COMMITMENT AND INVESTMENT IN AUDIENCE

Four important content marketing lessons from Email Marketing & Marketing Automation Excellence 2017, a global benchmarking research to support businesses to improve their email, marketing automation, and content marketing ROI

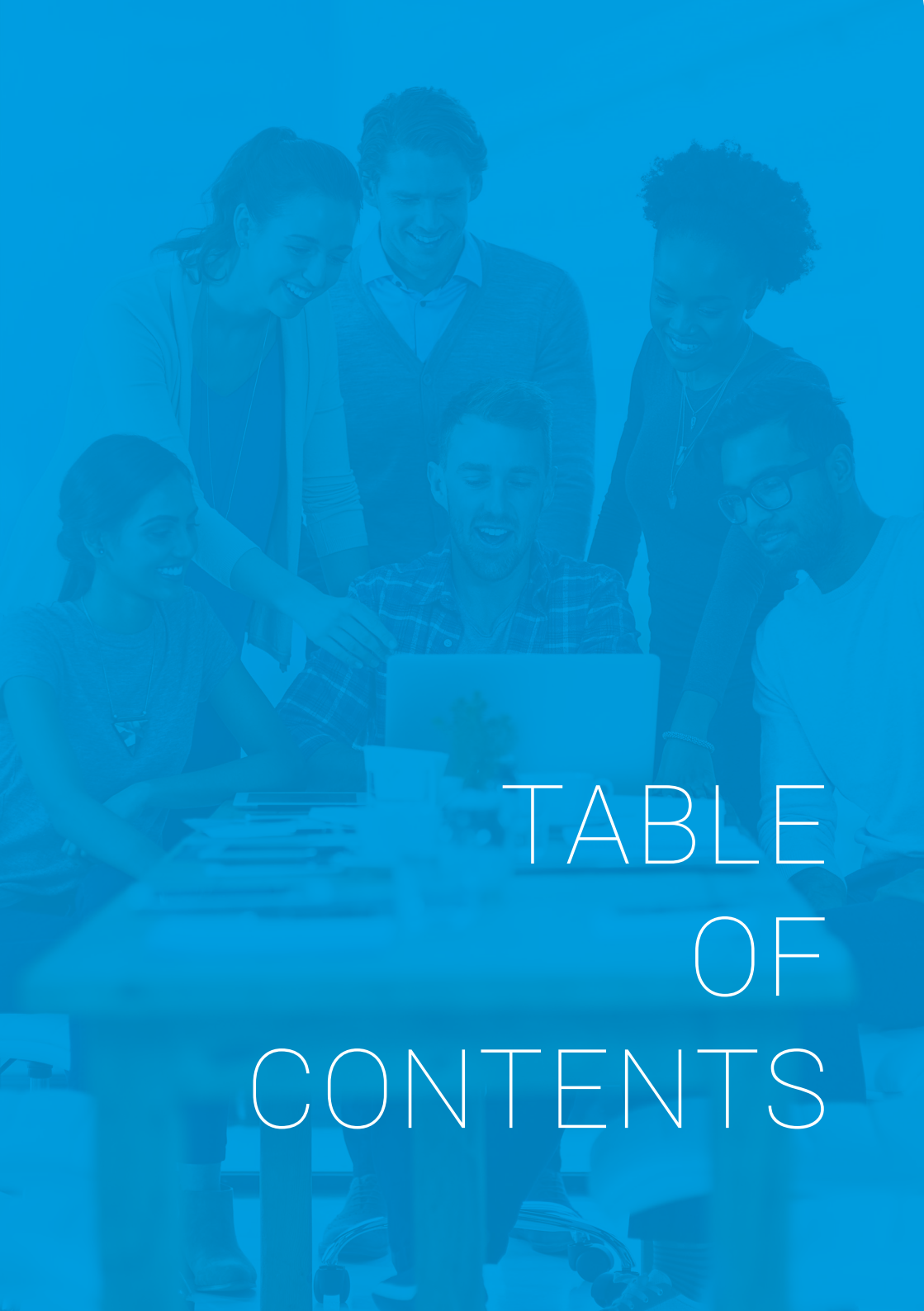By Robert Rose • Chief Strategy Advisor • Content Marketing Institute

GetResponse

Businesses often manage content marketing, email marketing, and marketing automation as separate channels. But to harness the power of each you need to bring them together around the needs of your audience. In this report Robert Rose of the Content Marketing Institute explains how to create a more audience-centered approach to integrating these activities.

Dr. Dave Chaffey
CEO and co-founder of Smart Insights

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INTRODUCTION: WINNING AT CONTENT MARKETING

It's pretty simple. For many businesses, content marketing is losing ground.

The last seventeen years have seen radical change in consumer behavior. The way customers become aware, browse, investigate, purchase, use, complain and/or become loyal to the way a brand delivers its product or service has changed. Marketing is arguably more important today than it's ever been. However, many businesses seem to be stuck in the 1990s, with the strategy to optimize marketing still stuck in a campaign-oriented, direct-marketing, sales-first myopia. Many marketing departments in today's business still serve mostly a subservient, on-demand function: producing ever more sales sheets, PDFs, brochures, and copy for an ever-hungry business that views it as the department that "makes things pretty."

This has to stop. Businesses have to win at marketing, otherwise they'll fail. This means they need to get much more skilled at content that goes well beyond sales PDFs, brochures, and ad copy. They can only win if they can create valuable content.

Content's power to cut through the advertising noise, develop better customer insight, and deliver actual value to consumers throughout the buyer's journey has proven it to be a powerful tool for marketers. But, in many cases, this practice is suffering from the slow evolution of marketing in general. Content marketing done well is NOT just an alternative form of advertising. For many businesses, doing content marketing well is new, and "different". As such, many are simply experimenting and making the minimal possible investment in terms of both time and money. In other words, these businesses are applying the old rules of direct marketing to the new approach of content marketing and it's not working very well. It's losing ground.

But it doesn't have to be. When content marketing is married with other parts of the marketing process – especially email marketing, marketing automation, and the capture of audience data – it can provide exponential value to the business. Marketers just need to step up and develop the right investment and process into this approach.

Put simply: the time is ripe for marketers to commit and invest in audiences to win at marketing. Peter Drucker once said that "marketing and innovation are the unique and distinguishing functions of the business." Smart content marketing can be the fuel that proves him right.

Welcome to the evolution of content

I was tremendously excited to receive and review the results of **GetResponse's Email Marketing & Marketing Automation Excellence 2017 Research**. This was a project that we at CMI worked with GetResponse, Smart Insights, and Holistic Email Marketing to develop. The goal was to examine more than 2,500 marketers from around the world, and understand their use of content marketing, marketing automation, and email marketing. From there, our aim is to deliver pragmatic advice that helps improve content marketing, email, and marketing automation efforts. I'm pleased to be the one to discuss the findings on the approach of content marketing. In one of the other reports focusing on this research, and specific to email marketing, Dr. Dave Chaffey wrote:

Now more than ever, organizations need a sound process to keep up with ever-changing best practices and take advantages of email marketing.
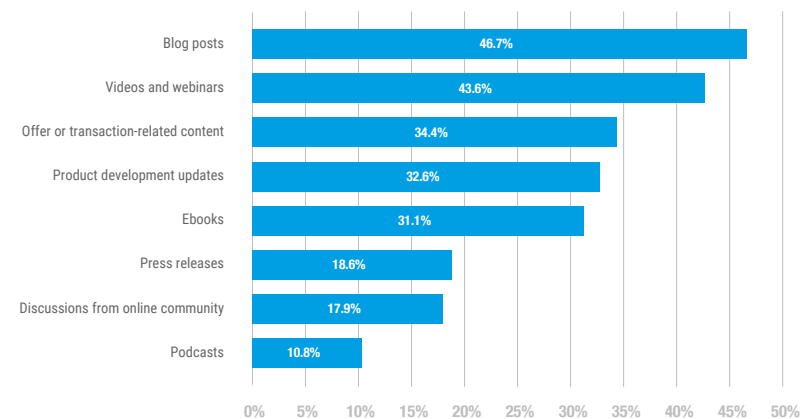
I couldn't agree more – and you could just as easily replace "email" with "content". The investment in a sound process that delivers ongoing results is the true mark of winning at both content marketing and email.

The new objective for marketing will be not just to "create customers", but to *evolve customers*, from unaware to brand-subscribing customer advocates. Content-driven experiences, powered and scaled by email marketing, and marketing automation, will be the natural selection process that moves the customer through that evolution.

The digital disruption of marketing has enabled marketers with powerful new tools. We can now publish and distribute content to build our own audiences. In fact, this is exactly what marketing automation is being used for, as this research has shown.

As you'll see from the chart below, over 43% of marketers share blog posts, videos, and webinars using marketing automation tools. Other popular types include offer or transaction-related content, product development updates, and ebooks – all of which are distributed through automated workflows by more than 31% of marketers.

Content types distributed using marketing automation

Content type	Percentage
Blog posts	46.7%
Videos and webinars	43.6%
Offer or transaction-related content	34.4%
Product development updates	32.6%
Ebooks	31.1%
Press releases	18.6%
Discussions from online community	17.9%
Podcasts	10.8%

But, of course, this also means that our competitors can do so as well. In our experience at CMI, successful companies are creating content marketing as a strategic function in their business. We have seen evidence of this in all the research, advisory clients and CMI's own Executive Forum. Successful companies are not just investing in one-off tools that fuel content campaigns. They are committing to holistic content platforms, powered by teams using enterprise-class tools that scale across all of marketing.

Investment and commitment to the audience is the key to winning at content marketing

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In this research study, we talked with more than 2,500 marketers around the world, from a range of business sizes and industries. These practitioners responded to the study of different forms of email marketing, marketing automation, content marketing, and social media marketing questions.

The breakdown of marketers involved was:
✓ **Business-to-Consumer** (B2C) marketing: **41.8%**
✓ **Business-to-Business** (B2B) marketing: **19.1%**
✓ **Both B2B and B2C** (B2B2C) marketing: **39.1%**

Overall, respondents were asked their biggest challenge with integrating content marketing with email marketing and marketing automation, and the two answers were "time" and "content". This really aligns well with CMI's own research, where we consistently find that "not enough time" and "content creation challenges" are the two biggest factors to which marketers attribute their struggle with success.

Further, the use of technology continues to be one of the largest learning curves for marketers. In CMI's 2017 Content Strategy Study, we found that the number one educational challenge for marketers regarding content was "how to better use technology."

Finally, hampering all marketer's efforts here is the challenge of data quality. A recent study by research firm Ascend2 found that "while improving data quality is the biggest challenge to marketing data success, it's also easily the most important objective of a marketing data strategy." This finding also emerged from the GetResponse Research here. Budget and data quality were the top two challenges mentioned for integrating marketing automation into their process (36% and 35.4% respectively.)

Here is the important point: **content marketing, email marketing, and marketing automation technology work hand in hand.**

✓ **Invest in a holistic platform combining content and technology**, so that you can better use technology to improve the quality of audience data.
✓ **Improve education and use of technology**, so that you can afford content marketers with more time and the ability to create higher quality content.
✓ **Use your technology to connect digital** content experiences, so that you can scale and measure that high quality content across the entire buyer's journey.

The quality of the audience database is what's most valuable in any strategic content marketing program. Winning at content means investing and committing to the kind of content that will inspire customers to provide the richest and most accurate data. This audience data is what powers higher quality email marketing and marketing automation programs. And a higher quality email and marketing automation strategy then makes a powerful business case to integrate technologies that scale that effort. **Put simply: audience data is what drives a content marketing winner.**

In the paper that follows, we will highlight the results of the **Email Marketing & Marketing Automation Excellence 2017** research. We will also explore best practices for the new approach to content marketing and how a commitment to investment and a strategic process keeps a content marketing strategy in good health.

We've organized this paper into four sections that talk about four important ways to marry audience data management practices with strategic content marketing creation, as well as methods content marketers can use to make themselves for more valuable to the C-Suite.
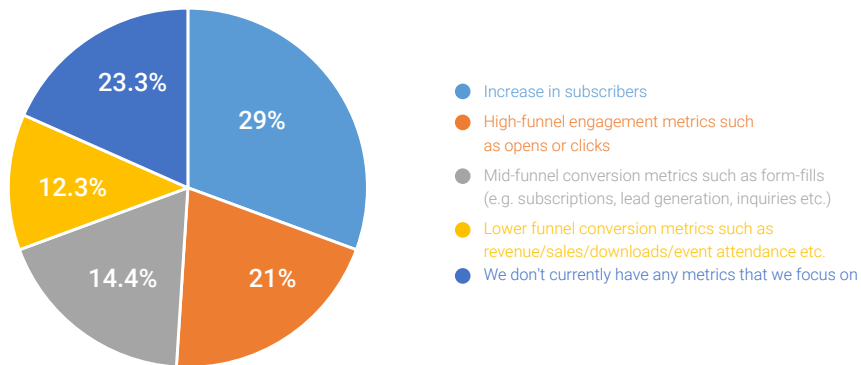
So, if you're ready, let's get to it.

KNOW YOUR

AUDIENCE

One of the findings in the GetResponse study was just how popular content marketing has become. This aligns well with our ongoing research at CMI. Each year we find between 80% and 90% of all marketers are trying content marketing in some capacity.

But in the GetResponse study, what was interesting was that of all the different budget investment options for 2017, content marketing had the highest priority. 91.3% of the respondents said they were going to keep their budget the same or increase it in the coming year.

- Increase in subscribers
- High-funnel engagement metrics such as opens or clicks
- Mid-funnel conversion metrics such as form-fills (e.g. subscriptions, lead generation, inquiries etc.)
- Lower funnel conversion metrics such as revenue/sales/downloads/event attendance etc.
- We don't currently have any metrics that we focus on

Then, when we asked marketers what the primary driver of success metrics for email marketing would be, increasing subscribers was the top response at 29%. The second most popular answer was that there were no current metrics at all.

The inevitable question when it comes to investing more money and effort to increase the number of subscribers is – what for? Who is it that we're actually trying to get to subscribe? Who is this audience? What value will they have for the business.

The challenges of not being able to answer these questions emerge later in the study. When we asked specifically about marketing automation challenges, marketers indicated securing budget, quality of customer data, knowledge to set up types of automation, and producing engaging content as the top four answers. And these answers are all linked to each other. In our experience, if marketers don't know their audience, and what they value, it becomes very difficult to produce engaging content. That makes it difficult to know how to optimize the setup of your automation solution. This lack of knowledge, in turn, affects the quality of the customer data you're getting, and means it will ultimately be harder to get more budget for new programs.

At CMI, we've found that understanding your audience and what they value is the key to starting a content marketing strategy. If you want to improve the effectiveness and the quality of both the data and the content, you need to have the ability to tie the consumption of content back to the personas you're trying to target.

The investment of both time and money in **persona creation** is considerable and – as many marketers discover only after they begin – it's a process that's never complete. People change, habits change, and the business' ability to engage with them as people changes. But, at its core, most persona development is done using only qualitative information that marketers glean from interviews and research studies.

For your content marketing to succeed, you need the ability to use data to understand which personas are engaging with various pieces of content.

It's only when you connect this data with the target personas that you can answer the questions:

✔ Are we creating the kind of content that's resonating with our target audience?
✔ As our subscriber list grows, are we improving the value of the customer data we're collecting?
✔ Are we becoming more or less effective in our content marketing efforts?

WINNING

RECOMMENDATION

As the famous Alice in Wonderland quote goes – "if you don't know where you are going, then any road will take you there." As a marketer, you need to understand the audience that you're trying to attract, then create a step-by-step plan to build a high-quality data profile as your subscriber base grows.

STEP 1: Develop your high-profile audience personas. Your targeted personas can be created through a mixture of research, surveys, conversations with your sales teams, and interviews with existing or past customers. The goal is to develop a profile of your "best audience". So, look for the commonalities of what these people value the most. What problems are they trying to solve? What are they interested in? Synthesize this information together to determine your primary target audience.

STEP 2: As you start to develop new forms for subscription to your newsletter, or your blog, or your resource center – begin to include fields that will capture important information about your persona. For example, if your target audience primarily works for small businesses, then you may want to ask about company size on your forms.

STEP 3: Document and formalize your personas and your data acquisition strategy. Once you identify your target audience, everyone should be on the same page when it comes to the persona profile. Build your persona profiles, and document them so that everyone is clear on the definition of the priority targets.

STEP 4: Put your target personas to work. Once you have personas defined, and the ability for your web forms to capture some of the most important data, you can begin to optimize your audience strategy. Utilize technology to develop "lead scoring" for subscribers/audience members who more closely align with your targets. Also, you can use technology to help you build progressively richer profiles on your audience. You don't have to ask for all the data at once. The right technology can help you build a rich data profile for your audience over time.
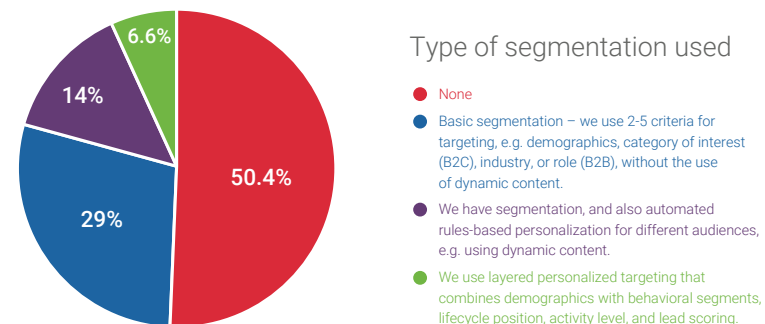
WHAT TO DO NEXT: First, if you haven't already taken the first step and begun the research to develop a richer audience/persona profile, launch a research project before anything else. Then, start looking at your capabilities around the second step. Having a flexible platform to capture persona information is one place where having a great email and/or marketing automation solution can really help. Look at your existing marketing database (if you have one) and establish a baseline metric for your audience. For example, perhaps all you have now are email addresses. How many of them bounce? What's the current response rate?

Then, set a goal for improving the health of that database for six months or a year from now.

SEGMENT AND PRIORITIZE AUDIENCES

In the GetResponse research, we found some very interesting challenges with targeting the delivery of more relevant content.

When we asked specifically about targeting email messages, more than half (50.4%) of the respondents said that they do "none – everyone receives the same message." Only 14% of those surveyed use segmentation with automated rules. And only 6.6% use more sophisticated layering techniques such as personalization or behavioral targeting.

Type of segmentation used

- **None**
- **Basic segmentation** – we use 2-5 criteria for targeting, e.g. demographics, category of interest (B2C), industry, or role (B2B), without the use of dynamic content.
- We have segmentation, and also automated rules-based personalization for different audiences, e.g. using dynamic content.
- We use layered personalized targeting that combines demographics with behavioral segments, lifecycle position, activity level, and lead scoring.

Pie chart values: 50.4%, 29%, 14%, 6.6%

We also asked about the techniques that marketers use to plan the integration of content with email marketing and marketing automation. According to the number one response, most marketers source content on an ad-hoc basis as they use it.

One of the biggest success factors in content marketing is being able to continually hold subscribers' attention, to build relationships with them over

time. This means that you have to use their consumption of content as insight into how you source what content they should experience next. For example, if a subscriber has read a lot of articles in your digital magazine, you shouldn't send them an email introducing them to it.

Even if you follow the steps to "get to know your audience", you still need to understand that not all of them are equal. And that there's usually more than one audience you're trying to target. They're all in very different places along their buyer's journey. You should be able to segment and prioritize content to your subscribers along their journey, and use their behavior to source new content.

The key here is for content marketers to work hand in hand with their technology teams to develop a process of audience segmentation and prioritization. Content marketing experiences such as a blog or a digital resource center should connect to the more purchase-oriented experiences. In this way, content consumption data can be used to help pool these subscribers. For example, your subscribers could move into a segment called "leads" once they consume some or one particular type of content. Then, once they do, they could start receiving more product-related content than they did before.

The goal here is to develop a process where the business can measure the effectiveness of content throughout the whole funnel. Your objective is not to just generate more traffic or subscribers, but better traffic and more engaged subscribers.

The ability to segment and prioritize not only enables better measurement, but also provides valuable insight to help you source better content to improve all aspects of your strategy.

It's time to take an assessment and then prioritize and plan where the data model can be improved over time. It may be a comprehensive re-marketing campaign to clean the data. It may be that it just makes sense to start from scratch. Or, it may make sense to prioritize one particular target segment in order to develop keener insight.

For example, one B2B manufacturer we worked with assessed their existing subscriber database. Even though they were targeting both high-level executives, and lower-level managers with their content, they found:

1. They were actually attracting a much higher number of lower-level manager personas.
2. When they closed a deal, it was almost always the executive persona that made the decision, and they were influenced by the manager who made the initial contact.
3. Many of these managers were falling out of the buyer's journey about mid-way through the funnel.

What was happening?

They discovered that these lower-level managers were getting value out of the content – but only to a point. After consuming a certain amount of content, the content that was highly targeted to executives wasn't as relevant any longer – so they gave up and went elsewhere.

And on the other side, executives who were coming to the site, weren't finding the content that they would initially find appealing.

They prioritized the creation of low-funnel level content to the managers to help them make a business case. Then, they put a greater priority on improving and targeting the executive content at the high end of the funnel. By segmenting these two audiences, and prioritizing the content delivery to each, they solved the challenge, and improved the content marketing results for both personas.

Ultimately, creating a great data story helps to guide the content strategy, giving the marketer greater insights into each customer's needs.

What to do next: Create a goal and an associated metric for the persona targeted vs. persona reached. For example, you may associate your content targeting as 60%/20%/20% toward three personas. Associate the actual reach of your content to that goal using the marketing data collected.

WINNING

RECOMMENDATION

TEST AND OPTIMIZE THE AUDIENCE JOURNEY

One of the keys to winning at any sport is to match the right "play" or "move" to the right part of the game. And there is, likewise, a need to understand how each play contributes to the next phase of the whole game. Similarly, mapping content to the buyer's journey is only half the equation. You need to manage in a smart way the time you invest in gathering data DURING that journey, to understand which data does (or does not) affect the outcome at some phase of that journey.

Jeff Ernst from Forrester captured this well in a blog post he wrote discussing how marketers still have a "blind spot" when it comes to the buyer's journey. He said: "You need to recognize that the B2B buying process is not one big decision; it is a series of micro-decisions. And the company that wins the business is the company that is there to answer those questions and provide fresh insights that influence how the buyers think about the problem so that the buyers can confidently advance their journey."

Similar to segmenting audiences and prioritizing content delivery to them based on their needs, successful content marketing also means testing and optimizing content at any one particular stop along that journey. Every time a content marketer creates a headline, or a blog post, or any piece of content, they're making a guess about what will resonate with the target audience. And many times, this guess is wrong.

However, you need to bear in mind that the challenge may not be in the content itself. The actual content might be perfect. But the problem might lie in the headline that was chosen. Or in the email subject line that promotes the content. Or in how the call to action was worded based on the audience segment. Therefore, testing and optimizing content at every single stage is an important step. The problem is that most content marketers don't do it at all.

This problem was pronounced in the GetResponse research as well. More than half (51%) of the respondents replied that they don't currently test their email marketing.

This is an important point. As a content marketer, you have to develop not only a plan to deliver content at the most relevant step in the buyer's journey, but also a plan that can actually optimize the experience for the audience at each step.

WINNING

RECOMMENDATION

As we've discussed, content marketers should take the time to first identify the gaps in their existing data, then clean and prune that data to make smarter decisions and priorities about segments to target. Marketers will also benefit by aligning the future data capture (as well as appending through third party services) along the optimal content mapping and buyer's journey insight.

A critical component of developing a successful content marketing approach will be to develop a testing plan for content to optimize conversions for each audience segment.

This is the critical piece here. It's not just having one type of registration form that gates ALL content – independent of the stage the buyer may find themselves in. Invest the extra time to understand:

• What value is THIS content providing, and should we split-test it against an alternative?
• What stage is the buyer likely to be in for this piece of content, should we test or try and optimize the call to action at this stage?
• What is the kind of content this customer is most likely to want next (what should we be putting in as a call to action?) How can we start to learn what is most effective?
• How do we also progressively ask for more information based on the "non-linear" nature of the journey? Should we test adding more form fields to the subscription form?

How to develop a testing plan

1. Define WHY you will test. You should have a reason to test your content. So, you should start with a basic hypothesis of what benefit you could gain. For example, you might say – "I believe we can have more people open our messages." Or, you might say, "We can have more of our target audience visit our resource center." Work with your team to define the success we believe we can achieve.

2. Define WHAT you will test. The next step is to understand what it is exactly you're going to test. While it is wonderful that you want to have more of your target market visit your resource center, the reasons they may not be visiting could be quite varied. So, you want to pose your hypothesis for why you are challenged with achieving success. For example, you might form a theory that "you believe that your subject lines are not compelling enough." Or, you might believe that "your content is too long" or that "your layout is confusing." Note: as a general rule, you only want to test one hypothesis at a time.

3. Examine HOW you will test. If you have any existing data or measurement, you should look to see what the trend is over the last few months or quarters. For example, if you want to have more targeted visitors, you should look at your historical data to see if there are any traffic patterns there. You may discover, for example, that there is a weekly or monthly pattern of traffic. Therefore, you should let your test run for a week, or a month, so that you can take advantage of the whole pattern. Or, for example, if you always send out your email on Mondays, you should duplicate that for your test. Make your new test as similar to your previous campaigns as possible.

4. Create. Once you've defined the test, the next step is to use your technology to create it. You might test a new layout of your email. Or you might create different calls to action. Or you might create different subject lines. Remember, only test one thing at a time, so that the results are clear. However, if your audience is large enough, you can create tests to multiple audience segments. For example, you might test your theories against two of your best performing lists. Or there might be a reason to create the same test against the best list vs. the worst list to see which performs better. Or you might create one random segment, and test layout. And you could create another random segment and test headlines.

5. Measure and analyze. Once you have started running the test, you will begin to see which version performs better. You'll gain insight and either prove or disprove the theory that you came up with when you defined the test. You should then form a new hypothesis and start again.

This commitment to testing is an ongoing process. If possible, every new email and campaign should be testing something. You can go back and return to old theories, and you can develop new theories.

As content marketing begins to play more of a substantial role over more conversion points (the "micro-decisions" as Ernst called them), creating an ongoing plan for testing and evolving data attributes will be a critical piece of a winning strategy.

What to do next:

Establish your test plan, and a baseline and ongoing measurement for content conversions. Monitor the increase in conversions as you A/B test content, or the fields for which you're looking to optimize. Additionally, measure the depth (by pieces of relevant information gathered) as customers go deeper into the funnel.
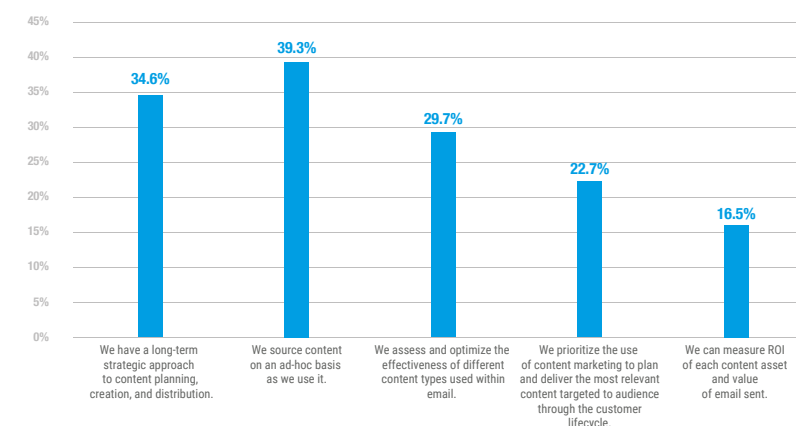
MEASUREMENT: PROGRESS IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE RESULT

A Forrester Research study recently concluded that marketers right now have an "acute focus [only] on acquisition that practically ignores the rest of the buyer's journey."

In our experience at CMI, far too many times content marketing programs are cut short or transformed into traditional sales programs – not because of the progress being made, but by the inability to track the health of the program and create actionable insight out of it.

In the GetResponse research, when we asked which techniques are used to plan integration of content with email marketing and marketing automation, only 16.5% said that they could "measure ROI of each content asset and value of the email sent."

Techniques used to integrate content with email marketing and marketing automation

Technique	Percentage
We have a long-term strategic approach to content planning, creation, and distribution.	34.6%
We source content on an ad-hoc basis as we use it.	39.3%
We assess and optimize the effectiveness of different content types used within email.	29.7%
We prioritize the use of content marketing to plan and deliver the most relevant content targeted to audience through the customer lifecycle.	22.7%
We can measure ROI of each content asset and value of email sent.	16.5%

To be successful in content marketing, you need to invest time to let content marketing begin to show results. But in order to buy that length of time, you have to commit to showing progress and return on investment along the way.

It's important to understand that one of the biggest benefits of a smart data program, aligned with a content marketing strategy, is not necessarily the generation of more activity through the pipeline. Certainly more leads are often a positive result. But more traffic, more leads, and more activity at the top of the funnel can also be detrimental. When sales is wasting their time on leads that are unqualified, or simply at the wrong stage in their buying journey, it can take precious time away (as well as add costs) to the business.

This is why a connected measurement plan that reports on how audiences move through segments, become leads and ultimately customers, is so important. You can't afford to only look at how many subscribers we are pouring into the top of the funnel, and how many customers are coming out at the bottom. Develop greater insight into their journey and interaction with your content while inside the funnel to help you understand the progress you're making.

WINNING RECOMMENDATION

Companies are inching closer to focusing on real-time interactions with customers. The requirement for marketers (despite the length of their sales cycle) to react more rapidly to the needs of our buyers has never been more pronounced.

Understanding the consumption of content at an aggregate level through web analytics will only get marketer so far. Truly gaining insight into how your content is improving the quality of leads, the value of customers, and the deeper insight into them is only available through a robust and healthy data management program.

A CMO at a financial services software company once relayed to me that he no longer looks at Google Analytics as a measure of how his content marketing efforts are moving the business forward. "Traffic", he said, "is the least of my concerns. The blogs we have set up across our different product groups are there solely to help sales understand what topics, concerns, discussions, and challenges our customers are having. The data generated by those blogs is appended to every record we keep on prospects and qualified opportunities. My measurement is feedback from our sales group – and the number of quality discussions they have with those opportunities. My goal is to simply help those prospects come to the logical conclusion that we are the best choice for them."

What to do next:

Create a general dashboard for measurement, one that tracks the right things and will be the most effective way to show your success – the increasing quality, depth, and overall health of the marketing database over time.

So what does the future hold for content marketing? One thing is clear. To truly succeed with content marketing as a strategic approach in the marketing process, you need to change your approach to both content AND data more broadly. There is simply no argument that both content and data are affecting your business. Research firm IDC has predicted that enterprise data will grow at 60% annually. Forrester has predicted that enterprises are growing unstructured content at a rate of 200% annually. So, content and data will affect your business – it's now just a matter of "how," not "if".

The 2017 GetResponse research is testament to this. There was wide acknowledgement that content is a major factor in business, and that there is a long way to go in terms of winning with a content and messaging infrastructure.

As I noted in the beginning, a successful content marketing approach is what feeds great marketing database quality, and that in turn feeds a more optimized marketing automation approach. All of this means not just a healthier content program, but a more effective marketing strategy, and an evolved business.

Content marketing data can be that thing that you rush, or don't pay much attention to. Or, you can invest the time, the money, and the process that building an audience deserves. And an audience can be the strategic asset that helps to differentiate and create success for every part of your business.

CONCLUSION: INVESTING IN AUDIENCES IS WINNING AT BUSINESS

RESOURCES

- GetResponse: Email Marketing & Marketing Automation Excellence 2017
- GetResponse: Email Marketing & Beyond: Global Industry Benchmarks 2017
- Content Marketing Institute 2017 Research
- Forrester Blog: Most B2B Marketers Struggle To Create Engaging Content
- Sirius Decisions: The Impact of Bad Data on Demand Generation
- Jeff Erns Blog: Marketers Have A Blind Spot In The Buyer's Journey
- Smart Insights Email marketing toolkit