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Content Marketing Strategy. Definition, Objectives and Tactics

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The interactivity dimension of the internet has allowed the customer to be a part of the marketing of any brand, product, services, or other entity. To this extent, digital inbound marketing encourages a customer-centric perspective in which organizations have to focus on helping consumers and involving them in the value-delivering process. An important component of digital inbound marketing that creates value and engagement for consumers is content marketing. The aim of this paper was to provide an examination of 'content marketing' and to gain understanding of the key dimensions of this digital marketing strategy, with its underlying tactics that can be implemented by companies in online environments. The insights presented in this study contribute to the content marketing strategy, as a viable strategy to other interruptive marketing techniques.

Keywords: *content marketing, digital marketing, online marketing, marketing strategy, digital inbound marketing*

JEL Classifications: *M31*

1. Introduction

Sharing online content is a key part of consumers' modern life. All over the world, people send news and interesting articles, share YouTube videos, and read and forward reviews of hotels or restaurants to their family and friends. This social transmission of content and information has an effect on consumers and brands. Consumer-to-consumer interactions in online and offline environments have an effect on attitudes, preferences and eventually buying behavior of people (Berger and Milkman, 2012).

With the advancements of technology, marketing has incorporated the interactivity provided by technology to create two-way communication channels with current and potential customers. Using internet-based technology, marketing encourages the active participation of consumers. Jutkowitz (2014) points out that we are on the verge of transformation for brands and organizations because of content, because nine out of ten companies are using content marketing to engage, interact, convert, and remind consumers of its products and brands.

Content marketing goes beyond selling and traditional marketing campaign and it focuses on providing consumers with value in the form of relevant information and ideas, using publication or syndication of text,

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images, videos and other content forms. Therefore, content marketing is changing the way companies sell and communicate with its target audience.

In online environments, an organization cannot focus on a push marketing strategy, and should direct its effort on a pull marketing strategy because it would invite more interactions and participations with consumers (Eldeman, 2010). To this end, content marketing can provide a valuable avenue for any company that also has an online presence.

However, as a starting point content includes the text that forms webpages, as well as the rich media content, such as videos, podcasts, user-generated content and interactive product selectors (Smith and Chaffey, 2013). Digital content marketing was defined by Pulizzi and Barrett's (2008, p. 8) as "the creation and distribution of educational and/or compelling content in multiple formats to attract and/or retain customers". Jefferson and Tanton (2013) agree that a paradigm change in marketing philosophy is required, and suggest that this change will imply switching from a selling perspective to a helping perspective, which can be achieved using content marketing.

Content marketing has been identified as part of digital inbound marketing (Opreana and Vinerean, 2015), in the quest to "attract potential customers, retain existing once, and transform aspirational consumers in advocates by developing various forms of content that prospects consider valuable and will use the created content in order to access a website to learn more or come into contact with a marketing offer."

Moreover, as indicated by Holliman and Rowley (2014), a considerable proportion of organizations do not allocate resources for content marketing. As the authors describe, there is confusion in comprehending this concept and its importance for this digital marketing strategy. Moreover, Holliman and Rowley (2014) emphasize the challenges of operationalizing content marketing because of its complexity.

B2B and B2C marketers are giving content marketing high priority, especially because Google's search engine algorithm updates (Moz, 2017; Google, 2017) that focuses on the content of each webpages, considering multiple dimensions of the content, such as relevancy, date of publication, propagation on social media, internal and external links, to name a few.

Therefore, content marketing is of high importance for the development and evolution of marketing, from an academic perspective, and for its application in online settings to achieve business goals, from a practical perspective.

2. Premises of Content Marketing

2.1. Definition of Content Marketing

Originally, the term 'content' is rooted in the publishing, where words, images and motion graphics have to be sufficiently interesting for the target audience to seek out the publishing platform whether it is a newspaper, magazine, TV or radio channel (Holliman and Rowley, 2014). In terms of bringing this concept into online and digital marketing, Handley and Chapman (2011, p. 21) state that content counts as "anything created and uploaded to a website: the words, images or other things that reside here". Focusing on the users (and potential customers) of a company's website, Halvorson and Rach (2012, p. 13) propose that content is "what the user came (to your website) to read, learn, see or experience".

Whereas these definitions explain content in general or in a digital framework, the concept of 'content marketing' is still in the process of being developed as a viable online marketing strategy. Thus, definitions of this term need to be explored. Pulizzi and Barrett (2008, p. 8) proposed one of the first definitions of content marketing: "the creation and distribution of educational and/or compelling content in multiple formats to attract and/or retain customers". Later, Rose and Pulizzi (2011, p. 12) suggested: "content marketing is a strategy focused on the creation of a valuable experience".

Content marketing has been part of the digital marketing strategy of companies operating in online framework for many years. As a result, a global content marketing education and training organization was founded by Joe Pulizzi (2012), accompanied by a website, namely Content Marketing Institute (CMI). The definition proposed by Content Marketing Institute for this new concept is:

"Content marketing is a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly-defined audience – and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action."

Thus, more shortly presented, content marketing is the process of creating personalized valuable content to an interactive, engaged, and targeted audience (Content Marketing Institute, 2017). Therefore, the content marketing is focused on providing consumer value, while also exhibiting relationship marketing concepts (attracting and retaining customers) focused on achieving the profitability goals of a company. In

fact, Pulizzi (2013) highlighted the difference between content created and shared online and content marketing: content marketing reflects the organization's business or monetary goals.

In his book, Järvinen and Taiminen (2015) propose that content marketing "refers to processes of creating and delivering content (i.e., text messages, pictures, videos, animations) to target customers in ways that add value and engages them in relationships with the company."

Similarly, Du Plessis (2015) re-iterates the importance of consumer engagement in valuable relationships, and also introduces a new concept associated with content marketing, namely brand storytelling, proposing the following definition: "Content marketing is a strategic brand storytelling technique aimed at changing consumers' inactive behavior through unobtrusive, engaging brand conversations in earned media." This definition focuses on influencing consumer behavior in favor of a particular brand by interacting with it, and developing a relation using B2C interactions on earned media (most notably, social media platforms).

Wuebben (2012, p. 5) also focuses on the brand's story and considers it a key component of content marketing, by defining this concept as "the story of your product or service and propels your brand into the hearts and minds of your prospect, customers and others".

On the other hand, Rowley (2008) proposes a new concept 'digital content marketing' that highlights important the connection is that exists between 'digital content marketing and e-marketing, Internet marketing, web marketing, and related disciplines. She proposes: "*Digital content marketing is the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating, and satisfying customer requirements profitably in the context of digital content, or bit-based objects distributed through electronic channels*" Rowley (2008). Therefore, Rowley (2008) classifies content marketing as a management process that should be focused on identifying the factors that satisfy the needs of customers, in order for the company to gain profit using electronic channels.

2.2. Characteristics of Content Marketing

Focusing her research in a business-to-business framework, Rowley (2014) identified three characteristics of content marketing, namely "Not-paid for", "Paid-for", and "Social". These characteristics can also be extrapolated to business-to-consumer marketing:

- "Not-paid for" content is developed by an organization that aims to achieve: customer engagement and developing relationships, knowledge, selling of products and services.
- "Paid-for" content is developed by an organization and has the same aims as the ones presented above, and in addition it also aims to sale the digital content created.
- "Social" content is created by brand community members who aim to express their views; to learn from the organization and other users.

3. Developing a Content Marketing Strategy

3.1. Digital Marketing and Content Marketing

Digital marketing uses modern digital channels to communicate build a deeper relationship with customers (Royle and Laing, 2014).

Due to tech development, content marketing has become a preferred online marketing strategy for many companies. Brands and companies can publish and share compelling brand stories on various online platforms that aid in achieving business goals related to customer conversion, acquisition or retention, brand visibility and value, or increased sales.

According to Halligan and Shah (2010), content marketing involves creating valuable content from the needs of potential buyers, who actively have engaged in searching information about the commodity.

Content marketing is also related to social media marketing because the created content needs to be shared, propagated and syndicated on various social platform to increase its visibility to a large audience. Initially companies used social media to share advertisements of their products, however, nowadays social media is used a two-way communication platform (Kilgour et al., 2015), and a facilitator of content marketing.

As a facilitator of an inbound approach, of reaching, attracting and retaining consumers organically, Halligan and Shah (2010) and Odden (2012) note that customers are the ones that actively seek a particular brand because it offers content that educates or entertains them. Odden (2012) goes further in suggesting that customers expect brands to invest time and effort in developing a long-lasting relationship with them, even before their first purchase.

Rowley (2014) notes that a content marketer also takes the role of publisher, and we would also add that the role would also extend to that of an editor of content. Moreover, Baer (2012) mentions this change because "all companies now find themselves in two industries: the business they are actually in, and the

publishing business”. Similarly, Scott (2011) highlights the fact that as publishers, marketers need to carefully identify and define their target audiences and then consider the type of content that would fulfill these needs.

3.2. Content Marketing Objectives

Content marketing objectives must form part of a defined content strategy, defined by Bloomstein (2012, p. 101) as: “the practice of planning for the creation, delivery and governance of useful, usable content”.

Rose and Pullizzi (2011) established the following objectives of a content marketing strategy for any organization that engages in this technique:

1. brand awareness or reinforcement;
2. lead conversion and nurturing;
3. customer conversion;
4. customer service;
5. customer upsell;
6. passionate subscribers.

Content marketing is the foundation for achieving trust among targeted audiences. Trust is further identified as one of the primary drivers for the success of content marketing (Pulizzi, 2012; Scott, 2011; Holliman and Rowley, 2014). Peppers and Rogers (2011) identify the four elements of a content marketing strategy that could develop and sustain trust for a company or a brand):

1. shared values (with the customer);
2. interdependence (mutual value in the relationship);
3. quality communication; and
4. non-opportunistic behavior.

3.3. Factors that Lead to Viral Content

In developing content, marketers’ mission is to design successful viral marketing campaigns that will help them develop higher visibility for their brands. Word of mouth and social media are viewed as more effective and affordable than traditional media, but their utility is dependent on the number of people who will forward and share content that helps a particular brand. Therefore, understanding what motivates consumers to share a particular piece of content can help organizations design and develop contagious content.

As Berger and Milkman (2012) identify, one reason people may share stories, news, and information is because they contain useful information for other people. Consumers may share such practically useful content for altruistic reasons (e.g., to help others) or for self-enhancement purposes (e.g., to appear knowledgeable, see Wojnicki and Godes, 2008).

Otherwise, content that encompasses emotional aspects will have an influence on the level of propagation and sharing in online settings. Berger and Milkman (2012) appreciate that people report discussing many of their emotional experiences with others, and customers report greater word of mouth at the extremes of satisfaction. In his empirical research, Berger and Milkman (2012) found that positive content has a higher chance to become viral because people would prefer to be known as someone who shares upbeat stories or makes others feel good rather than someone who shares things that makes others sad or upset. His study also illustrated that the relationship between emotion and level of contagion is more complex than valence alone and that arousal drives social transmission.

More specifically, “online content that evoked high-arousal emotions was more viral, regardless of whether those emotions were of a positive (i.e., awe) or negative (i.e., anger or anxiety) nature. Online content that evoked more of a deactivating emotion (i.e., sadness), however, was actually less likely to be viral” (Berger and Milkman, 2012).

3.4. Tactics Associated with a Content Marketing Strategy

Various authors (Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016; Escobar, 2016; Halligan and Shah, 2010; Pulizzi, 2013) approached content marketing and discussed the dimensions or tactics that can be incorporated in a content marketing strategy. There are various forms of content, from the basic ones, such as video, image, text, to the more specific ones, to the more specific ones, as the ones we will explore in this section.

All content marketing tactics are also related to another aspect of digital inbound marketing, namely search engine optimization, namely certain techniques that should be implemented to increase the visibility and reachability of each type of content.

In any online setting, organizations can choose from a variety of formats and tactics for a successful content marketing strategy. However, these tactics need to reflect the needs of targeted audiences and the

objectives of the organization. The most common content marketing formats and tactics are presented below (Sobal, 2017; Kolowich, 2016; McGill, 2017):

1. **Blog posts.** As the most common form of content marketing, blog posts are published on a website and are then shared on social media, once they are optimized using the premises of search engine optimization. Blog posts should be published on a regular basis in order to attract new and recurring visitors, and they should be focused on providing valuable content for the targeted audience so that it will make readers inclined to forward and share them on social platforms and other websites.

2. **Ebooks.** This type of content reflects a comprehensive and in-depth resource of information on a certain subject for potential consumers, and can provide a new source of credibility for the company responsible for the creation of this content. In online marketing practice, ebooks are considered a lead generation tool because in order for potential customers to access the free resource, they usually have to provide their contact information. As a result, consumers get the opportunity to learn valuable information, and the organization that produced the ebook develops a new lead for their business.

3. **Templates.** Templates and worksheets are used by organizations in online settings to help potential customers with certain issues, by saving them time and effort. By downloading a template or a useful worksheet, companies aid in simplifying a challenge for potential customers, who, in turn, will be more likely to engage with a particular company in the future.

4. **Infographics.** This type of content can organize data in a visual manner, thus providing a more compelling and engaging opportunity to transmit information. Infographics are relevant to large sets of information and data that can be exposed more clearly and easy to understand.

5. **Videos.** This content format has the highest level of engagement and contagion on social media and other websites. Videos can be used as a content marketing tactic to explain certain issues, demonstrate a product or service, or present a topic of interest to targeted audiences.

6. **Podcasts.** Podcasts represent pre-recorded interviews and edited radio shows that are used to debate different topics of interest to a company's target audience. Podcasts are also used for lead generation, by asking listeners to subscribe for updates, thus this content tactic can build an audience and establish a particular brand as a source of expertise.

7. **Guides.** Introductory guides or guides help potential consumers with step-by-step instructions on achieving different goals and task.

8. **Kits.** This content format represents a collection of content with a common subject. Online companies use this tactic to repurpose content that was already published, and aggregating it under one offer.

9. **Tip sheets and Checklists.** This content format provides guidance and concise tips or best practices for potential consumers looking to complete a particular task. Again, this content offer creates the basis for a long-lasting relationships with consumers, who will engage on a continuous basis with a company.

10. **Webinars.** Another content form used by companies to gain more credibility among targeted consumers are the webinars. Usually compiled as a series, webinars provide information on a certain subject and they involve gathering expert and leaders in certain fields to share their ideas on the main topic.

11. **Whitepapers.** Whitepapers are similar to academic papers in their objective, authoritative, detailed and informative presentation of research findings and reports. Ebooks tend to present in-depth content in a creative, visual and often inform manner, whereas whitepapers provide unbiased details on trends or evolution in a particular industry or area of business.

12. **Case Studies.** This content tactic can provide potential consumers with an incentive to convert. Online companies use case studies to share customer success stories that explain how their products or services helped a particular customer.

13. **Surveys/Research Reports.** As another content marketing tactic, companies use surveys and their results to reflect on the perception of respondents on the state of an industry or to persuade potential customers about the features of a particular product or service.

14. **User-generated content.** This content type can take any form of text, images, video or audio that was created by consumers of a brand or company. This content created by loyal customers can then be repurposed and re-distributed with the audience of the organization, to increase its visibility and generate more credibility among customers. More recently, based on the uniqueness of social media, research has focused on the impact of user-generated content in influencing brand reputations and brand development, and brand co-creation (Iglesias *et al.*, 2013; Quinton, 2013).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1. Theoretical Contributions

There is limited previous research about content marketing, and because of this there is a research gap that needs to be filled with a variety of perspectives that help the understanding of this concept. This has led to confusion around the concept content marketing (Holliman and Rowley, 2014).

In this paper, we've established the definitions of content marketing and the premises of this strategy in digital marketing. Content is a key component of online marketing strategies that attract and retain consumers organically. This paper also contributes in providing an understanding of how content can be used in marketing, or more specifically, in engaging customers, which is central to the development of a consumer-centric approach in online settings.

In addition, this study offers further insights into the challenges associated with developing an effective content marketing strategy. The most important challenge relates to the change in marketing paradigm from online selling online, to supporting and helping consumers in online settings, by nurturing each relationship with consumers for long-term success with content marketing tactics.

4.2. Managerial Implications

In online frameworks, managers have many opportunities to engage in content marketing strategies, as the ones developed in this paper. However, the core objective should be expanding the brand using content marketing. Digital content, whether it be "not paid for", "paid for" or social, is at the heart of brand-building processes (Holliman and Rowley, 2014).

To succeed in content marketing, this study showed that managers need to focus on developing brand stories that engage consumers with useful, relevant and valuable content. Turning to value, the research reported in this article suggests the importance of the content being valuable and useful to the audience, and helping them to complete a task or solve a problem (Holliman and Rowley, 2014). Because content implies to some extent web-based information quality, managers can reflect on the five dimensions of qualitative information: usefulness, goodness, accuracy, currency and importance, as suggested by Rieh (2002).

4.3. Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this studies are those commonly associated with theoretical research. The present research has encompassed many ideas regarding 'content marketing' in online settings, however an inclusion of more sources could have provided additional insights. For example, this paper did not discuss the need for content marketing KPIs and metrics and the development of appropriate dashboards for organizations to monitor the evolution of each content format. This aspect represents an intriguing prospect for a future research, with an empirical dimension. Moreover, future studies could also explore the effectiveness of various content marketing tactics in different industries or in relation to the decision making process and finding which content format can persuade consumers based on different stages in buyer's journey.

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