



Content Changes Everything

A model to transform your customer relationships and your organization.

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An idea whose time has come.

The level of interest in content has never been higher among marketers. But content has the power to change far more than the marketing function. It can transform our understanding of our brand, our customer relationships, and indeed, the very definition of the business we are in.

Content changes everything.

This paper will show you:

- Why content is the missing piece in brand engagement, and how it will revitalize your customer relationships
- How to recognize truly valuable content, and why it can be valuable for both your customer and your business
- Why a focus on valuable content will transform your organization
- Guideposts to help you get there

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Whether it is the *Harvard Business Review* declaring: “Traditional marketing communications just aren’t relevant”¹, or McKinsey arguing that: “To truly engage customers for whom ‘push’ advertising is increasingly irrelevant, companies must do more outside the confines of the traditional marketing organization”², all signs indicate that the current challenges facing marketers are profound and relevant beyond the marketing department.

Relationships are what marketing is all about

As marketers, we have long known that maintaining good relationships with our customers is critical to success.³ A handful of companies have been able to make their way into the hearts and minds of their customers, but why only a handful? It’s not resources alone that have led to these successes. Nor is it exclusively about channel choice – many brands have learned that technology on its own is not enough – how we can deliver on the ever-elusive goal of customer engagement.

We believe it’s about something more fundamental – and something you may have long been advocating at the highest levels of your organization. Rich conversations, based on reciprocity and respect. This is the secret to better customer-brand relationships.

We aren’t talking about messaging hierarchies and brand differentiators. We’re talking about an honest-to-goodness conversation; the kind we all engage in every day. Conversations of substance – rooted in content. And for all our investments in technology, we have overlooked perhaps the most fundamental part of the brand-customer relationship: what we talk about.

When you begin to frame content in this way, you begin to see the value it holds within your organization. It’s your brand’s voice brought to life in a meaningful way. It’s the articulation of your brand promise. And it’s a true business asset, worth investing in.

In this paper we’ll argue that when organizations focus on creating valuable content they are not only benefiting clients, they are also benefiting their organization.

1 Bill Lee, “Marketing is Dead,” *Harvard Business Review*, 2012.

2 Tom French et al., “We’re all marketers,” *McKinsey&Company*, 2011.

3 Roland Rust et al., “Customer Centered Brand Management,” *Harvard Business Review*, 2004.

Content is:

- A tool to enable employees to have meaningful conversations with customers;
- A resource for business intelligence that can be used across organizational silos; and
- An expert source of information, for customers looking to address questions as they move through their customer journey.

You may be saying to yourself, “this is all great, but how does it help me? Where is the opportunity to improve shareholder value, get better ROI and create efficiencies across my business?” What we’re proposing here isn’t a process or series of tactics: we’re talking about content maturity. It’s an organizational mindset; an idea whose time has come. Built on the premise of generating real customer engagement, content maturity...

- Starts by putting customers at the heart of your strategy;
- Sees genuine conversation as the way to building deep, rich and meaningful relationships with customers;
- Values content as a strategic business asset that enables customer conversations, is a source for business intelligence, and adds value across the products and service landscape.

Is content a billion dollar proposition?

When Coca-Cola launched the latest version of its global marketing strategy, it shifted the focus from creative excellence to content excellence. With a brand worth \$7 billion, according to Interbrand, that’s a billion-dollar bet on the power of content.

PART 1:

What is good content?

Content is made up of three interconnected and naturally overlapping dimensions. When each dimension is optimized, it leads to content that is valuable to both customers and your business.

While most organizations have mastered one or two of these elements – generally format and quality, as utility can be the most difficult – few are producing truly valuable content that adds to the bottom line.

The blogosphere is full of “content marketing” recommendations that, when you scratch beneath the surface, look a lot like this:

(1) beg, borrow and steal as much content as possible; (2) flood your website and emails with as much of the stuff as possible; (3) spam customers with everything you have; (4) measure your return as if it were a DM campaign.

Content marketing becomes more about quantity and less about quality. Unfortunately, when it is treated in this manner, brands lose out on the true business value of content, and fundamentally nothing has changed.

Let’s dig in and see what truly valuable content looks like.

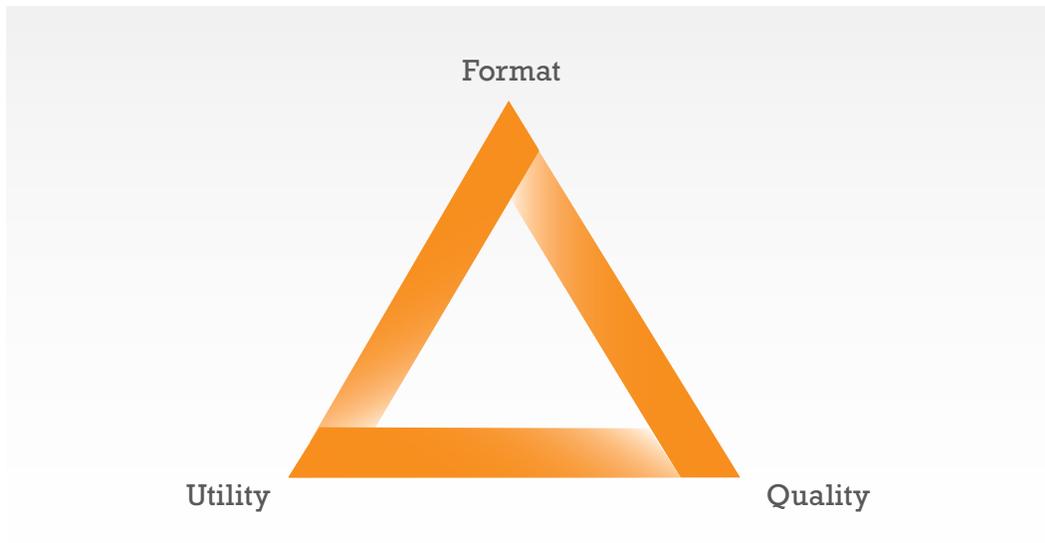


Diagram 1.0: Elements of valuable content

- **Utility.** It’s easy to see utility as simply a matter of user-experience design – the architecture built to allow users to complete tasks quickly. And UX is absolutely a critical element of utility – websites have to be logically structured, online calculators must work, forms must be clear.

But utility in the context of valuable content also means ensuring the content we produce helps the user complete the wider tasks they are pursuing (for example, buying a first home to settle in, looking great at a sister's wedding, or reducing departmental operating costs), not just the tasks the brand needs them to complete (signing a mortgage, buying shoes, outsourcing technology). What's more, customer utility needs may change at different stages of the customer journey. At the time of transaction, needs may be highly functional – a form that works, for example. But earlier on in their journey the utility need from content may be something softer such as entertainment or education.

Think about what happens when a user arrives at a page only to be presented with content that doesn't answer their questions, or encourage them to act. It leads to a broken experience that hampers trust and delays the likelihood of a future relationship.

To achieve utility, start with understanding what content your customers need. Then craft an experience that supports and enables the content.

- **Format.** This is the part most people describe when they talk about content (i.e. text, video, image, etc.). It's the form of the final output that is consumed by the end user, and it is critical to engagement. How do you decide whether content should be presented as an online demo, a calculator, a printed workbook, or a face-to-face conversation? You decide by carefully mapping out your customer's journey to purchase or action. What are the stages of engagement – from awareness and education through to justification and conversion? Where are they on this path, what media are they consulting, what problems are they trying to solve? And therefore, what formats are most compelling and appropriate to move them to the next stage?

From sports to space: Will web content cut out the media middleman?

Increasingly, the content a brand creates will be as important as its core activities. Don't think consumers are interested? Ask the 120,000 subscribers (50 million video views) to Chelsea FC's Chelsea TV or the 3.2 million viewers who watched NASA's live video feed of the Mars Rover Curiosity's descent to the red planet on August 5, 2012.

- **Quality.** Fundamentally, this is about the craft in the execution of the content. Is the content appropriate and compelling? Is it trustworthy? Is it inspiring? Is it well written? Is the visual execution engaging? How is the content elevated beyond the functional, to become material the user will truly value?

While utility ensures content helps the user complete a specific task, and the right format puts it in the right place to be most easily consumed, quality is the attribute that makes the content attractive, interesting, noteworthy, shareable.

It provides that element of satisfaction or delight that consumers associate with a brand, which builds engagement. And this is where a good writer, designer or videographer who also understands the concept of utility and customer needs, is worth his or her weight in gold.

Looking back: A new marketing era begins

1940 – 1980: Better products, better times. Products were changing consumers' lives for the better. And in the halcyon days for Madison Avenue, consumers were inundated with marketing messages, fueling mass consumption for products that would change their lives for the better.

1980 – 1999: Your deepest desires. In this era of frosted windows and focus groups, brands realized they had to transition their thinking from creating products and finding markets to creating products designed to address real customer needs.

2000 – 2012: Blind faith in technology. A new millennium brings increased reliance on technology: if you build a self-service website with loads of tools, consumers will feel empowered to make purchasing decisions faster. Remember the days of landing page optimization?

2012 - ...: Content to the fore. Marketers have come to realize that having the right technology is only half the answer. After all, users don't go to a site and download an app because it's there and they can. They are looking to do something, learn something, achieve something, and to do that they need content.

A question of credibility

When we talk to clients about content and honing utility, format and quality, credibility inevitably enters the conversation. (For example, this comment from a bank: "We don't have credibility talking about lifestyle issues.") But is it a red herring? Credibility only becomes a problem when brands lack commitment to the opportunity that has been identified.

Take Michelin, the company that manufactures the rubber bits that keep your car from skidding off the road – and also makes the famous Michelin Guides. How can Michelin possibly be a credible source of information about where to eat?

The reality is, they have been able to become a credible source of these reviews because they have fully committed to the content. Early on – read: 1900 – they identified that providing reviews of restaurants and hotels helped their customers, motorists, feel comfortable and even inspired to take long-distance automobile trips

(which involve Michelin tire products). Having identified that providing this content would support the core business, Michelin set about producing the best guides available. The Michelin hotel and restaurant guides are not half-hearted, isolated landing pages that go up for a month. The guides transformed Michelin's business by becoming a fully robust line of business in itself.

**IKEA's catalogue:
bigger than Jesus?**

There are three times more IKEA catalogues printed every year than the Bible. This iconic content marketing piece is so central to IKEA's success that it supports the largest photo studio in northern Europe and consumes 70% of IKEA's global marketing budget.

So before you reject the idea of a content strategy that is not, at first glance, directly related to your core business, think about the possibilities. What kind of unexpected content could help your customers perform tasks that are related to your offering, have them understand how and when to use your product (think IKEA catalogue and Kraft Kitchens), and generate goodwill along the way?

Content has the power to fundamentally transform the way your organization does business – opening your organization up to new markets, business ventures and opportunities that you would have never thought possible.

PART 2:

The Content Maturity Model

Recognizing good content is one thing, but being in a position to plan, create and deploy it effectively is another. How can your organization know when, where and how often to converse with customers and prospects? As importantly, what should you talk about? And what's the measurable value of these conversations to your business? Getting to these answers requires what we call content maturity – the extent to which an organization:

- **Has a deep understanding of customer content needs.** Content maturity begins by mapping out the customer journey and determining the kind of content customers are looking for at each touch point along the way. These touch points are the opportunities for conversation.
- **Is nimble, able and responsive.** To achieve content maturity, you need to build the necessary infrastructure to ensure the organization is well optimized to respond to customer conversations and needs. There is a well-thought-out process that tackles everything from content creation to governance – a system to produce content and deploy across channels seamlessly.
- **Employs an active, responsive and real-time analytics process.** The best analytics frameworks are designed to measure the success of content across channels, from in-store brochures through to online e-newsletters. Organizations displaying content maturity are able to collect rich data about customer engagement and make informed content marketing decisions that will improve this engagement. They can also track the impact this content is having on every facet of the business.

Together, these conditions allow a business to put content at the heart of organizational decision making, not just marketing activities. For businesses that go that extra mile, the wins are bigger than improved marketing results or more efficient work processes. But how do you get to a point of content maturity where your brand enters the ring above its weight class, discovering ideas, building relationships and exploring new business opportunities through content? It starts with understanding where you are in the “Content Maturity Model,” and seeing the steps in front of you.

Level 1: Awareness

At this stage of maturity, you have likely realized there is a problem with your current activities. You have seen a shift from traditional to new marketing channels, but technology is not enabling you to deliver the marketing or business results you had expected. You have made the investment, spent the dollars, but have not seen the payback on technology initiatives (e.g., customer relationship software, online portals, etc.) and it feels like the challenge is so large that, when it comes to fixing the problem, you do not know where to start.

Your instincts and experience also suggest that your current approach to content – likely focused on messaging about products and services – is not resonating with your various audiences. You begin to value customers differently, recognizing that

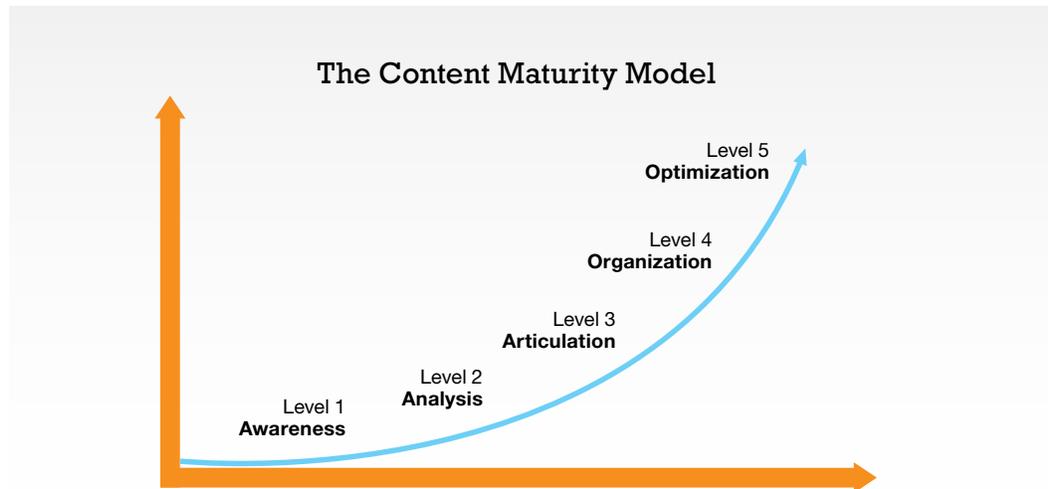


Diagram 2.0: Stages of Content Maturity

a relationship is more than a series of short-term transactions, and that each loyal customer represents a lifetime of sustainable organizational value. You are thinking more broadly about their needs and how you can meet them in new ways through your marketing activities. And you are beginning to see that the answer lies within your conversations with them – the content.

On the ground: Those executing marketing activities know that they have to continue to produce content, but the question becomes: What kinds of content need to be produced and when?

Level 2: Analysis

You are starting to use content to fix identified marketing problems (e.g., an online customer support centre to troubleshoot technical problems), but there is no consistency in results. You are struggling to get internal support for your efforts because it's difficult to demonstrate the business value to other parts of the organization.

You are likely trying to figure out the reasons for this inconsistency. At this stage in the model you are building a testing culture, but the testing is not yet content-focused – it is focused on testing tactics, channel, offer. Content is still in the background. But by testing you are starting to see links between customer touch points, and how the individual elements affect each other. You are thinking about the customer journey, and may be starting to reach out to peers in other departments to co-ordinate efforts, particularly as it relates to content-based programs.

But these efforts remain ad-hoc and incomplete. Budgets, lines of authority, and agency relationships are not aligned to a customer-centric approach.

On the ground: As your testing culture becomes established, tests of layout, offers, and channel are providing results that seem disconnected and shallow, even arbitrary – there appears to be a missing piece and signs are suggesting it is content.

Level 3: Articulation

High touch or high tech, managing content can make or break your business

When content is key to your business, managing for it goes well beyond the marketing department to operations, HR, and technology. Just ask Groupon, which employs hundreds of comedian/copywriters among their 10,000 employees, or TripAdvisor, whose 1,400 employees – and a lot of technology – manage 75 million user reviews, 11 million traveler photographs, and 50 new contributions every minute.

At this stage you are formally exploring customer journey mapping. You are able to clearly determine the individual tasks customers complete as they make buying decisions about your product or service. The tasks, or stages in their journey, represent the moments at which you can converse with customers. You are developing and testing content that is valuable and helps them reach their goals.

As you begin to demonstrate results from these trials and articulate your approach to other parts of the organization, your work is getting noticed. The organization begins to see the value in customer-centricity, and in cooperating across channel and product silos to think more expansively about the client journey. With the support of colleagues from across the organization, in sales, customer service, operations, technology, you are beginning to develop an organizational content strategy. You are analyzing your existing content, and identifying the new content required to support the customer journey. Together you are asking

questions like “What tasks are our customer trying to complete? What content will help achieve that?” But as the momentum builds, so does the realization that your current organizational structure, even with buy-in from your colleagues, is not capable of efficiently producing the content you need.

On the ground: For marketing managers, you are taking a comprehensive inventory of the content your organization or department has produced. You are in the beginning stages of mapping this content to your customers’ journey and identifying where gaps might exist – or where there is superfluous content that can be discarded. You are formulating a content strategy, for a single or even multiple content programs.

Level 4: Organization

You know the content you need and the strategy is in place, but organizationally you and your colleagues are finding it challenging to create and deploy content within the organization’s existing structures. So, working across the organization, you set about creating the necessary infrastructure to support more advanced levels of content creation, maintenance and measurement.

You hire individuals with new skill sets: content strategists, digital strategists. They are part of your planning and program design. You establish a roster of content partners and producers, both internal and external, to draw upon when needed. And you create the governance model, the rules and guidelines, for the production and maintenance of content.

Once these changes are implemented, you find you can begin to deliver on the strategies you started to develop at Level 3. You are able to measure the success of your content efforts – across channels and in real-time, you are able to directly attribute business and marketing successes to content programs.

However, your content ambition and the size of the opportunity is not yet matched by resources.

On the ground: You are changing the way you approach marketing planning and execution. You are crafting briefs that include rich customer insights; they go beyond demographics and outline the psychological mindset of your customers. Project planning is no longer done in a vacuum; it's collaborative across departments and areas of expertise. Your agency partnerships are integrated and content is at the heart of your discussions. You are no longer talking about the kinds of messages you should be creating, and are now talking about the kinds of conversations you should be having. The ways you measure the success of your efforts have also changed. Short-term gains are no longer privileged over long-term sustainable forms of revenue.

Level 5: Optimization

The results of your efforts are getting noticed at the highest levels of your organization – from better returns on investment, improved customer retention and acquisition, to organizational efficiencies. Leaders in the organization are intrigued by improved performance and opt to allocate additional resources to aid in the efforts.

With those resources, you are able to pursue and take advantage of new opportunities, building a credible business case for ventures not thought possible in the past. Content is seen as a critical way to articulate your organization's brand promise. It may even prompt your organization to rethink your entire business model.

On the ground: The conversations you are having with customers are no longer one way. They are rich, meaningful and of mutual benefit. The content you are producing is valuable and used regularly by customers, is shared with their networks and seen as a source of expertise. Your content strategy is creating efficiencies throughout the organization, not only in the way you create and publish content, but also your maintenance efforts are helping to create a source of content that can be leveraged for future initiatives.

Content gives you wiiiiings

It does for Red Bull, whose Red Bull Media House division transcends the sponsorship model to be a full-fledged media producer and distributor. Whether it's creating events like Crashed Ice, Air Race, X Fighters, or celebrating its first F1 world championship in 2010, everything they do becomes content and is used to support the brand and its 44% market share.

What's changing as you mature?

As your organization moves through each level of content maturity, you will start to see changes at both the organizational and marketing level – from resource allocation to customer understanding.

	From	To
Understanding the customer	<p>Superficial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic demographic insights • There is some understanding of customer motivation within the context of the organization's objectives • Insights come from focus groups and research, and is primarily concerned with the organization's desired outcome 	<p>Deep</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rich and detailed customer personas, including demographic, technographic and ethnographic insights • Customer motivation is understood on a psychological level, within the context of their goal • Within the context of the customer's role, identifying the opportunities for the brand to play a role
Communication	<p>Monologue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak <i>to</i> consumers • Repetitive messages that don't get results 	<p>Dialogue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak <i>with</i> consumers • Messages are revised based on consumer feedback • Messages are nimble enough to adapt to the situation that develops
Budgeting	<p>Channel-led</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budgets are grandfathered • Budget allocation is led by tactical choices • Understanding of the customer is not an important part of the budget discussion 	<p>Conversation-led</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budgets are allocated based on customer insight • Budget decisions are led by an understanding of the customer journey • Customer understanding is used to validate all budgeting decisions

	From	To
Marketing	<p>Campaigns</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing is campaign-based • There are no plans to sustain campaigns • Campaigns have a rigid timeframe • No formal agency role for content 	<p>Programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing efforts are planned around sustained, ongoing programs • Campaigns are planned and updated continually • Programs responsive to the customer as they progress along their journey • Clear understanding of who is responsible for content in the agency environment
Organizational structure	<p>Product-centric</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing team is structured around product and departmental silos • No silo makes decisions based on an holistic customer view • Cross-silo planning difficult to implement 	<p>Customer-centric</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your marketing team is structured around the needs of the customer • Decisions are based on the content required to support the customer journey • Cross-functional planning has been institutionalized
Results	<p>Random</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance is patchy and unreliable • There is a lack of consistency between results and activity • Metrics are shallow (clicks, time on site) and results reveal few insights 	<p>Sustainable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs deliver consistent and predictable results • Changes in results can be pinpointed at planned changes in activity • Consistent improvement is indicated, based on tests

PART 3:

Where to begin

Now that you have a better sense of your organization's level of content maturity, it's time to get to work. How can you get to a state of content optimization?

Here's the truth — it's going to take time, hard work and buy-in. If you're concerned that your organization is not ready, not to worry, even in the early stages you can start to see results. Regardless of where you sit in the organizational hierarchy, there are real, measurable steps you can take to get your content working harder and evolve your level of content maturity.

For the C-suite: If you're tired of seeing temporary gains from your marketing efforts, rather than a stable stream of revenue generated through loyal buying, it's time to try something different.

- **Take an integrated approach to resources:** Get all the right stakeholders in a room. And if you don't have them internally, look for outside partners. Start with your customer's journey and determine where along that journey your organization could be working harder. What content is required to support your customer? It's from this point that you can make informed and accurate resource decisions.
- **Rethink success:** Deep, sustainable relationships deliver deep, sustainable returns. So no more describing ROI that is merely a short-term sales blip; start thinking and talking in terms of the lifetime value of your customers. Figure out what new metrics you need to evaluate both the short-term and long-term business value created as a result of a given content program.
- **Be suspicious of grandfathered budgets:** Technology is changing rapidly and as a result the customer journey is constantly shifting. So ask your marketing directors: how has the customer journey changed over the past 12 months? How has that affected strategic and budget plans?

For marketing directors: Get to know your audience on a deeper level. Knowing how often they use their smartphone isn't enough. What motivates them? What will allow them to make faster, smarter and more reliable purchase decisions?

- **Develop a complete understanding of your customer:** Dedicate resources to develop and maintain a detailed picture of your customers: their personas and their journeys. Make sure all your teams use these to validate and inform their tactical and strategic decisions.
- **Make strategy and budgets customer-centric:** Sure it's going to take some work to build a budget from the ground up, rather than just adding 5% across the board, but the results will be worth it. With the complete customer persona and journey in place, and content opportunities identified, it's then a matter of figuring out your strategic plan and the budgets required to support it.

- **Hire the right people:** If you need help getting your content strategy off the ground, hire experts. You're not in this alone, and chances are you don't have all the subject matter experts you need to create great content in house. The pharmaceutical company Merck uses two agencies to help with their content marketing, for strategy and for content creation.

For marketing managers: You understand how marketing strategies are rolled out better than anybody. You're executing within your organization's marketing functions; now you can start making each execution better.

- **Empathize with your customer:** You may not have a full persona or customer journey, but keep the focus on making sure your output is as useful as possible for your customer. When you're in the thick of it on the eighth round of stakeholder revisions to that brochure that was due a week ago, the last thing you might be thinking about is the customer, but this is where you can really make a measurable impact to your business. Start by putting yourself in the shoes of your customer: ask yourself, "how will they use this piece of content? As a consumer, do I find it useful?"
- **Set aside project budget for sustaining programs:** When executing a project, ask your team or your agencies to tell you what they would do if they took 20% of the budget to sustain the program.
- **Establish metrics that matter:** Demonstrate the effect of your work by understanding and reporting on the metrics that show the real value of your content. Do this alongside reporting on the short-term project goal.

Can content get you out of the price-discounting business?

Travelocity's former CEO, Michelle Peluso, turned around a struggling discount online travel service with a relentless focus on a better customer experience. The strategy: provide customers with value across the full lifecycle of dream, plan, shop, book, anticipate, travel, post-trip including better content resources at every stage.

Getting from where you are to where you want to be as a marketer and an organization is possible. You can:

- Build deep meaningful relationships with customers that yield sustainable ROI;
- Squeeze more efficiency from your marketing dollars;
- Find new markets, explore new business opportunities; and
- Build a loyal following that champions your brand and stands up in defence of it in times of need.

But to realize these opportunities, you must rethink your current approach to planning, strategy and execution. You can no longer fall back on the same old, same old – nor do you want to invest in new and untested marketing technologies without careful consideration and planning. It can be a wild west out there – but if you use content as the grounding principle for your business decisions, and ensure it is client-centric, you will succeed.

About the authors

Mark Michaud, Senior Vice President

Mark is a seasoned content and marketing professional who has worked with global and national brands in North America for over 15 years at Toronto's Ariad Communications. In his current role as head of the agency's strategy group, he works with account teams, digital professionals, designers and editors to produce award-winning and strategically sound marketing programs with content at their core. With his decades-long experience in financial services marketing, he has built innovative and successful content programs for bank, credit unions, and investment firms in Canada and the U.S. empowering brands and their front line sales forces to be more effective. His email and web-based programs have won many accolades, including awards from MarketingSherpa and the Canadian Marketing Association.

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Kieran Miles, Senior Account Director

Kieran has over a decade of marketing and communications experience working with leading financial, B2B and technology companies in Canada and the UK. He has been with Ariad for over four years, developing strategic, content-rich marketing programs targeting consumers, businesses, and third-parties across online and offline channels. Kieran plays a leading role in developing Ariad's thought leadership program.

With a background in journalism and public relations he has a particular interest in the role of content in B2B marketing, and how the nature of conversation progresses based on the depth of the relationship with the customer.

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Chad Story, Content Strategist

As a content strategist in Ariad's strategy group, Chad works with clients from across verticals to solve tough online and offline content problems – from B2B to consumer packaged goods. He is an active member of Ariad's thought leadership team, which explores how content can transform businesses.

Chad blends his experience with editorial planning, marketing and user-experience design to craft content strategies that deliver value to both businesses and end users.

He holds a master's degree in communications from the University of Ottawa, and is an active member of Toronto's content strategy community.

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We can help

Let's start the conversation and get on the road to content maturity.

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About us

Ariad Communications is a marketing agency focused on creating content that motivates, creative that inspires, and strategy that connects it all to clients' customers to drive business results. Some of Canada's most successful brands engage with Ariad's marketing professionals to generate brand engagement, deepen customer relationships and instill loyalty.

Beautiful thinking

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