

# 5 content lessons from 20,000 clicks

## Getting your audience to listen

By Manny Da Silva

July 2010

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We are bombarded with so much information these days that we have become very good at filtering and selecting what we'll pay attention to. This creates a constant challenge for marketers: how can we get our messages across to our audiences?

The solution isn't easy, and it requires a lot of work. For the past 20 years, Ariad has been running marketing programs that rely on insightful content intended to start productive conversations between businesses and their customers. Our financial services clients' email programs, in particular, give us great insight into how to improve customer and prospect engagement with our content. We send out millions of emails every year on behalf of financial services companies, and we track online engagement with the content to help us produce increasingly compelling marketing programs.

Ariad recently reviewed and analyzed its personalized newsletter service for financial advisors, looking at email click metrics from a sample of 20 electronic newsletter issues from the fourth quarter of 2008 to the first quarter of 2010. Each newsletter contains a combination of about six articles with content aimed at advisors' clients.

Our analysis of a sample of 20,000 clicks on various financial planning topics taught us five valuable lessons about what works:

1. Make sure content is relevant to the audience.
2. Identify a problem or issue and offer insight into resolving it.
3. Identify an opportunity or a benefit.
4. Understand what people want to hear and when they want to hear it.
5. Make things as real as possible.

### 1. Make sure content is relevant to the audience

If there's anything that will make your audience perceive your communications as junk mail or spam, it is irrelevant content. We need to match applicable topics with our audiences, paying attention to which subjects have broad appeal and which ones are of special interest. For instance, we all want to pay less tax, so this is a pretty safe topic for a broad audience. However, not everyone runs his or her own business or will need a Registered Disability Savings Plan or Life Long Learning Plan. If possible, being able to target these specific subject areas would better engage an audience and result in better readership metrics.

As an example of the above, when sending content out to a broad audience base, articles such as "Your notice of assessment is a valuable planning tool" and "Take advantage of tax savings opportunities" engaged more readers than "Savings plan builds security for Canadians with disabilities" and "Small business owners need to put succession plans into action." The latter articles attracted only 8% of the total clicks for the issue in which they appeared.

The importance of relevance is further illustrated when an article teaser, placed at the end of an email, attracts a significant proportion of the click activity. Content that requires scrolling sometimes gets overlooked. But this was not the case with the article “How CPP changes can help the 21st century retiree,” which received 26% of the total clicks for its issue despite being the last article to appear in the email.

## **2. Identify a problem or issue and offer insight on resolving it**

Identifying from your readers’ pain points will surely get them nodding their heads and wanting to read more. The issue you’re identifying should be clear to the reader and the link to a relevant need should be explicit.

Consider the decision to open a Tax Free Savings Account (TFSA) when the plan was first introduced a couple of years ago. If customers had heard about the plan, they knew it was supposed to save them taxes, but many were confused about it. There was much research and industry experience to attest to the fact that Canadians, in general, didn’t quite understand the TFSA, let alone whether to use a TFSA instead of, or with an RRSP.

Therefore, it is not a surprise that articles titled “What you need to know about the TFSA” and “RSP or TFSA? Let goals drive your strategy” were very popular, obtaining 47% and 37% respectively of the total clicks for the issue in which they appeared. Readers knew there was something beneficial in the TFSA, but they didn’t understand how to take advantage of the plan. So, explaining features and providing insight on how the TFSA can help with goals resonated with many.

Another example is with content about the Canada Pension Plan changes the government proposed in 2009. The CPP is the foundation of retirement income for most, so when the government plans to change something, people get concerned and want to know that it is to their benefit. Resolving this issue is highly relevant to most, which is why an article titled “CPP benefits may be changing – here’s how you can plan now” was the most popular article in that issue, receiving 43% of the total clicks.

Compare the above articles to an article titled “Even low inflation can erode your dollar power.” While this is true, and the calculations provide proof, our observations of online content selection suggest that inflation is currently not generally perceived as a big problem by Canadians. Industry doesn’t want Canadians to forget about inflation and certainly recognizes it as a problem, but when an audience doesn’t attach as much importance to the issue, you wind up with lower content engagement.

The trick to securing higher engagement is to identify the problem from the reader’s perspective. If we flip the inflation discussion around and talk about low interest rates for savings, it gets more attention. Financial services clients seem to be more concerned with not earning enough on their savings. You might say it’s the same issue or subject, but it has to speak to the reader from his or her perspective and identify with a problem perceived to be relevant. This is why an article titled “Cash earning next to nil? There are alternatives” received a lot more attention (29% of total clicks for the issue) than the inflation article (only 5% of the total issue clicks).

### 3. Identify an opportunity or a benefit

A clear, relevant benefit will turn heads and attract clicks. If the benefit or opportunity is vague, the message will be weak as will be the reader engagement.

The opportunity of a bargain is appealing to most, so an article titled “Is that summer property a tempting bargain?” was the most popular article for the July issue in which it appeared, receiving almost one-third of total clicks. Not only was it sent in the right month, but it also came out when there was a growing perception that vacation properties, especially in the U.S., were much more affordable than they had been in the recent past.

Similarly, people like to save on taxes and mortgage costs. So articles such as “Get your tax refund up front” and “How to save on mortgage costs” get a fair bit of attention. The payoff or benefit is clear.

In contrast to the above examples, our analysis showed that reader engagement will slip if the benefit or opportunity is not clear. This can easily happen if you lead with a product focus. For example, the article “Consider small-cap funds as we swing into recovery” only slightly engaged readers, receiving 10% of the total clicks for the issue in which it appeared. The actual benefit that small-cap funds deliver at the beginning of a recovery isn’t explicit from the headline. Without reading the article, the reader won’t know why there is a benefit or opportunity at hand. Given that people skim when reading online content, lack of clarity will increase the probability that the content will get neglected.

And don’t try to disguise a product as a benefit. Your audience will catch on. Despite the suggested benefit of tax efficiency in an article titled “Corporate class funds offer tax-efficient investing,” the content wasn’t highly appealing to readers (securing only 9% of total clicks). Not only is this article leading with a product focus, but the product is not widely understood and known.

### 4. Understand what people want to hear and when they want to hear it

The timing of certain messages can greatly affect how receptive your audience will be to them. Sometimes good messages and content fall on deaf ears because of timing.

At the tail end of the last economic downturn, investors needed something positive to look forward to. An article titled “The shape of things to come – Economic Recovery,” which included a hopeful teaser, resonated well with readers because it said the right thing at the right time. With more than one-fifth of the total clicks for the issue, this article countered much of the doom and gloom that was prevalent at the time.

Compare this to an article offering the sage advice of reviewing insurance coverage after a major purchase. Most in the industry and, indeed, most customers, would agree that this is a good thing to do, yet this subject didn’t engage readers so well, receiving only 5% of the total clicks for the issue in which it appeared. This is a good example of a message that would have much more impact right after that major purchase has occurred, when someone is much more receptive to this message. This timing is more challenging, but in order for the message to resonate, timing here is important.

## 5. Make things as real as possible

Real life examples can breathe life into content that isn't otherwise perceived to be very exciting. Take the subject of estate planning. This is often a neglected area for many Canadians. The article "Michael Jackson's estate plan provides valuable lessons" used a celebrity case study to attract attention to a subject many want to avoid. This celebrity case study went beyond the typical fictitious "Mr. and Mrs. Jones." It focused on real-life issues, such as caring for children and inheritances, without including complex calculations. The article attracted almost one-third of the issue's clicks.

### Conclusion

Make your content relevant, and your prospects will tune in to what you have to say, and maybe even share your content and messages with friends and family. Resolve problems and add value, and your clients will give you their time. Provide benefits, and your readers will want to know more. Understand your audience, and they'll allow you to continue communicating with them. Base your content in reality, and your audience will absorb it better.

### About Ariad

Ariad Custom Communications is a marketing agency that specializes in creating compelling brand experiences that drive business. Ariad's customer-centric approach blends strategy with content to develop innovative marketing campaigns, both online and offline. The result: some of Canada's most successful brands work with Ariad's smart, savvy marketing professionals to generate engagement, deepen customer relationships and instill loyalty.

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