

Don't let your mechanic write your love letters

The surprising reason nobody cares about your beautiful content site.



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It might surprise you how many brands are still trying to make destination content sites these days.

As in: a website people type into their address bar.

As in: Something people seek out.

Something people miss.

Something people wonder about in the empty spaces, like maybe while they're waiting for the elevator, or getting copies from the printer.

In a word: Incorrect.

This mistakes how often people think about brands. It mistakes how people use this jalopy called the internet. And it misunderstands what content is for: Content isn't a place you travel to, but a thing that takes you where you want to go.

At its best, content isn't about you, the brand, and what you want to sell. Content is about you, the reader, and where you want to travel to. Done right, where you're going leads to a sale — sometimes the sale of a product, but more often the sale of an idea.

We were trying to explain this to a client the other day. They'd spent millions of dollars on a website and a custom CMS. Twice, I think. But years later their site wasn't growing as fast as they'd like. Content was taking too long to produce. Content was too expensive. They had to pay for a lot of traffic, and the traffic they bought wasn't staying around. So they had a solution: redesign the site.

This misunderstands the problem at hand. They're building a perfect and beautiful thing that holds an infrequent amount of weak content. Instead, they should be building a less perfect thing that holds a frequent amount of strong content. They should be investing in how their stories get made, not where the stories live. After all, the site is *a tool for getting ideas into the market*. It's not the market itself.

But it's not like this client is alone in their misunderstanding.

Earlier this year we worked with a famously successful consumer brand. Great product. Great reputation. They'd recently decided to launch a content site. That site was intended to promote the lifestyle around their product — in the same way that, say, Equinox (the high-end gym) publishes Furthermore (the "high-performance life" site).

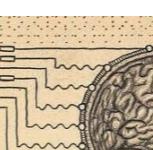
But our client's site wasn't getting much traction. The reason: they'd spent all their time and money on the site design, and almost no time at all strategizing how to actually get the right kind of content made. The site was beautiful, but nobody was reading the stories.

This should tell us something about content strategy: it's the process of creating stories, and the method of getting those stories out into the world, that's most important — not the destination where those stories live. Content is nothing without distribution. And yet clients keep paying design agencies millions of dollars to design a site that's rarely visited.

Don't get me wrong. Some of my best friends are design agencies. But then, bartenders think everybody needs a drink.

I was discussing this with our founder and CD Andrew. It's like brands are building castles to protect their content, I said, when they should be building trebuchets to fling it over the walls.

Andrew: "No, it's just, I mean ... don't let your mechanic write your love letters."



Steve Bryant

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Steve specializes in content strategy, branded content, product development, and editorial operations. Yes, he'd love to get a drink.



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