



Best Practices for Creating a Content Marketing Strategy



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Executive Summary

A content marketing strategy doesn't create itself—it's the result of careful planning, strategizing and execution. As Social Media and Content Strategist at Babcock & Jenkins Carmen Hill explains: "Whether it's a targeted campaign or comprehensive program, you need to plant a strong foundation of content that attracts prospects at every stage of the buyer's journey, seeding awareness and nurturing ongoing interest."

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—Carmen Hill,
Babcock & Jenkins

To get a comprehensive overview of the most effective content marketing strategies, we held an online discussion with some of the best and brightest thought leaders, including Marketing Interactions' Ardath Albee, DocuSign's Meagen Eisenberg, Heinz Marketing's Matt Heinz, and The Funnelholic's Craig Rosenberg. What we learned is guaranteed to help all marketers develop and deploy appropriate strategies for content across all channels and lead lifecycles. The topics we covered are below; answers have been edited for brevity.

Checklist

1. **Secure executive sponsorship.**
2. **Understand your customer to target your content marketing efforts.**
3. **Create an editorial calendar.**
4. **Extend the life of your content by repurposing.**
5. **Evaluate capabilities and resources, then develop a process for measuring and reporting.**
6. **Develop an array of content across multiple channels.**
7. **Don't just create content, curate it as well.**

Best Practices for Creating a Content Marketing Strategy

1. **Secure executive sponsorship.** Effective, long-term content marketing programs cannot operate as "skunk works" projects, done on the sidelines between other priority projects. Even though a significant portion of content marketing efforts can be executed without significant out-of-pocket expenses, the

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lack of budget requirements should not equate to letting the program run under the radar. Rather, work with your VP of Marketing or CMO to make content marketing a high-visibility priority for the organization as a whole. Ensure that the broader leadership team understands why it's important and what value it will provide to existing, prioritized key business metrics. (Heinz)

Gain C-Level buy-in. You need executive backing to fund and source a content strategy. You also need the support to ensure there is enough commitment to see a content marketing strategy through. Results will not be instantaneous. Think about the length of your sales cycle. (Albee)

2. Understand your customer to target your content

marketing efforts. Start by mapping your sales cycle to the buying cycle. The typical buying cycle flow follows: need, learn, evaluate (trial), negotiate, purchase, implement and advocate. I would set up a spreadsheet with the first row highlighting the buyer's journey. Below that I would put the definition by stage, followed by the gates that marketing and sales has to get through to get them to the next stage. I would then map the tools and resources below each stage to achieve the next stage, such as case studies, whitepapers, videos, demos, etc. Finally I would put the named assets with actual links. You will start to see very quickly where you have available content and what you need to build out for your content marketing strategy. (Eisenberg)

The content elements you produce cannot be solely a product of your internal ideas, opinions and priorities. The best content marketing programs in the market today focus intently on customer priorities, problems and needs. The more you understand and address the customer in your content, the more likely your content will be attractive to direct consumers as well as more viral to their networks. (Heinz)

Build buyer insight. This means buyer personas, or some version of them that works for you. You need to know what your target segment's objectives and orientation are and what obstacles they may encounter that could derail the deal. This is also when you should involve sales and customers in the process. Interview some of each to learn about what sales is hearing on the street and what buyers truly experienced. Now

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that you know what questions your buyers need answered (the answers create the premise for the content you will create) take a look at what you have and evaluate it based on which persona it addresses, which question it answers, and which stage of the buying process it will serve. This allows you to identify gaps where new content will need to be developed or point out which content will need to be refreshed, reinvented or retired. (Albee)

Don't let product marketing take over—Amex Open Forum is the model for you. They create content their buyers want to read, but they aren't trying to sell you credit cards in the content. Focus on “who” you're buyer is, and create content that is meaningful to them. (Rosenberg)

- 3. Create an editorial calendar.** Develop an editorial calendar; this is your execution plan. It should include the content strategy you designed as well as everything else. This overview also provides you the opportunity to determine how to integrate everything into a cohesive story for execution, and how to connect the dots. (Albee)

You will have plenty of serendipitous content opportunities, based on real-time news and activities in your market and with your customers. But every good content marketing program begins with a carefully planned, proactive editorial calendar. This calendar should enumerate the constant, customer-centric themes you want your readers, viewers and listeners to see. It should also provide a tentative outline of when different pieces of content will publish, on what platform, and which syndication and social channels it will be distributed through. You won't follow this calendar verbatim, but if it exists up front you'll be far more consistent and successful at publishing the content you need, and generating the results you want. Here's a good starting point for an editorial calendar template you can use. (Heinz)

Cadence is critical. Remember, marketers today need to act like publishers. Publishers create content in a consistent, timely fashion. Creating a whitepaper is not a strategy. Instead, you want to create infrastructure and process that allows you to create content consistently over time. Similar to a television program, people will begin to expect new content from you, and that is good. (Rosenberg)

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- 4. Extend the life of your content by repurposing.** After putting the time and energy into a fantastic webinar, for example, convert it into a video and publish it on your YouTube channel. Post the presentation deck on SlideShare. Pay for a transcription and make an edited PDF of the audio track available. Break that transcript up into a short series of blog posts and keep going. (Heinz)

Follow “The Rule of 5.” This is Ardath Albee’s rule, and I have been repeating it for years. Creating lots of content is hard, but taking one idea and creating multiple pieces of content from it makes your life easier and allows you to scale. Here is an example: This Q&A stream can be used for a whitepaper, blog post, chapter in an e-book, slide preso... (Rosenberg)

- 5. Evaluate capabilities and resources, then develop a process for measuring and reporting.** Take a look at everything you’ll need to do to execute the strategy you’ve created. Do you have enough resources, as well as the capabilities to execute? Do you have enough budget? And don’t forget about everything else on your plate or in development. Set expectations appropriately. A content strategy is a long-term approach that will gain momentum over time. It’s not a three-month campaign with three touches and a sales call. This is where you must develop your KPIs and present a process for measuring and reporting on progress that’s tied to creating business value. (Albee)

Even though it’s not always direct-response to a sale, your content marketing program is driving a wider pipeline, greater nurture and conversion potential, and accelerating the volume of opportunities throughout the wider sales and marketing pipeline that can turn into sales and revenue for the business. Be very specific about what these measures are, both in the short-term as leading indicators that you’re on the right track, and, more importantly, in the long-term to demonstrate the expected financial impact of the program. Better yet, demonstrate that financial impact relative to other/current programs that may be more costly. In most organizations, decreasing costs and increasing profit margin are at least as important as growing sales and revenue. An effective content marketing program can do both. Make sure you point that out and measure it over time. (Heinz)

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6. **Develop an array of content across multiple channels.**

Avoid falling into the trap of only publishing printed content, or focusing entirely on your blog. Take the time to understand which channels and formats your customers prefer or gravitate toward most, and diversify how and where you publish to extend your reach. Video in particular tends to be one of the most underutilized content platforms for many organizations, in part because companies overthink the sophistication and production value of a great video. Great content still plays well even if it's presented via a webcam atop your monitor. (Heinz)

Inspired by my experience as a gardener, I like to plan content the way I do a colorful container or flower bed, with a balanced mix of thrillers, fillers and spillers.

Thrillers are the rock stars—the pieces that are valuable enough to attract your audience and motivate them to learn more. For example, you might conduct a survey of industry peers and publish the results in a white paper or e-book. That same research can then be chunked into smaller pieces or used to connect your audience to deeper levels of consideration content.

Fillers may not command center stage, but they are essential elements that build on the featured attraction, connecting it to other assets and holding attention over time. Every B2B content collection needs a foundation of content that covers industry trends and best practices, customer stories, ROI/TCO information—and yes, tech specs and benefits.

Spillers are the compelling tidbits that people want to pass along to colleagues, social networks—or even their boss. Spill-worthy content could be an entertaining video, a practical checklist, an interesting infographic or a newsworthy tweet—anything that can be easily snipped and shared. (Hill)

7. **Don't just create content, curate it as well.** You don't have a monopoly on great content for your customers and prospects, nor should you. There's enormous value in not only producing original content, but curating “best of” content from across the Web. None of us have enough time to read all the sources of great content at our disposal today—magazines, newsletters, blog feeds, etc. If you serve as an editor for your followers, someone who reads more of the great content and filters the

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“best of the best” into your platforms, that alone can drive significant following and loyalty. It also shows independence and credibility if you’re not the only voice being published. (Heinz)

In Closing

Good content marketing delivers high-quality, relevant and valuable information to prospects and also drives profitable consumer action. In addition, a strategic content marketing campaign can bolster your search engine optimization and brand positioning. Your company can’t afford to be doing it the wrong way, or not doing it at all. With these insightful, actionable tips from our expert panelists, you can begin creating an efficient content marketing strategy or fine-tune the one you already have in place. The company that does this best will break through the noise and drive real results.

About Act-On Software

Act-On’s fully integrated cloud-based platform enables marketers to realize their creative expression to the fullest.

Act-On’s rapid implementation, intuitive user interface and complete tool set enable marketing and sales professionals to execute and optimize their campaigns and calculate the critical metrics to define success.

The Act-On platform features an integrated suite of tools to create web forms, landing pages, and emails. Act-On’s platform also offers Twitter Prospector to enable marketers to use Twitter and other social media properties as a lead source and for reputation management.

Combined with a best-in-class email engine and a series of easy-to-use tools for website visitor tracking, lead scoring, lead nurturing, and one-click integration with leading web conferencing and CRM solutions, the Act-On platform is the foundation for successful business growth strategies for the Fortune 5,000,000.

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