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The next challenge

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Content (adj.)

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Abstract

Content is highly appealing to marketers, but does not always have the same impact on prospects as is hoped for. This article argues that marketers need to consider adopting the opposite of business as usual in order to achieve the desired standout.

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Gaps in content strategy

I'm giving you the opportunity right now to take ten deep breaths and one big step back to discuss how happy you are with your content (ie, are you content with content?). I've been delivering courses for the IDM and talking about content marketing with clients for about 5 years now, which would suggest we are getting to a state of maturity with content marketing activity (although only 35 per cent of marketers have a documented content strategy — what are the rest of you doing?). Before writing this, I assumed we all knew by now what our content marketing efforts are delivering. But then, we also know what happens when we assume (we make an 'ass' of 'u' and 'me'). Apparently, only 21 per cent of you are successful at tracking return on investment (ROI). These are some scary statistics that worry me. But, for a moment, we can suggest that you are one of those people that have a documented content strategy and are measuring your ROI effectively.

Here is my question to you: In today's content-heavy, organic reach-restricting algorithms, how can you make a huge impact for your business through the content you are creating? Honestly, I think there are two answers to this:

1. Either you produce, publish and promote the market share of content for your industry, so your audience really cannot hit a web page or social network without seeing you. The problem with this is you'll need more budget and resource than you can shake a stick at and you risk the chance of boring people (a bit like death by PowerPoint, but with content) and, in all honesty, your chances of making a huge impact in the marketplace are pretty slim, especially if you are creating 'same-as-usual' content;
2. Or you create something so mind-bendingly disruptive that your audience can't help but sit up, take note and tell others about it. The issue with this is that you'll need to start thinking differently and, quite possibly, it's going to look exactly the opposite to business as usual.

This is about being brave. We all talk about innovation and digital disruption in our respective industries (I've even heard it come from the Water Board). As examples, Eloqua were market makers of automation and Radian6 for social listening. It's these disruptive solutions that have shaken industries and created new marketplaces and, while we talk about this a lot in the context of the marketplace, we rarely see it from a marketing and messaging perspective. Thinking differently ain't easy — but it's needed.

Shifting the focus in the customer journey

This could be perceived as a big challenge for us. Most of our jobs are to market the product, solution or service, not to create a new product or solution that will disrupt the marketplace. The good thing is that this is our opportunity to beat the rest to it. As you'd expect in business-to-business (B2B), there is a huge focus on the end of the buyer journey, gated content, case studies, product and data sheets, webinars and events, and much less focus on the start of the journey where they find out about your brand and where preference starts to form.

Getting the brand talked about

Preferences are becoming more and more important in the buyer process. A recent study from Google has shown that, over the 12 searches an individual is doing throughout the buyer journey on average, there are only two brands included, which would suggest that, if they don't remember you, you have very little chance of selection. We have to go back to getting our brands talked about and shared, which, in today's network economy (sorry for the buzzword), you would have thought would be easier than ever. It's not!

What business as usual looks like

How can you start to produce better results from content? The first step is not a crazy brainstorming session where we dream up 'viral' (I hate that word, too) video campaigns. It is actually looking at what business as usual looks like: What are you and your competition doing? Now, what might be the complete opposite of that? Some examples of business as usual could be: we are optimizing for maximum efficiency, we post three to five times a day across our social channels, and our resources are focused on gated content and events to nurture our audience. We create 30 blog posts per month, we target our key decision makers and we are recycling our content to get the most from it. We are educating our client base, so they see the value in us.

The opposite of business as usual

To address some of these business as usual statements: rather than optimize for incremental improvement, run A/B testing at extremes and see what works best. Rather than post three to five times a day, make your Twitter handle private and just post once a week — make it so engaging and exclusive that people are hanging on for your very next tweet. Set your content free, let people have it — they will contact you when they are ready. Forget blogs, why not use your budget on vlogs (video blogs) — video is becoming more important, after all. The key decision maker does not exist — at best, they rubber stamp the contract and are heavily influenced by their peers. So target the peers. Never recycle a piece of content again — everything you produce should be original or it's not worth talking about. Entertain rather than educate your audience so they build positive points of reference about your brand. Or you could just do what everyone else is doing ...

Some good examples

There are good examples of this everywhere, but the two that stick out for me are:

- *Adobe Marketing Cloud* — ‘*Metrics, not Myths*’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZXUq7Pln3g>; <http://blogs.adobe.com/conversations/adobe-marketing-cloud-metrics-not-myths>): This campaign drove ten times the volume of leads on launch day than predicted and, while you cannot see the exact effect that it is having on Adobe’s bottom line, you can get a good idea that the company is making waves in the market-place. The campaign generated 3,620,593 visits, 628,894 actions and 177,151 enquiries.
- *Volvo Trucks* — ‘*The Epic Split*’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7FIvfx5J10>): This is possibly one of the most-shared videos in B2B. Volvo Trucks went to a business-to-consumer (B2C) agency to drive awareness and brand consideration before launching further marketing in 140 local markets. Volvo Trucks’ Live Test films generated 100 million-plus YouTube views and were shared nearly 8 million times. In a recent survey of 2,200 owners of different truck brands, almost half of those who have seen the films say they are now more than likely to choose Volvo next time they buy a truck. Now that’s brand preference.

While these two examples had big production and media budgets behind them and brands willing to think differently, the core of these ideas was the creativity and desire to stand out from the crowd. These principles can be applied to any budget.

Your turn, your challenge

Some of this may sound unrealistic. If that’s the case, you need to find a method to prove the results, and find a test you can run with an audience. Rather than spend a huge amount of money on paid media, why not run a smaller project and find a partner with an existing community to trial some activity, and then measure your results against your existing benchmarks? Remember — B2B does not stand for ‘boring-to-boring’.