

Too Easy to Ignore: Why Brands Are Losing the War for Attention in the Era of Peak Content

Content marketing may be nearing a saturation point. Most brand content is invisible, lost in the clutter. To have any chance of being noticed, marketers have to find a way to make the brand story impossible to ignore.

Content marketing has become a victim of its own excess.

In the analogue era content existed in limited form. It lived on paper or over the air. It was stored on bookshelves, on magazine racks and on microfilm. Supply was limited because content was expensive to produce and distribute. Therefore, all content had a price tag.

Today content takes a more fluid form. Almost all of it is free. It seeps into every nook and cranny of digital life. It gnaws at attention spans. It steals time. It uses the slightest pretext to distract. It unfurls in front of people as an infinite scroll. It baits them with listicles. And invariably “learn more” is “more of the same”.

Absorbed in their screens, people skim through an endless stream of content, scrolling, swiping, tapping and clicking, pausing only to share the stories that arouse momentary interest. Time spent on digital media may have grown dramatically – but attention spans have shriveled.

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Now consider what branded content is up against these days. About 500 million blogs pumping out over 4 million posts daily. Almost 5 billion videos watched on YouTube every day. A galactic war amongst streaming services to monopolize attention. Hordes of self-published books. User generated content – vast amounts of it, belching out every day, competing for attention with legitimate publishers. Welcome to the era of Peak Content.

How can any brand, no matter how much effort they put into producing quality content, expect to get noticed in this arms race for attention? Content marketing may have hit a saturation point. And yet marketers seem undeterred, continuing to devote about twenty five per cent of

their budgets to content creation, knowing the only option at this point is invisibility.

When the digital form of content marketing first emerged as a recognized discipline, it promised to rescue marketers from the

predicted death of mass advertising. Instead of buying people's attention, marketers could lure them by masquerading as publishers, using the social web to drive traffic. But with the democratization of publishing, brands everywhere decided to become media companies. And when the newspaper business started to crater, the news field was left wide open to a swarm of clickbait publishers and content farms eager to swoop in. Quantity over quality became the formula for chasing traffic.

What followed was a content deluge. And so, the world is now drowning in shallow, disposable and transient content. Discoverability is subject to the whims of algorithms, curators and micro-influencers. For brands desperate to be noticed, the time has come to hit the reset button on a practice area corrupted by malpractice.

Aversion to Complexity

The most pervasive example of malpractice is the absence of a formal content strategy. Even if a strategy does exist, it is often disconnected from higher order marketing goals such as driving growth. No wonder so few companies are committed at the leadership level to content marketing: the business case is wobbly at best. The gulf between engagement metrics (views, likes, shares) and the corporate dashboard (market share, revenue growth, net promoter score) is too immense to cross. Attempts to justify the investment in content marketing are usually an exercise in dart throwing. Unable to conclusively prove ROI, content marketing remains a field trial. As Content Marketing Institute founder Joe Pulizzi says, "Content marketing programs do not get killed because they don't produce results. They get killed because the person who controls the purse strings doesn't get it."

Another dysfunctional practice is the ghettoization of the content team, who are often walled off from the rest of the marketing group, seen as orphaned journalists. Left on their own, they robotically churn out zombie content, trying to please dual masters: the demand generation crew, solely interested in lead nurturing, and brand marketing, looking to insert their commercial messaging everywhere. Which explains why customers feel that most of the brand content they see is too generic, self-serving and dull to be of

much value. This struggle to deliver captivating content explains why engagement rates are humiliatingly low for most brands.

The failure to win attention has two root causes: a tendency to make assumptions about what customers want, and an aversion to the complexity involved in versioning content to suit different audiences. Companies are still struggling with "personalizing at scale", even when there is a wealth of digital assets. People get driven to a content hub, where they face a bewildering mosaic of tiles, beckoning them with click-worthy headlines. The onus is on them to tunnel through the site, digging for the answers they want. And even when their browsing patterns trigger related content suggestions ("You might also be interested in..."), the clues to their broader interests and passions get lost in the digital exhaust.

Anticipating and serving the content needs of customers requires mastering three disciplines: connecting the content strategy to the business mission; making brand content central to the lives of the people it serves; and developing an integrated ecosystem that serves up the right content to the right people at the right time.

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From Pillars to Post

The place to start is to identify the nexus between the business mission, the street-level concerns of customers and the social, technological and cultural changes influencing everyday conversation. This is where it helps to think like a true publisher: knowing the stories that will resonate emotionally with an audience. Where content marketing programs go wrong is focusing exclusively on the block-and-tackle content: the stuff sales people like to send out to prospects. But the more sustainable conversations with people start with just three questions: What do you care about most? What keeps you up at night? What do you value above all else?

The goal is to come across as more than just another vendor with out-of-the box solutions. The brand should be seen as a fellow traveler who sees the world through the eyes of its customers. The content needs to feel like it was written for them and about them. It needs to inspire and motivate them. It needs to make their

dreams seem attainable. Facts should be converted into ideas – proof points into stories. But none of that is possible without first agreeing on why the brand exists: making it clear that it stands for something more than the sum value of products and services. By declaring its purpose – its “North Star” - the brand is positioned to lead the conversation with customers.

Take Nike, for instance. Its willingness to take a bold stand – exemplified by its award-winning Kaepernick campaign – is clearly paying dividends. Nike shares are at an all-time high. The Nike brand is all about inspiring people to realize their full athletic potential, a purpose statement that makes it easy to connect with young, hip, progressive urbanites who make up their core audience. “It doesn’t matter how many people hate your brand as long as enough people love it,” says Nike co-founder Phil Knight.

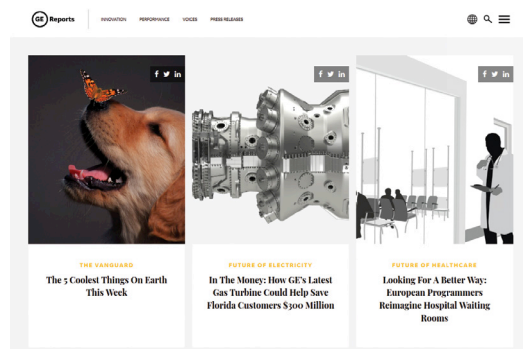
Nike is not alone. Other popular lifestyle brands have also proven that becoming a leadership voice on behalf of a shared cause, movement or passion leads to a devoted fanbase. Look no further than the energy drink Red Bull – or the outdoor clothier Patagonia – or the recreational retailer MEC. All brands with believable credos and a heartfelt commitment to the communities they serve.

Another strategic route is to be seen as a challenger brand - a provocateur – a game changer. Here the goal is to get customers to think differently by serving as an advocate of transformational change. Dove “Real Beauty” remains the classic reference case, earning cultural notoriety through truth-telling more than story-telling. Ben & Jerry’s, another iconic Unilever brand, fights for climate justice. In fact, the entire Unilever portfolio of brands adheres to its Sustainable Living platform in one way or another (“Together we can change how the world does business”).

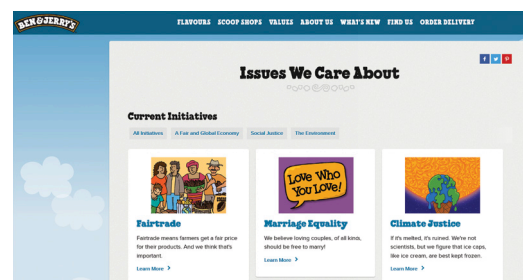
Yet another approach is to be seen as a go-to authority – a teacher – an educator. This is probably the most common route to take because

it is the safest and least controversial. The DTC mattress company Casper considers itself a sleep wellness expert. The Cleveland Clinic is a health advisor. GE is all about the Industrial Internet. IBM wants to make the planet smarter. Hubspot is the go-to expert on inbound marketing. P&G serves up tips for “Busy Moms on the Go”.

Whatever strategic direction is taken, the goal is to identify a “thematic platform” consistent with the brand purpose and paired with a “stand-by-you” ethos. Think of it as a manifesto: an urgent call for change. A “missionary statement” instead of a mission statement. Once that editorial high ground has been staked out, the content pillars can be defined, laying out the main storylines. This is where confusion usually sets in: Does thought leadership take precedence over more utilitarian content related to the buying journey? Where does help-related content fit in? Or are they all treated as separate content domains, with different owners, publishing goals, models and processes?



GE Reports is a content hub reporting on GE's transformation into a digital industrial company.



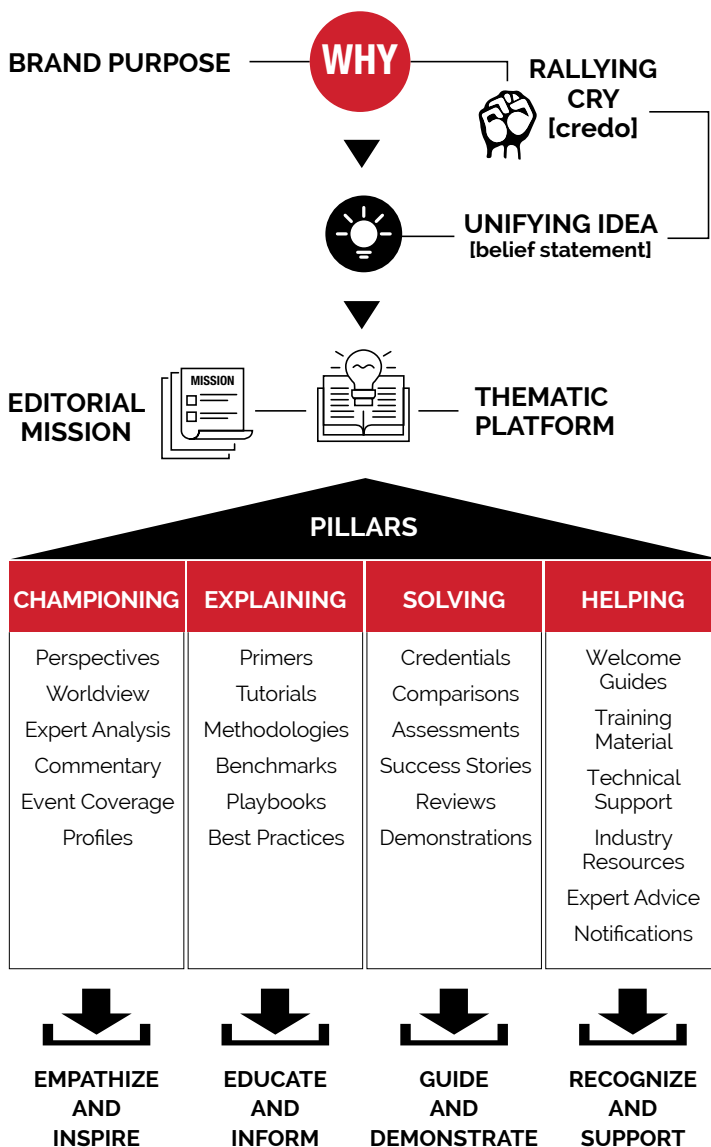
Ben & Jerry's takes a bold position on social justice issues.

That’s why a unified content experience strategy is essential. Otherwise it becomes too easy for finance to defund content production not directly tied to selling – when the only way to break through the clutter may be to challenge the status quo, or question accepted wisdom, or champion a cause.

Development of a cohesive content strategy should be a holistic planning exercise, framed around the lifecycle of a customer. It should involve all stakeholders and content producers in marketing, sales and service – anyone who has anything to do with customer communications. It should be based on deep insight into the subjects that customers care about. And it must allocate the investment impartially across demand generation, customer engagement and relationship management, based on revenue attribution. If current customers are disproportionately accountable for sales, the content funding should be weighted accordingly, with more of the budget devoted to serving them.

The Next Frontier

Even the most airtight content strategy will fail if the operational technology to support it is not up to the job. Go back to the content hub dilemma: the only way to minimize the bounce rate (the percentage of visitors who never get past the home page) is to make the most relevant content instantly visible instead of forcing



a visitor to excavate the site on their own. Most of the popular content marketing platforms (like Percolate, Sprinklr, and Kapost) are primarily orchestration engines that streamline the production workflow. So the job of managing the content experience must be handed off to a specialized platform, such as Uberflip, which supports the creation of personalized content hubs, or an all-in-one experience management suite (such as Sitecore or Adobe Experience Cloud).

Using this technology, it should be possible to customize the content experience based on different relationship states, whether someone is an early-stage buyer acquainting themselves with a topic for the first time or a long-time customer seeking deeper knowledge. Instead of working across different systems – a CMP, a marketing automation suite, a digital experience platform – the marketing team is able to configure personalized content pages according to the knowledge profile of an individual. The displayed content can be based on where the customer is in the buying cycle; the tenure and depth of the relationship; their viewing history; their inferred intent according to 3rd party browsing data; and any declared interests acquired through a preference checklist. The habitual skimmers can be treated differently from the knowledge junkies – ardent followers from new signups – occasional visitors from the highly engaged.

The next frontier of content marketing will couple AI-driven personalization technology with the story-telling mastery of a content team whose singular mandate should be to make the brand a publisher of record for the audience they serve. Only then will brands be able win the attention they so desperately crave.



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