

Customer  
first  
thinking.



## Content Marketing Strategy

An Interview with Robert Rose, Founder, The Content Advisory

### Robert Rose:

Robert Rose is one of the early pioneers and evangelists of content marketing and the author of "Content Marketing Strategy".



When you stop to consider the numbers, it must be very hard these days for any content creator or producer not to be completely cowed by the odds of building a meaningful audience.

Estimates vary but there are something like 600 million blogs in the world. There are an estimated four million podcasts. About the same number of videos are uploaded to YouTube every day. More than three million photos get uploaded daily. No one knows the exact number of brand newsletters but no doubt it's also in the millions since a large majority of businesses report having one.

Marketing consultant Mark Schaefer once famously called this meteoric growth "content shock", by which he meant the "intersection of finite content consumption and rising content availability". Anyone producing branded content these days is not simply sparring with close rivals for the attention of highly distracted customers, they are up against every influencer, opinion leader, web publisher, blogger and creator, all of them just as keen to get noticed. No wonder much of the content that brands produce today is ignored.

The content glut simply suffocates the chances of discovery.

Yet brands keep trying. Content marketing has become a mainstream strategy. No company dares to rely exclusively on paid media anymore to get their message noticed. Owned media is heavily counted on to generate organic web traffic. And customers today expect to find the information they want on demand, whether through search or social media, using whichever device is most convenient.

From the early to mid-2000's, marketers began to slowly catch on that quality content was the key to earning higher search engine rankings and generating more inbound web traffic. Which is why content marketing quickly became indispensable. By the time the Content Marketing Institute was founded by Joe Pulizzi in 2010, a burgeoning class of content specialists had sprung up, drawn from the journalism world. Today many businesses have a dedicated cadre of specialists whose job it is to produce content that can be consumed across all forms of media.

Yet despite the ubiquity of content marketing, the problem remains: how to crack the code of building an engaged audience. Which explains why only "28% of marketers rate their organization's overall level of content marketing as extremely successful".<sup>1</sup> After all, marketing's main remit is to generate demand. Most of the time that means one thing: turning prospective buyers into qualified leads who can be nurtured through the sales funnel. Certainly that is all Sales cares about. Product management too. And those internal groups are the ones clamouring the loudest for more and more content they can use. So that means the content team is chained to a production assembly line, churning out as many promotional assets as they possibly can, with the sales KPIs of the organization foremost in their

minds. No one is thinking too deeply about what the information seeker wants or needs.

That is where most organizations are going wrong, according to one of the world's foremost experts in content marketing, Robert Rose. Content producers need to start thinking like publishers, he argues. More than that, organizations need to turn their content operations into media businesses with the dedicated goal of attracting and monetizing a captive audience.

It is a radical prescription. Getting organizations to think less in terms of selling and more about sharing takes a huge mindset shift. But with the right content strategy, Robert Rose believes it is achievable. And so in his latest book "Content Marketing Strategy", he presents a detailed blueprint for success. Ever since he co-wrote the landmark book "Managing Content Marketing" with his fellow evangelist Joe Pulizzi thirteen years ago, Robert Rose has been on a mission to convince organizations that the only way to break through the content clutter is to offer information of unique value that someone might actually be willing to pay for.

SS

**Stephen Shaw (SS):** You're one of the world's leading authorities on content marketing. Yet you had early ambitions to become a screen writer. Is there a part of you that still yearns to be one?

RR

**Robert Rose (RR):** Oh, every day. Every single day. What drove me away from that whole idea despite some limited success was the business side of it. The job of being a screenwriter or a playwright or a songwriter is a sales job. It's not just about creating great work, and then, yay, somebody finds it. You actually have to market it and sell it and sell yourself, which I was not great at. And so, that was what drove me away. But, yes, I do miss it very much.

SS

How did you end up in the marketing world?

RR

I went to work for Showtime on the B2B side of their business in marketing, supporting the field sales team as they developed relationships with cable providers like Comcast. And to this day, I will tell you, it's the best job I ever had. I mean those people were super sweet, lovely to work with. Taught me so much that it actually gave me quite a passion for marketing, which I didn't know a lot about at the time. And so I dove into marketing books, just went headfirst into it, because I was having such a good time. And then my wife and I moved to Washington, D.C. where I joined a different cable network as their marketing research guy. My first

project was figuring out this new thing called the Internet. It was everything I wanted to do - writing, multimedia, technology, music. I had found my home. And so digital became a huge focus for me.

SS

I just remember that era as a time when there were a lot of digital crusaders thinking they were going to change the world.

RR

Not unlike today!

SS

Later you headed up marketing for a startup technology company and transformed your marketing team into what you call in your book a "publishing unit". Was that when you first realized that "content was king"?

RR

That was back in 2002. We were selling enterprise web content management. When we got our first round of funding they literally plopped millions of dollars on my desk and said, "Go build a marketing team". I had no idea what the hell I was doing. Our competition at the time was IBM, Hewlett Packard – and of course Microsoft was in the game, Oracle as well. These were huge brands that we were never going to beat doing any of the things that I had been trained on, like brand and search engine optimization - we were just never going to beat them on any of that. And so the only option I could come up with was we needed to be subject matter experts. So when potential customers came to talk with us, we could offer knowledge that they weren't getting from the competition. I hired journalists, writers, content creators and just built this thought leadership machine around software as a service and cloud computing because that was all brand new then. We were cloud computing before cloud computing was cool. And so we started to get more inbound leads. We started to really build a reputation as not only one of the smartest of the companies in the space, but one of the smarter companies in cloud computing. And so we started getting asked to speak more, we started getting asked to contribute articles and all of that generated more and more business.

SS

And the company grew as a result.

RR

That's exactly right. When we started to see that it was working, we had to build and scale that, right? So the early days we were doing a white paper a month, we were doing blogs, we were doing events, we were doing a webinar program, we were speaking at events - that was really our

marketing strategy. We didn't know it was even called content marketing then – not until I read Joe's book, "Get Content, Get Customers".<sup>2</sup> And that's when I went to seek out Joe. I saw that he was speaking at this conference. So I did what any good marketer would do: I used some of my budget to purchase a sponsorship, which got me a speaking slot, which meant I had an excuse to go. And I stalked him, basically. And he and I had a dinner which we still talk about to this day, where we became instant friends.

SS

You then decided to form the Content Marketing Institute. How did that come about?

RR

Joe came out of the publishing world and at the time he was running a matchmaking service between brands and custom publishers. So if a company wanted to do a magazine, he would find a print company that could do it and he would take a small commission on that service. It didn't scale very well and so he said "I want to do something different. I want to go all in on this content marketing thing. I'm thinking about starting this new evangelizing event." I loved the idea. And he said, "Would you help me think this through?". After a period of 18 months, I finally said, "I'll be your Chief Strategy Officer". When I joined there was only three or four people on board. So I was an early part of it, but he was always the visionary behind it.

SS

But you did bring to the table your own content marketing experience and practical knowledge.

RR

Yeah, it was always his vision from the media side, and it was always my vision from the marketing practitioner side. That was the whole idea of us launching a consulting practice. We always knew that consulting was not going to be the most valuable part of the business, but it would keep us close to what was actually going on, and it would keep me fat and happy.

SS

Was there an inflection point when the marketing world really sat up and took notice of content marketing?

RR

I'm not sure it was a moment in time as much as it was a period in time. We founded the Content Marketing Institute at a time when everyone was putting money in their mattress and freaking out about the economy. And so coming out of that, from 2010 to 2013, there was a real leaning into this nascent thing called social media, this new thing called inbound marketing, this new idea of search

engine optimization. It was all about being found and being trusted. HubSpot became the voice and the face of inbound marketing as a practice, which of course is just marketing automation, right? But HubSpot did something that Marketo and Adobe and all of their competitors didn't do, which was to put a thought leadership program in place. And that really drove this idea of content marketing.

SS

That was over a decade ago and yet in the book you state that most companies have still not figured it out: Content marketing remains a "new concept", you state. Is that because most companies still think of it as non-working media, that they're still stuck in a campaign mindset?

RR

Yeah, in a headline, that's it. Where many companies struggle is they take the way marketing has been done for the last 60 or 70 years and apply it to content marketing. And this is what the book really gets to: content marketing is a different operational approach. You have to think about promoting content, you have to think about updating it, you have to think about how consistently you'll post. You have to think of it like a media company would. And treating content with the same care and affection that a media company does is just a different operating model than looking at content as a campaign. And it's that operating model that trips companies up. For most of them, content is just a vending machine, churning out more and more stuff that's intended to serve a moment in time.

SS

Let's talk for a moment about the undisputed content leaders out there right now, and you name them in the book - Red Bull, Cleveland Clinic, HubSpot, Arrow Electronics. All very different businesses. What do they have in common that accounts for their particular success?

RR

They changed the way that they looked at content. Someone once said that Red Bull was basically a media company that happened to also sell a soft drink. But the whole birth of Red Bull Media House was purely by accident. They started by dragging a printing press down to the local racetrack, where they would print the race results as they happened in real time, and then hand them out to people. And they started to realize that it was working. It was an accidental thing. And so operating like a media company was a way to market their product without resorting to advertising. HubSpot did the same thing, right? They just knew that creating a

relationship with an audience was a good business strategy. What do both those kinds of companies have in common? They operate like a media company.

SS

You write about the ability to monetize an audience, and that does sound awfully like a publishing model. How do you monetize an audience? And what's your definition of an audience? Is it a prospect pool? A marketplace? A community? All of the above?

RR

It's really all of the above because it expands our notion as marketers of what a customer is. An audience is all of the people - groups of people - who can add wealth to our business. Now, typically, I'm going to say they're addressable, right? But when I say they're addressable, I mean that you have a relationship with them. It is not through an intermediary, like a Facebook or a podcast feed or some other intermediary that controls when and where your content is seen by that audience. They are addressable in the sense that you choose to have the relationship with them and can address them when you want to.

SS

In other words, an owned audience. Is it a correct distinction to say that an audience has common or shared interests, whereas customers have shared needs?

RR

Yeah, the way you framed it is fantastic. So it's not just the buyers of your product or service, but all the people who serve the needs and interests of your particular market and can help you add wealth to the business.

SS

You also say in the book that you really need a cultural shift in an organization to make this happen. In fact, you advocate starting from scratch, just rethinking everything. It's asking a lot to give up half a century of marketing practice for something that seems a bit intangible.

RR

This goes back to where do most companies trip up. Usually, companies will hire a bunch of journalists and make a team out of them. But then those people become a vending machine of content. So immediately they're producing content because they're good at it. But the content team's job is not to be good at content; the content team's job is to make the business good at content. And so that means putting in place standards and processes.

SS

And that's one of the gifts of your book: you go pretty deep on process. But one of the tension points, if I may put it that way, is this dichotomy between what brand marketers want

to say and what customers actually want to know, which comes down to, "How can you make my life better?". How do companies resolve that tension?

RR

There has to be a marketing strategy to sort all that out. The challenge on the content marketing side, to your point, is that there's often no one who can say no, right? So there needs to be an arbiter of good. But it comes back to standards and operating procedures - because without standards, there can be no arbiter of good. When sales says, "I don't need a white paper, I need a better brochure", they're right if no objectives have been set against either of those things. There's no way to go back and say, "No, you don't need a new brochure."

SS

Increasingly budgets are being diverted from long term brand building to performance marketing. And I think content marketing suffers as a result of that because it's really about building brand equity over time, right?

RR

Absolutely, yes. I mean, it is crazy how we're still having this debate over what's better, long term brand building or short term performance marketing. And of course, they're both important. It's not a question of either/or, it's a question of balance. Balance doesn't mean equal. Balance means that we are applying the right level of weight to each one according to what it is that's needed. There's that wonderful Chinese saying, "The best time to plant a tree was 100 years ago, and the second best time is yesterday". And so that's the problem with something like content marketing. The best time to start content marketing was five years ago; the second best time is yesterday.

SS

One of the points you make in the book is the audience should be thought of as an asset. The same could be said of a relationship marketing strategy where the payoff is long term growth in the value of a customer base. And this goes back to the whole concept of audience versus customer. Is one really a subset of the other? Is relationship marketing the actual goal here?

RR

That's it. You've nailed it. That's exactly it, right? It's all about how do we develop a relationship with that broader audience. People still argue that nobody wakes up in the morning and says, "I need a better relationship with my butter provider". That always struck me as very cynical, but it's true. We don't wake up and long for a better relationship



with really any provider. But that doesn't negate the importance for the butter provider to have a relationship with us. Because no matter how brief, there is a relationship there when we purchase that stick of butter. All we're suggesting is that in today's marketing world, that window of time needs to be longer, it needs to be more expansive, it needs to be more meaningful. So if I'm the butter provider it's incumbent upon me to create reasons for my consumer to have a deeper, more meaningful relationship. We need to extend the time for deepening a relationship with customers so that we have more of a chance of being top of mind when they actually are in a buying window.

SS

The way to avoid being substitutable is in part by offering a one-of-a-kind experience. Red Bull is certainly an example of that in a highly competitive category, using content and events to distinguish itself.

RR

That's right. When I was at my web content technology company in the early 2000s, nobody knew what cloud computing was. Nobody knew what software as a service meant. Nobody knew anything about any of that. It was too new and weird and strange. So our entire goal was to educate people. Because for them, technology of any kind was always a capital expense. The idea of a subscription was so alien to them.

SS

In the book, you have a couple of different frameworks that really struck home with me. At the highest level, you have three pillars of content strategy: Communications, Experiences and Operations. Can provide a brief overview of what you mean by those three pillars?

RR

Visualize a Venn diagram. One circle is Content as a capability in your business. This is making sure your people do the right things. This is not having the team be good at content, but having the team help the business be good at content. Then we have a circle called Experiences where we're looking at different kinds of expressions of that content, whether that be a blog post, a PDF file, a video, a podcast, whatever the expressions are of those ideas and producing them so that they can be consumed by our audiences. That means we need to understand our audiences, we need to understand our story, we need to understand all the things that we're doing to build these content products. In the middle, straddling those two circles, are what we call

Operations or content orchestration through the creation of standards, workflows, technology, training, and all of those kinds of things.

SS

You also have your content marketing version of the 4 Ps: Performer, Promoter, Professor, Poet.

RR

Yes. I couldn't resist. I'm a sucker for alliteration.

SS

Again, can you provide a brief overview of that framework?

RR

That's really about business storytelling and how to express those ideas. When we talked earlier about that arbiter of good, well, what does good look like? What defines good content? And, of course, what defines good content is the impact on the audience. So I broke that down into four categories. One is the Poet which is content that changes behaviour. This is the highest level of content, where we're trying to actually change someone's mind on something. We are trying to inspire someone to do something. Then you have what we call Professor content, which is meant to teach something. That's the second highest order. It has to impart knowledge, it has to impart wisdom. Then you have Promoter content. And that is simply content to promote something. And then Performer content is at the very top, which is just supposed to draw out an emotion from you. It's not supposed to tell a story. It's not supposed to do anything. It's literally just there to elicit an emotion from you.

SS

No conversation about content marketing is going to be complete these days without some mention of AI. How will AI change how content is produced?

RR

We don't know yet. That's the real answer. Because without knowing your content strategy or without understanding what it is you currently do from a process or an operational standpoint, you can't understand how AI can be effective. But I think where we will see AI begin to make real inroads is, of course, in helping speed the idea of iteration in the content creation process. AI is much more interesting as a research assistant, as a way to summarize docs, as a way to find patterns which are hard to find. Those are the things that it's really good at. Things it's not so good at is original ideas or bringing wisdom to bear, or generating something that you've never thought of before, right? That's the hard part. With the growth of AI, with the growth of misinformation, with the distrust that's in our culture right now, it is incumbent upon all of us to create great, wonderful,

interesting, true things. I used to say that content marketing was the biggest opportunity that businesses are not availing themselves of. And now I say content marketing is the biggest responsibility that businesses have that they're not availing themselves of.

1. Source: NYTLicensing
2. Joe Pulizzi, 2009, McGraw Hill



Stephen Shaw is the chief strategy officer of Kenna, a marketing solutions provider specializing in customer experience management. He is also the host of a regular podcast called Customer First Thinking. Stephen can be reached via e-mail at [sshaw@kenna.ca](mailto:sshaw@kenna.ca).