The No-Nonsense Guide to Creating a Content Strategy

A Guide for B2B and B2C Technology Providers

Introduction

Content without a plan behind it is just a collection of words, which is fine if you're a part-time food blogger. If you're a business, with employees relying on you for their jobs, content without a strategy and a plan behind it is a recipe for trouble. At best it's a waste of resources. At worst, you risk customers and stakeholders building a view of your culture, products, and services that differs from your own and which will ultimately hurt your business.

For our purposes here, included in our definition of content, is any branding and messaging published by the organization, across any medium, pertaining to the organization and its products and services. This includes printed collateral you take to trade shows, your digital marketing efforts, demand-gen, sales enablement, public relations (PR), investor relations, and industry influencers such as the media and analysts.

Too often, when organizations talk about building a content strategy, their content is focused on their products and services, all but ignoring content about the business, its culture, and why it exists.

But a true content strategy should include both organizational content and product and service-level content because customers don't just look at your speeds and feeds anymore. They want to know who makes the decisions at the company, and can they trust the company will be around to support its products and services years down the road. Today, they also want to know if your company is sensitive to economic and social issues. For many, who you are as an organization is almost as important as what you do.

With that introduction to why you need a content strategy and what it needs to include, let's get started.

Step 1: Know Thyself

The first step to building a content strategy is to understand yourself. Determine these three things:

1. What do we want our customers and stakeholders to know about us? What drives us? What do we stand for? What problems do we solve? What is our culture? Understanding this requires a commitment by organizational leaders to sit down and put some thought into these topics. Often, organizations find it nearly impossible to get everyone to commit to the process, which is why outside agencies are sometimes the best facilitators of branding exercises. When you're paying an agency a lot of money to do something, it's sometimes easier to get people to the table.

2. The next part of this step is understanding how your customers and stakeholders see you now. What do they actually know about you? Do they see you as a stable company? Are you ethical and trustworthy? Does your company have a perception of caring about issues important to them? And of course, what do they know about your products and services.

3. The last, but very important part of this step is to understand what you're doing now, from a content standpoint, to support your public persona and your product portfolio. What channels are you using to reach customers? How are you currently measuring success and what are your numbers today. You will need this information as a baseline to compare against once you've put your content strategy into motion.

From all of this research, you will uncover gaps. You'll find that not all of your customers and stakeholders see you the same. You'll find that your current content marketing practices, while doing well in certain channels, struggle in others.

Many believe the first thing you need to do in any content strategy is to define your KPIs or your goals, and that is necessary. But, how can you decide what you need to focus on

without knowing what your problems are? Sure, you may know that your business is moving into a new area and you need to start building awareness and presence in that area, but that's not going to be the only thing your organization needs to focus on.

So the first thing we need to do is baseline everything. To do that, here are a few **key things to focus on as you document your findings:**

- The **buyer's journey**. Do you have content to support the top, middle, and bottom of the funnel?
- In what areas do your **branding and messaging** differ from what you gathered from your customers and external stakeholders?
- Do you have a good **balance of organizational-level content**, **awareness content** and **product-level content**? Don't worry if you don't know what these three categories of content are, because you likely won't find it anywhere but here. We'll discuss [these content buckets in Step 5](#).

Save this information for now. We'll plug it back in later in our planning.

Step 2: Know Your Customer

Once your business is large enough to warrant a content strategy, you should have enough of a customer base to know some things about them, such as what verticals and business units your solutions fit into. You will also have a good idea of who your users are and the people within your target customers who make purchasing decisions.

But with very few exceptions, it's rarely a single person making the decisions about large technology purchases. If you sell server-side software into enterprises, an IT Director might ultimately make the call, but only after input from others on the team, and probably after a good bit of personal research by visiting similar vendors' websites, reading customer reviews, and seeing what the analysts in your industry have to say about your company and your product roadmap.

Understanding the parties involved in buying decisions helps you create content specifically for them. And that's why we build "personas."

Personas help us categorize customers by:

- Company type
- Company size
- Job title
- Job duties
- Challenges they're facing (which your solutions solve)
- How they consume content (which web sites, do they open email, which social platforms are they most active on)

Gathering this information requires a thorough review of all available sources of information. Talk to your sales teams. Follow your customers on social media and listen to what they say. Tap your existing customer relationship management (CRM) system and see what content your current customers consume. In general, look for commonalities among your customers. If you don't have a ready supply of data, you can send out a survey and simply ask.

Once you've gathered information about your customers, you can create profiles based on the similarities you identified. These personas will inform your content strategy helping you better focus your content efforts on the right kinds of content pushed through the right channels to reach the decision-makers at target companies.

> Without a baseline, you're not only going to spend a great deal of time and money on content you possibly didn't need, but it's also going to be that much more difficult measuring your successes and providing justification for any additional spending you need as an outcome of these exercises.

Step 3: Determine Your Content Marketing Goals

A big part of any successful content marketing strategy requires thinking through and documenting what you want to accomplish. I like to break goals down into three areas, organizational, awareness, and revenue.

Content Focused on the Organization

Organization goals align with branding and public relations. It's not enough in today's business climate, that you offer good products and services. Additionally, people want to know what your organization stands for and they want to make sure the vendors they do business with are good stewards of their business data, and that their vendors and business partners are socially aware and aren't going to do or say anything to tarnish their affiliations.

The kinds of content you might publish from an organizational standpoint include press releases, blogs, industry media articles and thought-leadership, social media and press-worthy content highlighting your organization's social programs and community leadership.

Content Focused on Generating Awareness

Awareness goals ensure there is a constant flow of content and messaging supporting the need for your business. This is also the easiest content area because any content not specifically focused on promoting your products directly (e.g., brochures and product web pages) help generate overall awareness for your brand. Content satisfying these goals include blogs and media articles, social media content, original research, webinars, podcasts, videos, ebooks, and more. Depending on your business, there is a lot of latitude in the types and tone of content in the awareness category.

Content for Growing Revenue

Brochures, datasheets, demo videos, interactive tools, your product web pages, even product documentation; are all types of content designed to help close sales and retain customers. There is nothing fun about updating your product's Evaluation Guide, but it is extremely important, particularly in high-tech software and SaaS markets, where

customers want to dig into a solution's features to make sure it fits their needs. Also included in this category is content developed for sales-enablement. Most of this content is technical, but it is every bit as important as anything you publish for the top and middle of the funnel.

Maybe your organization needs to build up awareness for your brand or maybe your solution solves a new challenge and you need to build awareness for the fact that there IS a solution on the market. Or maybe you're in an established industry and need to create content that separates you from your competition.

Whatever the goals are that you identify for the coming future, identifying this up-front will help you identify what specific types of content, and how much content, you need to publish over several quarters or even for the year.

Step 4: Search Engine Optimization

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is an extremely important part of any content strategy and without it, all of your efforts could be for naught. SEO research should be as ongoing a program as your persona development and upkeep. Search terms change. Industry influencers make up new terms and categories for your products and services and if your content doesn't reflect the reality of how prospects find solutions like yours, then they'll find your competitor's solutions first, and yours last, if at all.

SEO practitioners understand how to divine search intent based on an exhaustive review of online search results and following the breadcrumb trail from search to source. They are also adept at weaving those results into a brand's content and messaging so it shows up in online search results.

In your research, you need to find and document popular terms and phrases used to describe your industry, product, and/or services. Start broad and find the words and phrases used to describe your industry and the broad category your solutions fit into (e.g., risk management, cybersecurity, transportation and logistics).

Then, move from the very broad to the very specific until you know the applicable terms and phrases for every part of your business you want prospects to know about.

As with almost all steps here, there are software solutions to help you perform these searches. You can also do-it-yourself using a spreadsheet and free online tools. Your

results will be limited, but it is possible to at least start your SEO work without spending a lot of money on paid tools.

This is a gross oversimplification of how to perform SEO research and we devoted no time to discussing how to implement it in your content. There are a lot of great online resources to get you started in SEO, and of course, there is no shortage of people with the knowledge to help, if you don't mind paying them.

Step 5: Perform a Content Inventory

It's very unlikely your current content strategy is completely wrong. In fact, you're probably doing a lot of things right and just need to focus and plan. This means you probably already have some very good content you can update, rechannel, and reuse.

Content inventories can be a tedious task, but they are critical as you baseline your current state of content readiness. There are software solutions to simplify this task, but you can also do-it-yourself with a little help from Google Analytics and a spreadsheet.

Start by inventorying all of your current content:

- Web properties
- Digital documents
- Blogs
- eBooks
- Webinars
- Videos
- Sales enablement (brochures, datasheets, etc.)
- Case Studies/Customer Stories

Here is a simple Content Inventory Spreadsheet you can download and customize.

As you document each piece, don't just think about it from a "now" perspective, but **consider how each piece of content fits into your future content strategy**. Some data to capture for each piece include:

- Title of the piece.
- URL/where it's published. This may be multiple places.
- Product or service it supports.
- Any other category of classification, such as supported vertical, or a specific type of customer.
- What stage of the funnel it supports.
- What stage of the customer journey it supports.
- Who wrote it, or developed it.
- Its Call to Action (CTA).
- Publication and/or last edit date.
- SEO data (keywords, phrases).

Capture as much classification data as you can about each piece. You'll be happy you did later.

When all of this work is done, you can start to perform some data analysis to understand where the gaps are. Maybe you need more Top-of-Funnel awareness-level content for one persona, or perhaps you need to create a program focused on thought-leadership targeting the C-Suite of enterprises you sell into.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of baselining. Without a baseline, you're not only going to spend a great deal of time and money on content you possibly didn't need, but it's also going to be that much more difficult measuring your successes and providing justification for any additional spending you need as an outcome of these exercises.

Step 6: Content Mapping

If you hoped to jump right into writing or storyboarding videos, we're not there yet. We still have several decisions to make regarding our content. Everything you've done up to this point has been part of the homework phase of your content strategy. It's also part of what we call Content Mapping.

There are varying definitions of what Content Mapping is and what's involved in a Content Mapping exercise. Some consider all of the things we've discussed up to this point as part of Content Mapping, culminating in the Content Strategy you roll out.

I prefer to think about Content Mapping as more of an endpoint. Mapping takes all of the data we've gathered and uses it to plot out the types of content we need and where to publish it.

Take the work we've done so far. So far, we've identified:

- **Personas targeted**
- **Funnel or Buyer Stage**
    - Top of Funnel: Pre-purchase Awareness Stage content that helps buyers evaluate your products and services.
    - Middle of the funnel: Pre-Purchase Decision-Making content that helps them cognitively make the purchasing decision (offer-based email, post-purchase" support content such as support materials and user guides).

- ○ Bottom of the funnel: Purchase and Post-Purchase content that specifically supports the buyer's needs.
- What **channels** we need to publish our content in.
- How it will be consumed (read, watched, or listened to).

In turn, this informs the types of content we need to create:

- Videos
- Blogs
- Podcasts
- Trade articles/thought leadership
- Original research
- Interactive content (calculators, demos, surveys)
- User guides
- Social media content
- Infographics
- eBooks

Buyer Stages

Persona 1

Post-Purchase

Pre-Purchase

Awareness & Education
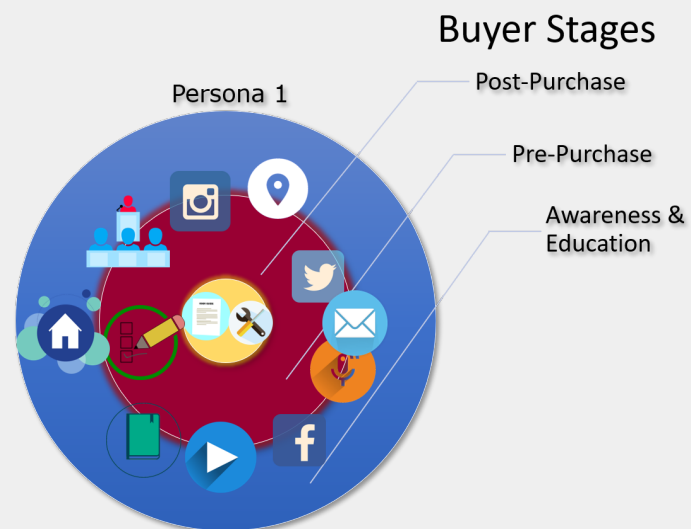
…the list goes on. As you look at your new content map and compare it against your content inventory, you will find you already have content you can use in certain places. You'll probably still need new content, but maybe you can update some existing content giving you a head-start.

How you build your Content Map is completely dependent on your business, your customer personas, and the channels your customers are best reached in. A good starting point is a structure similar to the Content Inventory, removing or adding fields as needed.

Step 7: Creating Content

Since there is no way to summarize how to create the dozens of different types of content you may need, suffice it to say that how quickly you can build out your content is completely dependent on your resources and internal support.

Sourcing subject matter experts who can outline technical content and review whatever your writing resources create, takes time. Creating customer videos and case studies isn't easy regardless of the industry. And no matter what most people think about their own skills in these areas, you still need professional writers and designers to take your content across the finish line.

You will need to prioritize your content strategy, and that is completely dependent on your organizational goals and needs. Smaller, younger brands may want to focus on awareness level content initially, while later-stage brands may need to create very specific middle, or bottom of the funnel content for sales to use to close deals.

However you prioritize your content rollout, it's critical to involve all of the stakeholders. That will complicate things and almost certainly slow your plans, but ensuring every stakeholder has a voice in what content they need and when they need it will go a long way towards improving your internal KPIs.

Step 8: The Right Content in the Right Channel

There are dozens of channels available to publish your content in, but the "spray and pray" approach to pushing out content isn't strategic and will likely not generate the kinds of returns you're hoping for.

Going back to our personas and understanding how your customers and prospects consume content and how they make their purchasing decisions will inform where you publish your content and in what forms.

For example, if one of your buyer personas is C-level executives whose primary method of researching products is through analyst reviews and customer testimonials, then you probably don't need an infographic for that persona. Conversely, infographics can work very well in other channels your customers frequent, so it may still make sense to create infographics.

Primary channels for delivering your content include:

- Your **website** and **landing pages**. From a digital marketing standpoint, consider hosting some of your gated content on micro-sites apart from your main web site. Using crosslinking, you can build your website rankings and potentially have more of your digital properties showing up in search results.
- **Social media platforms.** This is a no-brainer for today's businesses. Still, posting content on social media isn't as simple and sharing a thumbnail version of an ad you're running on an industry publication site. Each social platform is different and how you format and deliver content—both paid and organic—on each will vary.
- **Email is still a viable marketing channel.** Despite news to the contrary or even your personal feelings about email marketing, the truth is, email can still work. It's true that it is very difficult to generate positive metrics cold-emailing prospects, and recent anti-spam legislation has only made it even more difficult. Still, if you can obtain opt-in email contacts through your other marketing campaigns and channels, then email outreach is a way to deliver targeted content directly to people who have indicated an interest, and to your existing customers.

- **Blogging and podcasts.** Blogs and podcasts fall into the "owned" (versus "earned") category of marketing channels, because even though people can find these properties on their own, these are still channels you control the message on. That said, blogs and podcasts give you the flexibility and freedom to discuss anything at all. Unlike Press Releases or even industry articles you contribute to, blogs and podcasts work best when they are a little irreverent and unbuttoned.
- **Earned media can make or break your business.** Since we mentioned owned media channels above, we can't not discuss earned media. Some might disagree that earned media is a channel because you technically can't create it. I'm going to respectfully disagree. You can create content and run programs designed specifically to foster organic, earned media. The most obvious example is your media outreach program. Likely, you have an agency helping you reach out to various media outlets pitching ideas for content. Any buzz and traffic resulting from those efforts are earned. Also consider industry analyst sites that allow vendors to self-post their products and allow customers to leave reviews, for better or for worse. Technically, you don't own that channel, but you were directly involved in its creation and any resulting positive reviews or traffic back to your own properties should be considered earned.
- **Search engine optimization drives search results.** SEO isn't a channel per-se, but if your SEO is poorly implemented, two of your main channels--organic and paid search results--will suffer. You should already have a documented list of your most popular search terms and those terms and phrases should be strategically used throughout your content. If you've done that correctly, your target audience will find your content organically. But, supplementing organic search with paid search results (PPC) is always a great idea. And trust me, your competition is already doing it.
- **Paid advertising.** The two big platforms serving the online paid advertising space are Google and Facebook. Yes, Facebook is a social media platform, but advertising on Facebook's platform is completely different from simply posting on Facebook. Both platforms allow you to create ads and target very specific audiences. Again, having your personas developed is extremely important here,

as is having done your homework around SEO so you know how prospects look for solutions like yours.

Step 9: Measuring Your Content Strategy's Success

With your content strategy in motion, now you can begin the never-ending task of measuring, tweaking, and measuring again. But what exactly should you measure and what should be considered a good result?

Here's the answer you've been waiting for; **it depends.** Seriously, your results and the measurement of success and failure you attach to those results are entirely based on the goals you set out back in Step 5 (INSERT LINK). If you were doing zero PPC advertising and you start devoting $100 a week to it, any new traffic thanks to your paid ad campaigns yields at least 100X results.

The best measurements for successful content marketing break down as shown below, though there are many more measurements you can look at as your metrics get more mature.

Web page and blog post success metrics:

Traffic - net how many visitors you had to the page. By itself, this number just tells you how easily your content was found. But there's a lot more to the story.

Visitors (new vs. returning) - this tells you how many of your total "Traffic" number included people who came back to your digital property after a previous visit. Again, a good number to know but only a starting point.

Bounce Rate - how many visitors came to your page and decided it wasn't what they were looking for. If this number is high, then you either have a problem with your SEO keywords and phrases bringing people who were looking for something else or the information you have on the page they came to, doesn't align with the search terms/ads they clicked on to get here. If this number stays high week after week, search platforms will penalize your site rankings and ads.

Exit Rate - Sounds the same as Bounce doesn't it? Exit Rate just tells you that the page was the last one your guests saw. If you have a Call To Action on a page with a high Exit rate, that means your guests are not clicking on it and moving on to the next page in the customer journey and you need to find out why.

Page Views and Page Visits - they sound the same but they are very different. For Google, a Page Visit represents a single property, for instance, a web site. If you look at five different pages (URLs) on my website domain, that's just a single "Page Visit" but it counts as five Page Views.

Traffic Sources - tells you where your visitors came from. This is extremely important if you're running ad campaigns on multiple properties.

Online paid advertising success metrics:

Total Spend - as it says, this tells you how much money was spent displaying ads to your target audience. Most platforms allow you to set a limit on your spending. If you hit your limit early, then maybe you need to up your limit. Then again, if you hit your limit and you aren't seeing the results you wanted once your visitors clicked through to your digital properties, then you may have a problem elsewhere, such as your SEO or the content on your properties. If you didn't hit your limit, then you may not be targeting the right keywords or your targeting might be too strict.

Impressions - indicates how many times your ad was shown to viewers. In itself, this isn't much of a measurement other than to give you a warm fuzzy that the property is showing your ad to your target audience. However, if your total impressions are very low, but you believe the audience for your keywords is large, then you probably need to rethink your keywords and/or targeting parameters.

Click-through Rate (CTR) - measures how many of the Impressions resulted in someone clicking on your ad. A high CTR means your ad resonated. From here, follow the

breadcrumbs and see what happened once they hit your digital property. If they stayed and read more content, or even clicked on a CTA, that means you're doing a good job moving prospects along their journey.

Conversion Rate - is a mathematical calculation of how well your ad campaign is performing. To set this up, you'll need to do a bit of prep work in your Google Analytics (GA) account in the form of setting up Goals. Goals tell GA what to consider a conversion. For instance, if someone clicks through your ad on Google, reads all about the new analyst report you built a landing page for, and then fills out the registration form to receive a copy of the report from you, then that registration form completion is a "Goal" you set up in GA. If your Conversion rate is low, you may need to look at factors such as the offer (is it sweet enough to cause the visitor to give up their contact information) or its relevance to the ad the visitor clicked on. Keep in mind that for search result ads, a good PPC conversion rate is approximately 4 percent. Depressing isn't it?

Quality Score - this mysterious measurement, used by all major browsing engines, uses a proprietary mix of measurements to assign a score to each of your ads. It uses that score to determine how much to charge you for each ad, and where in the search results your ad appears (A higher Quality Scores put your ad closer to the top of the results). Some factors generally believed to impact your Quality Score include: how well your ad keywords match the content the visitor sees when they click on the ad, the actual page or content people see when they click on your ad, your CTR, and the historical performance of your ads overall. As you can imagine, your Quality Score builds over time, so don't ever slack.

Email marketing success metrics:

Open Rate - tells you how many readers clicked on the email to view it. This also includes email clients that offer a preview where the body of the email is shown in a pane without any action by the reader. So keep in mind that your Open Rate and the actual number of people who at least glanced over your email could be very different.

Click-Through Rate (CTR) - offers a better measurement of the effectiveness of your email marketing programs. Ideally, every email you send includes a CTA, else you won't be able to measure your CTR.

Opt-out Rate (a.k.a., Unsubscribe) - tells you how many people are choosing to no longer receive your email. If this number is consistently high or even increasing, then you may need to consider the type of content you're delivering, or even when you're delivering the content if you're using Drip Marketing or other advanced touch-point marketing programs.

Delivery Rate - your delivery rate can indicate problems in several areas and bears watching. If your Delivery Rate is high (95% or higher) then your lists are up-to-date and your delivery service is doing a good job. If your Delivery Rate is low once, maybe it was just a glitch. If it's consistently low, then you probably have a lot of old email addresses (~30% of email addresses turn over every year), or maybe your email service delivery company has issues. Also, keep an eye on the domains that aren't delivered. This can tell you if there is a problem with a company's email server, which would impact your rate through no fault of your own.

Social media success metrics:

Amplification Rate - is a measure of how much your posts and content were shared. Likes (a.k.a., Applause rate) are great, but they are largely a vanity metric. It's the Amplification Rate that's going to boost your content to success heights.

Conversion Rate - similar to Conversion Rate on your other digital properties, this measures how effective your social posts are in getting viewers to take the desired action.

Return on Investment - tells you how much all of the effort you put into your social media campaigns (employee costs, advertising costs, cost to create the content, and about ten other things) yields in terms of actual business value. This is a very mature measurement,

but if you want to prove the value of your social media efforts, it's worth measuring. Rather than trying to cover how to calculate social media ROI, check out Hootsuite's guide on measuring social media ROI here.

Other types of content success metrics:

Other major content categories include videos, webinars, podcasts, eBooks, brochures, and other sales enablement. Generally, what you want to measure are the "consume" metrics. Did they download the content, or watch most of the video, or listen to most of the podcast. Subscribing rates are great metrics as well.

A note on measuring the success of webinars and podcasts: Two measurements I see time and again held up as an indicator of success are registrations and subscribers.

Here's a question: How many webinars have you signed up for and never attended or even went back and watched? Probably more than you have actually watched.

Yet, too often marketers hold up high registration or subscriber numbers as a success metric; usually to people who aren't paying attention to the small details. And that's wrong. The metrics you want to track include:

1. **Actual attendees** - how many people showed up to consume the content.
2. **Average time on page** (i.e., how long did they stay and listen)
3. **Downloads**. Over time, this can add up and make a podcast or webinar that had poor attendance, turn out to be one of your best-performing pieces of content.
4. **Conversion.** If you can track customers from the first time they come to one of your digital properties through the sales cycle, you might find that one of the five people who attended your webinar three months ago, turned out to be one of your best long-term customers.

Wrapping Up

Content marketing isn't a "one and done" endeavor; it lives and breathes and requires care and feeding. As you track your successes, and your shortfalls, you'll gain a better understanding of your customers and how they interact with your brand. And that will help you refine your content strategy, focusing your efforts on the areas most important to the business at that particular time.

The most important thing you can do is remain committed and consistent. Follow your plan and adjust as necessary. Make sure you document and track all new content in your content inventory tracking system (or spreadsheet). This will help you keep track of everything you've published, making it easier to find reusable content and helping you to know what content to update when your business needs change.

You can do this. It's a lot of work, but you have the skills and tools. But if you find you need a little help, you know how to reach me.

Thank You