

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".¹ 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 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.

I started by asking Robert about his early career arc as an aspiring playwright and screenwriter and whether he still harboured yearnings to become one.

RR **Robert Rose (RR):** Oh, every day. Every single day. Yeah, I miss it. You know what, it was funny, because what drove me away from that whole idea of being a musician or being a screenwriter or a playwright, which is where, whatever limited success I had was actually writing plays, not screenplays, wasn't the doing of the thing. It was the business of the thing. And what I discovered was I didn't enjoy at all, I got no satisfaction at all, of the job of being a screenwriter or a playwright or a songwriter, because the job is a sales job. Of course, any artist that is going to make it in any sort of popular medium, you are a salesperson at heart, which I am not, and so 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 the industry is not terribly inviting. Let's just put it softly, and so, that was what drove me away. So the doing of the thing is something that - I mean, I still play music in my spare time, but I haven't thought about writing a screenplay or a play in a long time. But actually, funny enough that you mentioned it, I have over the last couple of months

ago, I started thinking I should probably put my fingers to keyboard again just to see if anything's there. But, yes, I do miss it very much.

SS

Stephen Shaw (SS): Well, after all these years in the marketing business, you probably have a pile of stories you can tell about this business.

RR

Oh, well, yes. I don't know how interesting they are to the broader world. In fact, it was funny. I just read a treatment for a documentary film that somebody wants to do, and they were sort of asking for my thoughts on it, and I was reading the treatment of it, and, you know, it was talking about all the things that are really interesting for those of us that are inside baseball, right? In terms of what's interesting from a marketing perspective, but, for the general public, like someone like my wife, for example, who's not in the business at all, I'm not sure how interesting they'd be, but nonetheless, yeah, there are some interesting stories for sure.

SS

Well, if they can make a series about Mad Men, surely they can make a series about modern marketing.

RR

Fair enough. That's a great point. Yeah, that's a great point. And, or "Silicon Valley", right? Which of course always reminds me of the modern sort of marketing and digital atmosphere.

SS

Absolutely. Or "Succession". I could go on, right...

RR

Yeah, there actually is plenty, yeah. There's lots of ways.

SS

To make something out of that. But now you fell into marketing, if I may use - it's not a pejorative term - most of us are accidental marketers - how did you end up in the marketing world having set out to be a playwright/screenwriter?

RR

Well, when I was writing, it was a day job for me, so I interestingly was trying to pay rent, and so what I knew how to do was do office work. And so I ended up joining as a temp, in Showtime, the cable TV network, their B2B side of their marketing, right. Not the B to C, more brand oriented side, but the B2B sort of their relationships with cable providers and that whole side of the business. Because in those days, this is the heady days of cable in the early nineties, that was a big deal to get carriage on the Comcasts and all of those of the world. And so I joined

in the marketing department there, supporting the field marketing team as they would go out and try and develop these relationships and learned a lot about marketing. And to this day, I will tell you, from a 40 hour a week W2 position sort of employee of a company, it's the best job I ever had. I mean those people were super sweet, lovely to work with. Taught me so much about stuff that it actually gave me quite a passion for marketing which I didn't know a lot about, at the time. And so I started just literally giving myself a self-MBA, right? I read everything. I just sort of basically dove into business books, dove into marketing history, dove into, you know, just went headfirst into it. Because I was having such a good time into that profession. And I've always been a student-minded person. Right. Whenever I sort of get interested in something, I sort of go all in for a while and I went all in and then I ultimately, it started to pay the bills more and I started really getting interested in it and I sort of took it from there. (9.56)

SS

Yeah, well of course, these were early days of the Internet too, right? This period was around the...

RR

Well, that's what I discovered.

SS

...turn of the century?

RR

Yeah, that's exactly what I discovered was there was this, I mean, it wasn't quite then, because we're talking 93, 94, 95. And then I ultimately moved, my wife and I moved, to Washington, D.C., where I joined another cable network as their marketing research guy and started in with this new - my first project there was sort of figuring out this digital, there was this new thing called AOL and there was this thing called CompuServe and the Internet and what would it be? And so my first project there in the marketing research department of this cable network was to figure out for TV, what the future of this thing was going to look like. And so I went neck deep into that as sort of a project of my job and went, "This is everything I want to do, I mean, this is writing, this is multimedia, this is technology, this is music". I had found my sort of home. And so digital became such a huge focus for me in the early days of the Internet and ultimately left that job at the cable TV to go join this brand new weird thing called a website design company, as their employee number three. And that's where I really sort of leapt off and sort of got into content and digital and web building and all the kinds of things.

SS

It's interesting because I do remember that era, obviously, and I just remember it as a time when there were a lot of digital crusaders thinking they were going to change the world - I guess they have.

RR

Not unlike today, right?.

SS

Right, exactly. If there's one thing in marketing, change is constant. Twenty years ago, I think it was 2003, you referenced in the book, you headed up the marketing group for a startup technology company in the sort of cloud space, and you helped transform your marketing team at the time into what you call in the book a publishing unit. Was that when you first started to realize that, hey, you know, "content was king" here?

RR

It was - I wish I had the PR version of that answer - is absolutely: I saw the future and it was all about building a content team. No, I didn't do any of that. What happened was, I had been doing marketing and I had joined up with some friends. These were all friends of mine from a previous job that I had in a big consulting firm. They started this startup in 2000. I joined them in 2000 - it was 2002, actually, that I joined - and it was a startup. And the startup software was enterprise software, web content management, as it turns out, and we got our first round of funding, so they literally plopped millions of dollars on my desk and said, a marketing team, go build one. And I had no idea what the hell I was doing. And so I basically did what I knew how to do, which was my hypothesis was, look, we are an enterprise company, we're selling big ticket items, six figure price tags. Our competition at the time was IBM. It was Hewlett Packard, now known as HP, of course Microsoft was in the game, Oracle was in the game. I mean these were huge brands that we were never going to beat on any of the things that I had trained on, right? Any of the things that I had trained on like brand and search engine optimization and all the things that were hot, we were just never going to beat them on any of that. And so the only hypothesis I could come up with was, if and when we got invited to the table, I wanted to be a mile and a half deeper than any of them were as a subject matter expert, right? So when they came to talk with us, we would have knowledge and thought that they weren't seeing from the competition. And it worked because basically what I did was I took what I knew and I hired journalists, ex-journalists, writers, content creators

and just built this thought leadership machine, not even just around content management, but around at the time software as a service and cloud computing because that was all brand new then. And as I like to say, we were cloud computing before cloud computing was cool. I mean remember this is 2003, 2004 and Salesforce is this weird sort of outlier of a company out there. And it worked...

SS

BlackBerry was still a thing.

RR

That's right. Well, BlackBerry was just getting going, right. I mean I was still operating off my Nokia phone for a long time. Yeah. And it worked. And we started to grow, 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 to articles and all of that generated more and more business. And it was a foundational thing that I just sort of felt more comfortable in, and that was the reason behind it. (15.15)

SS

And you saw results from it because the company grew.

RR

That's exactly right. The company grew out of that. And then it started to become a focused effort. When we started to see that it was working, it became like, okay, now it's a strategy, right? Now it's building and scaling 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 out at events and that was really our marketing strategy. Yes, we were doing search engine marketing and Google search and, you know, email marketing and the sort of more direct based marketing approach, but we leaned heavily into, and we didn't know it was called content marketing then, it wasn't until I read Joe's book, "Get Content, Get Customers"² that I even knew that it had a name of what we were doing. And that's when I went to seek out Joe and much to his disdain, I actually registered the domain "contentmarketing.com" because I thought, this is it, this is what we're doing, and this is what we want to be doing.

SS

I was going to ask you about that, because you've had a long standing partnership with Joe, obviously, and a very productive and fruitful one. Was it because you just approached him out of the blue and said, "Hey, you know,

I've done something here that marries up with what your philosophy/ethos is?"

RR

Yeah, we started, so basically by the time it got to, you know, we were four or five years into this, by the time it got to 2006 and 2007 in the startup, we had started to use our own approach as it was a little bit meta in the sense that we were using our own approach to sort of drive our point of view on our thought leadership into the world. Because remember, we're selling web content management to marketing teams, right? So it was in our best interest to sell the idea of producing more content on your website, producing blogs, producing thought leadership programs, that was a good thing to do, not just have a static website, but to have a whole content program. Thus you need a web content management system to do that. So content marketing became a bit of a hook for us to sell web content management and our particular brand of it, which was of course cloud based, collaborative based, you know, flexible, fast, all the cloud computing benefits. And so I was speaking at a conference, and I had read Joe's book and I saw that he was actually speaking at this conference. So I did what a 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. I tracked him down and invited him to dinner. And he and I had a dinner, which we still talk about to this day, where we became instant friends. We were instantly, instantly bonded with one another. It was one of those things that you just go, yeah, this is it, right? This is where I need to be. And felt very comfortable. And so that's when we started talking.

SS

So take me through that, because then you decided to form the Content Marketing Institute, how did that all come about? You had to leave your job to do that, right? Yeah.

RR

He had decided to do this Hunt of 42, or Junta 42 as he called it, as a company which was a matchmaking service for publishing because he of course came out of the publishing world and he was doing a matchmaking service between brands and custom publishers, right? So BlackBerry wants to do a magazine. He would partner up BlackBerry with a print company that could do his magazine for him. An airline wants to do a magazine. He would be the matchmaking service and he would take a small commission

on that matchmaking service. And it worked about as well as you think it might. It just sort of didn't at all work, because it doesn't scale very well. So he was talking to me at that conference, and he said I want to do something different. I want to sort of go all in on this content marketing thing. He said I'm thinking about starting this new brand, education, media, evangelizing, events. And he wanted to really center it around an event. He said what do you think? And I loved the idea. And he said, "Would you come on as a brand advisor?" Right? Would you come on and just help me sort of think this through? And so I did that for like a month or two and it sort of aligned with my wanting to leave. Like, we were on our, getting ready for the third round of funding, I was having tensions at work, and I wasn't having any fun anymore at the startup and so I was like "It's time for me to go, right? It's time for me to do something different." And this was sort of like the universe calling to me like, "This is what you should be doing". So I was going to hang up my own shingle anyway and start teaching other people how to do this. And it just aligned with what he was doing, and he was like, hey, if you're - I'm shortening now what is sort of an 18 month process - but over those 18 months I sort of went all in with Joe and said, "I'll be your Chief Strategy Officer". So technically the company was founded well before I became Chief Strategy Officer and partnered up with him. But yeah, I joined along when there was like three or four people on board. So I was an early part of it, but not the instigator of it. He was always the visionary behind it. (20.37)

SS

But you did bring to the table, obviously, your own experience and marketing savviness...

RR

That was always the partnership...

SS

...if I can put it that way.

RR

Yeah, it was always his vision from the media side, and it was always my vision from the marketing practitioner side. Like, what were marketing teams really dealing with? And that was the whole idea of us launching consulting. When we launched our consulting practice, behind it was we never intended the consulting practice to scale, and purposely built it not to scale because we were building a media company and not a consulting firm. And we always knew that consulting was not going to be the most valuable part of the business, but it would keep us close. It would keep us close

to the real work and what was really going on and keep us close to the business, and it would keep me fat and happy. So that was the reason behind it, is I could bring the real issues along with the real practitioners to bear and the stories and the case studies and everything that we could talk about, to keep us sort of very close to the actual work and not be some ivory tower like an analyst firm or something like that. But that was the whole point of it, yeah, so my role there was always a sort of chief practitioner.

SS

So the two of you really pulled the concept of content marketing to the mainstream. I mean, there was this thing called inbound marketing that HubSpot was promoting. But really, the concept of content marketing is so closely associated with the two of you. Was there an inflection point? I know it was a bit of drip irrigation over time as the word seeped out, as you guys began to evangelize, as your conferences grew in size, but was there an inflection point in the industry when they kind of took notice, that there's a thing going on here called content marketing? Some people point to BMW's video "The Hire" as maybe one of those inflection points. In your mind, were there some turning points here that really put momentum behind the concept of content marketing?

RR

I mean I'm not sure it's a moment in time as much as it is, let's call it a period in time, right? So let's look at the time of 2010 to 2013, and what we found coming out of the crisis. Because let's not forget that we founded Content Marketing Institute during the middle of the time when we were all putting money in our mattress and freaking out that the world was actually going to crack open and die, right? I mean, we were all ready to having a toxic freak out about the world and 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, and this new idea of - relatively new idea - that had gotten some traction in the mid 2000s but had sort of been put on hold while everybody put money under their mattress called search engine optimization. So it was all about being found and being trusted and leaning into the brand and leaning into customer acquisition as a strategy in marketing. So all those things sort of came together in 2010 to 2013 and is in my view the real reason that inbound - and at a meta level,

inbound is one of the most successful content marketing efforts that have ever existed, right?

So putting a content brand around something that is different than your product was really something that HubSpot did remarkably well. They became the voice and the face of inbound marketing as a practice, which of course is just marketing automation, right? Inbound marketing is just marketing automation. We've been doing it for ten years at that point. But they did something that Marketo and Adobe and all of the competitors that they were looking at didn't do, which was to put a thought leadership program behind it, put a content brand behind it. And that pivot both at the meta level as well as sort of, as part of all that confluence of everything else, really drove what I see as the driver of the idea of content marketing. And the interesting thing happened, and we still laugh about it today, is what ended up happening was HubSpot owned the small business market. They owned that market, right, for inbound and really focused in on everything from solo practitioners to small businesses because that's where they were going to make their bread and butter. They sort of neglected the entire enterprise market. And we trying to differentiate against that, went only after the big global enterprise companies. So we were driving that sort of idea for big global complex companies and driving content marketing. And we saw the hockey stick growth of that term as HubSpot was driving inbound. Subsequently, 2014, 2015, HubSpot started to go more upstream as they needed to after they were trying to become more successful. And they tried to sort of, you know, and I don't blame them for this, they tried to sort of pull in some of the concepts of content marketing and call it inbound. And, you know, we had a "frenemies" fight for about six months where we went, hey, no, it's different, it's similar, but it's very different than what you're trying to do. But that would be the timeframe I would point to. (26.19)

SS

And you know, ultimately Salesforce jumped into this as well and really addressed the whole enterprise side of things with their massive budget dedicated to content. We'll come back to them because you do call them out in the book. But I do want to say, and it's fascinating to hear you talk about that history because I haven't really read that summary anywhere, so it's quite interesting to hear you say that. But that was a

decade ago that all began, really, since content marketing entered the mainstream. And yet in the book you state, quite explicitly, that most companies have still not figured it out. It remains a new concept, your words, to them. Is that because most companies still think of it as non-working media, that they're still stuck in this targeting campaign mindset? Is that what's holding companies back, or marketing departments, holding them back?

RR

Yes, in a headline, yes. I mean, there's some more nuance to that for sure, but yeah, in a headline, that's it. Where many companies struggle with this is they take the campaign project oriented mindset of the way marketing has been done for the last 60 or 70 years and applied it to content marketing. You referenced earlier the BMW ad, right? Whatever it was, the James Bondy thing that they did, which was the brand films thing, that was a campaign, right? I would say that's great brand marketing and brand storytelling or something like that. That's a great campaign. It is not a content marketing initiative because there was no owned media perspective there. There was no real idea of getting, building an audience around that idea and doing something with that audience. And so that was sort of, that used to be, like the biggest thing that we would sort of dispel myths of, or try and correct in terms of what we were talking about with companies, was the idea of campaign, project, flight based marketing versus an owned media ongoing, building a media operation. And that at the heart of it, and this is what hopefully the book really gets to, is that it's that operation that is different. That's the operational elements that are different, which is when you're looking at building something that is supposed to last for months and years and not be a campaign. It's just a different operational approach, right? You have to think about promoting it, you have to think about taking care of it, 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 and strategy 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. They don't switch up the way that they look at content. For most of them, content is just an on demand

vending machine of churning out more and more stuff that's supposed to live, you know, for the moment, not forever. And changing that operation to something that is looking at it like a publication or something like that is just a different way of doing things. (29.45)

SS

Mark Schaefer uses the term - I love it - "coin operated marketing". The expectation you put money in and you get something out.

RR

That's right.

SS

... and it's a little tougher to prove with content marketing. I want to do a deep dive on that concept that's at the heart of your book, which is the operational model around turning marketing into a media business. But let's talk for a moment about the content leaders out there right now, the undisputed content leaders, and you name them in the book: Red Bull, Cleveland Clinic, HubSpot. We talked about Arrow Electronics - I didn't really know a whole lot about them until you talk about them in the book. They're all in very different businesses. What do they have in common that accounts for their particular success?

RR

I mean, the simplest thing is, not to sort of belabour the previous point, but is that they changed the way that they looked at content, right? They changed the way that they managed it. I mean, Red Bull, the way that they got started, you know, I mean, it wasn't me that said this, I can't remember the magazine, back in 2014 I think it was, that said that Red Bull was basically a media company that happened to also sell a soft drink, right? But the whole birth of Red Bull Media House, which is what produces the magazine and the documentary and the guys getting thrown out of spaceships and all the events that they do and all those things, the sort of media company that they built, the thrust of that was purely by accident, right? They basically started by producing ... they literally dragged a printing idea, printing press, down to the local racetrack, where they would print the race results as they happened in real time and then make those a handout, right, for the people who were leaving the racetrack. And they started to realize that it was working. I mean, it was, again, an accidental thing. And so operating like a media company and really looking at themselves as a publisher first, of value, of interesting experiences, was a way to market their product that didn't

have to necessarily comport to advertising or, you know, those kinds of things. And of course, they really leaned into that, right? And it's those companies that have sort of taken that model.

HubSpot did the same thing, right? When they did inbound marketing, they built entire teams that were just focused on the blog and the event and the book and the community and building out that whole system, where they operated like a media company. So those are the, if you look, and it's funny, in the book, I talk about the accidental versus the purposeful, right? So there are brands out there that we hold up to high standards of content marketing. Brands like Amazon and JP Morgan & Chase and others, that if you went and asked them and you said, are you doing content marketing? They'd go, I don't even know what that is, right. They've not read the books, they haven't been to any events. They don't even know. They just knew that somehow operating like a media company and creating a relationship with audience was a good business strategy. And then of course, you have the purposeful ones who are actually, they read the books, they do the things, they start a strategy, and they do things, and both are succeeding. So the whole point of the book was really, what do both those kinds of companies have in common? Like what are they doing in common? And the one thing that they have in common is that they all have teams that operate like a media company.

SS

So let's jump into that because you do make a very strong case for it, that content marketing is best served as a media operation in service to an audience. And you talk about the ability to monetize that audience, and that does sound awfully like a publishing model. How do you monetize that audience? And your definition of an audience - is it a prospect pool? Is it a marketplace? Is it a community? Is it all of the above?

RR

It's really all of the above because it basically expands our notion as marketers of what a customer is, right? Drucker, Peter Drucker, what was it, 60 years ago now? He defined a business as saying our business is to create customers, right? That is the purpose of a business, is to create customers. And I still agree with that in 2024. But what we have often done, and not done, is to put the word customer into too tight of a bucket, right? In other words, we define customer

as someone who has bought our product or service. And customer is really someone, as Drucker would say, who adds wealth to our business. And so they are all of the audiences, they are all the people, groups of people, who can add wealth to our business. And so that is our audience, right? And so how do we serve that audience? And ultimately, how can they help us serve our purpose? To add wealth to our business. That's how I look at an audience. Now, typically, I'm going to segment that down one level and say they're addressable, right? And call that my callback to my cable TV days. But when I say they're addressable, I mean that you have the 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. They choose whether or not to continue that relationship or not. That's an addressable audience for me. (35.33)

SS

And is the dividing line - I know it's somewhat blurry here because there's a continuum, from someone that's totally unfamiliar with their product to someone who's a fan, clearly - but is the dividing line that the audience has common or shared interests? That is, that's the audience that may not be a customer, but the customer actually has shared needs. Therefore, they need to buy your product or services. Is that more or less kind of correct?

RR

More or less, yeah, more or less. Right. But if you sort of widen that umbrella out, and I love the way you framed that, which is if you sort of take that sentence that you said and sort of then apply that, that could include the analyst community for your particular industry. That could include influencers in your industry. That could include the network of the people who actually buy your product. That would actually help, you know, in other words, if you're a toy company, it's not just reaching the kids, it's reaching the parents too, right. So it's not just the buyers of your product or service, but are all the people who serve the needs and interest of your particular area and can help you add wealth to the business. And so, yeah, the way you framed it is fantastic. Obviously, if they have no relation to what I do at all, I don't really care about them that much. You know,

the tendency there, of course, is to perhaps maybe open the umbrella a little too wide. But that, I think it's, then you start to say, okay, well, if our audience is X now, how do we start to niche it down into what is our biggest priority? Like, what are our business priorities here? Is it actually putting more leads in our funnel, making more people aware of what we do, making the analyst community aware of what we do, making the press available, and those are all audiences. But where's our biggest business priority in terms of the audience that we need to reach, like right now?

SS

So, sticking with this topic, you also say in the book that ... that you really need a cultural shift in an organization to make this happen. In fact, I think at one point you advocate that really you should start from scratch, just rethink everything. And by that, I mean, I take it you mean, learning to become a media operation, a publisher. That's a big transformational leap, and certainly would explain why a lot of companies sort of have held back in a total full-on commitment to this concept, right. It's asking a company a lot to give up, you know, 50, 60 years of baked-in marketing practice for something that seems abstract.

RR

Yeah, I mean, it can be, it doesn't have to be. Most of the great content marketing programs that we've ever seen have started out as very modest efforts, right? Usually driven by one or a handful of people in varying sizes of organizations. Now, there are some that dive headfirst into it and make a full scale transformation of the entirety of their marketing department. But that's really rare. It's usually that it's some group that gets together and operates. Now, the challenge is usually - and this goes back to our question of where do most companies trip up? - is that what most companies will do, the ones that are struggling will hire that group, right? They'll hire a bunch of journalists, or they'll hire a bunch of content experts or production experts, and they'll make a team out of it. And let's say they even call it a content marketing team, whether it's one or two or ten people or whatever it is. But then those people become that coin-operated, that on-demand vending machine of content for everything, right? And so immediately they're producing because they're good at content, right? And as I've said, 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 that it's helping with standards, with operations, with processes, and that operation is the important part.

So, looking at it as a “We manage the blog” – great! What is the goal? What are the objectives? How does it operate? How does it work? If it's simply, and I was speaking with a university team, speaking of something that's not out of the traditional business realm, where the two people that were in charge of, sort of, content marketing for the university, their job was to manage this blog, right? But that wasn't their job. Their job wasn't the operations of a media operation called a blog. It was basically to be the filter for all the professors and employees of the university who wanted to submit content for the blog, right? So they were just a dam or a filter. So it wasn't a strategy, it was just a catch-all, right? It was just managing enough water to fill a bucket at any point in time. So it didn't work, right? So changing the operation or the process, not necessarily the amount of resources associated with it, was the important part of that. (40.41)

SS

And that's one of the gifts of your book, I think, is you go pretty deep on process and we're going to get into that shortly. But one of the tension points, if I may put it that way, is this dichotomy between what brand marketers really want to say - they're sort of the customers if you will of the content marketing group - and they want to promote how great their products are, clearly – and that dichotomy between what they want to do and what customers actually want, which is really, “How can you make my life better?”, right? So there's that massive distance. How do companies resolve that tension? And it's part of the transformational challenge, obviously, going to a media operation. Who serves as that honest broker? Do companies need a Chief Content Officer? You argue in the book for, and quite convincingly, I might add, for an Editorial Council. In one of your columns, you even, I think, promote this concept of an editorial product manager.

RR

That's right.

SS

Because that broker is going to have to be a unicorn with some marketing - someone like yourself, someone with marketing savviness - combined with some creative juices. They've really got to represent the best of both worlds in many respects for this to work.

RR

Yeah, ultimately. So it comes down to two things, both which are exceedingly rare, to be honest in today's modern workplace, which is, one, having goals and objectives that align with whatever it is we're trying to do, right? So in other words, it's not always about a conversion of a sale or the conversion of a person into a lead, et cetera, et cetera, so, but it often is, right? And those are fine, right. I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't do great ads or great marketing or great direct calls to action to say, become a lead “buy now, discounted”, all the things that we know in direct marketing. So let's put that to the side for a moment, because we kind of understand that.

So what we're talking about here is content marketing, ultimately, and the content marketing, the thought leadership piece of it, which is not talking about our product or service, not talking about a direct call to action to buy now, but rather delivering value through the expression of our content in some way. And so understanding those goals and objectives and where they overlap and where they need to merge and where they need to fit together. That's the business of the marketing strategy. And there has to be a marketing strategy, integrated marketing strategy to sort all that out. The challenge on the content marketing side, just to your point, is that there's often no one who can say no, right? And whether that's a Chief Content Officer or somebody, what we always call it is “the arbiter of good”, right? There needs to be someone or some people that are ultimately the arbiter of what good looks like. Now whether that's one person, a Chief Content Officer, who says this is good, it can go, or whether it's a council which is going to do all the horse trading and all the things that they need to do to say, okay, this is good, this is what we're going to prioritize, and this is what we're going to say. So there needs to be an arbiter of good there. And in many cases, because there's no - and this comes back, I know it's kind of beating a dead horse - but it comes back to standards and operating procedures and all of the sort of documenting what it is we do for a living because there's no standards, there can be no arbiter of good. Right? In other words, when sales says, “I need a fresh new ... I don't need a white paper, I need a better brochure”. If there's no standards against that or no objectives that have been set against either of those things, then he's right, they're right.

Right? They do need that because that's what they need right now. There's no way to go back and go, no, you don't need a new brochure. What you need is a better white paper because we haven't taken the time to build in a strategic operating process where we can measure all the things that we're doing so that I can actually create a standard for you to say, no, your gut is wrong on this. We need to be doing this, right? So, everybody's right and everybody's wrong, when there's no objectives set and no arbiter of good, thus everything we do is sort of okay and we just throw enough against the wall and see what sticks. (45.11)

SS

It also falls into the whole debate on brand building versus performance marketing, short term versus long term...

RR

Of course, 100%.

SS

I mean, budgets are being bled into performance marketing and drained away from the idea of long term brand building. And I think content marketing suffers as a result of that because really it's building brand equity over time, right?

RR

Absolutely, yes. I mean, it is crazy how we're still having this debate 70 years later over what's better, brand building, long term brand building, or short term performance marketing. And of course, they're both important. The question is not a question of either/or, it's a question of balance. And the question of balance in any given context, right? And so what do we need more of today? What do we need more of tomorrow? What do we need? Balance. It's funny. I wrote about this one time, which is balance doesn't mean equal. Balance means that we are applying the right level of weight to each one in the context of what we have, that is balance. You know, when you've got the person on the tightrope with the big stick that they're walking across the tightrope, it's not always straight across. That's not balance. It's offsetting what it is I need in the moment. That's the true magic of having an integrated, evolving, 24/7,365 marketing strategy, is it can balance itself as it needs to in the moment based on what it is that's needed.

SS

Yeah. In other words, there's no fixed 60/40 formula forever. It adjusts over time based on the growth and evolution and maturity of the business.

RR

Yeah. And it's, unfortunately, the short term often wins out because the long term feels like a value play, right? It feels like, you know, and if you don't put constant attention to

the long term value, it ends up always moving out the time horizon, right? There's that wonderful Chinese saying, the best time to plant a tree was 100 years ago, and the second best time is yesterday. Right? And so that's the problem with something like content marketing is the best time to start content marketing was five years ago. The second best time is yesterday, right? And so you've got to apply certain - because it is a long term play - you've got to apply some constant level of pressure to it as you can't fully turn it off, otherwise you're starting from zero again.

SS

Well, and I think it also goes back to this funnel management mindset that most marketers have. And I want to get into this a little bit because, again, one of the points you make in the book is this focus on the audience as an asset, which I totally believe in, but, you know, the same could be said of a relationship marketing strategy. Right? The payoff there is really long term growth in the value of a customer. And this goes back to the conversation we had not too long ago about this whole concept of audience versus customer. Is one really a subset of the other? Is relationship marketing really the goal here? Build relationships over time, and content is one aspect of that overall experience. So therefore, if you have a strong relationship marketing strategy in the business, or a very customer centric business, it's an easier case to make, to invest in that quality content.

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, right? And so, you know, I wrote about this last week, or the week before, which is we've been talking about relationships in digital marketing since the earliest days, right? Going back to our original sort of the 2010 to when social media started. I can remember speakers being up on stage and they would say, you know, ah, relationships are bullshit, right? Because nobody wakes up in the morning and says, "I need a better relationship with my butter provider", or "I need a better relationship with my generator provider", you know, and that's true. And it 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 need or negate the importance for the butter provider or for the generator provider to have a relationship with us. Because no matter how brief, there is a relationship there. When they purchase that stick of

butter or when they purchase that generator, that window of time in life, we do have a relationship with that particular customer. All we're trying to suggest 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 wider, it needs to be more meaningful. So if I'm the butter provider or if I'm the generator provider, it's incumbent upon me to create reasons for my consumer to have a deeper, more meaningful relationship.

Now, if I'm butter, it doesn't need to be that much more meaningful or trustful, or a deeper relationship. If I'm a generator provider and I'm selling something that's seven figures to somebody who's going to only buy that generator once every five years or something like that, well, it's a more meaningful relationship, right? It's definitely something that I need to have a different level of trust on. This is why you see something like a B2B company developing, not just a how to run your generator, or not just developing how to do this work, this product, or why our product is so great, but teaching engineers to be better engineers, or teaching electricians to be better electricians - that keeps the relationship alive and a reason for it. So when they are in that small buying window, they are the ones that are top of mind in a very commoditized crowded marketplace. That's it in a nutshell, right? Is, we need to widen out the time window that we have a relationship with customers so that we have more of a chance of being top of mind when they actually are in that buying window. And if you just sort of take that, look at it... (51.26)

SS

Exactly. If you're not, you're substitutable. If you're substitutable,...

RR

That's right.

SS

...you're a commoditized product driven by the lowest price. I mean, Red Bull is your best example of differentiation by associating yourself with sponsorship of an activity, a sport that's meaningful for a big segment of the population, and talk about a commodified category, energy drinks. And they still stand out with their brand for sure. That's the argument. I want to get into the idea of experiences, and I do want to dive into a couple of the models and frameworks in your book just to have you, give the audience here, a bit of an overview on that and certainly a reason to buy the book, which I highly recommend...

RR

Thank you for that.

SS

It seems to me that we're evolving, yet again, from an era where the focus was on owned media to a focus on experience, right?

RR

That's right.

SS

That's all you hear about today, differentiated experience. So owned experiences, if you will, that you actually promote through owned media. So if you own the media, you can promote the event. Salesforce, Red Bull, again, , examples, certainly examples of that. And I do mean experience in the broadest sense of the word. That is, content consumption can be part of that experience just as well as anything else. Is that a good way to sort of look at this and in fact build the business case here, that content is a way to differentiate your experience from the next guy's experience?

RR

That's right. And you can find, because the next question that a CEO or a CMO would have is, "Okay, in what part of the journey?" - it goes back to what I was just saying, right? Widening out the sort of window of the relationship. Right? What part of the experience do we need to widen it out from? Where is the center of our challenge and where do we need to widen it out from? If we're new, if we're a brand new startup, it's pretty incumbent upon us to widen out that awareness window, right? To start to develop a relationship with people who don't know what we do, don't know who we are, don't know our company name, don't even know what it is.

When I was at my company in the early days of 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 thing was to educate people in terms of what the business model. I had plenty of arguments with CFO's at client companies who could not. I mean, this sounds weird today, but at those days, they could not grok the idea of how a software product delivered as a cloud service, a subscription based service, would fit into the way that they would basically monetize, or sort of account, do the accounting, for the way that they bought software, right? Because for them, it was always a capital expense. Boom. That's a capital expense, and away they go, right? It was like

a subscription. It was so alien to them, right? So awareness and education was primary for us to sort of drive that widened relationship, to develop sort of the openness to that particular model.

If I'm a well established brand, like an auto brand or a generator brand or something that's been around for a million years, rain gutters, or whatever it is that you sell, it's probably not at the awareness stage. Everybody knows they need rain gutters, everybody knows that they need a new car. Everybody knows that the value of having those things - you don't need to drive awareness, what you're trying to drive, is reasons to buy from me, right? And so mine is commoditized. I'm a roofing company, and so I have to differentiate my experience from those that are down the street. So it's that middle of the funnel, that middle of the journey, that needs to be widened out so that you can actually have that relationship when they're in that buying window, and so on and so forth, through loyalty and through use of the product and back around to re-up or resubscribe or resell or whatever it is, again, to buy more products from that same brand. Applying that part of the customer's journey around what it is you do for a living, and then finding that experience that can help widen that and deepen that relationship at that particular level, that's the real trick. (55.52)

SS

So, and just picking up on this, in the book, you have a couple of different frameworks that really struck home for me. At the highest level, you have this idea of three pillars of content strategy, and you name them: Communications, just what we were talking about, Experiences and Operations, which you were alluding to earlier. Can you just provide a brief overview of what you mean by those three pillars. I know the book goes into great detail, but just a sort of thumbnail sketch of what those concepts mean.

RR

Sure. And what I wanted to do there was sort of provide, like, literally for any marketing students that are out there, old or young, was the idea of what are the 4 P's here, of what we're talking about. What is the product, place, price and promotion of the content marketing idea? The operation - we spent so much time talking about - well, what is that operation? How does it work? What are the pressure points? What do we model against? And so the

idea of three pillars comes down to one sort of ... let's visualize in your head sort of a Venn diagram, right? A three circle Venn diagram where there's overlap in both circles and a center circle. And so you've got the left one, which we would call coordinated content. Content as a capability in your business. Right? So this is the model. This is making sure your people do the right things. And this is the coordination of content. This is not having the team be good at content, but having the team help the business be good at content. We need to coordinate all that communication. We need to do all the things that we need to do to have everybody working together in a common way to actually do that. That means charters, that means skill sets, that means all the things that we think about when we think about that level of coordination.

Then on the very opposite side, we have, okay, what are they being coordinated about? Right? If we're coordinating ideas in the one, what's the very far end of that? And that's what we call Experiences, right? Where we're looking at different kinds of expressions of that content, whether that be a blog post, whether it be a PDF file, whether it be a video, whether it be a podcast, whatever the expressions are of those ideas and packaging them 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, quote unquote, content products that will actually exist out into the world and how our consumers will actually get to it. And in the middle, straddling all of those things, are what we call Operations or content orchestration, right? Which is where we're basically waving our baton around through the idea of the creation of standards, through the creation of workflows, through the creation of applying technology, applying the idea of training, and all of those kinds of things. An operational model that says how we bring those two things together, bringing those two things together. And so each of those pillars. And we don't need to go into it here, but each of those pillars then have, basically, pressure points, if you will, things to ask yourself to say, are we doing this? Are we not doing this? Are we doing this? Are we not doing that? And you can

see where you have the bigger weaknesses. Right? So we can apply sort of that product place, price promotion idea and say, where are we weak? Where are we strong? And where do we need to fill gaps?

SS

So you do have 4 P's, though, in your book?

RR

Yes, I do.

SS

Performer, Promoter, Professor, Poet.

RR

Yes. I couldn't resist! I'm a sucker for alliteration, I have to say.

SS

Yeah. And I love the idea of Poet ... poetry. So, again, can you just provide here for folks a brief overview of each of those ideas, concepts? (59.44)

RR

Sure. This comes in this chapter that's really built on business storytelling and how to express those ideas, in those experiences, right? Which is, what are we doing? What impact are we trying to have on an audience of the content? Right? And this comes down to a question, which is a classic question, which is, when we talked earlier about that arbiter of good, well, what is arbiter? What is good? What does good look like? And often comes the question of saying, well, what defines good content? And, of course, what defines good content is the objective that it has on the impact of the audience, right? So if you ask, for example, a movie producer, what is good content? He'll say, oh, that which puts butts in seats, right? Paid butts in seats, right? That's good content. In other words, it doesn't matter how stupid it is. If it's an Adam Sandler comedy or whatever, if it puts butts in seats, it's good content. Then you say, ask that to a teacher. And the teacher will say, well, it's that which educates or that which imparts knowledge in a successful way to a student. Doesn't matter how popular it is. Doesn't matter how many butts in seats it is. It has a specific goal and objective. Ask a salesperson what good content is, that which sells something. It persuades somebody of something. You ask somebody who's, for example, an auteur or an artist or something, what is good content? They'll say that which moves or that which creates an emotion or that which actually moves someone to do something they didn't before. It tells a great story.

So, with all those in mind with business content, what I did was I sort of broke those down into, when we're assembling

these kinds of experiences, what are the attributes of four different categories, right? One, the Poet, which has the most attributes, by the way, that's content that changes behaviour. It basically is built to engage you at an emotional level and either change a behaviour or change a belief that you've come to believe, right? This is the highest level of content, where we're trying to actually change someone's mind on something, right? We are trying to inspire someone to do something. Then, of course, you have what we call Professor content, which is meant to teach something. That's the second highest order, where you've got a lot of attributes that are there, and it's meant to - the content has to, the structure of it has to - impart knowledge, it has to impart wisdom so that you have experience, knowledge, and bringing those things together. Then as you move up sort of what we call the pyramid there, you end up with the idea of promoter content. And that is simply to promote something, right? So you've got old world, new world, boom, there you go, and away you go. And then Performer at the very top, which is, it's literally just supposed to draw out an emotion from you, right? So think of a great juggling act or think of a great music that you've heard. 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. And what you want to do is sort of pull all of those things together so that you're actually filling out all the attributes of a piece of content so that you can pressure test ideas. Like, I have a wonderful idea for something. Well, what's its goal or objective? Well, its goal or objective is to teach someone something. Ah. Let's look at the Professor content, and let's apply these attributes and see which ones are most appropriate.

SS

Well, yeah, it is a great framework and unique, too. I really haven't seen that any other place. We're almost out of time here, Robert, and no conversation about content is going to be complete these days without some mention of AI. So forgive me for that ...

RR

Of course.

SS

You know, there is clearly a trend here that Generative AI will displace or replace or become the engine, if you will, for a lot of lower level content, but that the storytelling that you've just been alluding to, the poetry, if you will, still will remain more of a humanistic responsibility. What's your

perspective? How will AI change how content is produced and people's perspective on it? Is it just to take out costs and just generate all this low level content, or will it evolve into something more than that?

RR

Well, I think the real answer here is that anybody who says they have an answer is fooling themselves, right? I mean, I think the answer is, we don't know yet. That's the real answer. But that's not very satisfying for a podcast, for sure. So let's try and answer it as best we can, which is, at the moment, what we can see is: So the first thing that I absolutely know for fact is that AI itself is not a strategy, right? AI is simply an opportunity. It is a question, not an answer. And so the real question, when we look at teams, when we look at businesses, when we look at content creators and how they're going to integrate AI into their content creation process, they're not looking for an AI strategy. They need to sort out their content strategy, of which AI might be an innovation of. And so without knowing your content strategy or without understanding what it is you currently do from a process from an operational standpoint, you can't understand how AI can be effective because you don't understand the question, right? And so that's our first always, to any client who says, how can we be better with AI at content? I say, well, let's talk about your content strategy and how you operate right now, and let's see the documentation on that. And they'll say, "Well, we don't know. I mean, content just sort of happens in our business". And it's like, then you don't understand the question then, right? You can't understand the question if you don't know what the question is. And so that's the first step.

So I think where we will see AI sort of begin to make real inroads is, of course, in helping speed the idea of iteration in that content creation process, right? Whether that means looking at AI as a research tool, which is, you know, as I've tweeted before, it's your tweetable moment, which is creating content is the least interesting thing that generative AI does, right? So to me, it's much more interesting as a research assistant, as a way to summarize documents, 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. And so, I always think that there's an application of creativity of you, and then how AI helps me be more of me is really the tool that it will become.

SS

Well, it's hard to imagine AI being as eloquent as yourself, I have to say.

RR

Yeah, some people would argue with that. Yeah.

SS

You're a terrific writer and it comes through in everything you do. And I just absolutely revelled in spending this past hour with you. As I say, big fan. And hopefully you'll continue to lead this industry in the right direction. It's a big ask, becoming a media operation for a business, having worked inside and for a lot of businesses over my career, but I, , have to think they'll eventually see the wisdom of it for sure.

RR

I hope so. I have big hopes. And as I've said, we have a responsibility now to do content well. Right? It's not just an opportunity, but 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. And that is, I would say, I used to say that content marketing was the biggest opportunity that businesses are not availing themselves of. And now I've switched that to put a little more urgency of it. And I say content marketing is the biggest responsibility that businesses have that they're not availing themselves of.

SS

I so completely agree. And just because organizations, businesses have to become more customer-centric and content marketing is a way to think about that. Right?

RR

Yes that is right

SS

So thank you so much for your time. Robert, it's been a pleasure, a delight. I thoroughly enjoyed the book. I continue to enjoy everything you do. The podcast is a lot of fun to listen to. So you're an absolute treasure for the industry and I want to thank you again.

RR

Thank you so much, my friend. It's been a real pleasure.

1. Source: NYTLicensing

2. Joe Pulizzi, 2009, McGraw Hill

That concludes my interview with Robert Rose. As we learned, where most organizations go wrong with content marketing is they view it as a Trojan Horse – a way to get customers to lower the drawbridge and let them inside the gates. Companies set up their content operations as content factories in servitude to brand marketing and sales. No one is charged with understanding the content needs of information seekers. So content is produced almost randomly, and invariably fails to resonate with the intended audience. A more strategic approach is to think first about what customers might value and then to organize content creation around those needs. To do that, organizations have to free up the resources to turn their content teams into publishing units more closely attuned to audience interests. Only by doing so will organizations break through the content clutter and turn audience attention and engagement into a lasting relationship with the brand.



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