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Content marketing does not exist

By Steve Liversedge

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After 17 years in the internet industry, you get accustomed to the crowds chasing the next latest 'best thing' in digital. It is an industry where people like catchy sayings, making things sound important, and - with a little smoke and mirrors - it might even get them some additional business. With the hype comes the followers, new job titles, etc.

Hey! Have you discovered "digital body language" yet? With enough hype this could be the next digital trend.

So the latest rage is content marketing, and many are latching onto the hype - but what if I told you content marketing does not exist. The reality is that we are simply hyping up the repackaging of a marketing process that has been practiced for decades, and, sooner or later, content marketing will fade away.

Even the IAB have been sucked into the hype, publishing "B2B Content Marketing" Reports. According to this report, a staggering 93% of B2B (business-to-business) marketers in North America are using content marketing. But is this just another way of saying companies use content as part of their marketing activities?

If you have a website, you are practicing content marketing. But it seems the hype is having the desired effect: 73% of companies are now producing more content, and LinkedIn is the social channel that is being used, and probably abused, the most in B2B.

So let's blow the lid off content marketing and see it for what it really is: not marketing, but a process within marketing that supports many aspects of marketing, based on quality content generation and distribution. We market a brand, a company, a product, a person, an event - not something as abstract as content.

The Content Marketing Institute website documents the purpose of content marketing as follows:

- Content marketing's purpose is to attract and retain customers by consistently creating and curating relevant and valuable content with the intention of changing or enhancing consumer behaviour. It is an ongoing process that is best integrated into your overall marketing strategy, and it focuses on owning media, not renting it.

I have a problem with this. "Attracting and retaining customers" through "relevant and valuable content"... sounds good doesn't it? But every business is - and has always been - about attracting and retaining customers, so nothing new there, and content must first be discovered before it attracts or influences customers.

Now we are going to apply this to content, the key differentiator being relevant and valuable content. I'd read a series of

articles, and maybe watch a video or two. Perhaps you might share that high-value research report or training info, and this might make me change my buying habits or influence my buying decision to the degree that the 4 Ps of marketing - Price, Product, Promotion and Place - are not important. Sounds like hype to me, but marketers and businesses are falling for it.

As marketers, have we not previously created relevant and valuable content? Even if the answer is only to a small degree, the only change going forward must surely be more content, and maximising its distribution. So instead of job titles being CCO (Chief Content Officer), the job becomes CCP (Chief Content Pimp).



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I say it again, content marketing is a myth, nothing more than hype. It is leading to ever more content being created, with marketers trying to find as many channels as possible to distribute the content. If content marketing was real and practical, we would be measuring the process and actions leading to success more effectively. But instead, we create more smoke and mirrors in our metrics.

In the latest 2015 B2B Content Marketing Report, you will notice that the primary method for measuring content marketing success is website traffic at 63% (even worse, this is a year-on-year measurement), yet the report also states that 80% of content marketers are using paid advertising. Yes, listen loudly: PAID ADVERTISING, that hard sell, punchy content, with supposedly very "little value" to drive you to read the relevant, valuable content. And what is top of the list at 58% for paid advertising? Search engine marketing. Now isn't that a kick in the pants for content marketers?

You see, the concept of content marketing cannot exist without promotion and advertising - the very things content marketing seeks to replace. Recall the 'owning media, not renting it' statement.

You will also notice that the primary tactics identified within the report for content distribution are: social media at 92%, e-newsletters at 83%, articles on the website at 81% and blogs at 80% - all of which are owned media channels. Leaving social media aside for now and focusing on e-newsletters, websites and blogs, we must ask ourselves two important questions, while always remembering that we are talking about B2B markets:

1. If content marketing is working and having the desired effect, based on content relevance and value, why are we not seeing industry-related email-open and click-through rates improve? And why is subscriber growth at the bottom of the list, as a metric to measure content marketing success?2. Why do less than 20% of content marketers use website engagement metrics in measuring content marketing success? Could it be that this new-found relevant and valuable content is hidden away in the B2B website, with the web focus being on product and service?

With regard to the social media channels, the top three channels reported as the preferred distribution channels were LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook. Yet, without awareness for these social business channels, how does a business grow its awareness, and where are the metrics to measure the success of these channels? In South Africa, very few B2B companies have got their heads around social media as a market engagement tool, which is understandable, as marketers struggle to come to grips with social engagement, as opposed to pushing content within the social channel.

The top three content marketing goals identified in the report were brand awareness, lead generation and engagement, all being over 80% in importance, yet fewer than 30% of marketers use measurement metrics relating to brand awareness, product/service awareness and customer renewal rates or cost savings.

Give it some time and the hype will die down. When the dust settles, logic will prevail and people will realise that content marketing is a myth. Generating more content is meaningless, yet over 70% of companies are increasing content creation. Why is this meaningless? It is because there is more to attracting and converting customers than relevant and valuable content creation.

Are we that naïve to think that businesses have not been producing relevant and valuable content as part of the marketing and promotion process up to now? Yes, there is always room for improvement, and yes, we would like clients to work harder at giving us access to relevant and meaningful info, but there are practicalities to consider.

In my opinion, return on investment (ROI) assessment is when the penny is going to drop for many companies, and the realisation that content marketing does not actually exist will sink in. Rather than generating more content, the focus will turn to enhanced digital persuasion architecture in channels such as the websites, email and social channels, as the business goals and objectives are re-enforced. Headers, subject lines, call to actions and value propositions are just as important as the body copy of any article or web page.

Content and valuable content is extremely important, but labelling it "content marketing", and emphasising a need for ever more content, is like burning the candle at both ends. It burns brighter right now, but darkness approaches much quicker.

Content distribution challenges; the need to identify meaningful business personas; generating quality and engaging content on an ongoing basis; and ineffective measurement metrics tells me the hype will eventually subside. Content marketing does not exist beyond the hype and a narrow belief that it is sustainable.

Do we do content marketing? Of course - how much content do you want? And yes, we will optimise the content for search rankings as well.

ABOUT STEVE LIVERSEDGE

Steve Liversedge is the digital director at Cubiclce and directs the development of effective online strategies and services for clients in both the B2B and B2C environment. Passionate about online measurability and the need for effective metrics and skills, he believes that without effective web analytics and the experience and skill needed to turn data into actionable intelligence, South African companies are missing out on a significant opportunity to improve business performance.
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