

Content Marketing Offers Profitable Possibilities for PR Practitioners

By Kiersten Lawson

In Neil Gaiman's novella, *Coraline*, the protagonist finds herself talking to a sardonic cat who explains, "Cats don't have names...you people have names. That's because you don't know who you are. We know who we are, so we don't need names." This bold idea points to the key role PR professionals can and should play in content marketing efforts. By its name, the term suggests an activity exclusive to marketers. But the truth is that successful long-term content marketing efforts aren't possible without the differentiated skills PR practitioners specialize in.

Unlike our feline mentors, we human communicators typically find names to be useful clarifying tools. For example, what is the distinction between content marketing and content strategy? I define the related terms like this:

- **Content strategy** comes first. It describes an iterative, regenerative strategy for optimizing and targeting content to meet customer needs while supporting your core business mission. Content strategy is about listening, learning and fine-tuning—from research through execution and feedback.
- **Content marketing** is a system of techniques and tactics used to execute on a content strategy. There is no chicken-and-egg conundrum. Content marketing tactics should be executed in service of a clearly defined content strategy. Otherwise, your investment in even the cleverest content marketing activities may be made in vain.

What Is Content Marketing?

My favorite definition of content marketing is also the shortest: Creating a customer who creates a customer. It's easy to remember and all-encompassing. Other ways to describe content marketing include:

- It starts with brands publishing, realizing they needn't rely on paid and earned efforts alone. They can directly communicate with current and potential customers. But that's just the beginning.
- The intended audience has got to be able to find the content. It must be available where (and when and on whatever device) they will discover it.
- The content brands publish must be material their audiences want or need. If it's not useful or delightful, it's lacking.
- Ultimately, successful content marketing spurs action—action that is good for the audience and the brand. Ideal actions include sharing, commenting or seeking out more information.

All these elements must be in play for owned content to inspire people to become customers—not just once but repeatedly—and to spread positive word of mouth about you among their friends and family and people they know, such that they might become loyal customers too.

So what does content marketing mean in the world of PR, where media engagement has long been the name of the game?

If you look at some of the most impressive players in content marketing, you may have to squint to see yourself as a PR person driving such efforts. **Red Bull** got 8 million live views

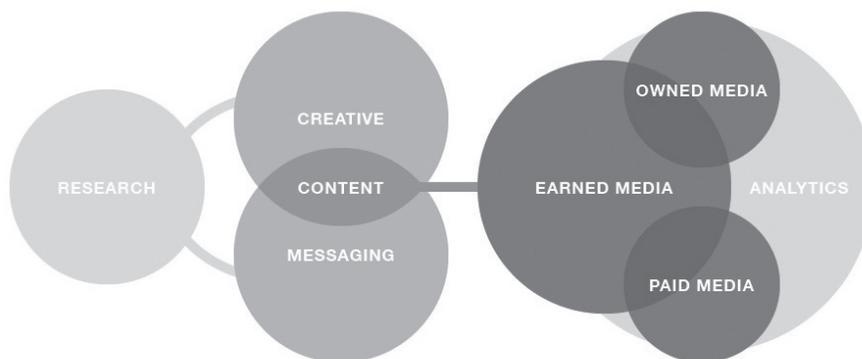
of its logo on an Austrian daredevil's space-suit as he dove 24 miles from the stratosphere to Earth—and it's still garnering views and new content partnerships. **Netflix's** content partnership with *The New York Times's* new T Brand Studio resulted in a groundbreaking new approach to native advertising. Storytelling like this seems far removed from a traditional PR campaign, but it doesn't need to be.

PR storytellers can use owned content marketing tactics like these to help brands influence people directly in ways we would have never thought possible only a few years ago.

PR is no longer just about media engagements. The boundaries between earned, owned and paid media continue to dissolve at an exponential rate as consumer preferences and demands keep changing the world. (They call it “on-demand” for a reason, after all.)

As options for how and where consumers take in information continue to increase, brands have become multichannel media companies to try to capture their increasingly fragmented attention. Therefore, it's increasingly important to integrate communications, research and creative teams to create content that will measurably connect with audiences.

The good news for PR is that moving beyond earned is a natural extension of our core



A visualization of the converged media landscape. (via SHIFT Communications)

Content Marketing Opportunities By the Numbers

Content is more than king. It's become dictator.

- **178** online properties on average per brand
- **3,000** brand impressions daily per person
- **6x** increase in leads generation when blogging 9-15 times per month
- **71** percent of brands increased content marketing budgets in 2013

Sources: Altimeter Group, Altimeter Group, HubSpot, Econsultancy and Responsys

More content isn't good enough—it has to be better content:

- **70** percent of B2B buying decisions complete before contacting a vendor
- **73** percent of B2B buyers who see personal value will purchase (only **22.6** percent who don't see a personal value will)

Sources: Social Selling in B2B Sales, Part 3: The new buying process, HootSuite, 2013 and From Promotion to Emotion: connecting B2B customers to brands, CEB/Google, 2013

skills—skills crucial to ongoing content

marketing success. We are experts at tailoring stories for specific audiences. We are steeped in the art of developing trusted one-to-one relationships over time.

Brands are managing more properties than any one person or team could ever keep track of. Each of us is so inundated with content that a new term has been coined to convey its overwhelming effect: infobesity. But across-the-board content marketing budget boosts signal that the C-suite increasingly recognizes the real business value of content marketing investments. After all, a

sixfold bump in leads generated by blogging a few more times a month shows how a solid owned content strategy can contribute to the sales funnel significantly.

A steady stream of fresh content isn't all it takes. Useful content and emotional connection are key. If they ever existed, the days when your product sheet, reviewers guide or press release was the primary driver of your audience's impression of your brand are long gone. Business decision-makers and consumers are doing their own research and only reaching out to you if they:

- Found your content
- Found it to answer the need or question that drove them to start researching in a way that was better than your competitors
- Were inspired by your content to reach out or seek to learn more

Regardless of your audience, it's more important than ever to make your story about them, not your brand or your product. The personal value that drives sales comes from convincingly elucidating the benefit you will bring to people's lives. Content marketing may be a fairly new term, but the importance of excellent, nuanced, audience-focused storytelling is as important as ever when it comes to changing or cementing perceptions of your brand.

And this is why PR prowess is crucial to content marketing success. As with social media, companies struggle to decide where content marketing should live in their organization and who should own it. But we all know our customers don't care about our org charts. Like social media, measurably successful content marketing must be an integrated activity that crosses all parts of the business, tied together by a content strategy rooted in fundamental organizational goals.

PR brings specialized expertise to bear in this integration. At the heart of PR excellence are the abilities to tailor a story to a precise

(often skeptical) audience and to build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships. Content marketing efforts bereft of those specialized skills risk failing to truly connect through ongoing relationships that drive long-term brand loyalty.

PR agencies and teams must prioritize when to retain and develop certain skills and when to partner with other experts.

That being said, PR excellence is only one critical component. Many different skills contribute to the most successful long-term content marketing programs. Expertise is needed spanning digital, design, development, storytelling, social media, media planning and buying, partner negotiations, and, of course, measurement and analytics.

Can PR professionals apply such a broad range of specialties? Perhaps not, according to Dr. Frances Frei's book, *Uncommon Service: How to Win by Putting Customers at the Core of Your Business*. She posits that to be best in class at something, you must be worst in class at something else. In a converged media landscape, PR agencies and teams must prioritize when to retain and develop certain skills and when to partner with other experts to ensure the brand's content marketing efforts are as integrated and fruitful as they can be.

These days, consumers look at an average of 12 sources before making a purchase on whatever combination of devices and channels is most convenient for them. They're not differentiating which content was driven by a PR, marketing, advertising or mobile team. But they are savvier than ever and will spurn misaligned material. If you're not providing consistent brand messaging through notable content appropriate to each specific channel

Collaboration Challenges and Steps to Success

Barriers to cross-discipline collaboration:

- Siloed teams
- Missing capabilities
- Disconnected data
- Inability to measure
- Budget mix mayhem
- One-size-fits-all content
- Comfort level gap

5 steps to creating content—and collaboration—that thrives:

1. Know your audience
2. Keep it compelling
3. Drive action
4. Have a distribution strategy
5. Measure

or format the person is viewing it in—and if the content on all your channels isn't complementary and driving a logical customer journey—then you're hobbling your ability to win and keep that customer's loyalty and willingness to spread the good word about you.

An audience-focused, integrated storytelling approach is the North Star, then. But do we even have a compass? Let's be honest. Highly effective collaboration across teams, disciplines, agencies and vendors—the kind that produces remarkable, even game-changing, results—didn't suddenly get easier when brands began telling their stories directly to customers.

In an ideal world, we'd carve out time beyond our daily responsibilities to develop plans and processes to overcome these issues, and there's every reason to do that if you can. But another, perhaps more feasible way

to overcome the barriers to collaboration is to focus every content marketing effort on the core elements of success, which by their nature require cooperation and teamwork.

Some of these steps PR could do in our sleep. We naturally think about the specific audience we're trying to reach, and we understand how critical shaping compelling stories is. Others aren't traditionally as much in our DNA, such as establishing firm success metrics or developing broad distribution strategies. By partnering with experts in those areas, we keep these tenets of excellence at the forefront while gradually breaking down silos. In this way, collaboration is organically shown to make each team's job easier and its business goals more attainable, as opposed to being viewed as something we just don't have time for. In this way, collaboration happens when it must, not when we "have time" to build it outside of our day jobs. And when the integrated expertise produces standout work, the rising tide of that content success lifts all disciplines' ships.

In a world where brands are media, content that connects is the true influencer. Content marketing is a rapidly evolving business opportunity with profitable possibilities for PR practitioners. Within any brand's content marketing efforts, the demand for the specialized skills PR experts offer can be increased through pan-discipline collaboration. And such streamlined, mutually beneficial partnerships are unmatched when it comes to forging real and lasting connections through content that improves and brightens people's lives—and their loyalty to your brand. **PRN**

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