

Best Practices in Content Marketing

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by Ardath Albee, Joe Chernov, Barbra Gago, Doug Kessler, Stephanie Tilton

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Executive Summary

A content marketing strategy involves the creation of content for the purpose of engaging and establishing relationships with current and prospective customers, and subscribes to the belief that delivering high-quality information to prospects at the right stage of the buying cycle drives profitable action. There are several stages of a content marketing strategy each with many elements to consider before moving to the next. In this guide, Focus Experts Ardath Albee, Joe Chernov, Barbra Gago, Doug Kessler, and Stephanie Tilton have suggested their top tips and best practices for each stage of the content marketing cycle.

Best Practices Checklist

- Conduct baseline analysis and create a plan.
- Create content your customers want
- Optimize content for distribution and visibility
- Don't put everything behind the gate
- Deliver the right content at the right time

Best Practices in Content Marketing

Best Practices

Conduct baseline analysis and create a plan.

"Analyze your customer base to identify your ideal customer(s). Then develop buyer personas for each ideal customer type, and for each major role in the buying process within the customer's organization. For each role, learn as much as possible about how that person goes about making a buying decision, including the questions asked at each stage of the buying process, keyword terms used while conducting search, and content preferences. To gather this information, consult your customer database and customer-facing personnel; conduct polls and surveys of your customer base; and monitor the online conversations that your prospects and customers engage in, such as via Twitter, blogs, and LinkedIn groups. Augment this data with research about buyer habits and trends published by companies such as MarketingProfs, MarketingSherpa, and TechTarget. Once done researching, create buyer profiles and scenarios that map to the buying process." (Tilton)

"Going back to stuff your content piece with keywords is doing it the wrong way around. Use keyword research to inform your choice of topic, title and the structure of the content itself. A piece of content laser-focused to serve a given keyword is much more likely to earn a high ranking than a retro-fitted piece. That doesn't mean ignoring the human reader in favor of the search spider. It just putting SEO into your strategy early." (Kessler)

"One of the biggest challenges marketers have is developing the volume of content necessary to fuel automated marketing processes. The Rule of Five is that for each content asset you create, there should be either 5 ways to use it, 5 permutations or versions, or a combination thereof. An example would be taking a white paper and extracting 2 main ideas for article development. Then take 2 other concepts and create blog posts. Tweet each one. Link them to each other to create a path. Use the articles in nurturing programs with links to the blog posts. When you plan your content development based on the Rule of Five, all of your research can be done at once along with the content development. Just as content marketing is not a one-off endeavor, consolidating your content development will make better use of your resources and provide a connected flow for your marketing programs." (Albee)

Create content your customers want.

"During the process of buying, there are many questions to be answered at each stage of the decision process. From 'what difference will it make?' to 'what are best practices?' to 'why should I believe your company?' each of the questions a buyer (or the members of a buying committee) have will need to be answered. The goal is to facilitate conversations between influencers, stakeholders and decision makers using the ideas your content presents. To get started, evaluate your existing content assets and determine which question each one answers. If it's not clear, refresh your content with the question in mind. All new content should be predicated on answering a question that's relevant for your target audience. Once a question is answered your buyers will have the confidence to take the next step. This is an effective way to use content marketing to accelerate pipeline momentum." (Albee)

"According to HP, people retain only about 20% of what they read, but they remember 80% of what they see and do. Marketers have the opportunity to improve recall by 400% if they incorporate visual communications into their content,

yet most continue to publish text-heavy whitepapers, reports and presentations. This is perhaps the single greatest missed opportunity in marketing. Once you've identified the concept you aim to promote, start with a visual representation and work backwards to the copy. The byproduct will not only be simpler language, but also that elusive blend of visual-plus-text communication. Don't have a designer? Go hire one." (Chernov)

"Content Marketing is about helping your prospects master an issue that's important to them. If you lace your content with sales messages, you undermine credibility and alienate the reader. Once you've told your story, by all means let them know a bit more about the good people who delivered it. But keep the sales sword sheathed." (Kessler)

Optimize content for distribution and visibility.

"Make it easy to access and share your content. Include keywords in every content asset and related web page on your site and other sites where you maintain a presence. Create dedicated landing pages for each content asset to boost your rankings in the search results pages, and to help prospects easily access the content they come across in the search engines. Decide whether or not registration is required to access your content. If you do require registration, adopt a progressive-profiling approach and ask for incremental information during each successive interaction with the prospect so you don't turn away prospective buyers with an intimidating list of questions. Embed social-sharing options in your PDFs, emails, and web pages, making it easy for readers to share your content. And include a call to action in each content asset, to guide prospects to relevant content that moves them further along the buying cycle." (Tilton)

"The social Web is like one gigantic BYOB party. You cannot expect any one site to be the single repository for all of your content. You need to, quite literally, bring your own content to the party if you want to get it noticed. Let go of the expectation that your target customer will find the right piece of content at the right moment in your Byzantine website. Instead, re-publish your content in the wild - Facebook, Scrib'd, SlideShare, Flickr, LinkedIn Groups ... your content needs to live in all of these places if it's going to have an outside chance at being discovered by everyone you want to consume it. In fact, at Eloqua, I use the 80/20 rule: 80% of the time, our broad-appeal content is consumed on networks other than our website." (Chernov)

"Every piece of content your produce should be used to promote at least one other piece of content. We increased downloads of our Content Marketing Workbook by 400% by promoting it in our B2B Marketing Manifesto. Anyone reading (and presumably enjoying) one of your content pieces is ripe for getting another." (Kessler)

Don't put everything behind the gate.

"Map each piece of content on a spectrum. Designate one end, 'awareness only,' and mark the other end, 'sales gets asked this.' For content marketing purposes, this is your funnel. If your content skews far in the direction of, 'awareness,' don't hide it behind a form. It will blunt spread. Conversely, if the content addresses questions that prospects uncover after they've begun to move down the purchase path, then gate it. Lead capture is much more important than reach at this stage. If you're stuck somewhere in the middle try a hybrid approach. Publish ungated content on a couple social platforms to see if it spreads, while directing prospects to a lead capture microsite. Consumption will tell you what type of content it is." (Chernov)

"Don't expect your prospects to fill out a ten-field form for every little scrap of content you generate. Earn their name and email with your very best content that delivers the most value -- like that 48-page eBook. Then nurture the anonymous people with enticing content that moves them along the buying path (and eventually to a data capture form)." (Kessler)

Deliver the right content at the right time.

“If content is King, then content mapping is Queen. Why? Because without strategy and thought going into the process of content delivery, content is simply not as effective. Content marketing is becoming the foundation to most corporate communication strategies, but without mapping content to individual personas at specific stages of the buying process, you are missing one critical aspect, the ability to provide value.” (Gago)

“Align your messages and content with the buyer profiles and scenarios you created. While you can map out the buying process at a very basic or complex level, the key is to understand how your prospects and customers think of the buying cycle, who is involved, and their information needs throughout the buying cycle. Create a grid or spreadsheet that summarizes the questions and concerns of each buyer at each stage of the buying process. Map these information needs to the content formats your prospects prefer. Conduct a content audit to see which of your current content is usable. Then update existing content and create new content where needed, keeping in mind the information needs of both prospects and existing customers that you want to up- or cross-sell.” (Tilton)

“Mapping content to the buying process is the key to delivering the right information to the right person at the right time. The exercise of assigning content to buying stage based on the type of information it provides will help marketers make the best use of existing content as well as discover gaps that need to be filled. When mapping your content, focus on creating a sequential flow that will resonate with your prospects because each content asset builds on the foundation of information they’ve accessed previously. Not all buyers will follow a linear path, but they (or a stakeholder) will need the information at some point in their decision process. That’s why it’s critical to know what content you have and the role it plays best during the buying process.” (Albee)

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Focus Best Practices Reports are designed to help professionals understand business and technology best practices in particular topic areas. The best practices included in each report are sourced from Focus Experts who have exhibited expertise in the particular topic. Best Practices Reports are designed to be practical, easy to consume, and actionable.