



Marketing by the book

Content marketing can take many forms. Are there any rules as to which format works best at the different stages of an often lengthy and complex B2B buying cycle? **Lucy Fisher** investigates

Content marketing is the latest way of describing something that's actually been around for a long time. Some years ago, however, the 'content' this term referred to tended to take the form of whitepapers, seminars and presentations. These days, however, B2B marketers have a plethora of formats at their disposal – from podcasts and webinars through to blogs, video and flash animation.

"It doesn't have to be all about whitepapers now and a lot of the time it shouldn't be," affirms Earnest's managing director, Chris Wilson.

"It's about providing searchable, relevant information at the right point in the buying chain"



CHRIS BAGNALL
MANAGING DIRECTOR EMEA
DWA MEDIA

Alongside the emergence of new formats, what has changed is the context in which all this information exists: the purchase behaviour of prospects and customers; and the ability to use analytics to assess what is working. Generally speaking, individuals now research online, often using Google as a starting point, before they want to engage with a sales person.

"Due to the prominence of the Internet nowadays," says Chris Bagnall, managing director, EMEA at DWA Media, "It's about providing searchable, relevant information at the right point in the buying chain: right format, right time, right audience."

And with all that noise within the fragmenting media landscape, content has to be better than it has ever been before. The web continues to expand, meaning there is fierce competition for your prospects' limited time and attention. "It has to be less about you and more about the problems that buyers have," says Velocity Partners' MD, Stan Woods. "The quality bar is higher than ever."

Choosing the right content

Experts say that there are some generalisations that apply to which content formats work best at various stages in the B2B purchase decision-making process, but to be wary of a blanket 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Rather than assuming certain content formats will be more effective at certain stages than others, do your research and take the time to really know who your audience is, the length of the buying cycle, and which job roles are involved. According to Wilson, "It'd be an easy world if you could say whitepapers go here, Twitter goes here, video goes here. It's a more subtle interplay around

The content marketing menu

Below are some key formats and how they can fit into the overall buying process

Whitepapers

Whitepapers are generally considered most important at the early stages of the buying cycle, when an individual is unsure about what the purchase options might be. They are often revisited close to the purchase decision, in order to look at technical issues in greater depth. Whitepapers vary greatly in length so bear in mind at what stage you will be seeking to engage a prospect when producing content in this format. "A four-page whitepaper will be pretty general and relevant to an earlier stage, whereas you won't be reading a 104-page whitepaper at the start of the sales cycle," says Bagnall.

E-books

E-books are generally shorter, less technical and more conversational in tone than the traditional whitepaper. They are designed to be easily digestible, are frequently in PDF format, which reduces printing costs, and are sent as a link or file that can be easily shared. They often have attention-grabbing functionality such as page-turning built in, too. "An e-book is more applicable to the business, as opposed to technical, side of the house. They tend to have more graphic elements and more white space," says Tilton. They are similar to whitepapers in that they are consumed both early on and further along in the sales process.

Video

Video and flash animation represent a way of sharing information and getting complex messages over quickly. They are effective at all stages of the buying cycle, particularly if you want to grab the attention of senior executives with very little time. Experts say they work particularly well at the final stages of decision-making, to differentiate a brand story or solution from its competitive set, who may still be relying on more old-fashioned formats such as lengthy whitepapers. "It's all in the presentation," says Wilson, "Many industries are commoditised so it's about how you tell the story and not what the story is."

Case studies

Case studies are powerful given that prospects often seek validation about the products or services they are considering. They can be in the form of written or video testimonials and they bring a personal element to purchase considerations. According to Tilton, "The best case studies I've seen intersperse images of that person's environment, and perhaps show shots of the particular tool they are using. This helps the audience to visualise the story." Generally case studies are most effective during awareness or consideration stage and perhaps at final and decision stage, too.

Blogs and micro-blogging

Blogs and micro-blogging represent another example of content marketing. It is not possible to convey much detail in a microblog, but this format does offer the opportunity to link to relevant research, videos or polls. Blogs are also effective within an overall search optimisation strategy. "Blogs are great to pique interest as you can float ideas and seek comment, but they are also good close to the sale, if people have questions," says Woods.

Mobile content

Experts say it's still early days for the use of mobile for content marketing purposes. Mobile shouldn't just be seen as a text medium, they say. According to Wilson, "Using the app store – creating something interactive that people can use – is still in its infancy. I'm amazed how many B2B organisations haven't done that already. Smartphones are getting better and faster all the time, with more feature-rich apps that are ideal for content marketing."

E-newsletters

Since the B2B buying cycle tends to take place over many months, e-newsletters are a good way to stay front of mind. Analytics tools should be used in order to ascertain a prospect's level of interest in order to maintain an appropriate frequency of contact.



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MANAGING DIRECTOR
EARNEST

delivery channel, format, and message. The content itself is more important than the format. It’s very contextual.”

Stephanie Tilton runs US-based content marketing specialist agency Ten Ton Marketing. Tilton suggests that, generally speaking, educational content, such as whitepapers or e-books, is more relevant at the early stages of the purchase decision, whereas specifics on products or services in the form of, say, brochures, case studies or data sheets, become more relevant later on in the process. But she warns that it can get complex in a B2B purchase context, where many individuals tend to be involved and sales cycles frequently take place over months, if not the course of a year or more. “There is a buying committee,” she explains. “You need to think about the concerns of all individuals involved when producing content, including the CFO, who has to write the cheque.”

So B2B marketers are advised to try different formats, especially since the type of content that works best will frequently come down to job role and personal preference. “Using the same core issue, wrap relevant stories around your content,” advises Tilton. “Make the story relevant to each of these people who have a say in the purchase.”

And remember, human nature can be unpredictable. “Experiment, but don’t

Content marketing dos and don’ts

- Experiment with crowd-sourcing techniques: it is now possible to leverage social media, blogs and forums in order to gain access to opinion and create timely content based on comments and feedback.
- Cut through the clutter by creating something both useful and entertaining.
- Ask individuals about their content preferences. Don’t push 100-page whitepapers on busy C-suite executives or those with a preference for video.
- Use analytics tools to see what works best and amend your content marketing strategy accordingly.
- Create content with a specific channel in mind: don’t force it into appropriate media.
- Remember that individuals – and job roles – have differing information needs. Make your story relevant.
- Repurpose content: that 50-page report can become a video, an on-demand webinar, an executive summary, and a podcast.
- Don’t forget the importance of testimonials or case studies.
- Think about your search strategy when devising your approach to content marketing and optimise all content for the web.

lurch from one to the other,” adds Wilson, “Some like video, some don’t. It’s horses for courses.” Fortunately there are a wide variety of web analytics offerings available nowadays, many of which are free, which can help you work out which formats are working best and amend your content marketing strategy accordingly.

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YOU vs CONTENT

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SOMETIMES
KEEPING UP WITH
ONLINE CONTENT
CAN BE A BIT OF
A BATTLE

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a hard working content strategy, regular compelling
content, seeded in the right places, driving more traffic to
your site, converting more visitors to leads.

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