



Ditch the PITCH

Out with in-your-face advertising,
in with branded content

BY CHUCK KAPELKE

ILLUSTRATION BY SHAW NIELSEN

Videos. Blogs. Advertorials. Infographics. White papers. According to the Content Marketing Institute (CMI), nearly three-quarters of business-to-consumer marketers are producing more content now than last year — and those companies that consider themselves effective at content marketing already are investing even more.

“Content marketing is getting a new resurgence because there are no barriers to entry in the publishing field now,” says Joe Pulizzi, founder of the CMI, which produced the report *B2C Content Marketing: 2014 Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends — North America* in conjunction with MarketingProfs.

“What you’re seeing is a transformation, as marketing departments are starting to look and feel more like the publishing industry.”

While marketers are flocking toward creative content in droves, CMI’s research found that fewer than half of companies actually have a strategy in place to guide their efforts. That’s unfortunate, because a coordinated content program can be a powerful weapon in the digital age: It can reduce the credibility gap among consumers who are increasingly skeptical and adept at clicking away, and it can grab the attention of casual information seekers who are already in a learning — and sharing — mindset.

“Content marketing is based on pull, not push,” says Andrew Susman, president of Studio One, a New York-based content marketing firm, and founding chairman of the Interactive Advertising Bureau’s Content Marketing Taskforce. “You show respect for people, and you get respect back. All our measurements show that when consumers select in, the marketing message is more effective.”

What’s It All About?

Companies that are getting it right with branded content are reaping the benefits. Consider the Cleveland Clinic, which in October 2013 alone attracted more than 1 million unique visitors to

BRANDED CONTENT 101

To clarify, “content” in this article refers to media — articles, videos, podcasts, blogs, e-books, and so on — that are paid for by companies and are branded, to a varying degree, but are also intended to be consumed voluntarily. This concept can be confusing because, as Andy Goldberg, global creative director for GE, points out, “the truth is, everything is content.”

In this sense, a 30-second spot that disrupts the flow of a television show is not content, but a 30-second YouTube video entirely meant to be shared online is. The point of content is to provide storytelling that attracts, rather than annoys, and to fit into the flow of the average media consumer’s experience.

Although it is branded, content seeks to be as engaging as the billions of bytes of non-sponsored content from which today’s consumers can choose. “Most of us think we’re just competing with our competitors, but that’s the least of our concerns,” says Joe Pulizzi, founder of the Content Marketing Institute. “We’re competing with viral YouTube videos, we’re competing with Candy Crush. We’re trying to get the attention of people who have unlimited options to educate and inspire themselves.”

Content can be used to build a reputation for thought leadership, as in the case of IBM’s white papers detailing compelling efforts to build a “smarter

planet”; for sharing recipes and living tips, like P&G’s Home Made Simple; or for creating communities of like-minded customers, like the American Express Open Forum for small businesses. The concept is to keep readers’ minds as engaged as before the moment they clicked over, to provoke thought and provide utility, and to drive home (albeit subtly) a brand’s message.

— C.K.



Creating and managing content can be complex and confusing for advertisers who are used to blowing their horns as loudly as possible, and marketing teams need to have the right pieces in place to pull it off.

its Health Hub, a website full of articles, infographics, blog posts, and other content, nearly all of it produced by the hospital’s own doctors, nurses, executives, and staff members. A key part of the clinic’s strategy is to have a body of content “lying in wait” for when people find themselves in need of specific health advice, explains Paul Matsen, chief marketing and communications officer for Cleveland Clinic. “We run more than 100 distinct search engine marketing programs by disease and condition, and we have more than 100 medical guides for diseases and conditions that people can download,” Matsen says. “We’ve seen some of the greatest lifts in national awareness that we’ve ever seen. The more people are familiar with us, the more we get into their consideration when they actually need care.”

Content can also be used to establish credibility among select target audiences. For example, General Electric has built an online center of polls, infographics, and articles centered on topics like trends in manufacturing and the future of health care, partly to attract government and industry leaders who might be reading, say, *The Economist*. In fact, GE’s site resides on Economist.com, and looks and feels like *Economist* content. “Rather than going to publishers as an advertiser to line up inventory, we wanted to go into a more native and

integrated play,” says Jason Hill, director of international advertising and content for GE. “We want something that is always on and reaches the right audience. We’re shaping the reputation of the company by driving what people are learning about us.” (See “GE Enlists Top-Tier Documentary Filmmakers to Capture Stories on Innovation,” page 24.)

Still, while branded content has enormous potential, woe to the company that wastes its time and money on content that is perceived as amateurish, deceptive, too sales-focused, or — worst of all — winds up being ignored completely. Creating and managing content can be complex and confusing for advertisers who are used to blowing their horns as loudly as possible, and marketing teams need to have the right pieces in place to pull it off effectively. The following are some tips for your content marketing efforts, based on insights from experts and marketers from ANA member companies.

Be Worthy

According to Ann Handley, chief content officer for Los Angeles-based MarketingProfs and co-author of *Content Rules: How to Create Killer Blogs, Podcasts, Videos, Ebooks, Webinars (and More) That Engage Customers and Ignite Your Business*, content needs to meet at least one of three criteria. First, it should be useful (“It makes

- A coordinated content program is a powerful weapon in the digital age.
- When consumers select in, the marketing message is more effective.
- Great content is useful, enjoyable, and inspiring, and sees the world through customers' eyes.
- Timely and relevant content adds value.
- Build a strong team and a smooth highway for creating and distributing the message.
- Keep investing and experimenting.

the readers' lives easier, makes them smarter, provides a tip/trick/lifehack," Handley says). It should be enjoyable ("It's not painful to get through and ... if readers pass it along or it makes them laugh, all the better," she says). And it should be inspiring ("It's not what anyone else would do, and maybe it breaks the mold a bit," Handley says).

Perhaps most important (and challenging) for marketers is the requirement to ditch the pitch and determinedly not focus on your products and services. Great branded content has to maintain the delicate balance between telling your story and leaving yourself out of it. When the Cleveland Clinic posts content on its nutrition blog, all the words are about eating healthy, with the tacit message that the hospital's doctors are approachable and knowledgeable. Another famous example is Red Bull, considered a leader by experts because of the beverage company's ability to splash its name across click-worthy videos like Felix Baumgartner base-jumping from space. "Red Bull has more than five million subscribers to its magazine; the company sells content at a profit," CMI's Pulizzi says. "It's a media company that never talks about the product. Instead, they talk about what it means to be a Red Bull customer: daring, aggressive, and getting the most out of life."

Content can often be more valuable when it is timely and relevant, as Thomson Reuters has found with its paid publications. "When our subject matter experts developed some reports around the tax implications of the Defense of Marriage Act and the Affordable Care Act, the reports generated more than 6,000 leads for our salespeople — far more than usual," says Jen McClure, senior director of social and digital media at Thomson Reuters. "Not only did we see the thought leadership profile of our sales team rise, but we saw our share of voice rise in that space over our competitors."

Content should deliver value in a way that feels fun and engaging and captures the quick-bite nature of the Internet, and it should have a clear voice and sense of style. To that end, General Mills has set up sites like *Tablespoon.com*, which bills itself as a source for "recipes, food hacks, how-tos, and party ideas" and exudes a fun, community vibe. Recipes are categorized with badges like OMG (for recipes like waffle sushi rolls and candied bacon chocolate

chip cookies) and LOL (for noodle weenies and corn-on-the-cob cake pops). "Our best content surprises and delights the consumer, and helps make their life easier, healthier, or richer in some demonstrable way," says Marc Belton, executive vice president for global strategy, growth, and marketing innovation for General Mills. (See "Making Content a Priority," page 21.)

While generating content in a "native" context can be useful for keeping readers' attention, it's important to be transparent, not deceptive. "One could make an argument that an advertorial is worse than an ad, because at least an ad tells you what it is," Studio One's Susman says. "It's the importance of proper disclosure, and treating the audience with respect because they're smart, rather than attempting to create content traps that pull somebody in without delivering on the promise. If you can give a gift and not spoil it with overcommercialization, people will reward you with trust and loyalty, and we have the sales figures to prove that."

As for deciding what to write about, the best source of ideas might be your own customers. Look for conversations online to tease out questions and ideas that are percolating. "We ask our salespeople to identify trends or questions that they are being asked a lot, as there's an opportunity to provide value," McClure says. "We want to bring those conversations back into the organization so our team can address those knowledge gaps."

No matter what medium or method you choose, the emphasis has to be on providing value to the reader. "Great content can generate a high degree of customer empathy," MarketingProfs' Handley says. "It truly sees the world through your customer's eyes."

Build the Highways

While the content itself is crucial, marketers also need a system to get their messages out. For a role model, look to Charles Schwab, which has a long tradition of publishing content (its member magazine, *On Investing*, is one of the highest-circulating personal finance magazines in America) and a proven track record of building networks of influence in the digital age. The company sets up a system of spokes — including targeted social messages, search ads, and paid

► Q&A WITH GENERAL MILLS' MARC BELTON

MAKING CONTENT A PRIORITY

As the executive vice president for global strategy, growth, and marketing innovation for General Mills, Marc Belton has helped the food company develop a robust platform of online content, including websites like Tablespoon.com and BettyCrocker.com. Belton holds overall responsibility for the company's global strategy; analysis, development, and pursuit of future growth opportunities; and leadership of the General Mills global marketing functions, including Gcom, Consumer Insights, Centralized Customer Marketing, and the company's health and wellness initiatives. We asked Belton for his thoughts on how content fits into his strategy.

Q. What is the role of content marketing in General Mills' overall marketing mix, and how is this role changing?

A. Content has always played a role in how we build brands at General Mills. We have a long history of developing and delivering content in the form of cookbooks, magazines, recipe clubs, television, and radio shows, all in support of building brands such as Betty Crocker, Pillsbury, Gold Medal Flour, and Bisquick, to name a few. We also developed and distributed sports and entertainment content in the form of radio and television broadcasts, athlete profiles, and trading cards in our early days of marketing Wheaties. Later, we developed original programming in the form of animation and cartoons (Underdog, Rocky and Bullwinkle, and many others) as well. Today, we are continuing this tradition through our social and digital channels.

Q. Which of your content marketing initiatives have worked particularly well, and why?

A. It sounds simple, but great content always must start with a great idea, something that truly provides a service, a shortcut, an insight that matters. Our best content surprises and delights the consumer, and helps make their life easier, healthier, or richer in some demonstrable way.

Not surprisingly, some of the better content is tied to recipes that deliver a "wow" in minutes or with ease. And we also have great non-recipe content — that is, content tied intrinsically to the brand's purpose. The Trail View series from Nature Valley, which won at Cannes last year, is a great example of this. The intimate visual trail guide takes you to great trails in our national parks for a one-of-a-kind experience.

Q. What are the keys to a successful content marketing program?

A. First, you must always start from a very solid and strategic brand foundation, starting with the brand's purpose. Content for content's sake is useless. But content that is tied to the purpose and that makes the brand more relevant to the consumer in some relevant — and surprising — way is the content that is worth every penny.

Second, a team that truly understands the brand, the insights, the brand's champions and advocates, the competitive space, etc., is critical to the content development process. There is an art and



science to content. You must respect the craft of creating content, and do not assume that everyone knows how to do it. Quite the opposite is true.

Q. From an organizational perspective, how is your content team structured?

A. We are still evolving in how we are organized around content development and distribution. We have a fully staffed set of capabilities organized around delivering content for the digital, social, and traditional media marketplaces. This is a mix of external agencies and experts, as well as an internal team of experts.

Q. How do you measure the ROI of your content marketing?

A. I suspect we are like most ANA marketers; we are relentless in understanding the return on every marketing investment — or at least being honest and highlighting when we are experimenting and learning. The one thing we love about the digital space is how trackable it is, how honest the results are in terms of giving you a clear view of what resonates and what falls flat. So we literally track the virality of everything we do.

Q. What are the biggest challenges in this space, and what advice do you have for other marketers?

A. Do nothing until you are sure of your brand's purpose and overall foundation, and make sure your team is similarly grounded. I would also advocate for making sure that your culture is truly prepared for how content is different from the development of other forms, like advertising. Content allows you to start small and experiment in the social space, with the idea of learning and developing as you listen. This requires a different agility, a willingness to try things that aren't perfect on the first blush, and a keen sense of listening and observing what people do with the content. This latter part is where you receive clues on how to build meaningful content that will resonate. I also would tell others to reach out and grab the wisdom and best practices in content from teams inside and outside of your company — such as the consumer insights team, your agency partners, your media agency partners, your media partners — all the individuals who are actually very knowledgeable about your brand and the marketplace. You just have to engage, and you can learn a lot.

— C.K.

Cleveland Clinic and Red Bull have notable examples of effective branded content that tells the story of the brand while ditching the pitch.

media, such as links generated by syndicators — that lead readers back to its online hubs for articles, polls, and more.

“We try to create the right content and deliver it to the right people at the right time at the right stage of the journey,” says Helen Loh, senior vice president of owned media, digital, and content marketing at Charles Schwab. “We test different formats — videos versus articles, pictures versus infographics — to get the optimal mix. Instead of buying a banner ad, we’ll post something like, ‘Avoid China because its subprime bubble is growing. Find out what you should do.’ Based on early indicators, such ads are multiple times [more effective] in terms of the engagement rate versus the industry average for banner ads.”

Moreover, Charles Schwab has defined a series of “journeys” to describe who should receive which content when. “Journeys are defined by the segment as well as the mindset,” Loh says. “If you visit one of our reports on

investing in China, it’s unlikely that you’re ready to open an account with us as the next step, but if you saw an ad about a retirement plan, that path is shorter. It’s about designing that path to action between engagement and getting to that end goal. That’s where the art of content marketing really comes in, nurturing that relationship all the way to the destination.”

Charles Schwab is also careful to catalog all its content with appropriate tags so that “when you syndicate it or distribute it through other channels, it shows up in the right place,” Loh explains. “It’s about building the highways, making sure that the content can travel to all the right places and making sure we have the right infrastructure for that.”

So how can your company follow suit? Start by looking into the rapidly

evolving tools for promoting your brand’s content alongside editorial content. One of the most popular options is Outbrain.com, which provides recommendations to readers at the bottom of popular publications. Huggies, for example, saw a lift in traffic to its hub by using Outbrain to lure readers with the headline “When Should My Baby Start Walking?” and Tide has attracted audiences with headlines like “Five Chores You Must Do Every Month.”

“Brands see content as a top-of-the-funnel engagement platform, but they get stuck because they don’t get the audiences they were expecting,” says Lisa LaCour, vice president of global marketing for Outbrain. “Because of the nature of how we fit within a publisher’s environment, brands get a highly engaged audience. We reach 180 million unique visitors per month in the U.S. alone. If you’re on CNN and click on a link to a story, you don’t care if it’s paid or not; you just want to be delighted when you click on it.”

Of course, the initial invitation to consume a piece of content is hugely important — think of it as a billboard along the highway — and for the link to receive the viewer’s click, it needs to have a hook. Marketers should spend time to craft — and, more importantly, test — different headlines, images, and graphic styles, and lean on the power of personalization when possible. Outbrain’s own research about headlines has found interesting insights: For example, the word “who” fares better than “why” or “what,” and words like “hot” and “worst” generate more interest than others. Outbrain has also found that images improve the click-through rates of its news headlines.

It’s also important to craft headlines and content that are search-engine friendly, understanding that your distributors are algorithms. “Our content teams are taught to build a hook into the headline but to make it very clear and concise so there is no ambiguity about what that story is about,” says Thomson Reuters’ McClure. “Cute headlines, puns, and other clever marketing don’t work because search engines won’t find them, or they will show up out of context.”

Build Your Team

As it stands, few marketing organizations already have high-performing content teams. “Marketers need an infrastructure in place for content creation, content distribution, and content management,” Susman says. “There’s more to it than



► CASE STUDY

GE ENLISTS TOP-TIER DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS TO CAPTURE STORIES ON INNOVATION

As a multinational company that makes everything from appliances to airplanes, General Electric is driven to sustain its reputation as an innovator. Partnering with documentary filmmaker Morgan Spurlock (*Super Size Me*), the company enlisted directors around the world to create compelling, three-minute films about innovation. The oh-so-lightly branded films have been shown in film festivals and garnered millions of views online.

THE CHALLENGE

In recent years, GE recognized that “for many people, the perceptions of GE are out of date,” says Jason Hill, director of international advertising and content for the company. “GE is more than 130 years old, but we are constantly reinventing ourselves and are at the leading edge. We like to think of ourselves as the world’s oldest startup.” GE was challenged with finding a way to make sure the company’s branding efforts are as forward-thinking as the products it makes. GE’s ultimate goal, Hill says, is “that our brand marketing lift the curtain and show the innovation and forward-thinking spirit of invention that are core to what the company does.”

THE SOLUTION

In 2011, GE partnered with Spurlock to give documentary filmmakers in different countries the same assignment. “The brief was incredibly open,” says Andy Goldberg, global creative director for GE. “We reached out to filmmakers and said, ‘Go tell three-minute stories about innovation, to celebrate ingenuity and incredibly smart thinking happening all around the world.’ It is content marketing and it is somewhat branded, but at the heart was the creative



GE's Focus Forward films — including *Fire with Fire* and *The Invisible Bike Helmet* — have generated more than 15 million views.

concept to tell stories in a different way.”

Through this project, called Focus Forward, GE has achieved the impossible by getting its sponsored content into major film festivals around the world. As of mid-2013, the films have generated more than 15 million views, 30 million shares, and 1.5 billion media impressions. Among the more popular videos is *Fire with Fire*, about a team of doctors who treated a leukemia patient by injecting her with a modified form of HIV, and *The Invisible Bike Helmet*, about two Swedish women who developed a bicycle helmet that pops open like an air bag. Comments on the Focus Forward Vimeo site talk about how the invention is a “game changer,” and the film received countless shares and earned media mentions.

No one points out the fact that GE’s logo appears at the start and end of the film, or that the company funded the

video through a larger content program. And that’s part of the idea. “These were stories supported by GE, but they’re not about GE,” Goldberg says. “It’s more of a reflection of a belief system, a GE equation. We look at what the world needs, we invent and build things that matter, and all of that combined makes the world work better.”

In addition to building brand awareness, GE established new relationships with outstanding communicators who can support the company’s future work. “We ended up with 30 films that have been critically acclaimed and watched millions of times online, and they have credibility in the film community,” Goldberg says. “We now have relationships with many of these filmmakers, and they are now more open to doing work for us that’s more GE focused, because they see how much respect we have for the creative and filmmaking process.”

WINNING FACTORS

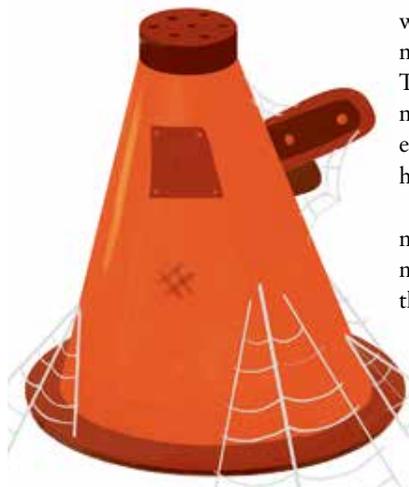
As with most branded content, the impact that Focus Forward has had on the bottom line is difficult to assess, but Goldberg says “there has been strong positive association with the Focus Forward program and with GE, and we’ve gotten great brand awareness. It’s been helpful with brand building.”

Focus Forward worked, and the videos were widely shared because they were interesting and thought-provoking, and not at all focused on making a sale. “You need the ability to know what’s going to resonate,” Goldberg says. “What one person thinks is great content might be too much about the brand. You want something that sparks interest so that someone says, ‘I need to see that again.’ Without that creative tension, you’ve lost it.”

— C.K.

“You need to have people understand how to write for digital channels. It’s a big shift from making a white paper that’s a PDF to creating something meant to be shared through mobile devices. Those are different skill sets.”

— Jen McClure, senior director of social and digital media, Thomson Reuters



meets the eye, because the team has to be creating, executing, promoting, measuring, and optimizing content. Ideally, a marketing team would have staff dedicated to each category, but even major players like Dell still create 70 percent of their content externally.”

As a first step, experts agree, it is vital to have a director conducting the orchestra. “Petco has a chief content officer, and SAP has a VP of content strategy,” CMI’s Pulizzi says. “You need to have someone who is accountable.”

Having leadership buy-in across departments is also essential; along these lines, Schwab has set up a committee of senior leaders who convene on a regular basis just to discuss their content strategy. “Have the people who are creating the content working closely with the people who will be distributing the content,” Loh says. “Making that connection is harder than it sounds. It’s important to have that partnership within the company as well as the processes to connect the two.”

Another key is to have a documented strategy in place, by looking at your business and marketing goals together. “Consider your baseline marketing objectives,” Pulizzi says. “Likes or social mentions or web traffic are pretty insignificant measures, when really your goal is one of three things: Does it drive revenue in some way? Does it reduce costs? Or does it lead to creating happier customers? Once you have that goal, then you can figure out what metrics help you achieve that goal.”

As to the team that executes this strategy, it can be either internal or external. What matters is that your team is adept at creating digital content that connects with people on credible terms. “You need to have people understand how to write for digital channels,” Thomson Reuters’ McClure says. “It’s a big shift from making a white paper that’s a PDF to creating something meant to be shared through mobile devices. Those are different skill sets.” McClure recommends that companies consider hiring experienced journalists who get what it takes to find a hook, frame a story, and maintain credibility.

Cleveland Clinic, which has a largely internal process, has set up an integrated content marketing team (combining creative and digital) that churns out ideas and helps the hospital’s employee/contributors develop their stories. The team has an editorial calendar and a structured process to approve what goes online. “We make sure every story fits our guidelines, and that it’s been scientifically

vetted and approved by the medical institute that oversees that area,” Matsen says.

Relying more on external sources, GE leans heavily on a dedicated set of writers and editors hired by The Economist Group to generate its content, which Hill says helps maintain a consistent tone and style. GE chose the publisher based on its demonstrated compatibility after asking a dozen global media companies to provide a cross-channel, cross-region proposal and be responsive once on board. “We meet with this dedicated group each week,” Hill says.

Whether your writers and editors are in-house or outsourced, most important is that they are constantly collaborating and maintaining their focus on the end user’s experience.

Stay Social

Social media platforms are potent resources for distributing content, and not surprisingly, CMI’s study found that b-to-c marketers will be using all social media platforms more frequently than they did last year. Yet while nearly 90 percent of marketers are using Facebook, fewer than 20 percent have been using sites like Foursquare, Vimeo, and Vine. These emerging networks could represent opportunities to reach new audiences and forge new frontiers.

MarketingProf’s Handley points to the example of Airbnb, the online room-sharing site, which crowdsourced compelling online videos using Vine (a platform that lets people create six-second videos), then stitched them together into a 4.5-minute clip. “Many times, companies launch a content strategy and then expect people to find them, or they expect something great to ‘go viral,’” she says. “Use social to engage and amplify, and also to begin to seed your audience and, ultimately, grow your database.”

Bear in mind that social media is not just for blasting out links to content, but rather it should serve as a two-way street for conversation. Thomson Reuters includes feedback links and share buttons on all its content, and Cleveland Clinic regularly surveys its Facebook users to figure out their “passion points” and uses the stories that get liked and retweeted to shape their choices in the future.

Content and how people respond to it can provide insights to guide your company’s broader strategy. Studio One’s Susman relates how his firm helped pet food company Iams set up an online dog and cat community that lets users share content: “The vast majority of dog

ILLUSTRATION: SHAW WELSEN

4 WAYS TO CREATE KILLER CONTENT

Ann Handley is the chief content officer for MarketingProfs and coauthor of *Content Rules: How to Create Killer Blogs, Podcasts, Videos, Ebooks, Webinars (and More) That Engage Customers and Ignite Your Business*. She writes at AnnHandley.com.

Here, she shares her thoughts on what brands should be doing to generate and capitalize on content.

1. Shift to a customer-centric viewpoint.

Whatever content you create, understand that your content shouldn't be about you; it's about what you do for your customers. That's Marketing 101, but we tend to forget that when it comes to creating content. Focus your content on how your business adds value to people's lives. How does it shoulder their burdens? How does it ease their pain? Said another way: Make your customer, not your product, the hero of your story. (As an example, Handley points to a Skype ad that tells the story of two women on opposite sides of the planet who are each missing a left arm. Yes, they use Skype to stay connected and get to know each other, but that receives an incidental mention in the tear-jerking story, which has been widely shared.)



2. Put someone in charge. Maybe that's an editorial director, a content marketing manager, or a chief content officer. The title isn't as important as the need to have someone on staff who is empowered to make content decisions and has the resources to do so. A content team should have a team lead, and reporting to that person are an editorial director, curator, syndicator, analytics expert, and site manager, with content producers, content creators, and designers working for them. This isn't necessarily about adding head count, but it is about defining roles within a content marketing effort.

3. Find good writers and storytellers. I'm a fan of hiring people who are skilled at creating content (former journalists, especially) because they understand the mindset of creating content to connect with an audience. [Handley cites Kapost, a content management company with a dedicated brand journalist, who posted an article when one of its competitors was acquired by Oracle. This "newsjacking" strategy thrust Kapost into the heart of a story and demonstrated the company's openness and presence in the space.]

4. Experiment with new tools. I love the example of Airbnb, which used Twitter and Vine to create a fun bit of storytelling for its service. Written by writer/filmmaker Ben York Jones and crowdsourced via Twitter, the story centers on the journey of a white sheet of paper. The resulting four-and-a-half-minute film was released on Airbnb's blog, on its Hollywood & Vines website, and on the Sundance Channel. It's beautiful, and it's useful, enjoyable, and inspired. (And remember, this is marketing!)

— C.K.

contributors sent in images and videos, and the majority of cat owners contributed with text," he says. "Maybe that tells you about the cognitive state of each audience, and maybe you can then use that to shape your packaging. [With content,] you learn not what people are trying to avoid, but what they're seeking."

To get the most out of social, make sure your content is usable on mobile devices. McClure and her team at Thomson Reuters have found that graphics that can be inserted directly into a social media stream, such as a Facebook timeline, are "the most resonant, most commented upon, most successful pieces of content" the company produces. "They are quick bites; you can get a whole story in a concise way. You need to think of how different content works in different channels," McClure says.

While measuring the ROI of a social media and content strategy can be tricky, the key is to go back to your overall objectives and follow all possible paths between engagement and sales. "Do an analysis of your customer base," Pulizzi recommends. "If someone receives your e-newsletter, are they spending more, sharing more, or doing anything that's different? You want to figure out how content creates better customers. Take the time to do that analysis. A lot of companies are looking at things like open rates, but you want to know what's different between a subscriber and a non-subscriber."



A final note of advice: Keep investing and experimenting, and remember that a failure today is a worthwhile learning experiment for the future. "We had a much earlier version of the Health Hub, called Cleveland Clinic Health, a few years ago, and it was a failure," says the Cleveland Clinic's Matsen. "We didn't have a social media strategy like we have now. We didn't understand content, and it flat out didn't work. But that didn't stop us from experimenting and iterating and eventually finding success with our Health Hub."

Once you get started, content marketing is a process that never ends. "Content marketing evolves outside of any campaign," Pulizzi says. "If you launch a content marketing initiative — a podcast video series, a content platform like P&G's Home Made Simple, or Amex's Open Forum — that goes on forever. These are media properties. You've got to have a long-term outlook if you're trying to build relationships with customers." ■

