-on-year, engagement rates are flat, and 5 per cent of the content produced by companies accounts for 90 per cent of engagement. In other words, 95 per cent of branded content gets little or no engagement at all.

With more brands using content to vie for consumer attention, the winners are likely to be those who experiment with new content marketing formats, trends and techniques, and those that find the right formula for producing and promoting quality, data-driven content that can grab the reader’s attention among the chaos.

This white paper explores some of the key opportunities and challenges facing brands in the field of content marketing. It examines what success looks like for content marketing in change to 2018, how to measure it, and how content republishing can help businesses better engage with – and convert – their audiences.

Tom Betts.
Chief Data Officer, Financial Times

*Beckon.com, 2016
Content marketing opportunities for brands

2017 was an extraordinary year on many fronts, and pundits are understandably wary of predicting trends as seismic shifts in the political and economic spheres continue to make waves across the globe. However, the digital world, while changing rapidly, tends not to execute sudden U-turns. Taking cues from the statistical outputs of 2017, the following trends should present excellent opportunities for B2B marketers over 2018 and beyond:

**Multimedia storytelling**
Creative multimedia storytelling will become imperative – as audiences tire of “blatant” marketing content and “bland” corporate blogs and social posts, they will want more compelling, interactive stories.

**Mobile-specific content**
We will see more content that capitalises on the mobile environment in particular, such as content marketing on instant messenger apps and lock screen push notifications.

**Live content**
More businesses will adopt immersive visual content such as live streaming and 360° video. Stats from Smart Stats from Smart Insights’ indicate brands will increasingly start to use social platforms to host live product tours, tutorials and launch events.

**Virtual (and augmented) reality**
These newer media formats will take off for brands; some companies have already started using VR to showcase their products and services and others will follow suit as costs drop.

**Second-generation metrics**
Content creators will use more innovative performance indicators. With competition getting fiercer, the gaze of CMOs will increasingly focus on deeper, more meaningful metrics - and ways to tie all the data together.

**Content republishing**
Brands will increasingly adopt content republishing, and distribute content via non-traditional routes such as digital media sites.

**Email marketing**
Contrary to past industry predictions, email open rates are actually increasing in certain cases. According to email marketing platform Sign-UpTo’s 2016 Email Marketing Benchmark Report email open rates on mobile have increased by 180 per cent in three years with mobile optimisation and personalisation being key to success.
Content marketing challenges for brands

At first glance, the content marketing challenges that businesses are facing seem to have changed little. Prime culprits identified by marketers include limited time, budget and resource to produce effective original content, the ongoing struggle to prove the direct ROI of content, issues getting a brand’s message heard, and difficulty engaging with target audiences.

Added to this are vexing internal issues such as lengthy sign-off processes, and not having a documented content strategy 54 per cent of B2B content marketers reportedly still lack this, according to the B2B Technology Marketing Community on LinkedIn’s B2B Content Marketing Spotlight Report 2016.

The biggest content marketing challenge in 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time/bandwidth to create content</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measuring content effectiveness</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producing truly engaging content</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producing enough content variety/volume</td>
<td>39%</td>
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</tbody>
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Crowd Research Partners, 2016

While all these still hold true for 2017, another challenge is coming to the fore: getting in front of an audience which is increasingly adept at avoiding advertisers, and rarely engages with branded content.
Key ingredients for successful content marketing

“The key to content marketing is in finding the right mix between strategy, creation and promotion”, explains Kevin Gibbons, MD of SEO and content marketing agency BlueGlass UK.

“Many brands like to rush into the creation phase – but you need to do your research. This helps you build an insight-driven strategy, have the distribution channels ready to put everything behind making your content a success”.

Strategy: cutting through the noise

As shown above, one of the biggest challenges content marketers are grappling with is getting the user’s attention in an increasingly crowded space. The key to solving this issue is to understand your audience and their needs.

Brands should start with user research to find out where their target audience is spending its time online, and what they’re reading (both in terms of topics and formats, on mobile and desktop); this could be done via speedy online surveys, opinions canvassed by email, or even traditional market research including focus groups.

Combining this research with search data for the relevant sector will clarify what search terms and, perhaps more importantly, search intents are relevant for that audience.

This should go beyond keyword volumes, branching out into what types of content (format, length etc) make it into the top 10 search results.

This approach would then allow a brand to produce engaging, topical, unique and data-driven content – which, crucially, is relevant to its audience’s interests. It’s also essential to document the overall content marketing strategy, and to decide which KPIs’ success will be measured by.

Creation: overcoming challenges

The production process is where many content marketers encounter their greatest obstacles. Nearly three quarters of B2B organisations intend to produce more original content in 2018, according to the Content Marketing Institute’s annual Content Marketing Budgets, Benchmarks and Trends reports.

But although users are undoubtedly hungrier than ever for quality content, producing it at speed, to a high standard, and for an acceptable price, is still a major challenge for most brands.

The finance sector is a case in point; according to Polar’s branded content benchmarks data from April 2016, financial publishers spend 2.4x more time producing branded content than in other sectors, but the resulting content performs around 20 per cent below average.

There are three main content production elements to address to achieve success: quality, speed and data.
Quality demands experienced resource, time and money – all of which can be tough to find.

Surprisingly, according to Curata’s Content Marketing Staffing and Tactics Barometer 2016, 41.2 per cent of US marketers report that the biggest skills gap in content marketing is, in fact, content creation.

The biggest skills gap in content marketing is content creation

Speed requires agile internal processes – but lengthy internal sign-off loops can lead to damaging delays.

Data relies on sufficient tracking being in place to inform marketers which piece of content has high page views, conversions, engagement and shares.

Boosting your content output without a vastly increased budget, or a negative impact on quality, remains the holy grail for content marketers.

According to Curata’s research, 43 per cent of US companies intend to increase their content marketing staffing levels over the next 12 months, but not every business can do this.

An alternative way to increase output is to intelligently repurpose content; for example, giving evergreen content a new topical hook, turning reports into infographics, or “chunking up” long-form pieces.

However, the temptation to write short, “listicle”-type pieces should generally be avoided, Daniel Furch, Head of Content at Searchmetrics, warns that “the average word count on URLs within the financial sector ranking on the top 10 search results of Google.com is 1,717, which is even higher than the average of 1,633.”

In any case, producing ever-more original content is not necessarily the answer. If 95 per cent of branded content receives no engagement, the solution may be not to produce greater quantities of ineffective content, but to put more effort into creating fewer pieces of content, each of which are more effective.

Furch also suggests that companies think more about the user experience. “We’ve seen that content dealing with financial topics is often even longer than the average content.

But what’s also important is to add structure to your content to make it easier to consume,” he advises. “Adding media like images or video to increase the time users spend on a certain page can be a good idea, or adding structural elements like lists with bullet points.

On average, 69% of the pages ranking in the top ten financial SERPs use bullet points, which is nearly 20% over the average (50%), 43% work with embedded videos (average: 46%).”

Another way to approach the content production conundrum is to add content created by others into your content marketing mix, freeing up time internally to focus on your own content projects. This can be done via content curation (collating content written by others and sharing it with your audience) or content syndication (republishing content written by others on your platform).

Add content created by others into your content marketing mix, freeing up time internally to focus on your own content project

Optimising internal processes should also be a priority; the performance of topical content can
be damaged by lengthy sign-off processes. To cut the feedback loop, brands need to abandon current processes and experiment with bolder approaches, such as live feedback sessions, where content is changed in real-time, with stakeholders, through a collaborative process.

One more key element to consider: measuring the effectiveness of your content

“Every company we speak with say they wish they had time to produce more engaging content,” comments Nick Walter, CMO at OnePulse, a leading consumer research app. “But what’s important is that the content we are creating is effective, and it’s only through strategic data collection that we understand what works – and what falls flat.”

A quarter of B2C content marketers in the US don’t measure the ROI of their content, according to a 2016 report by the Content Marketing Institute. However, performance measurement is key to optimising targeting, increasing visibility and understanding what works – and therefore where to focus effort and budget.

Google Analytics is an essential starting point for any online business, but it does have its limits. E-commerce companies increasingly aim for an integrated, end-to-end analytics solution, spanning the whole user journey from upper funnel to post-purchase. However, such solutions can be prohibitively expensive for a brand whose main business is not producing content.

Renée Kaplan, Head of Audience Engagement at the FT, suggests starting with setting out your prime objectives for your content – what are you trying to do, who are you trying to reach – and then investigate the many analytics tools and dashboards that are currently on the market. Your choice will probably depend on what metrics are most appropriate for your chosen objectives - likes and shares if you want to engage a broader audience on social, for example.

“News media are increasingly moving away from first-generation metrics such as page views,” Renée explains. “The new metrics of content success are around audience engagement.

Clicking on content may not add up to anything as you might bounce right away. There are now much better metrics to assess the value of content, such as time spent, participation (such as likes, shares) and commenting. These are much more powerful signs that this piece of content has had an impact on a consumer. It shows that they’re getting value – and that’s a sign of real success.”

Data from Searchmetrics on ranking factors in the financial sector show that social share numbers are far below average. Looking only at the average amount of Facebook signals (including shares and likes), the financial pages ranking at the very first Google.com position show only around 10 per cent of the amount of Facebook signals than the average URL ranking at the very same position.

Whichever analytics solution a brand chooses, it’s crucial to make use of that spend, ensuring the results are accessible and interpretable by the marketing team, and to schedule regular reviews.
How could you boost your existing content marketing strategy?

One increasingly popular way for publishers to boost their content output without a negative impact on quality is content republishing (sometimes called content syndication). This is a form of content distribution where a business (or media outlet) publishes content originating from a newspaper or a purpose-built platform (such as Newscred). Republished content currently makes up just 6 per cent of the content output of US brands according to Curata, but this is expected to rise over the next 12 months.

How does it work?

The original site publishes a piece of content, whether a news story, opinion piece, podcast, report, or video. Brands licensed to republish this piece of content then reuse it on their own sites to enhance their existing content mix, increase their credibility as industry thought leaders, incentivise email campaigns, boost their social media output and inform white papers.

The benefits – if using a credible, authoritative source – include access to a huge array of recent, quality content, at a planned monthly cost; the authority conferred by content written by journalists or subject matter experts (useful if in-house expertise in those areas is not available in your business) and copy-edited; and the avoidance of internal sign-off.

Republished content is usually licensed for sharing, providing licensees with a raft of incisive, authoritative content to augment their social offering. This allows marketing teams to focus on creating and promoting more compelling branded content.

Maximising ROI from content republishing

To capitalise on the benefits of content republishing, marketers need to consider the following:

- How can this republished content be presented on-site to make it more engaging?
  This could be as simple as improving the on-page user experience, or ensuring it appears within topic filters and site search.

- Can this republished content be used more intelligently?
  For example, could senior managers comment on key points in reports or news stories, helping to present the senior management team as thought leaders.

- How can its effectiveness be measured?
  Metrics such as bounce rate, page scroll, trust scores, backlinks and citation flow can all provide valuable insight.

- Who uses content republishing?
  Brands who republish content range from B2B marketing agencies like OgilvyOne Business to large companies and investment firms including HSBC’s investment arm, Columbia Threadneedle, and Pinebridge.

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Financial Times Republishing

The Financial Times’ republishing service enables organisations to share and distribute FT content, online or in print, to help engage clients, attract prospects, improve brand awareness and build market positioning.

Qtrade and the Financial Times

Qtrade is a leading online brokerage firm in Canada whose trading platforms, tools and resources are used by tens of thousands of self-directed investors to achieve their financial goals.

The aim: Qtrade wanted a continual supply of unbiased, accurate and up-to-the-minute financial content (particularly around market data, currencies and investments) to help attract and engage new clients, and to retain its existing client base.

The challenge: Qtrade had little content of its own to distribute and minimal internal resource for content creation. The additional content needed to be authoritative and accurate enough to reliably inform investors making decisions in a competitive market.

The solution: After reviewing several solutions, Qtrade opted for the FT Republishing Platform, based on the quality of its content, its brand presence, and high net worth audience. It also offered a broad mix of relevant content and formats.

The result: A third of Qtrade’s content now comes from FT’s republishing platform. This additional content has helped meet client demand for accurate, timely and informed analysis, filled a marketing gap, attracted (and retained) high net worth investors, and made cost and time savings.

Syndicated content and SEO: dispelling the myth

Some marketers are wary of how republishing content, which was originally published on another site, might affect their search engine rankings and site credibility. Most are aware that what Google penalises websites for has certainly changed in recent years - but isn’t any duplicate content still penalised?

The firm answer is no: while some duplicate content does impact rankings, Google does not penalise syndicated content, and will merely choose what it considers to be the most relevant instance to display in search results.

Content republishing best practices

To make republished content work harder for a brand and maximise returns, it’s important to move beyond simply publishing the content and waiting for it to work magic.

• Ensuring authority

Some publishers and syndication platforms are more credible, or offer a broader range of topics or expertise, than others. As the content republishing trend gathers pace, more publisher platforms are offering their content under licence, but caveat emptor certainly applies here.

• Choosing formats

Some content formats that will work better for particular audiences and commercial objectives. Is the audience time poor? Consider video (without sound) or infographics. Is the objective to convert qualified B2B leads? Case studies may be a better option.

• Adopting a test-and-learn approach

This is still a young field, so the best way to maximise return is to experiment with different promotional methods, with sufficient tracking in place to produce clear results.

Before we partnered with the FT, we had very little content to distribute. This has been a great way to fill a gap in our marketing, not only to our clients but to new prospects too.

David Gilmour,
Online Marketing Manager, Qtrade
Conclusion

Businesses are undeniably facing new challenges around engaging with their target audiences online, and the quality, timeliness and interactivity of content demanded by consumers – whether B2B or B2C – can be daunting.

“There is a high cost to content production,” warns Renée Kaplan, “and you need to be as informed as possible as to what a likely outcome is. Be very clear in your objectives – and bear in mind that one content strategy can’t do it all.”

To thrive in today’s digital ecosystem, companies need to prioritise ruthlessly, set clear content objectives, and be realistic about what can be achieved internally. If internal resource is limited, it may make sense to embrace content marketing techniques such as curation and republishing to intelligently enhance an existing content mix, so internal efforts can focus on producing original, compelling pieces which answer a palpable customer need.

The “old” gold standard of having mobile-first, search-optimised and shareable content is no longer sufficient; successful content marketing in 2018 means thinking audience-first, and having a strong content acquisition and distribution strategy, backed by meaningful analytics to track effectiveness.

Companies which are quick to adapt, and are bold in their test-and-learn tactics, are the ones who will win in gaining their audience’s attention.
Want to find out more?

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Find out more: [ft.com/republishing](http://ft.com/republishing)

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