

# Creating Your Content Marketing Plan

A step-by-step guide to developing a content plan that builds customer loyalty and boosts your bottom line

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## I. Introduction

It goes by many names: content marketing, value-added content, custom content, custom publishing, customer media. Call it what you will, this tried-and-true form of communications is one of the biggest buzzes today in customer relationship marketing (CRM).

Content marketing allows marketers to reach and connect with customers, driving loyalty and healthier bottom lines. Today's businesses large and small are restructuring their marketing goals to put customized content at the core. But content marketing is not a new idea; marketers have been doing it for decades. So why all the buzz now?

Thanks to the rise in content-rich social media and the 24-hour accessibility of information, customers are craving higher volumes of trustworthy content to help them make smart decisions. Not to mention that, when done right, content marketing costs much less than traditional mass media methods like TV and radio. Finally, years of results mean marketers know that content marketing works.

That's not to say your organization should start churning out articles, videos, blog posts and e-newsletters without a plan. A content marketing strategy should be recognized by your business as a major commitment shaped by well-defined goals, researched communication channels, strategic timelines and appropriate measurement tactics.

This white paper examines which types of content can work to truly build loyalty, and then defines the five stages of building a comprehensive content marketing plan.



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## Consumers Want Great Content

- More than 60% of consumers want content beyond specials. They want to learn about new products, features and services from the brands they follow.
- Online consumer education produces nearly 300% higher ROI than traditional marketing campaigns.

Source: 2009 Marketing Sherpa Survey

## More Loyalty-Strengthening Exercises

- Consider yourself a publisher and distributor of valuable information – not merely a marketer
- Identify content opportunities that affect customer behavior
- Maintain a core message and tailor it to your selected media channels
- Cultivate a unique content personality that resonates
- Make content ripe for two-way communication

## II. Strategic Warm-up: Building Loyalty Muscle With the Right Content

The link between content and customer loyalty is clear: Readers who gain value from an organization's content, whether or not it's directly related to a product or service, are more willing to engage with that organization again and again.

But what kind of content generates that repeat engagement?

- **It's personally relevant.** Relevance means connecting content to the wants and needs of your individual customers. In other words, it's what your customers want to read — not what you want to say. To best align your content program with individual consumers, leverage customer data to understand their preferences — then continually create new and innovative ways to benefit them.
- **It positions your organization as a credible resource.** Your content should help guide and educate. When it comes to marketing your products or services, your customers should feel they are more like partners than mere sales targets. Even if consumers don't have the immediate need for a particular product or service, you can keep yourself top of mind by branding yourself as the one they should contact when they are ready to move forward.
- **It stokes the emotional connection.** Loyalty can be thought of as an emotion that's strengthened over time through customer experience. By offering consistent, relevant messaging across multiple channels, you are strengthening that connection with every communication. Do this, and over time customers begin to feel personally valued by your business.
- **It's insightful, educational — and abundant.** The old adage "quality, not quantity" is only partly true when it comes to loyalty-building content. Today's consumers expect both. They are hungrier than ever for insightful, engaging information that can help them make sound decisions. And with increasingly ever-present social media, there are more ways to supply your customers with the content they're looking for. So will they satisfy their craving with a competitor — or with you?

Now that you understand the impact of content on loyalty, it's time to devise a strategy that works for your business and your budget. In the following pages, we identify each step, from setting goals to measuring success.

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## III. Strategic Planning, Stage 1: Three Rules for Setting Your Content-Related Business Goals

There may be many ways in which your organization could benefit from a comprehensive content strategy. This is good news, of course – but it can also make the first step the most difficult.

**Don't** create and publish a frenzy of content to see how your business will benefit.

**Do** identify specific objectives that you hope to achieve through custom content.

For instance, are you trying to increase product/brand awareness? Generate more sales or conversions? Increase customer retention? Promote key services? Identify your primary objective, and take it from there, keeping in mind the following three rules.

### **Rule #1: Content goals must be measurable.**

Start with your basic objective. For instance:

*“I want to increase brand awareness through social media content distribution.”*

A good start. Now how do you build from there to make your goal quantifiable? Whether it's a percentage, dollar amount, ratio or another metric, committing to a number is key. So in this example, your goal may become:

*“I want to increase brand awareness through social media content distribution by 1) increasing my number of followers to 10,000 and 2) increasing the number of content referrals (i.e., the number of people who share articles with a friend) by 70 percent.”*

### **Rule #2: Content goals must be realistic.**

It can be motivating for your team to shoot high, but damaging to shoot too high. In other words, your goals should be attainable. So try analyzing your competitors, your audience, past company trends and industry statistics. In this instance, then, your goal may change to:

*“I want to increase brand awareness through social media content distribution by 1) increasing my number of followers to 4,000 and 2) increasing the number of content referrals by 20 percent.”*

### **Rule #3: Content goals must have a timeline.**

Apply Rule #2 when setting your timeline: Your date must be attainable and take into

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account industry trends as well as internal challenges. Then you may choose to pick a year, a quarter, a week — or a calendar date that marks a significant event. To continue with our example:

*“Within six months of our new website launch in December, I want to increase brand awareness through social media content distribution by 1) increasing my number of followers to 4,000 and 2) increasing the number of content referrals by 20 percent.”*

You now have a clearly defined objective that is quantifiable and timeline-driven. This will come in handy when it’s time to measure the success of your program.

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## What do your customers want?

- 80% of marketers surveyed claimed customer preference is a key factor, but only 12% ask customers their preferred frequency for email messages.
- Consumers prefer email more than 3-to-1 for marketing communications; but only 15% of consumers want *all* marketing messages to come through email.
- 50% of consumers consider unsolicited messages from companies with whom they regularly conduct business unacceptable – up from 26% in the previous year.

Source: 2009 Channel Study by ExactTarget and Forrester

## IV. Strategic Planning, Stage 2: Choose Your Media Channels Through Careful Research and Analysis

With a seemingly countless number of ways to reach customers today – from mobile to direct mail to social media – most marketers by now have embraced a multi-channel approach.

But the increase in available media channels presents just as many challenges as it does opportunities. In fact, data from a recent joint study by ExactTarget and Forrester reveals that while more than 85 percent of all marketers are executing multi-channel campaigns, less than half know what channels their customers prefer.

That means the companies who distribute content through a consumer's preferred channels have a sharp competitive edge.

So how do you make your multi-channel mix a bull's-eye rather than a shot in the dark?

- **Conduct market research.** Start with data mining, then profile and segment your customers based on their preferences. Which channels are your customers using? How are they using them? Which channels work best for which audiences? Is there an optimal media mix based on age or demographic?
- **Track and measure.** Review customer analytics to draw conclusions on how customers' transaction behaviors are tied to various media channels. Email open rates, content opt-ins, online conversions, on- and offline tracking codes, and click-through rates are just some of the metrics to use.
- **Use social media to listen and engage — not to sell.** When in doubt over your customers' preferences, why not go straight to the source? Tools like customer polls, surveys and "preference centers" are a great way to find out what they want. Also see what you can glean from social chatter. You may gain valuable insight simply from exploring — and participating in — forums such as chat rooms, expert Q&A sessions and blog posts.
- **Test. Measure. Repeat.** Nailing down your customers' communication preferences is not a one-time deal. Preferences are evolving all the time — so make sure you stay on top of trends and behaviors with frequent testing, measuring and tweaking.

Research has shown that today's typical consumer expects and prefers a steady amount of content across several different channels (depending on the type of message). With research, measuring and testing — as well as opportunities for two-way dialog — you can deliver.

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## V: Strategic Planning, Stage 3: Develop a Realistic Editorial Calendar

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Thanks to Stages 1 and 2, you have clearly defined ideas of what you are hoping to accomplish with your content and the channels you'll use to accomplish those goals. Now it's time to filter big-picture content goals into editorial specifics.

### Plan for Consistent, Coordinated Messaging

Remember, loyalty will evolve when your customers encounter consistent messaging about your brand across all channels. So as you execute your content calendar, maintain a core message and coordinate all other content around that message.

**TIP:** *Start with a 360-degree view of the content currently being generated by your company. Identify and separate what you currently have — and what you would like to have.*

### Out With the Old, In With the ... Old: Recycling Content

What content can you leverage and repurpose? Creating customized content is an ongoing effort that evolves based on customers' needs — but that doesn't mean you have to start from scratch each time.

**TIP:** *Find creative ways to repurpose your content to distinctly serve your marketing needs. Support new points by tying in past publications, re-promote an existing idea by adding a fresh content spin or tie in third-party videos.*

### Now for the New: Content Creation

Identify content gaps that your company needs to fill. Would you like to ramp up your social media presence? Offer expert insights on industry-related topics? Create a custom newsletter for a market segment? If you don't have the resources to research and produce your own publications, consider hiring outside writers to get the job done.

**TIP:** *When publishing new content, keep SEO and keywords top of mind. Some types of media fare better than others in search results. For example, Forrester Research reports that videos are 53 times more likely than text pages to appear on the first page of search results.*

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## **Schedule Deliveries – Then Enjoy the Returns**

Develop an organized timeline of content delivery across each of your selected media channels; then maintain your commitment by keeping the information coming. Don't forget to allot time for evaluating timelines and measuring whether or not your goals are on track to hit their results.

Now that you've assigned calendar timelines to your goals, you're one step closer to reaping the returns of a well-strategized content program.



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## How can content boost your bottom line?

Content generates leads, drives sales and increases loyalty. Some case studies to prove it:

- Telecheck cut its cancellation rates in half by using a value-add newsletter.
- Ninety percent of the people who clicked through to at least one article in a healthcare finance company's newsletter went on to visit the company's website. More than 25% forwarded an article to a friend or family member, and nearly half said that the information in the newsletter influenced them to take action and use the company's services.
- When a major national retailer sent coupons in its lifestyle newsletter, with no direct call to action mentioned, those coupons had the highest redemption rate compared to other promotion mediums.
- In one issue of a major mortgage company's newsletter, the top two click-throughs (at 30% and 20%) were both educational and information-based stories – handily beating out the sales-focused pieces.

## VI. Strategic Planning, Stage 4: Evaluate Content Metrics to Affect the Bottom Line

If you followed the rules in Stage 1, then you already have some measurable goals in place. But as with any marketing strategy, your content program should produce results that positively affect revenue.

### Ask yourself: Do my content goals translate into financial success?

To address this, it may be time to revisit — and refine — your original goals. In our previous example, we've identified how to achieve brand awareness through quantifiable content measures. But how can those goals translate into financial gain?

Let's return to our sample content goal and metric:

*“Within six months of our new website launch in December, I want to increase brand awareness through social media content distribution by 1) increasing my number of followers to 4,000 and 2) increasing the number of content referrals by 20 percent.”*

What is the financial goal behind increasing brand awareness? Is it to increase the number of sales? Acquire five new account members each month? Increase the purchase frequency among existing customers?

By working backwards, you should be able to identify a financial driver for your content goal and refine accordingly. Then, when it comes time to measure the monetary success of your content program, you'll have the metrics in place to do so.

As you rework your goals, here are a few more ways in which to measure your program's financial legitimacy:

- Net gain/loss of high-value customers
- Average speed of sales cycle and transaction values when customers enter through content marketing channels
- Customer retention percentages
- Online coupon redemption and profit/loss margins
- New customer acquisition percentages
- Cost per new customer
- Value of interested but not-purchasing customers in terms of profit potential
- Cost savings from customer complaint resolution
- Effect on customer churn
- Number of new product ideas generated and used
- Net gain/loss on product development time
- Changes in adoption rate of policy/pricing changes

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## VII. Summary: Put It All in Motion

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Once you have your plan in place, it's time to move forward with implementation. Use your editorial calendar to guide you through important benchmarks, and to keep both content goals and financial goals on track. Then, by leveraging measurement results repeatedly over time, you can continually refine your strategies to garner the greatest impact.

Putting content at the core of your marketing plan requires your company to rethink its current strategies, resources, timelines and budget. But with careful planning, well-defined goals and metrics to validate success, your content can bring real value and real benefits to your customers and your business.

## VIII. About Customer Communications Group

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**Customer Communications Group, Inc. (CCG)**

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CCG is a full-service marketing agency offering integrated end-to-end expertise with a mandatory emphasis on maximum ROI. And we know content. Over the past 30-plus years, we've carefully honed our understanding of the words that build participation. As pioneers in the field of customer relationship marketing (CRM), our focus is on building and strengthening long-term, profitable relationships with customers and creating an actual dialog, rather than soliciting a one-time action. We're uniquely adept at creating content that not only drives action, but also has a long shelf life, to keep the customer engaged past the point of initial connection.

