What Is Content Marketing?

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I cover digital marketing for the entrepreneur as well as the CMO.

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You’ve just heard someone mention “content marketing” and you get the idea you should already know what it is, but you’re too embarrassed to ask anyone. Congratulations, this post is for you.

The Content Marketing Institute, an online resource for information on all things content marketing related, defines content marketing thusly:

Content marketing is a marketing technique of creating and distributing valuable, relevant and consistent content to attract and acquire a clearly defined audience – with the objective of driving profitable customer action.

The key word here is “valuable.” It’s what changes this definition from one that could describe almost any form of advertising or marketing. You can tell if a piece of content is the sort that could be part of a content marketing campaign if people seek it out, if people want to consume it, rather than avoiding it. So was VW’s 2014 “Game Day” commercial, which has been viewed on YouTube almost 18 million times as of the writing of this post, an ad, or content marketing? The answer is it’s both, depending on how it’s received by each individual who is exposed to it. The same will apply to any piece of content marketing you create, depending on whether the recipient received value from it or not. Of course the goal is to provide as much value from your content marketing to as much of your target audience as possible. At this point, despite this definition and explanation, you’re probably still wondering what exactly content marketing is. We can get more clarity by considering a few examples.

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Five Content Marketing Examples

There are as many types of content marketing as there are types of content--far too many to cover here. My intent is to give you an introduction to content marketing and get you thinking like a content marketer so you’ll see the opportunities all around you. Soon you’ll be coming up with 50 content marketing ideas every day. You won’t be able to stop seeing opportunities to create content. Here are five examples to help your mind start percolating.

Infographics. These are generally long, vertical graphics that include statistics, charts, graphs, and other information. If you need some examples, here are 197 infographics on the topic of content marketing curated by Michael Schmitz, head of Content Lab at Publicis, Munich. Infographics can be effective in that if one is good it can be passed around social media and posted on websites for years. You can get a professionally designed infographic by hiring a contractor on a site like oDesk or if you want to remove some of the risk you can go with a company like Visua.ly. A decent infographic will usually cost you at least $1,000 to have designed, but can cost several thousand dollars if you are hiring a contractor or agency to include strategy and planning, research, copywriting, and design. There is also the matter of promoting that infographic to bloggers and the media. Or you could set up a board on Pinterest and curate infographics on a topic related to your business. That is also a form of content marketing, and it costs nothing but your time. Hey, it worked for Michael.

Webpages. What’s the difference between a normal webpage and a webpage that is content marketing? Consider The Beginner’s Guide to SEO from Moz, a provider of SEO related tools and resources. This resource, offered for free, has been viewed millions of times, bringing in countless customers who otherwise might never have stumbled across Moz and the services they offer. Or take a look at a case study from the design firm Teehan+Lax. Most case studies are boring. Their case studies are fascinating. That’s the difference between simply putting content on your website, and content marketing.

Podcasts. Michael Hyatt, author of the best-selling book Platform: Get Noticed in a Noisy World, practices what he preaches. His “This is Your Life” podcast is downloaded 250,000 times each month. As Hyatt elaborates on his blog post 4 Reasons You Should Consider Launching Your Own Podcast, “A podcast gives you visibility in a completely different world—primarily iTunes. I have had scores of new people say they had never heard of me until they stumbled onto me in iTunes.” Hyatt gives valuable information and advice in his podcast--all for free. But that podcast leads to more sales of his books, signups for his courses, and requests for him as a speaker.

Videos. Gary Vaynerchuk is a master of content marketing using online video, just take a look at his YouTube channel. He got his start creating videos to promote his family’s wine store and through those videos and other online marketing he eventually grew it to a $45M empire. Videos and podcasts are a largely untapped form of content marketing because people think it’s expensive and hard. But with the falling cost of professional grade equipment creating high quality video and audio content is easier than ever. Amateur video content marketing has been used to sell blenders, launch new dental products, and market Hong Kong visa consulting services. What video could you throw together for your company that might change your fortunes overnight? It might be easier than you think.

Books. Like movies, people often think of books as selling themselves, but savvy marketers don’t sell books just to sell books, they sell books as marketing tools. Michael Port’s sales manual Book Yourself Solid is a great read for entrepreneurs, salespeople, and marketers, and while I’m sure Port enjoys selling his book, the book is a tool for driving customers to his coaching and speaking services. Although with self-publishing it’s easier than ever to publish a book, there is still the perception that it’s difficult and that only reputable professionals can publish a business book. Publish your own, and even if people don’t read it you can still use it as a form of content marketing every time you’re introduced as “Author of…”

Those are just a few examples of content marketing. I could also have mentioned white papers, ebooks, apps, public speaking, presentations, and blogs. Entire books have been written on using each of these in content marketing efforts.

Why Content Marketing?

Perhaps more important than understand what content marketing is, is understanding why content marketing is important to your business. First we need to understand the four steps of the buying cycle:

Awareness. Prior to awareness a customer may have a need, but they are not aware there is a solution.

Research. Once a customer is aware there is a solution, they will perform research to educate themselves. For example, a car buyer will try to find out what different types of cars exist, and which one will fit their needs.

Consideration. At this point the customer starts comparing different products from different vendors to make sure they’re getting a high quality product at a fair price.

Buy. Finally, the customer makes their decision and moves forward with the transaction.

Traditional advertising and marketing is great when it comes to the second two steps. Content marketing taps into the first two stages of the buying process by raising awareness of solutions and educating consumers about a product they may have never considered before.

At my own company we’ve used content marketing to grow more than 1,000% over the past year. Potential clients find our content, find value in it, and by the time they contact us they’re already convinced they want to work with us. We don’t have to engage in any high pressure sales tactics, it’s merely a matter of working out details, signing an agreement, and getting started. The trust that usually needs to be built up during an extensive sales cycle has already been created before we know the potential client exists.

The return on investment for content marketing can be phenomenal if executed correctly. We haven’t spent a dime on our own content marketing, or even that much time. 95% of the success we’ve experienced with content marketing can be traced to a handful of articles I’ve written, adding up to perhaps 20 hours of work.

Content marketing also provides additional benefits in that it supports other digital marketing channels. It provides additional content for social media marketing and contributes to SEO efforts by generating natural inbound links and building up good content on your website that gets found in search engines. In fact, for many companies the bulk of their SEO efforts should be focused on content marketing.

How Do I Get Started?

There are many firms that offer content marketing services, often paired with SEO or PR. If you’re simply too busy to do it yourself and aren’t ready to manage it in-house, then hiring a firm may be your best option. But if you want to jump in and do your own content marketing the easiest way is to start blogging. It will likely be hard at first, but the more you do it, the better you’ll get at it. Following tips from websites like Copyblogger you’ll quickly learn how to craft content for your website or blog that will engage readers and turn them into customers or clients. But while technically good writing and the right headlines can help, it’s not the key to creating great content that is the best form of content marketing.

Great Content

If you’ve ever slogged your way through reading a piece of marketing and only finished reading because you had to, then you’ve experienced bad content marketing. When I speak to companies about content marketing I tell them that content is good if they genuinely want to read it. Content is great if they’re willing to pay to read it. If you want to see great examples of content, just look at what you’ve paid to read, watch, or listen to lately. If you watched The Lego Movie this year, you saw one of the greatest examples of content marketing to date. Oh, you thought they made that movie in order to sell movie tickets? Think again. That was a 100 minute toy commercial, and rather than using a DVR to skip it you paid good money to watch it. Is it any coincidence that Lego recently leapfrogged Mattel, the creators of Barbie, to become the largest toy company in the world? You may not have the budget to make a feature film to promote your company, but you can still give potential customers valuable information.

The #1 Secret of Content Marketing

Add value. That’s the secret. It’s not really a secret at all. We've already talked about it throughout this piece. Although when you look at some of the marketing companies engage in you wonder if they’re purposely avoiding the obvious. We skip advertising when it provides little to no value. If you want to learn about advertising that doesn’t get skipped, find a skateboarder and ask him if you can watch him look through a skateboard magazine. You’ll see that he spends as much time looking at the ads as he does looking at the articles and photos. Or check out The Berrics website. Much of the content is advertisements, but skaters don’t skip these videos, they watch them just like they watch the other videos, because they’re getting the value they want--good skating. As a skater I’d like to say skateboard companies pioneered content marketing decades ago, but I know they were only doing what came naturally, and selling more product was secondary to the fun of creating videos and magazines. If you want to hire someone onto your marketing team who understands content marketing intuitively, hiring a skateboarder might not be a bad step.

If you’re not sure how you can add value through content marketing, ask your existing customers what kind of content you can produce that would be helpful to them now, or would have been helpful to them when they were looking for your product or service. They’ll tell you.

How Can I Learn More?

Read Joe Pulizzi's excellent book Epic Content Marketing. I started reading it after I wrote this post and it confirmed and expanded what I already knew about content marketing, with much more detail than I could ever go into here. Something Pulizzi emphasizes which I originally left out was the importance of focusing on producing mobile-friendly content, since smartphones are becoming the dominant way in which most of our customers access content. Also read Michael Hyatt's Platform, mentioned above. Frequent websites like those of Content Marketing Institute, Ragan, Copyblogger, Michael Hyatt, and Gary Vaynerchuk and sign up for their email newsletters. It won't take you long to become not just familiar with content marketing, but an expert.

Most companies are not doing real content marketing...yet. That’s why you’ll have an advantage if you jump in. Let me know how it goes.

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