



Content Marketing Throughout the Customer Journey

A guide to optimizing the
content experience for discovery

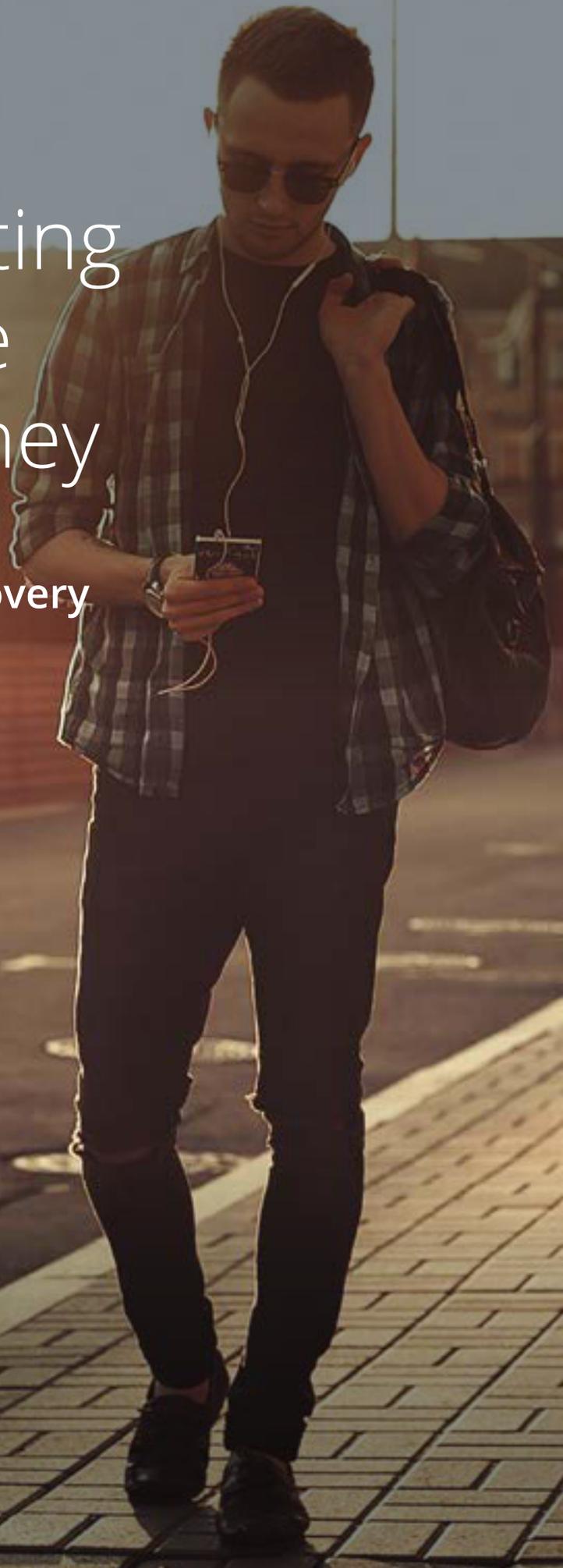


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With 5+ years of digital marketing experience across a variety of industries, she's dedicated to making your content reading experience as useful, valuable, and as friendly as possible.

Introduction

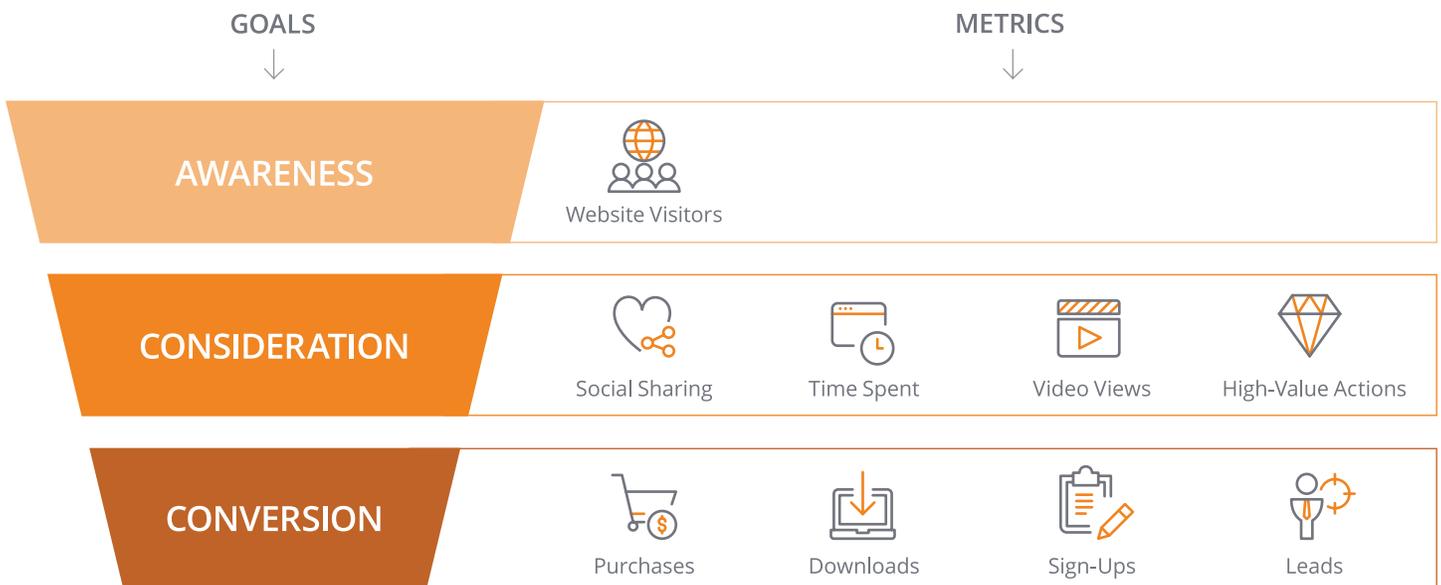
Smart marketers know that traffic doesn't equal leads, customers, or loyal fans.

Why?

Because generating those actions stem from first providing enough valuable content to form a relationship with the reader or viewer.

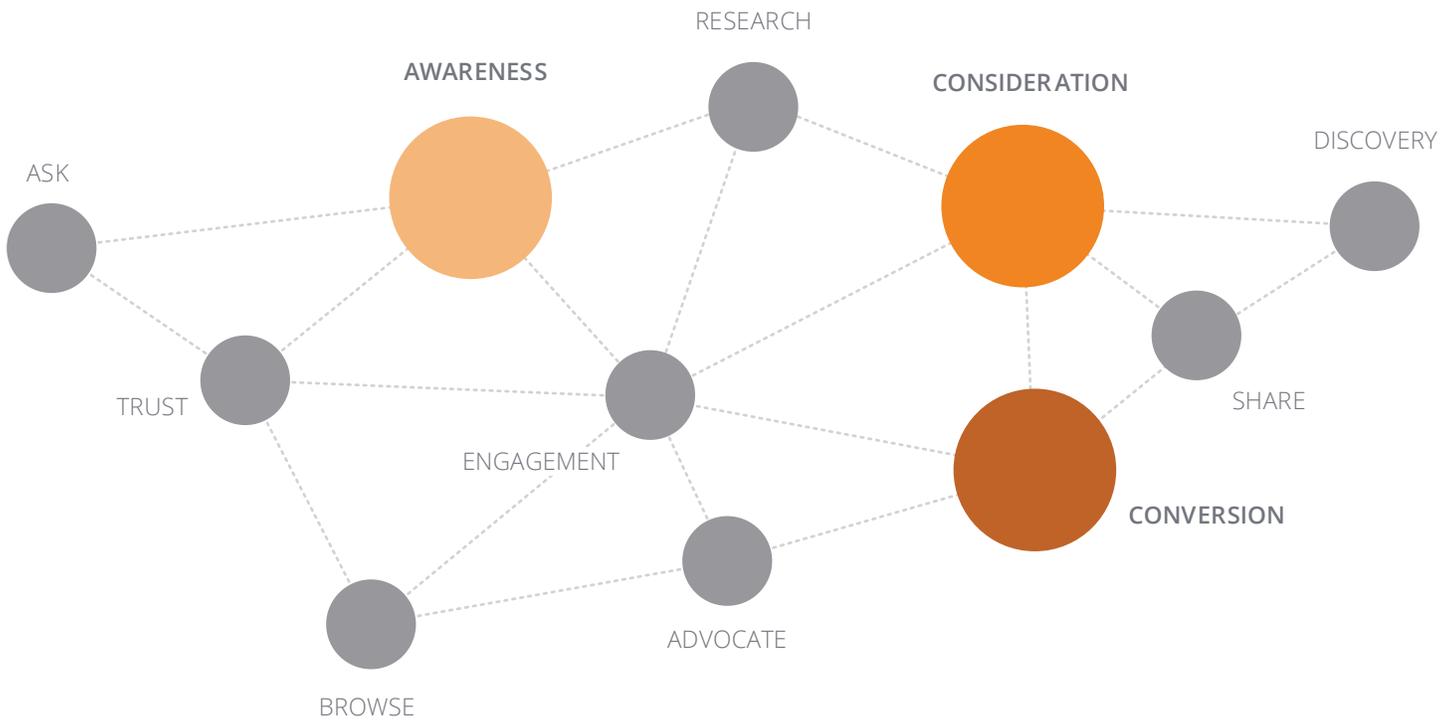
And that takes time, and resources, along with an optimized content experience. One that not only captures traffic, but engages readers, and drives conversions.

It's all part of a very strategic, action-oriented process the industry likes to call "the content funnel," whereby marketers target consumers at different stages of the customer journey with content that helps qualify, nurture, and convert them into customers, and eventually brand advocates.

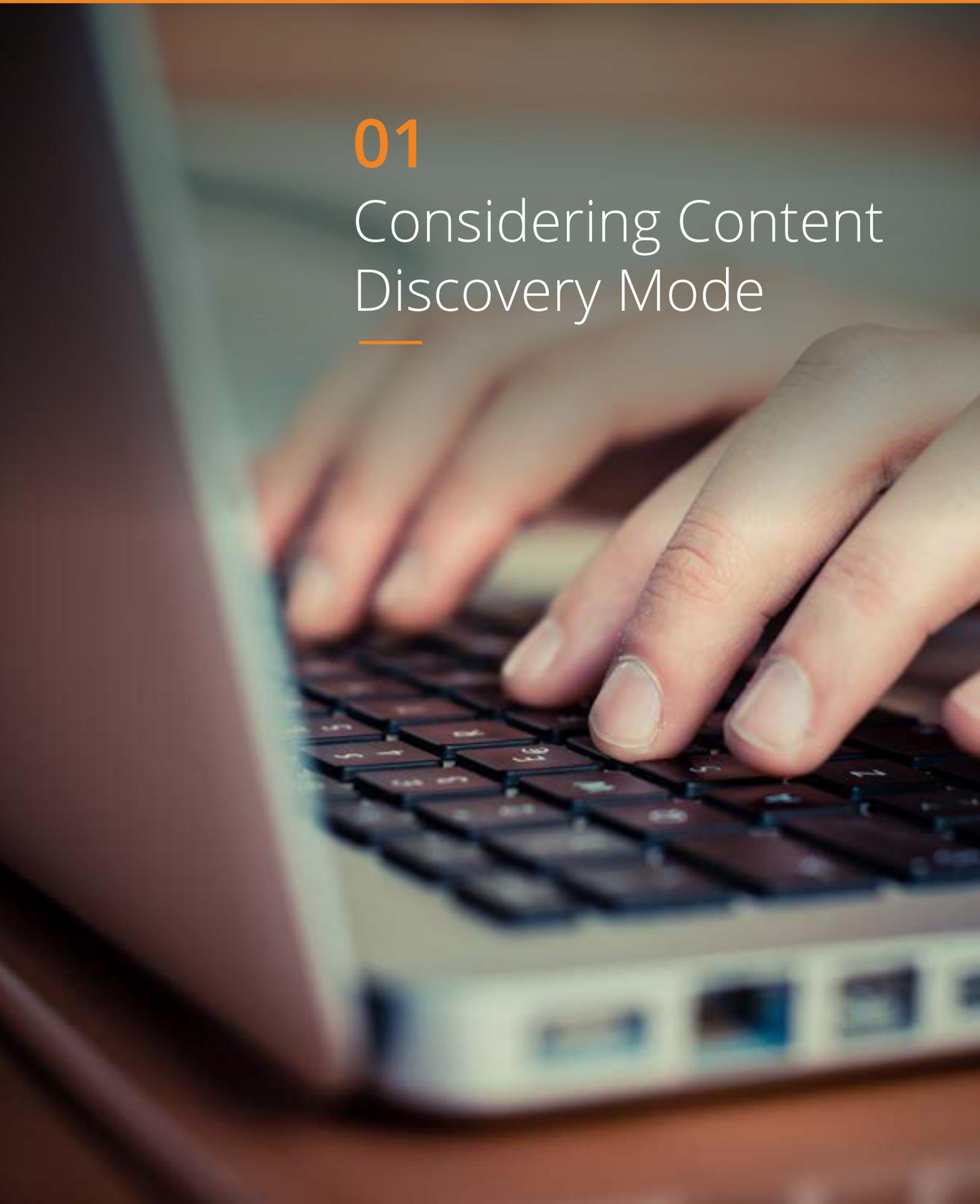


Despite the fact that marketers have long understood the actual customer journey looks more like the below web than a linear funnel, they often are unable to provide a completely personalized content experience.

By applying the funnel framework, marketers can benefit from a highly effective way of influencing the consumer's path to purchase.



In this eBook, I'm going to show that marketers who leverage content discovery by surpassing reader expectations can move prospects through the funnel at a higher rate of conversion, proving a better return on their content marketing investment.



01

Considering Content Discovery Mode

Considering Content Discovery Mode

It's not surprising that the topics surrounding discovery and content consumption are often overlooked in comparison to the easier to define and measure online behaviors of search, social, email, and shopping.



8 Hours

The reality is that we now spend one-third of our day in content consumption mode.*

We define content consumption mode, or Discovery Mode, as the state someone is in when they are reading articles or watching videos for entertainment or informational purposes.

It's in these particular moments where audiences are most receptive to discovering more content, as the nature of their browsing puts them in the mindset for new opportunities with relevant and interesting content.

Marketers need to better understand such pivotal moments and how they impact the overall online experience and decision-making journey of a consumer.

*ZenithOptimedia's Media Consumption Forecasts, 2015

This is not to say that feeding consumers with more content is the answer.

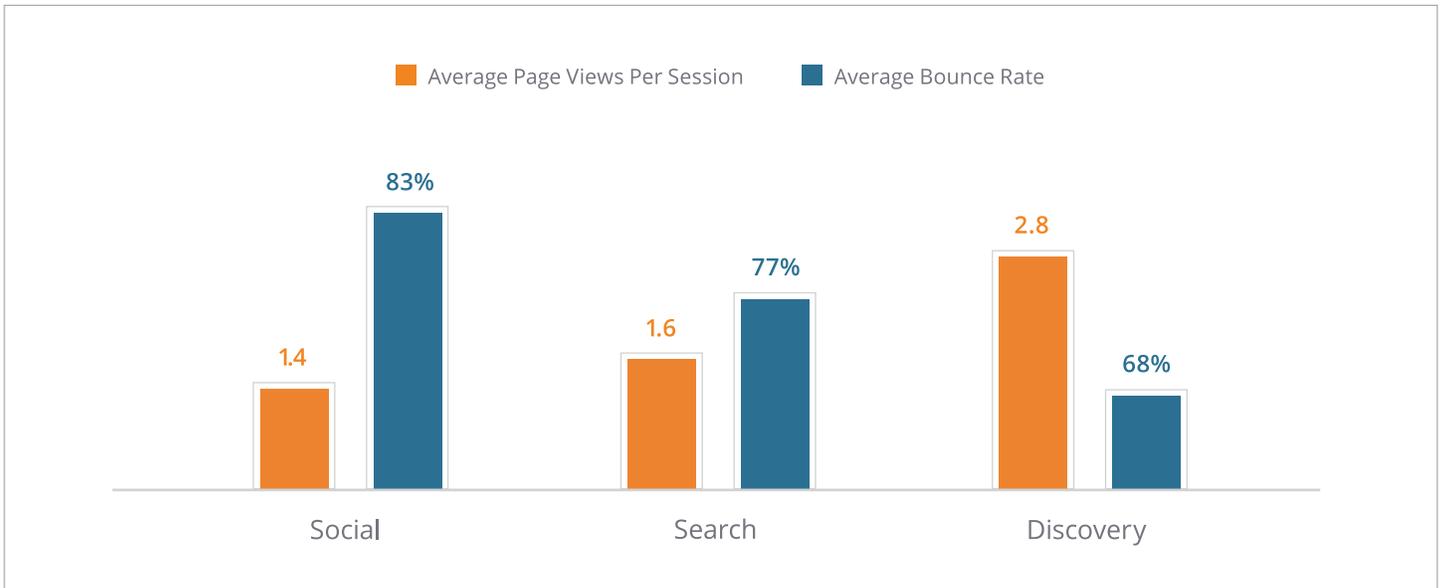
Instead, understanding the full customer journey and matching the right audience to the right story at the right time is more important than ever.

Think about the moment your customer fell in love with your brand. Then map every interaction that lead up to that point.

If discovering and engaging with content made up a significant portion of that path, this is a story and an experience your brand can help to craft.

It's about discovering the most relevant and engaged audiences and meeting them with the content that speaks to them.

We found that audiences driven by content discovery were more engaged and likely to stay on-site longer than audiences driven by search and social marketing properties.



6-month sample data set (Jan - June 2016) of over 2 billion U.S. consumer sessions that exceed 3.4 billion page views in total

Here are some of the key findings:

Discovery traffic, defined by content being recommended across Outbrain's network of premium publishers, viewed 75% more pages per session than search traffic and 100% more pages per session than social traffic.

Additionally, discovery traffic is 12% less likely to bounce than search traffic and 20% less likely to bounce than social traffic.

Readers who discover content via recommendations have the lowest tendency to bounce because content recommendations target an audience that is already engaged and in content consumption mode.

This is where the power and opportunity of content discovery lies.

02

Setting Content KPIs that Measure Value

Setting Content KPIs that Measure Value

Knowing how critical it is to develop relationships with audiences means trading in mere traffic impressions for engagement metrics.

You might be thinking:

“Well, I measure bounce rate and time on page, so I should have a fair understanding of engagement on my content.”

But you might not.

Unless of course you know that the last page (or exit page), in a user’s session is not included in the Google Analytics time on page calculation.

And that visitors who read an entire article on your site and then hit “back” on their browser are still being counted as a bounce, negatively skewing your numbers and perception of audience engagement.

There is a solution to make bounce rate a more accurate measurement.

When someone lands on a piece of content, let’s say it takes 5 to 15 seconds (maybe 20, depending on your site) for her to understand if this is something she wants to read.

If the reader decides to stay, you don’t want to count her visit as a bounce, right?

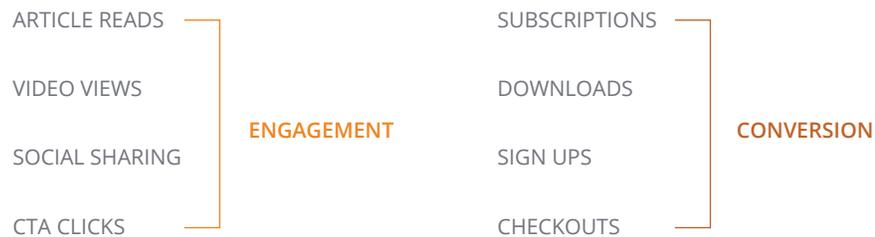
By adding a line of code to your Google Analytics tracking script, you can automatically trigger an event when readers stay for a minimum amount of time.

You decide what you think the appropriate time should be to measure the engagement of your readers.

For more details on this setup, I recommend reading the following blog posts:

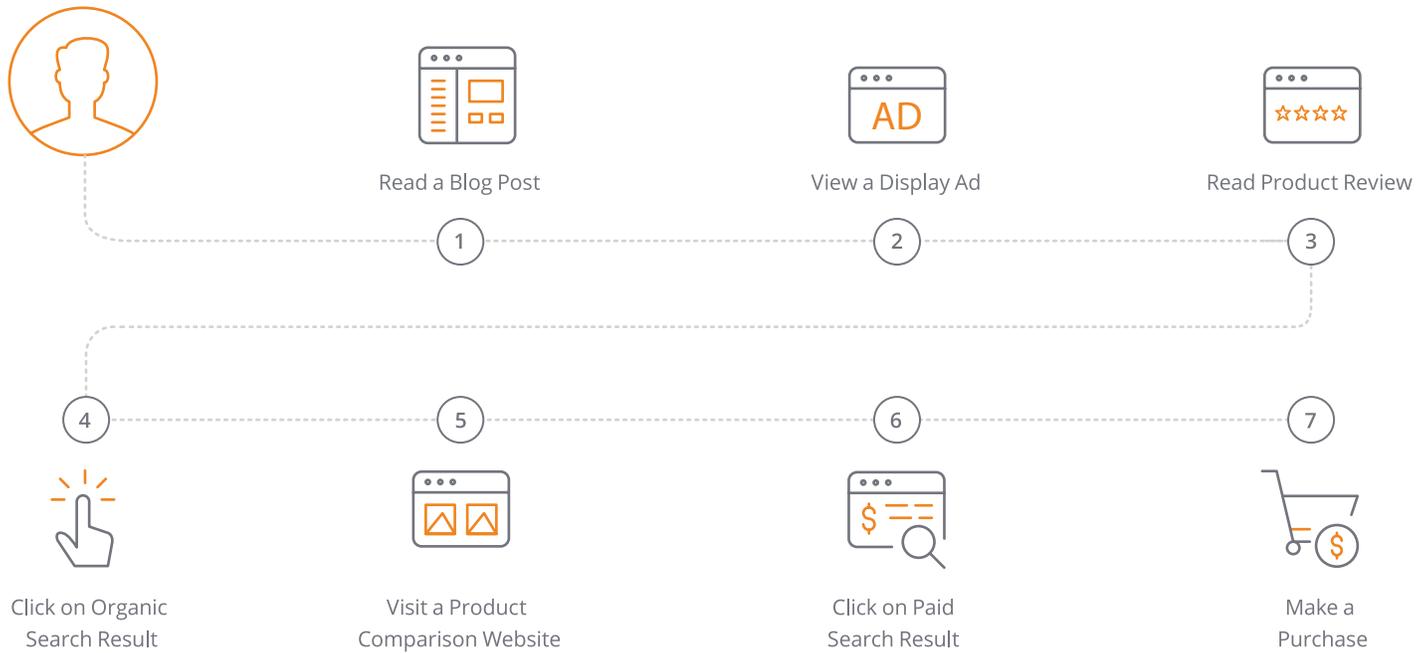
- [Bounce Rate as You Understand it has No Place in Content Marketing](#)
- [Why Time on Page is a Broken KPI for Content Marketing](#)
- [Increase Content Engagement by Using this Google Tag Manager Hack](#)

Additionally, depending on what types of goals you have per article or content campaign, the following are great metrics you can incorporate into your KPIs:



The days of last-touch attribution are over.

There are many influential actions, touch-points, and behaviors a prospect can take during the customer journey.



How else are you going to measure the business value of your content campaigns?

This data can reveal behavioral patterns that correlate to higher conversion rates, lower cost per acquisition (CPA), and increased customer lifetime value (LTV).

So, if you want to effectively report on your top of funnel content marketing efforts when tracking bottom funnel conversions, here's what you need to do at a minimum:

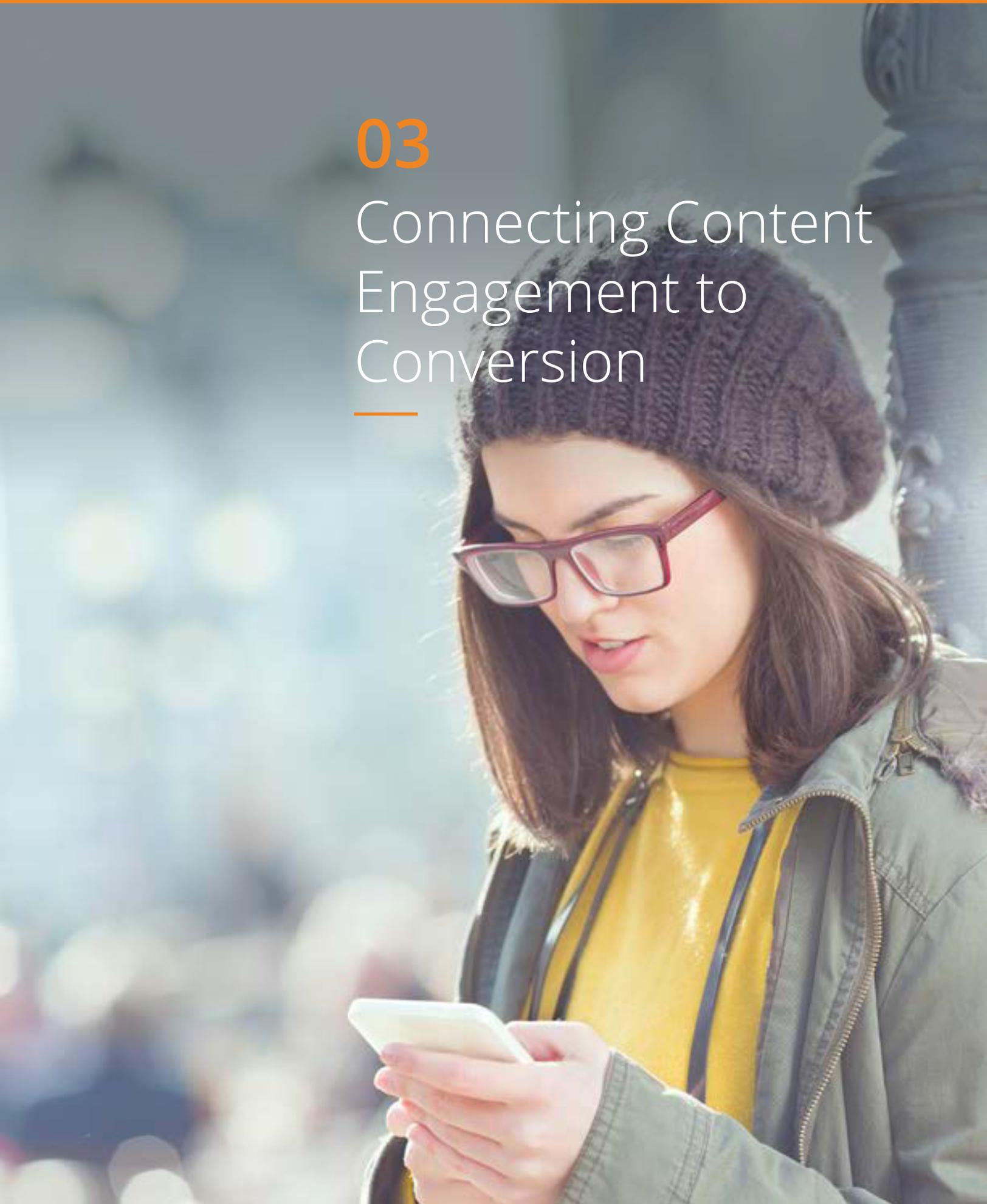
Factor in first-touch attribution and no longer assign 100% value to the last click before a conversion.

And if cost per acquisition is what you are performing against, this will be the first step in properly allocating resources and media spend to areas that are having an impact on final conversions.

In other words, content!

03

Connecting Content Engagement to Conversion



Connecting Content Engagement to Conversion

The tracking of how top of funnel engagement impacts lower funnel activity is easier said than done.

One of the toughest challenges you may be facing when it comes to the budget allocation of your content initiatives is understanding the explicit value each of these engagements contribute to your consumer's conversion decision.

While many advanced marketers implement costly cross-channel attribution and media mix solutions, the main problem with these models is that they only marginally reflect the upper funnel activities of our online audiences.

The missing piece?

Time.

Consider this:

While the average time from when a reader first engages with content to the time she converts depends on the vertical, overall, the stat Outbrain is seeing is an average of 6-30 days.

So, if you want to make real-time budgeting decisions based on your data, waiting for the lionshare of conversions to arrive is not going to be a viable option.

Because of this disconnect between top of funnel engagement and bottom of funnel conversions, marketers must begin optimizing the efforts of their content promotion media spends.

Instead of only measuring the engagement metrics mentioned above, such as page and video views, time on site, bounce rate, page scroll, return visits, and social shares, you must assess the real monetary value of these activities.

Don't get me wrong...

There is no doubt that these metrics are critical for improving your content and building a loyal audience; however, they also need to be considered as measurable drivers of business growth.

Doing so will help avoid content marketing activities getting pigeonholed into branding only budgets.

Thankfully, Outbrain has done much of the dirty work in assessing the value of our own content which you can learn from to make every dollar spent work harder across the entire customer journey.

An Internal Outbrain Case Study for the Engaged User

We set out to answer the million dollar question.

The one that would let us assess the value of our content marketing activities in real time:

What's the expected value of an engaged user?

To answer that question, we did the following:

1. Defined what engagement means for each piece of content we own
2. Divided our audience to engaged and non-engaged users
3. Measured the performance of the two groups by re-engaging each of them with lower funnel content

For measuring engagement with a piece of content, we ran an external script which checked three different metrics per each content visitor:

1. Time on page
2. Scroll depth
3. Number of page visits during a single session

Whenever the visitor achieved all three of the minimum engagement levels, the “engagement pixel” was triggered.

Boom!

The engagement pixel then fired both of our Facebook and **Outbrain custom audience** pixels, allowing us to retarget via paid media efforts only those who we deemed fully engaged with our content.

Pretty neat, huh?

The Intel We Surfaced

The results of targeting only engaged audiences vs. non-engaged audiences efforts were significant.

Go figure.

Campaigns that targeted engaged users brought:

- 50% lower cost per acquisition
- 28% lower cost per lead
- 55% more social activity
- 52% higher click-through rate
- 63% more time on site

I don't mean to toot our own horn, but those are impressive numbers across the board.

Toot toot.

Knowing the expected value of an engaged user means we are now able to define the expected CPAs of our upper funnel campaigns in real time.

That means not only setting the right cost-per-click (CPC), but also acquiring more relevant users for less cost.

Which now, you can do too, **with the right content.**

04

The Anatomy of a Blog Post



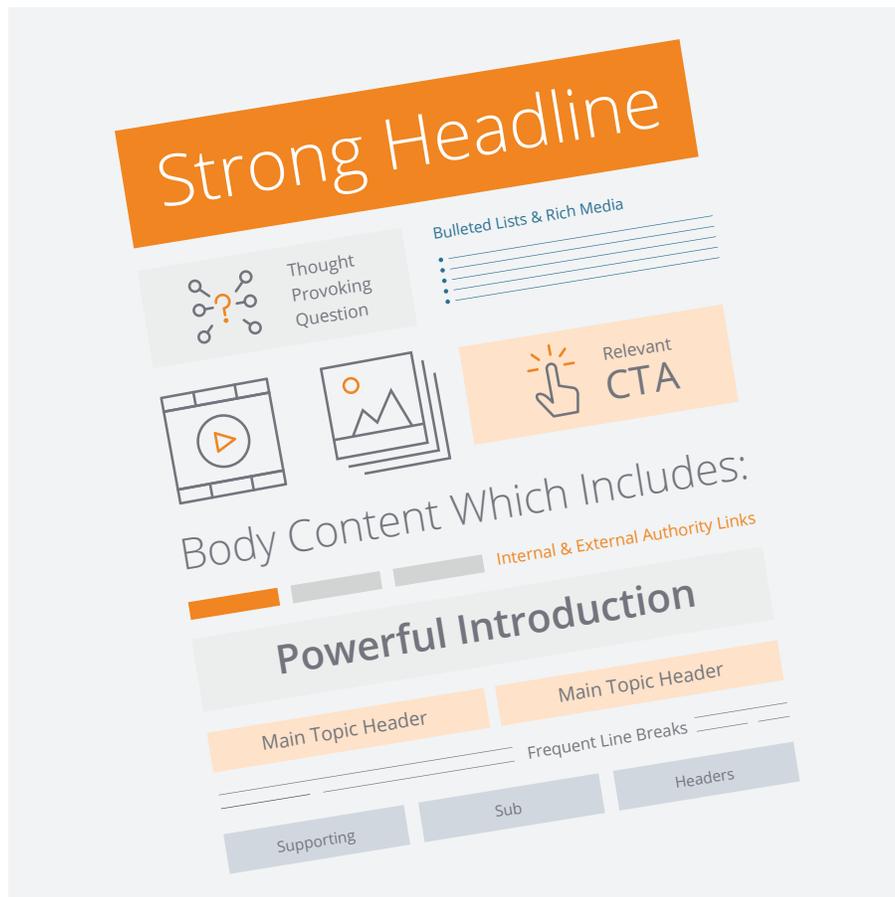
The Anatomy of a Blog Post

Every piece of content has its own anatomy. In human anatomy, every bone in our body is designed to protect our life force. And through evolution, our bodies have refined themselves for an optimum experience here on planet earth.

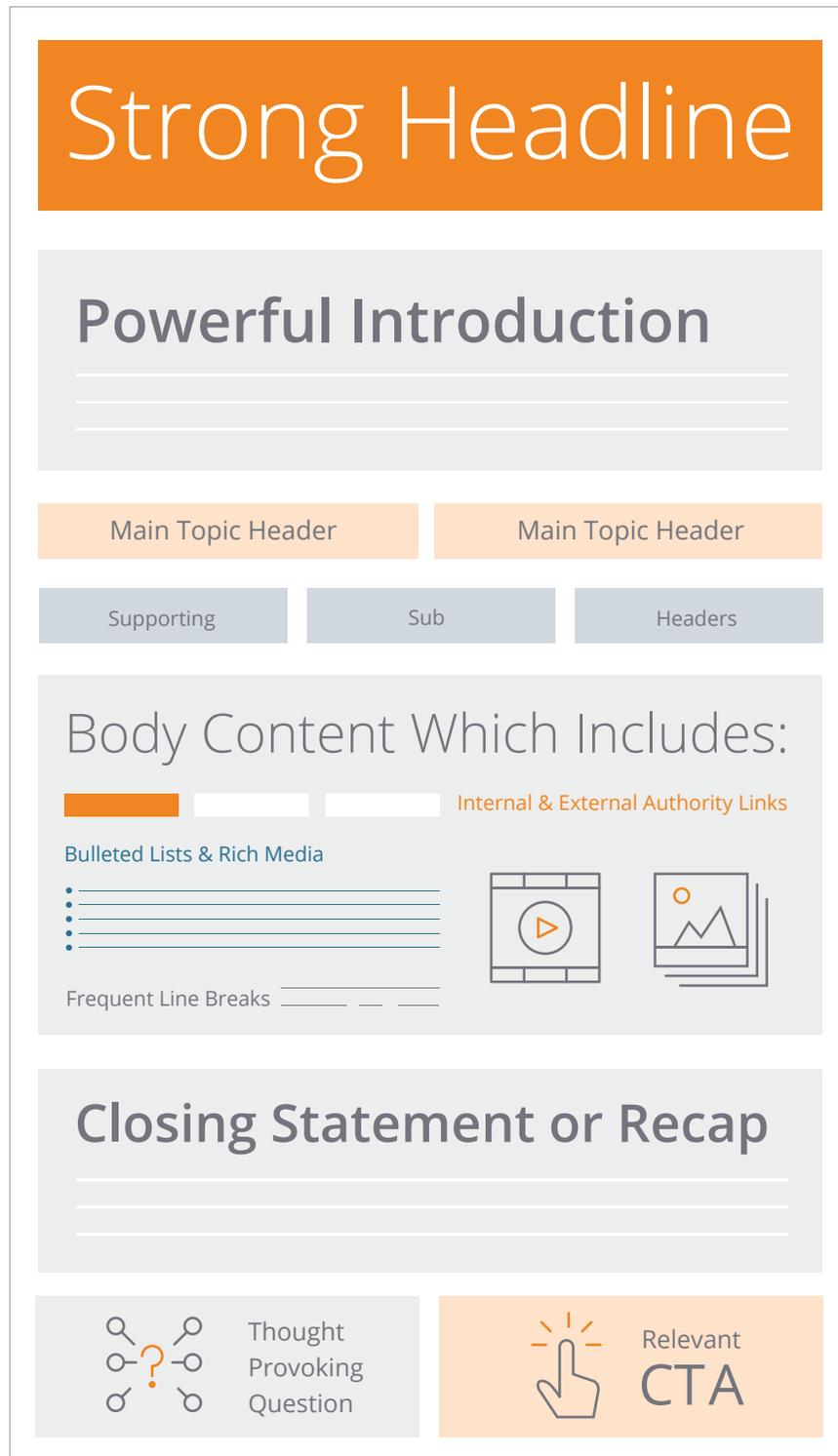
Like human evolution, content too has evolved over the years of digital media, refining itself with Google updates and an audience of online users who lack an attention span for low-quality content and overly promotional marketing tactics.

What would the anatomy of an article even look like at this point?

Consider all of the important features included in a highly engaging and well-converting (remember the funnel) piece of content:



Now, imagine them all taking place in article form:



If you're thinking this looks a lot like your college essay, you're right.

Though, I'm sure you'll notice there are some important things distinguishing an authentic blog article from what you learned in your writing 101 workshop during freshman year.

For starters, heavy chunks of text are simply not engaging.

Readers need to be able to scan your content for everything they need, especially on mobile, without having to dedicate too much time to sorting through the information instead of processing it quickly.

That's why you'll find "frequent line breaks" referenced on the previous page.

I'm sure you weren't interested in calling out the attention of your professor unnecessarily with a CTA back in the day, but in marketing, a strong next-step-in-the-funnel activity is necessary for converting readers the way you want them to.

05

Creating Content with Empathy



Creating Content with Empathy

While it's important to know your KPIs going into content creation, that's not to say an article should be developed in an overly self-serving fashion.

The purpose of content marketing is to align your company goals with meeting audience needs.

Your helpfulness and willingness to contribute value impacts a prospect's position in the content funnel.

Ah, relationship building.

In order to effectively be able to do this, you have to understand and use empathy. That is, the ability to understand and share the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of your readers.

While you can't surface the reader's inner hopes, dreams, and fears through the typical interpersonal activities we routinely participate in, there is another great tool for learning how to connect with digital audiences in a more meaningful way.

Empathy maps are great for visualizing and internalizing key elements which will deeply influence the messages you create around your topic.

Consider how you might begin to write an article for readers interested in growing their content marketing program through guest blogging using the following map:

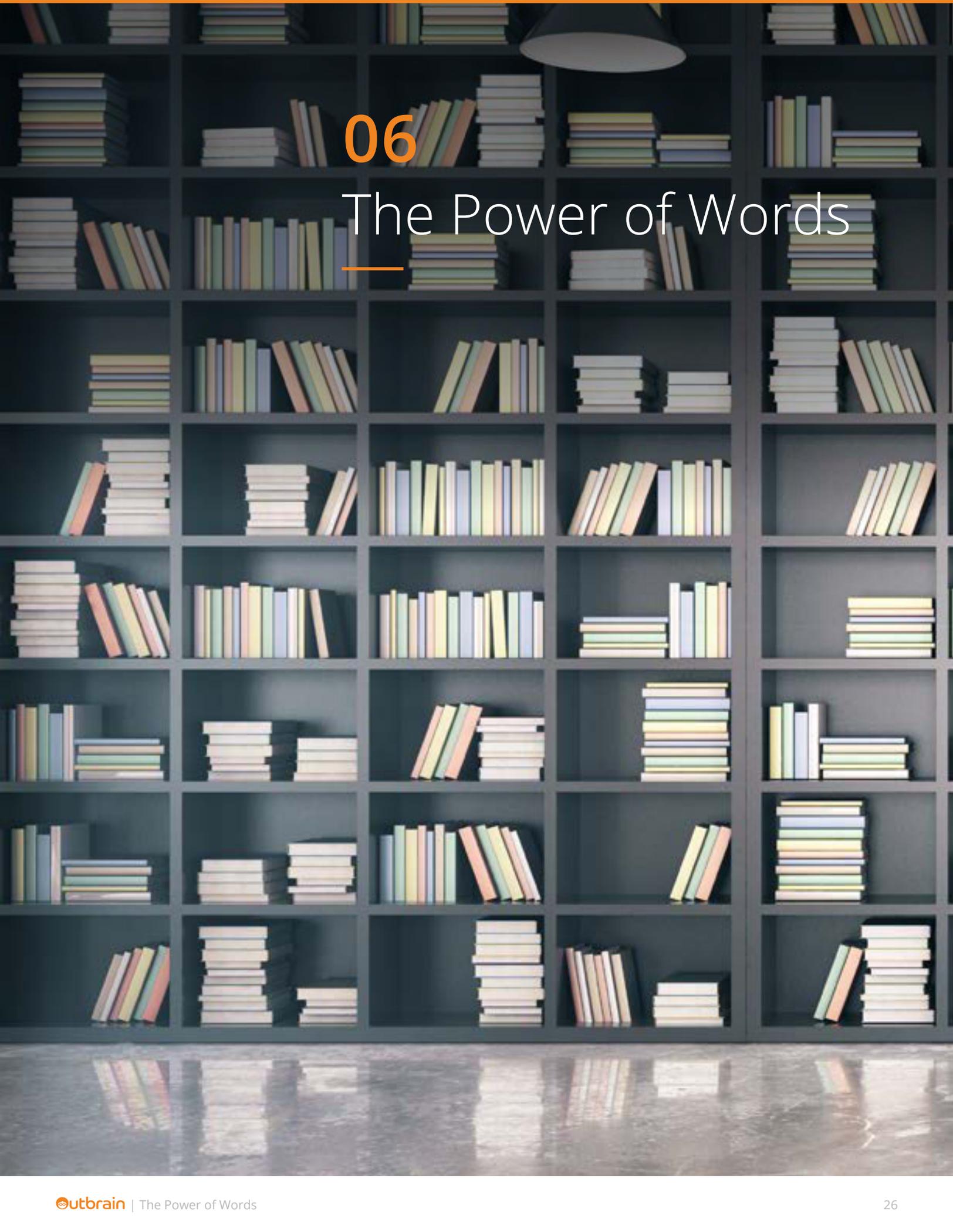


- Think / Feel** > What really matters, major preoccupations, worries, and aspirations
- Hear** > What peers say, what influencers say, what superiors say
- See** > What's the environment, what does the industry look like, what are they exposed to
- Say / Do** > Attitude, appearance, and behavior in public and professionally
- Pain** > Fears, frustrations, insecurities, and obstacles
- Gain** > Wants, needs, desires, obstacles, and outcome

Now that it's easier to see what this audience looks like, it will be easier to speak to them.

Taking time from the creation process to reflect on larger emotional triggers that enable an audience to relate with you will seem daunting at first.

But map after map, you will find validation in shorter content journeys through the funnel and an audience that identifies with you.



06

The Power of Words

We've all heard that "actions speak louder than words."

But what about when words are all we have for audiences who are just learning about our business through the articles we've created and recommended for them online?

That means the way we choose and use our words determines how we will be seen by those audiences, and therefore, how we will act in relation to them.

Be mindful of the words you're using to speak to the crowds of onlookers interacting with your content via some advice from Outbrain:

Have a Personality

Use expressive words that characterize certain patterns of thought, feelings and behaviors.

This will make your business unique over competitors and more relatable to target audiences.

Don't Self-Talk

It's really not about you, so avoid using language in the "we" perspective.

Put the focus ON your reader and tell them how they will benefit from you, not you from them.

Communicate Opportunity

Try using positive persuasion tactics when looking to motivate your audience instead of instilling fear.

You'll find that most readers manifest opportunity better than just avoiding loss.

Help Them Achieve

Things like smart CTAs which guide readers to your other valuable assets and resources don't have to be masked with clickbaity text.

Transparency in the actions a reader will take upon click-through not only signals trust but also filters out the unqualified prospects you don't want as a part of your funnel.

Represent Professionalism

Reflect your authority in the industry by using common terminology, but avoid the jargon and lingo that leave audiences feeling like your content is all "smoke and mirrors."

Support your content with strong sources and citations (internal and external), making sure provide linkbacks to authority sites.

Use Your Empathy Map

Take keywords and phrases you've researched and highlighted to splice into your copy for added authenticity and to help remain focused on the message for your segmented audience.

Use Your Blog Post Anatomy

The structure of how you are communicating your words is important. The better they flow, the easier it will be for them to make a lasting impression. Key points shouldn't be shrouded in messy formatting but instead highlighted through visibility.

Infusing these practices into your writing will allow you to close the gap between what we wish to communicate to our audiences and how those audiences perceive our messages and business.



07

Creating Content with Intent

Creating Content with Intent

Content discovery can be a truly rewarding experience as it holds marketers accountable for their content.

When in practice, if a user clicks through a paid recommendation and the experience isn't aligned with what they were expecting, it can immediately impact the potential relationship a brand is trying to establish.

With the same effect as a real-life recommendation, it's like an introduction through friends or peers — and first impressions are incredibly important.

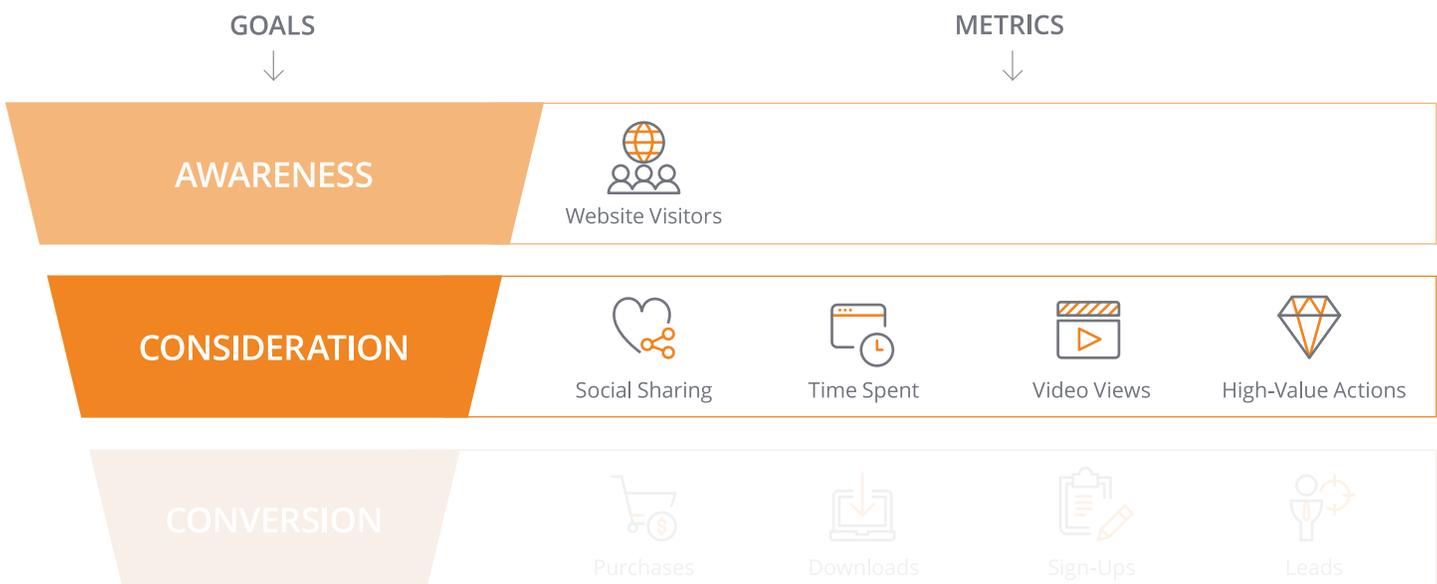
Even if you haven't had much experience with this, that's okay.

There is a simple framework one can follow, and it starts with one question.

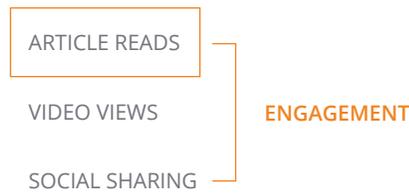
What do you want your content to do?

As users in content discovery mode are often coming through the top of the funnel, focusing first on measuring engagement KPIs is a must.

Here's how you can break the process down:



Step 1: Start by selecting one engagement KPI:



You will want to track whether or not someone read an article by firing a web analytics event, as we did in the internal Outbrain case study above, when someone scrolls a certain percent of the way down the page.

The minimum definition of an engaged reader is really up to you, but 70% is pretty indicative of someone who is interested in consuming most of your content.

Heat map software also measures where people are clicking on your content, and the amount of time they spend viewing each area.

Now, the task becomes creating content that will trigger the necessary engagement.

Consider, for a moment, the nature of an educational how-to blog post.

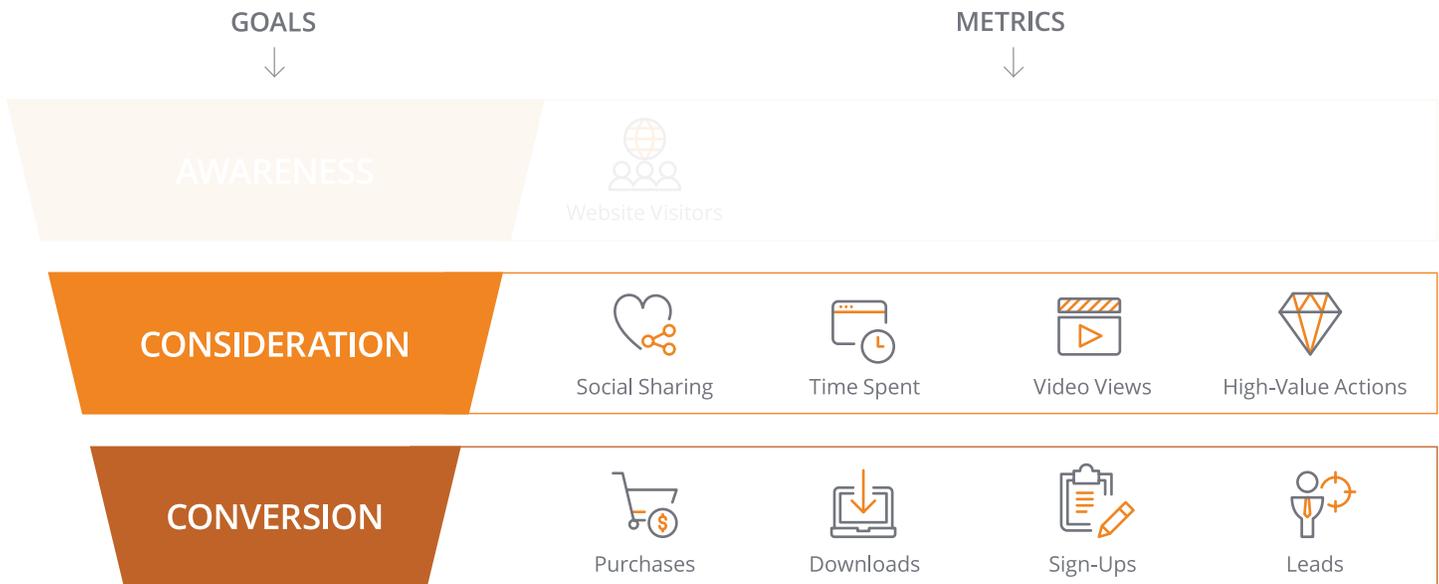
Most readers will be incentivized to complete the article in order to gain its full value and utility, making it a strong candidate for helping meet the engagement KPI you've selected.

Take this guest post on our blog "[5 Ways Green Hat Uses Webinars to Bring in More B2B Marketing Business](#)," from the Content and Inbound Manager at Green Hat, a digital marketing agency.

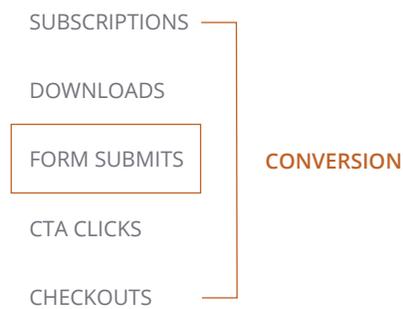
It's plain and simple — if readers want to learn how to use webinars to bring in more B2B marketing business, they'll have to check out the super tactical ways to do so by reading the entire article.

If they don't, they will miss out on important information they may not have known before.

On turning that engagement into conversions...



Step 2: Finish by selecting one conversion KPI:

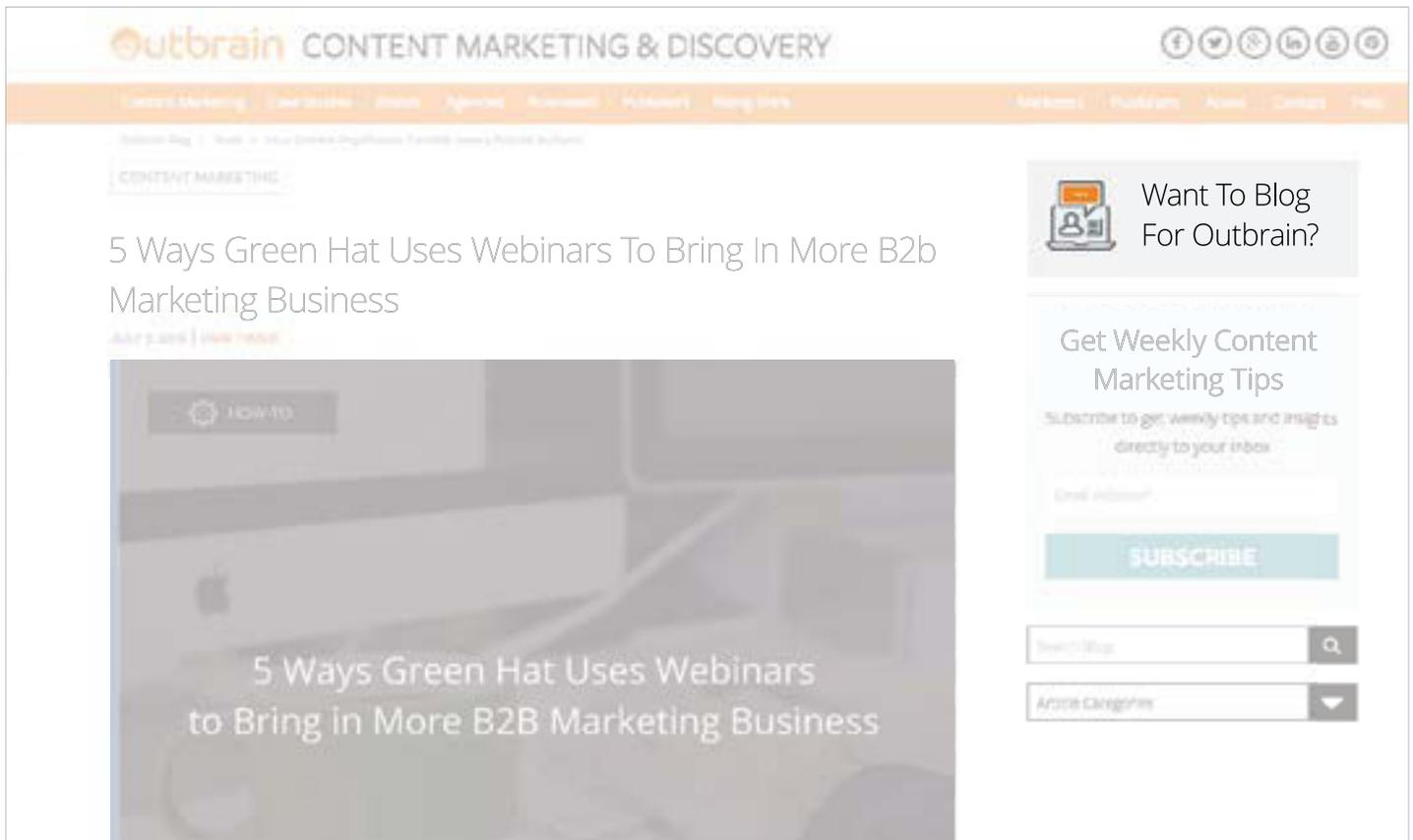


If our goal for this piece of content is conversions via form submits, we want to optimize the content for that experience.

That means, including a clear and visible CTA within the body of content which users can easily access and use to move further along the funnel.

In hopes of finding another Daniel Tolliday to contribute their expertise as a guest author, we set out to strategically place CTA's so other experts in the industry could learn more about our guest blogging opportunities.

By clicking on either the right-hand CTA or in-article CTA, readers were then taken to a page where they could submit their information (convert via form submits) and provide links to writing samples.



To find editors of a publication, simply Google: "publication name" editor + LinkedIn.

Want to blog for Outbrain?

[Learn More](#)

Step 4: Leverage Your Email List

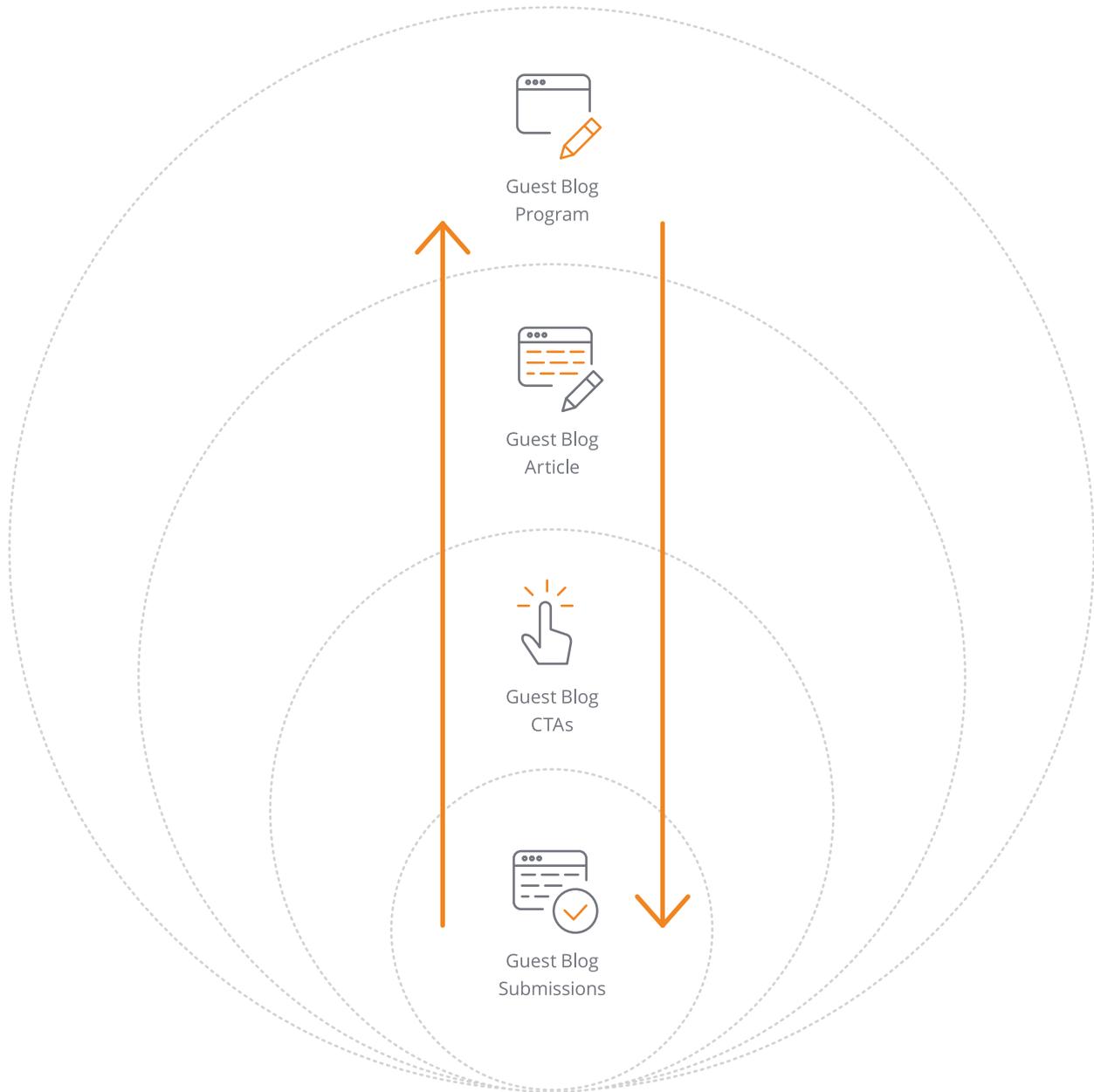
Send Out Three Newsletters Prior to the Event

Include topic-focused content about your webinar in the newsletters, as well as a call to action that sends readers directly to your landing page.

Through strategically leveraging a relevant guest post to house our two distinct and motivated guest blog CTAs, we're not only able to increase conversions, but also move readers through the funnel at a higher rate of conversion.

Whether you prefer working out from your KPIs or down to your KPIs, make sure to chart your initiatives and then build your content from there.

Content Charting



Following the framework above, marketers can not only more easily visualize the larger content strategy needed to meet audiences with engaging content but also measure the impact being made.

And only from there can we learn how to surpass reader expectations.

A close-up, side-profile shot of a person wearing glasses and a white scarf with a black pattern. They are looking down at a silver smartphone held in their hands. The background is a blurred city street at night, with bokeh lights in green, red, and yellow.

08

Respecting the Content Journey

Respecting the Content Journey

With the rapid rate of content production and distribution taking place, it can be easy to fall into the trap of expecting immediate results. We know content marketing is a long game, yet we often set unrealistic expectations due to its effectiveness in converting prospects into customers.

While a journey through the content funnel will fluctuate based on a variety of factors, it takes most consumers many pieces of content before arriving at a purchase decision.

You will need to be there throughout that journey, actively delivering the right content, to the right audience, in the right place, at the right time, all while telling right story and reporting on the right metrics.

It will take time, patience, and a well thought-out content marketing strategy.

And whether you're catching users higher up the funnel or meeting them when they are more informed about your business, measuring the right KPIs is key.

Just remember, content discovery can be a much more efficient channel for both driving interactions with content, as well as developing longer-term sustainable relationships with audiences.

And with great power comes great responsibility, so make sure to utilize content discovery wisely.

Conclusion

Let's quickly recap what we covered.

To be successful at creating a content experience that surpasses reader expectations and ultimately generates a higher content ROI, make sure you're paying close attention to the following:

1. We spend more than eight hours a day in content consumption mode.
2. Set KPIs that measure actual engagement with your content.
3. Connect engagement behavior with conversions in order to optimize top of funnel content campaigns in real-time.
4. Scanability is key to successful online content.
5. Use your words carefully, and don't be afraid to have a personality.
6. Empathy is key to creating content that will resonate with your audience.
7. Respect the content journey as you build a relationship with your audience.

While an important goal with content is to get your audiences to click your headline, consider this analogy:

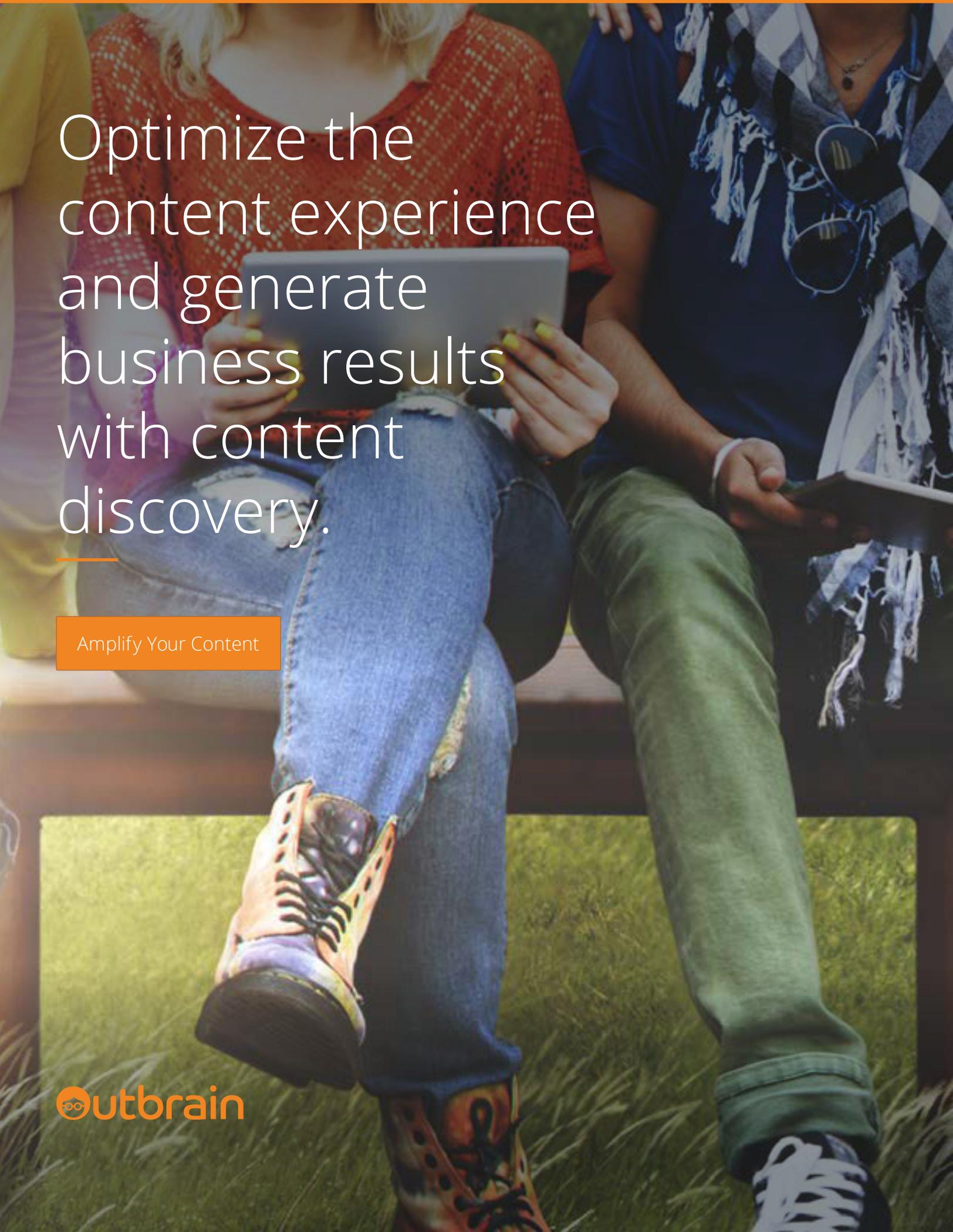
You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.

It's not about just dropping mass amounts of traffic into the content funnel — we do that already and from a variety of different paid and organic online sources.

The proof is in attributing where audiences are coming from, when, and how to make the appropriate introductions in order to help them navigate through the desired funnel(s) we have in mind.

That's where smarter KPIs come into play.

A well thought out communication framework demonstrates the value of continued actions with a brand, and implementation via tactical content optimizations make qualified conversions possible.



Optimize the
content experience
and generate
business results
with content
discovery.

Amplify Your Content

 **Outbrain**