

STRATEGY

SEVEN STEPS TO A CONTENT STRATEGY

second edition



BlogStar is a London based content marketing agency dedicated to providing top quality content marketing services to businesses in many different sectors.

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BlogStar



Generating, publishing and managing content can be resource-hungry process. Even if your company is committed to only a modest schedule of blogs, articles or case studies, someone has to create the content and ensure that it posted and replenished on a regular basis.

And here's the trap. You look at your rivals. You can see they're blogging, posting videos and using social media to strike up a two way conversation with their customers and there's an immediate fear – and its mostly justified – that content strategy equals competitive edge. So the pressure is on to create your own content, perhaps starting with a regular blog by the CEO or video product reviews.

Take a Long, Deep Breath

But at this point it's important to step back, take a long and deep breath and establish some objectives. A content schedule might look like a 'must have' in the face of competitive pressures but unless you are absolutely clear about why you are publishing and what you need to achieve then not only will your strategy be less effective than it should be, you'll also be unable to assess the success of your campaign. And unless you can measure success you won't really have the tools and information to drive further improvements. So the starting point for any content strategy is the establishment of goals. Not fuzzy 'nice to have,' goals but 'big hairy audacious goals' that will make a real and measurable difference to the performance of your company over the short, medium or long term. Ambitious goals not only underpin any content strategy by providing the 'raison d'etre' but they also energize the process. When the goal is seen as important in the context of

the wider business that in itself drives the development and publication of compelling content. A well designed and executed content strategy can deliver across a range of commercially important objectives.

These include:

1. Establishing your business as a thought leader, industry influencer or important source of information. This can be hugely important in industries such as software and IT where customers are getting to grips with new concepts – for example, deliverable via the cloud. By becoming a source of information, a supplier builds brand awareness and trust among potential customers. But this is not a tactic confined to cutting edge industries. In the retail industry, a camera shop or musical instrument shop might feature reviews or instructional videos that create value around the basic sales proposition. And if a camera shop takes the time to show potential customers how to take great pictures, that in turn will build trust, loyalty and ultimately drive sales in the longer term.
2. Driving leads However, the purpose of your content strategy may be much more direct. You may see content as a way of driving leads. For instance, when an accountancy or law firm creates content explaining the latest change in financial regulation or tweak to employment law the purpose is both to educate but also stimulate contact. The article provides the understanding of the issues. An email sign-up is the route to finding out more.
3. Driving Sales. Equally content can drive sales by providing reviews, updates and news of new products on the market.
4. Building a Community. Content strategy lies at the heart of social media strategy. At one level you can certainly use content distributed by, say, Facebook, to drive sales. Arguably, however, that ultimate commercial goal is best served in the shorter term by building a community of loyal followers and ambassadors. Content is the currency that will drive likes on the company page. As such the goal may be to simply increase the number of likes by 300% over a given period while also increasing engagement by providing compelling material that encourages interaction and sharing.
5. Provide Customer Service. Content can also be a hugely important customer service tool. For instance, by providing instructional videos around complex gadgets you not only provide a value-add for the customer but also, potentially, deflect calls from advice lines.

Once you've defined these goals you can put figures on them. A 5% increase in sales or leads, 300% more 'likes', a 10% reduction in calls to customer service hotlines as buyers turn to social media or your forums for instructions or information.

Defining the Conversation



By establishing goals you also define the nature of the conversation you want to have with your customers and the nature of the content itself. Put simply, a company seeking to drive short term sales is likely to deploy a different kind of content from one that is seeking to establish itself as a thought leader.

But the nature of the content will also be defined by your customers and their needs as filtered through the prism of the wider marketplace. We'll be looking at that in later chapters.



Technology is crucial to the effective implementation of content strategy. Or to put it another way, you can spend weeks or months defining and planning a strategy but unless you have tools at your disposal to create, distribute, schedule and manage your material, plus the tracking and analytics software to measure your results, your strategy will not travel very far on the journey from brainstorming sessions and planning meeting to the real world.

Now that sounds simple enough. You develop a strategy and you buy in the content management tools. What could be easier? Well the truth is there are a lot of content management tools out there on the market and the challenge is to choose the right platform for your content requirements. At the most basis level, a content management system – which may also be marketed as a marketing automation platform or an eCRM system should make it easy to create, publish and manage your content.

And the importance of an easy to use creation tool can't be understated. A true content strategy requires a commitment to publishing material at regular intervals and a schedule that seems relatively easy to implement at the planning stage can begin to look relentless when the work is underway.

So if your content strategy involves a twice-weekly blog, the update of product news on a daily basis and weekly e-mail newsletter linking to relevant pages on your site, you require a tool that enables you to rapidly create, upload and manage web pages. Ease of use is essential. A content management system should also allow you to create a look and feel for your content through templates while also making it easy to position assets such as images and videos within your pages.

Then there's the question of channels and depending on your requirements, you may require a system that publishes optimised not only for major web browsers but also for social media.

It's also important to consider scheduling tools. If you're implementing a content-hungry strategy (updates several times a week or even every day with various internal and external parties contributing) a calendar mapping publication dates and workflow will be vital.

A Choice of Systems



A content management system doesn't have to be complex. For instance, Wordpress – which began life as a blogging platform – has evolved into an effective CMS solution. Its USP is ease of use. The interface itself is simple and intuitive and hosting is provided through Wordpress.org. Equally you can use it in conjunction with your existing hosting arrangements.

Wordpress is an open-source product – meaning anyone is free to modify the code and create add-ons and as a result there are a host of plugins available. These include tools to allow you to create forms, schedule and publish podcasts, manage e-mail campaigns or link with payment systems.

Wordpress certainly isn't the only game in town in terms of open-source CMS. - Drupal and Joomla are also widely used – but it remains the most popular.

Putting the Emphasis on eCommerce

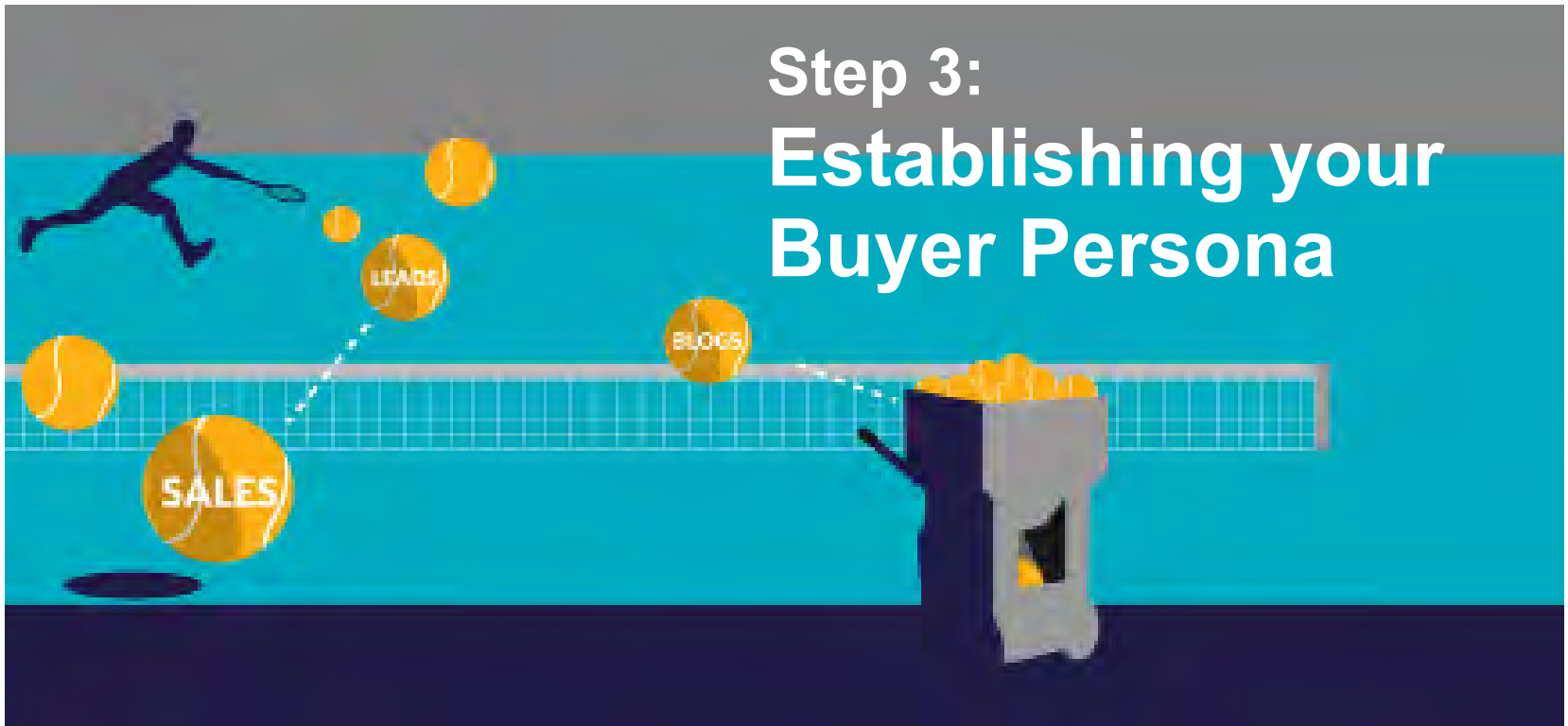


An alternative is to use marketing automation platforms (MAPs) such as Marketo or Hubspot. As with CMS tools these provide the means to create, import and manage content but their focus from the get-go is e-commerce and the automation of marketing processes. In that respect the content management tools available form part of a wider functionality that supports both inbound and outbound marketing.

For instance, Marketo allows you to target e-mail campaigns drawing on CRM data to choose the recipients. In terms of content creation it enables the rapid creation of content-rich landing pages, populated with forms that enable the users to gather leads. A marketing calendar facilitates scheduling and there is integration with social media. Hubspot offers a similar range of features.

Crucially both offer reporting tools which allow users to assess the success of campaigns in terms of leads, sales and engagement and as such provides all the data necessary to hone future content creation.

So the key is to assess the potential CMS options in terms of how they align with your objectives both now and in the longer term. If your objective is simply to educate and inspire customers through blogs or articles, an open-source CMS may be the cost-effective solution. Marketing Automation Platforms and eCRM solutions, on the other hand, offer more for businesses that are using content to directly drive sales and leads.



The content that you post and the conversations you have with customers will to a great extent be defined by your key objectives but within that overarching remit your blogs, articles, videos and e-zines should be tailored to the customer groups that you're setting out to reach.

You probably know quite a lot about your customers already, at least in terms of the broad demographics of age, gender, social class, income, where they live and their aspirations. You may also know a fair amount about their interests, activities, how they spend their leisure time and the media they consume. All this forms the basis of creating the customer/buyer personas, which will enable you to tailor your content strategy to a targeted constituency.

To a degree this information can be “bought in” through market research and surveys of your own customers. Equally a huge amount can be learned by simply talking to customers in store, on chat channels, and telephone hotlines.

Web analytics also plays an important role, allowing you to track customer journeys and slice and dice search terms to build a picture of who your customers are and what they want.

And it can be a moving target. The expectations of customers in mid-recession will be different from those expressed during an economic boom and the public/customer mood can be hard to track. Again, wider market research can play a role, as can the analysis of conversations on social media.

Hitting the Right Note

So why is this important for communications strategy? Well, because an intimate understanding of your target market will enable you to tailor your content in terms of:

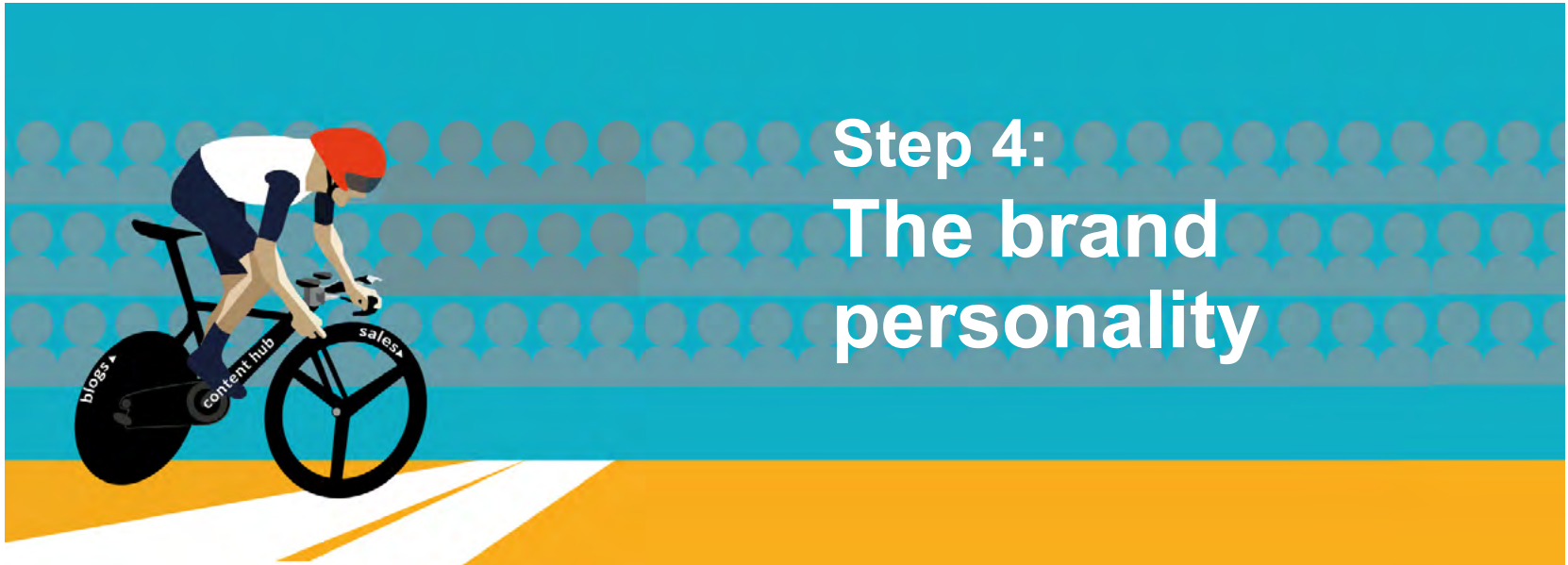
1. Tone. Does the voice resonate with your target audience?
2. Subject matter. Are you talking about the things that matter to your audience? You can see this in terms of product focus but also market positioning. For instance, if your customers are looking for ways to save money or work within limited budgets then a focus on discounts, or money saving strategies could play an important role in your communications. However, if your customer consider themselves upscale, premium buyers, then too much focus on budgets, discounts and money saving could be counter-productive.
3. Distribution. Are you using the right channels? For instance, a content strategy based around printed publications such as customer magazines, will be not be effective if a key group of customers gets most of its information online.

Your market research will give you the raw information that you need to hone your content, but to get the tone, subject and distribution right you need to go stage further and think in terms of the persona. Your target customer is not an amalgam of data but a person.

Some businesses or organisation find it helpful to give this person a name – hence the focus of political parties on esoteric characters such as Mondeo Man and Worcester Woman, each of whom represent the key characteristics of a target constituency that is the focus of a campaign. You can apply similar profiling to e-commerce, even breaking it down to subgroups of your consumers, such as Moaning Lisa who is never satisfied or First Adopter Fred.

It's important to remember that there may well be a number of very different buyer/customer personas and each of them will have to be addressed by your content strategy. Once you have your personas you can begin to think about addressing their needs.

What content do you have that addresses their questions, requirements and interests? What content can you generate? What content don't I have? Those last two questions naturally lead to a gap analysis which in turn raises questions about how to develop a mix of effective material.



Step 4: The brand personality

Let's start with an unassailable fact – namely there is an awful lot of content available to via websites, blogs, apps and e-mail and even if you narrow that material down to the interests and requirements of a clearly identifiable audience, the chances are there's still too much content 'out there' for any individual to consume in the space of week, month or lifetime.

So the challenge is to make your content stand out from that of your competitors. There are many ways to differentiate yourself but one hugely important element is the development of a brand personality for your communications.

An Integrated Strategy

The creation of a brand persona highlights the importance of an integrated approach to content strategy. If your business has been around a while and its products are well known, you probably already have a clearly defined brand or portfolio of brands in the marketplace. At one level those brands will have been developed in-house through company colours, logos, marketing collateral and culture.

Equally, customers take their own view of a brand based on their own experience of the products and customer service. This legacy naturally feeds into content strategy. To some extent your voice will be governed by who your customers expect you to be.

In addition, a content strategy provides an opportunity not simply to build on existing brand equity but to enhance a change of brand perceptions or to tailor messages to subsets of your audience. The key is to develop a personality or voice that is consistent with brand values and aligned with your objectives while also ensuring that the content itself resonates with the chosen audience.

So what are your options? Well, there are various ways to establish an identity, including:

1. **A Focus on Style.** You develop a style that is uniquely yours. If your communications are text based, that could mean placing the focus on arresting, witty or authoritative writing of the type that you see every day in newspapers, magazines or high-profile publications. The same principles can be applied to pictures and video. Develop a visual style that is uniquely yours.
2. **A Defined Personality.** Within the style that you choose can also build a 'personality' for the brand itself or for individuals within the organisation. In the case of a brand/house style you might choose to be an authoritative expert. Equally you could opt for witty, quirky writing, or simply bubble with enthusiasm about the topics you cover. By the same token, a blog or article written by a CEO, founder or head of marketing should have an identifiable individual voice.
3. **Be A Source of Knowledge.** A content strategy can't be sustained on style alone. If customers are to return again there must be substance. So what are you going to offer?
4. In complex areas such as IT or telecoms an effective tactic is to offer more useful information than your competitors. Explain the latest products. Identify trends in the marketplace. Suggest ways and means to solve customer problems.
5. On the other hand, if you're a consumer facing business, knowledge might mean reviews of walkthroughs of the latest products and access to events (say a special screening or product launch) that won't be available through other channels.

Write About What Matters to Your Audience



You've done your market research so you know what your target customers like and what matters to them. You can use a content strategy to address those concerns directly. For instance, what matters to a travel company or airline customer is getting the best out of two day break in a European City.

Content can provide the information on everything from getting around town to the 'must see' sights. Equally, what matters is choosing the right kind of city break across criteria such as culture and the arts, sun, food and drink and nightlife. Good content will not only help the customer make a choice it will also provide the inspiration to trigger bookings.

Express Your Brand Values

There are some organisations that consumers and customer simply 'get behind' because of the values that the brand represents. That might be because (as is the case with Apple) that customers have bought into the idea that the company and its products represent the epitome of high-tech cool. Equally customers buy into businesses offering fair trade or environmentally friendly products for ethical reasons. Building content around unique brand values provides a means to strengthen engagement with your audience.

Little business will launch a content strategy with a blank page. Most will have an existing customer base and profile in their chosen market. The key to establishing an identity is to create a voice that reflects your own view of the company, its values and how it is seen in the marketplace and tailor that voice to the personae of your buyers.



Think for a moment about the range of content you can offer to your customers and the formats you can use to deliver it. First of all there's what you have already.

If you're operating in the B2B space, you may have case studies, white papers, articles, market information and instructional material at your disposal as well as collateral describing the products you make or sell. In addition to text-based material you will probably also have pictures and video. If you're playing in the B2C arena, you may have product reviews, and information, instructional material, inspirational articles, advice on selection (within product categories) and a range of collateral related to marketing campaigns and sponsorship.

For many brands collating and marshalling this content provides a starting point from which to create the new material that will underpin the evolving content strategy.

Then there's the question of how you deliver the content. Options include the website, social media e-mail and possibly also print. In other words, you have a broad range of material, most of which is deliverable across a range of channels. So how do you choose what to deploy to deliver on objectives?

The Sales Cycle

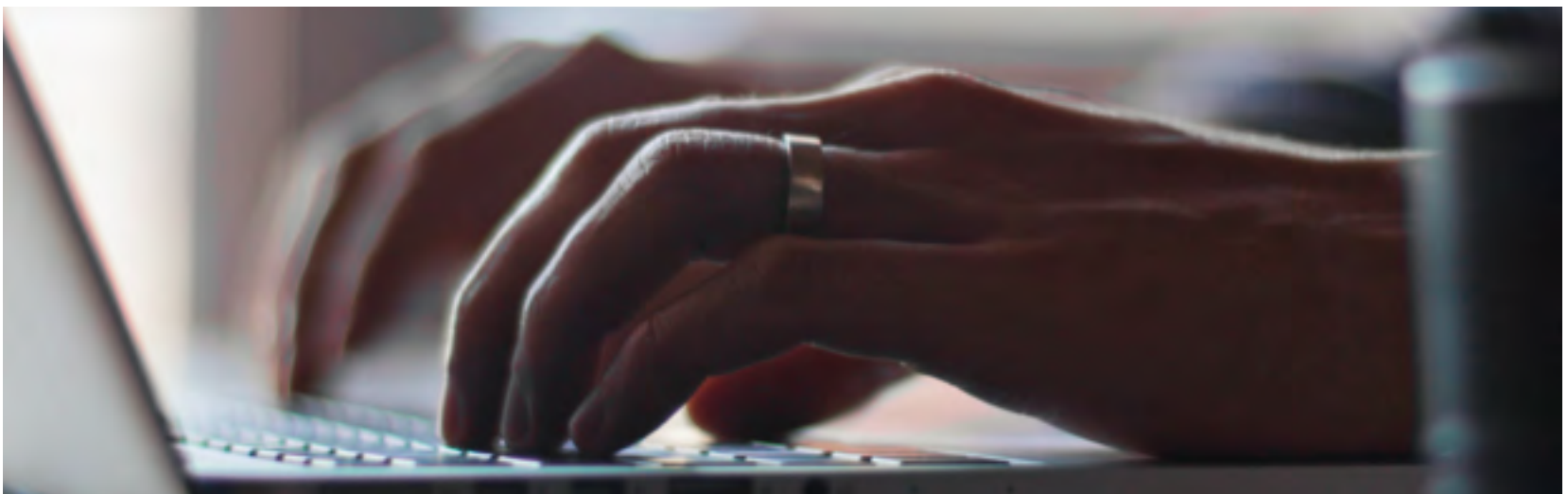
Once again we return to the customer. We've already broken down your customer groups in terms of their interests, concerns, requirements and cultural expectations as a basis for delivering content. But what we haven't looked at is where each customer stands in the sales cycle. This is

important because the customer's position on the journey that leads from mildly interested prospect to a fully-fledged purchaser will affect the kind of content they require at any given time.

If you throw the net as widely as possible, you find yourself addressing a broad community of potential buyers whose profiles suggest they will be interested in your products but to date there is no evidence of contact. You know, broadly speaking, who they are – because your market research has told you – but they have yet to touch base with you. They are perhaps interested in the product area but not necessarily in your products.

Draw the net in a little and you're addressing a tighter community of prospects – essentially customers who have registered an interest in what you have to sell. Filtering down from there we have the hot leads who have expressed an active interest in what you have to offer. A smaller subset of this group will be on the point of making a purchase. Now let's assume for a moment that all of the above are interested (at some level) in what you have to say. That's the good news. But where it gets tricky is that each group will require something different.

The Information Poor



Let's return to that anonymous community of prospects that have yet to make any contact with your business. Let's say, you're selling an IT-product – such as CRM solutions delivered by the cloud. At this stage you can assume the existence of a group of potential customers that have an interest in the product or service type, but no real awareness of your company. And what they need at this stage is information. For instance, they may want to know how cloud computing has affected the CRM solution marketplace and the implications for systems integration and security.

Until they have that information, they won't progress down the road to become hot leads and buyers. The same principles apply to consumer market. Trends being what they are, we can assume that each Christmas for the next few years will see a rise in sales of iPads and other tablets. For those new to this product, the first step is finding out what a tablet can do for them. Again the requirement is for information. And the requirement is for information they can find themselves through search engines. Thus, the most appropriate channels are blogs, social networks, your company website and sites operated by partners or affiliates.

Moving Closer



Those seeking information will scour the web and if they come (via search engines or links to your site) it's an opportunity to provide the information they need in return for a greater degree of two way engagement. The most common way to approach this is offer further information in return for an e-mail registration.

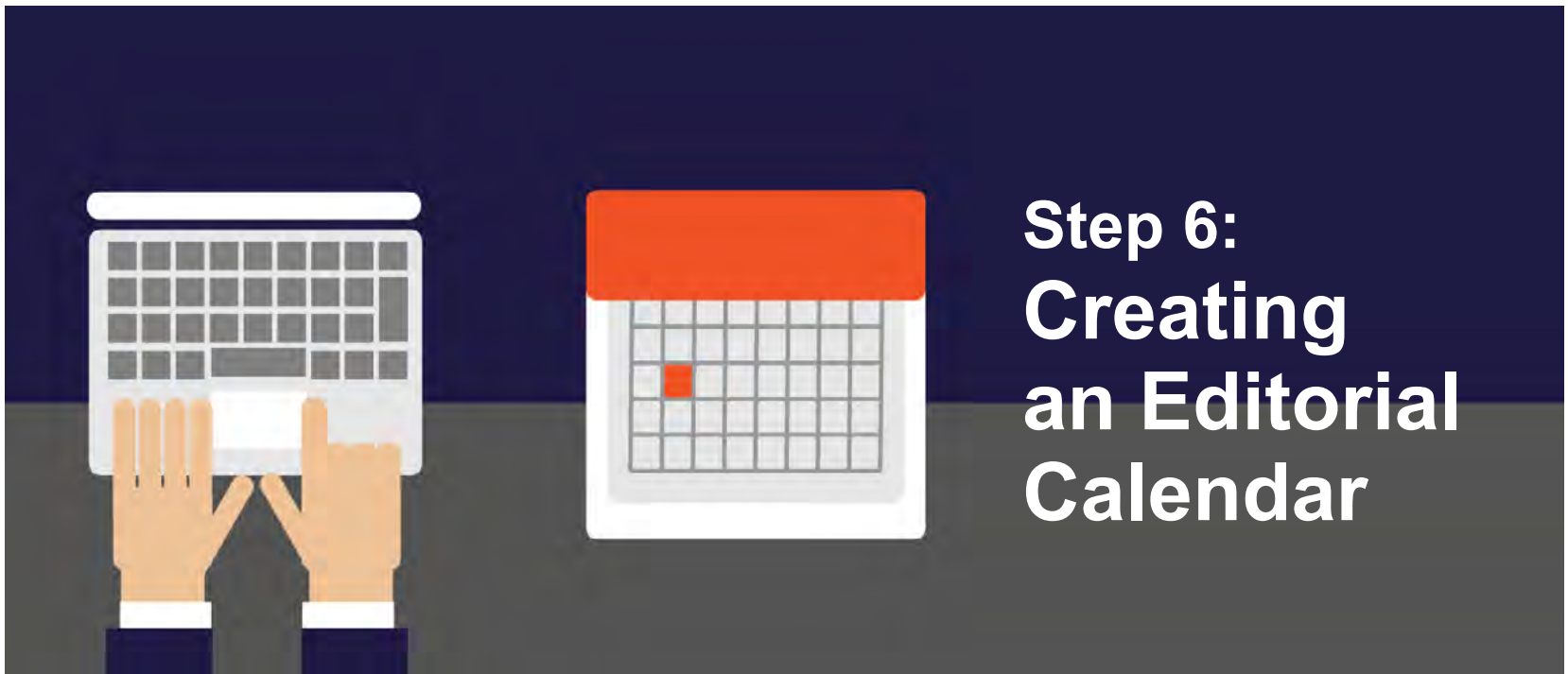
At this stage, you can begin to offer a deeper level of content. In the B2B space that could mean a white paper, or an eBook. E-mail provides a way to push the offer of more information to the client.

Finally when, the prospect becomes a hot lead, the opportunity is there to become more product focused. In the B2B arena, the general market report gives away to the case study (text or video) which demonstrates how your own product can solve a problem.

In the B2C space, this is an opportunity for direct selling through product news, updates and offers. B2C customers follow a similar journey – possibly much more telescoped than their B2B counterparts – but the content mix may well be different.

For instance, in addition to providing information, the process of using content to sell products in the longer-term often revolves around building brand associations. For example, Red Bull providing entertainment themed around adventure sports to attract and engage a section of its target audience.

The lines of demarcation that separate say a distant suspect from an up-close-and-personal hot lead are of course amorphous and selecting the type of content is not an exact science. Content strategy can be honed over time with A/B testing used a means to compare the efficacy of different content types and channels.



You have an over-arching strategy, you have the creation and management tools, you know who you'll be addressing and the tone you'll be adopting across a selected range of content types. Now all you have to do is create and publish the content.

And this is where the planning process moves from high-level strategic issues to the practicalities of producing content on a regular basis over a sustained period.

The danger with any content strategy – particularly when executed in-house – is that in a matter of weeks or months the output begins to tail off. The blog that was once updated once or twice a month becomes irregular. The product news or e-mail newsletter gets done but only when someone has the time to do it.

This isn't because of laziness or any lack of commitment. As any magazine or newspaper editor will tell you, producing content on a regular basis can be a relentless business. Not only do you have to allocate time to the creating and managing your material, you also have to engage in a continuous process of thinking creatively to produce the ideas and concepts that ultimately end up in your blogs, videos, news pages and white papers. And it's very easy to get sidetracked.

Planning Your Schedule

The best approach to ensuring a regular flow of content is to create a calendar or schedule with deadlines, publication dates and (crucially important) topics. The calendar is your plan. And once you have a plan you are much less likely to get blown off course. Just about everything that we've talked about in previous chapters will inform your schedule.

So as you sit down with paper, spreadsheet or the bespoke calendar tool that comes with your content management or marketing automation, you should be thinking about:

1. Your goals in terms of what you want your content to deliver in the short, medium and longer-term.
2. Your target audience.
3. The classes of content you'll be using to address that audience or subsets of people within it.
4. The brand identity you're seeking to create or reinforce.

Identify Topics



The next stage is to identify topics. Let's say your plan is for a fairly simple schedule of content, delivered via regular blogs or articles and aimed at a single, clearly identifiable customer group. Now you begin to identify topics that are aligned with your goals while also appealing to the chosen audience.

The same principle applies if you're creating content for several 'buyer personas' at different stages of the sales cycle. Once again, you identify the topics that will appeal to them and perhaps also the class of media that will be most effective in reaching them along with the most appropriate distribution channels – website, e-mail, YouTube, Facebook, etc.

The next stage is slot those topics, media types and channels into an editorial schedule. In many cases your choice of topics will be time sensitive:

For instance, the deployment of subjects within a publication timetable could be affected by factors such as:

1. The broader marketing agenda. For instance, if your company is planning an advertising campaign or sales drive highlighting certain aspects of the product or service portfolio, the timing of the campaign should be reflected by the topics covered in your blogging schedule
2. New products coming on the market
3. Developments in the marketplace that you might want to comment upon
4. Customer stories – case studies

During this process, it's important to remember that content is not the same as advertising or marketing collateral. So if your company is launching an advertising campaign to highlight a new product launch, the content should approach the subject not as another form of ad but as useful content that educates or inspires the reader or viewer.

The schedule shouldn't necessarily be set in stone. Certainly there should be enough flexibility to embrace sudden or unexpected developments in the marketplace that will be of interest to your audience.

The Deadlines



Content schedules should be planned and reviewed on a regular basis. Some companies do it weekly, some monthly, some quarterly but the end result is a solid framework that will dictate publication and workflow.

The workflow element is important. Publication lies at the end of a potentially protracted process. A blog that is due for publication on October 15 has to be written and also edited, checked and signed off. Your schedule has to allow time for all these stages and they should be included on an editorial schedule. And the more content you create across different classes and channels, the more complex the schedule. For instance, video content will require a schedule that includes scripting, the shoot, the edit and the sign off.

A company that process eight blogs a month, two in-depth articles, two videos and a quarterly white paper, will be dealing with quite a complex workflow. All the stages should be charted on your calendar or schedule. You'll also, potentially, be marshalling a complex set of resources. That's what we'll be looking at the final chapter.



Content creation requires a commitment in time and manpower. Regular blogging – say once week – needn't be labour intensive but it does require at least one person with a commitment to write the material, plus at least one other individual to check and/or edit the content prior to sign-off.

And even if the output is relatively modest, you'll need someone with good writing skills and enough time to adhere to the schedule. Add some additional elements to the blog, such as videos or pictures and you bring more complexity. The pictures need to be either sourced or commissioned (with a brief) and the videos need to be planned, scripted, shot and edited. Now let's look at something that's a bit more ambitious.

From banks and accountancy firms to telecoms companies and fashion retailers, online or print magazines are great way to entertain and educate customers while retaining absolute control over the content. But to produce a magazine, you'll need writers, sub-editors, picture editors and photographers, plus an editor or project manager to oversee production and control workflow. You'll also need a sign-off process.

Factor in additional elements of a content strategy, such as distribution via social media and search engine optimisation and it's becomes apparent that you'll need to draw upon a range of specialist skills. In other words, budgeting and allocation of resources is crucial to a successful content strategy, even if the only resource required is a member of staff to write a blog and another to check it and sign-off.

Any process of resource allocation should begin with an assessment of what you've got already in terms of content, in-house expertise and third party assistance. In terms of content, you can look at articles, white papers, videos that have already been created as well as material that is scheduled to be produced in coming weeks and months. Some or all may be usable.

In terms of people, you should also look at in-house talent and expertise. Many larger businesses will already have editorial and content management skills in their marketing departments while others will be working with third parties such as agencies.

The next stage is to compare what you've got with what you'll need to deliver your strategy. It's a map and gap exercise, which will allow you to work out costs (and ultimately the ROI) and the additional resources required to deliver on the editorial calendar. Arguably if a content strategy is central to your marketing goals, the most effective approach to marshalling the resources you need is to work with an agency.

As with all outsourcing arrangements, the company should essentially own the strategy in terms of objectives and editorial direction, with the agency handling the execution. In that respect, the agency would hire and brief writers, photographers, etc., process and deliver the content and administer any changes ahead of sign off.

The advantage of using an agency – or a large in-house marketing department – is that it will have the skills, tools, and workflow expertise already available.

Summary

There are many good reasons to put content creation at the heart of a marketing strategy. If you're a specialist company – perhaps working in software or accountancy – a blog or quarterly online magazine provides an opportunity to educate customers with the kind of in-depth information that probably won't be available in a newspaper or news-stand magazine. What's more, the content will be focused on your company, your voice and your customers.

Equally, if you're a fashion retailer, content provides a way to inspire customers, engage with them emotionally (often through social media) and inspire loyalty.

These shouldn't be fluffy aspirations, though. A content strategy should earn its keep by delivering very definite and pre-determined outcomes.

And to achieve those outcomes you need to plan. Identify the objectives, define your target market, establish how you're going to reach them in terms of brand identity and media type and then execute well-resourced and scheduled flow of high quality copy.

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