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OUTSTANDING PAPER – Social Media Marketing

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Abstract

Content Marketing has become the industry standard. It has been found to be more effective than Traditional marketing. Content Marketing shifts Marketing away from persuasive advertising and selling approaches and instead provides information which creates value for the consumer. This information may be interesting, helpful, informative, problem solving or just entertaining, but the consumer must derive some benefit from it (Chordras 2018, Metrick 2018.) Market segmentation is extremely important to Content Marketing as each piece of content must be tailored to the particular target market the business is trying to reach (Chordras 2018.) Successful Content Marketers create benefits for themselves as well in the form of increased sales, reduced costs, and more loyal consumers (Content Marketing Institute 2017, Metrick 2018.) As traditional marketing decreases in effectiveness Content Marketing effectiveness is increasing (Content Marketing Institute 2016, Patel 2016.) It has progressed from being a practice used to get a competitive edge on the competition to a must use. Companies who do not use Content Marketing get left behind in the industry.

This paper is designed to provide a broad overview of Content Marketing to the marketing educator. Existing textbooks have not had time to include substantial information on this fast-growing area, and most educators do not have time to fully research each new area of Marketing as it appears.. A full understanding of Content Marketing can be very helpful in making sure our students graduate with knowledge of all current marketing practices.

Introduction

Content Marketing has become the hottest buzzword in Marketing and in the past decade has become a extensively established practice (Cespedes & Heddleston 2018.) Although not a new concept, it has been around as long as marketing itself, it was not at first recognized as a separate concept but incorporated with advertising in general. The term “Content Marketing” was coined in the late 1990’s but only came into its own in 2008-2009 (i-Scoop 2018.) It is still evolving (Cespedes & Heddleston 2018.)

Certainly, the advent of Social Media was the driving force in its increasing popularity, although digital marketing is not its only use (i-Scoop 2018.) Consumers were also a major factor. Consumers have become tired of intrusive “selling” efforts and especially did not want it on their Social Media (Dembosky & Bradshaw 2011) which opened the door for the use of Content

Marketing with its useful and interesting information to replace traditional advertising. And more and more consumers begin using Social Media every day (Leslie 2018.)

What is Content Marketing

As it is a new term, there is as yet no consensus on a single definition of Content Marketing and numerous versions abound (i-SCOOP 2018.) Yet the difference is in the wording and they are in general agreement about the meaning of the concept. Content Marketing is, in short, providing consumers with information that is interesting, useful, problem-solving, entertaining or in some way beneficial to the consumer rather than an attempt to sell a product (Content Marketing Institute 2017, i-SCOOP 2018, Ruffolo 2017.) It is most often used to connect with current target markets via content but can also be useful to inbound marketing in connecting with prospects (LeadG2 2018.)

Content marketing is about creating customer value (i-SCOOP 2018, Ruffolo 2017) and sharing information (Ruffolo 2017.) Useful content should be at the core of your marketing strategy (Content Marketing Institute 2017.) Using Content Marketing means to provide relevant information to the target market. This requires understanding your target marketing and their interests. It is a key element in Content Marketing that target markets are clearly identified and thoroughly understood. Then material about a specific interest or which solves a particular problem, etc. can be developed and posted, either on the company's Social Media, blog or website, or on groups which already exist on Social Media or other digital venues. It is important when joining an existing Social Media group to become a participant, not a company trying to make themselves important (Metrick 2018.) It is vital to develop credibility and a trust relationship with the target market, which occurs when consumers feel the marketer's contributions are real and trustworthy (i-Scoop 2018, Ruffolo 2017.)

Relevance to the consumer is key in using Content Marketing to provide customer value. Customer value can be created by sharing information, information which may sometimes, but is not usually, about the company or its products. Although Content should be generally related to your product, business or industry (Chordas 2018,) information about the company or its products should be used only when of relevance to the consumer should they be used. Consumer engagement is the goal and selling efforts do not engage.. Companies use many techniques to provide relevant and engaging content to consumers including offering information of interest, advice, humor, problem solutions, videos and storytelling (Content Marketing Institute 2018, Forrest & Piper 2018, Liu et al. 2018, Ruffolo 2017,)

Why Content Marketing is Rising in Popularity

With the emergence of Social Media and other technology, traditional marketing has become less and less effective. The major reason business is turning to Content Marketing is that it nets them increased sales, reduced costs, and more loyal consumers (Content Marketing Institute 2017, Metrick 2018.) The ROI in using Content Marketing is phenomenal (Ruffolo

2017.) Content Marketing, with its added consumer value concept, is proving more effective than traditional marketing (Content Marketing Institute 2016, Patel 2016.) There are no marketing goals which cannot be achieved using Content Marketing (i-SCOOP 2018.)

While Content Marketing is all about providing benefits to consumers, there are tangible and intangible benefits to a company which uses Content Marketing. Intangible benefits include increased brand awareness, increased respect and esteem in the industry, gaining new customers because they like your Content and decide to try your brand, and more team coordination (Pulizzi 2016.) Among the tangible benefits are increased site traffic, improved Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and direct customer conversion (MOZ 2018.)

SEO, or Search Engine Optimization, is strongly impacted by Content Marketing (Content Marketing Institute 2017.) Content Marketing provides the content that SEO demands (Patel 2015.) Content marketing tells Google that you are important and authoritative in your industry (MOZ 2018) and moves you higher in the search result standing. Google actively seeks high quality content with the most relevant information for the search enquiries of their users (Ruffolo 2017.) All major search engines such as Google, Bing and Yahoo want their primary search results to show all results ranked based on what the search engine considers most relevant to consumers (Search Engine Land 2018.) In general search engines reward those who publish high quality, consistent content (Content Marketing Institute 2017.)

Effective SEO consists of high quality, relevant content which uses the keywords you are targeting (Patel 2015.) Search Engine Optimization include consistent use of keywords (Content Marketing Institute 2017) and the strategic employment of key words (Patel 2015.) However, poor quality content infused with keywords will not work (Patel 2015.) In 2010 Google noticed the quality of their search result were falling, and that a number of companies were basically “content farms.” Google developed Google Panda, an algorithm which weeds out poor quality, thin content and rewards the use of unique, compelling content (Dholakiya 2017.) Quality defeats quantity and its content that helps people find a business (MOZ 2018.)

Modern, forward-thinking marketers believe that Content Marketing is a better way to market (Content Marketing Institute 2017.) Social Media websites are considered one of the most beneficial resources a business can have. Content marketing has gone from a technique which would get a business ahead to one that merely keeps it equal. A business who does not use Content Marketing gets left behind. Content Marketing is now the industry standard (Ruffolo 2017.)

Successful Content Marketing

Not all Content Marketing is successful. To get outstanding results requires exceptional skill and expertise (Ruffolo 2017.) The objective is to attract and retain target markets (Content Marketing Institute 2017, Ruffolo 2017.) This is done by providing truly relevant and useful content (information) to prospects and customers to help them solve their problems, etc. (Content

Marketing Institute 2017) while showing what your company does better than the competition (Chordas 2018.) Content marketing is all about information. It is the marketing of a business or brand through the sharing of educational, entertaining, or insightful information that will help consumers enrich their lives. This may be in the form of a personal change or, hopefully, be in the form of a purchase decision. It is not about forcing a sales pitch on consumers but about helping them move towards the best option for themselves (which may or may not be buying the marketers brand) (Ruffolo 2017.)

There are many ways customer value can be created. Companies use a wide variety of methods to share content. Sometimes it is a contribution to a subject in which the target market is interested (Ruffolo 2017.) It could be a question and answer session. Humor that is appropriate and relevant to your target marketing can be extremely effective (Ruffolo 2017.) Storytelling is considered one of the most powerful ways to get information across. Telling a story that exemplifies personal challenges creates an experience which resonates with consumers (i-SCOOP 2016.) Presenting solutions to consumer problems is always a welcome type of content for consumers (i-SCOOP 2018, Ruffolo 2017.)

For example, Ties.com developed a comprehensive guide for tying ties. It was a high quality publication which contained step-by-step instructions for tying every kind of tie from classical necktie knots to the flamboyant and adventurous. The production quality of the guide was also quite high, and they provided YouTube videos as well. The result was that if you Google “how to tie a tie,” Ties.com will always be the first result on the list (Feldman 2018.)

Building trust is an important part of Content Marketing (Pavlika 2018.) When a marketer freely shares content in an open and honest way it builds trust (Ruffolo 2017.) A goal of Content Marketing is to engage customers in a trustworthy and valuable way (Patel 2016.) Customers should trust the company brand as an authority (Chordas 2018, Ruffolo 2017.) Trust, more than ever, is significantly related to sales, profits, turnover and a source of competitive advantage (Ebersole 2018.) Customers know when businesses are honest and direct with them (Gensler 2015.)

Firms can post Content Marketing on their own websites, blogs or Social Media, or join existing sites. The same message can be sent to different target markets, just in a different manner and venue (i-SCOOP 2018.) Timely and popular topics already exist in active conversations. Sharing content around these topics keeps brands relevant and helps them establish a reputation as the go to source for information (Ruffolo 2017.)

One of the key elements in successfully using Content Marketing is to have a Content Marketing Strategy. Knowing what goals the company wants to accomplish is essential to making a Content Marketing strategy work (Content Marketing Institute 2017, Linn 2015.) The strategy also makes possible another of the other crucial elements of successful Content Marketing – measurement. All Content Marketing needs to be subjected to measurement to see if

it met its stated objectives (i-SCOOP 2018.) Top performers in Content Marketing focus on measurement (Pulizzi 2016.)

Another item successful marketers include in their Content marketing is Evergreen content. Evergreen content provides value today and into the far future. It is any content that provides a basic overview of a topic or provides information which will still be true in a decade (Ruffolo 2017.) Evergreen content takes less time and entails less maintenance and may function as a great industry reference (MOZ 2018.) An excellent example of this is Ties.com (Feldman 2018) as described on page 8.

Above all, Content Marketing requires commitment. 91% of top performers report they are extremely or very committed. You cannot “kind of” do Content Marketing and be successful (Pulizzi 2016.) It takes a lot of time and effort to get started in Content Marketing, and it takes time to see real results. Also, it is common to see some success, then enter a slump. Many companies quit when they hit the slump which is a mistake. This is a common pattern and committed companies who stick with it see strong, long term success (MOZ 2018.)

Unsuccessful Content Marketing

Many companies try, but do not succeed, in using Content Marketing. The reasons are numerous and varied. They range from poor content to poor grammar and are usually a result of a lack of expertise, skill, and commitment to Content Marketing by the marketer (Ruffolo 2017.)

One of the worst and most obvious mistakes is not knowing the target market which is essential in all types of marketing. Knowing and understanding the target market is vital to producing quality Content (Ruffolo 2017.) A company needs to know on which venues the target market spend their time, and what conversations they participate in and consider relevant (Ruffolo 2017.) Content needs to be optimized for each of targets’ social channels. This comprises tailoring your Content to the needs and preferences of the target for each channel and including the relevant keywords (i-SCOOP 2018, Patel 2016.) Quality content tailored to the target market, presented on the right venue, and containing the appropriate and relevant keywords (without overusing them) is necessary for successful Content Marketing (Chordas 2018, Patel 2016.) Failure to do this leads to failure of the Content Marketing.

Many businesses make the mistake of thinking grammar and spelling are unimportant. Grammar is such a simple thing, but poor grammar detracts from the credibility of the business and distract the reader from the Content (Ruffolo 2017.) Readers are more likely to focus on the grammatical errors instead of the message and are unlikely to subscribe to your services or buy your products (Patel 2016.)

Not having a strategy leads to failure in any type of marketing, but businesses often do not realize they should have a strategy specifically for Content Marketing (Content Marketing Institute 2017, Linn 2015.) Without knowing what the company was trying to achieve it is

impossible to measure whether it succeeded or failed (Patel 2016, Pulizzi 2016, Ruffolo 2017.) As the old saying goes, if you do not know where you are going you are likely to end up someplace else.

Failing to provide quality Content is another major reason Content Marketing can fail (MOZ 2018, Ruffolo 2017.) Poor quality content is recognized and rejected by search engines (Content Marketing Institute 2017.) Along with quality content the relevant keywords must be used (MOZ 2018, Patel 2016, Patel 2017) in appropriate ways. Non-relevant keywords do not optimize for search engines (Patel 2018) and gratuitous use can be identified and rejected by programs such as Google Panda (Dholakiya 2017, Patel 2018.) A lack of facts backing up Content contributes to poor quality (Ruffolo 2017.) A lack of commitment by the company can lead to low quality and Content Marketing failure (Pulizzi 2016.)

One of the worst mistakes a company can make is a failure to be useful. The whole idea of Content Marketing is to provide Content which is useful to the consumer in some way (Patel 2016.) Content must be relevant and provide value to consumers (i-SCOOP 2018, Search Engine Land 2018.) The Content can provide value to the target market in many ways such as being interesting to read, teaching or providing knowledge, presenting solutions to problems, or just being humorous or entertaining. Just any old copy will not work.

Conclusion

In the last few years Content Marketing has moved from the category of giving a company an edge over the competition to the category of being left behind if you do not use it. This follows the trend of more Marketing dollars moved from traditional marketing to Social Media or other digital mediums as more and more consumers join Social Media every day. Content Marketing is becoming a dominant force in marketing.

Content Marketing is getting away from the “selling” aspect of marketing and intrusive advertising to a more customer-centric environment. In general Content Marketing makes available information to the target market or the public which is interesting, informative, problem-solving or entertaining. It can bring new customers and increased profitability to those who have the ability to use it correctly. Content Marketing has now become an industry standard.

As educator's, a thorough understanding of Content Marketing is required so it may be addressed properly in marketing classrooms. Marketing practices, such as Content Marketing, evolve too quickly to be adequately addressed in text books. It is up to the educator to fill in the gaps.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:

Content Marketing is relevant to educators, researchers and practitioners because at present it represents the most cutting edge, most powerful, most effective marketing practice available. This is expected to continue as the use of Social Media and other digital venues is still growing. However, this paper's primary purpose is to give a comprehensive overview of Content Marketing to educators. At present many of our texts are very light on the subject, and an educator needs a complete understanding of Content Marketing to take to the classroom and make sure our graduating students will be current in all marketing practices.

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Dr. PJ Forrest is a Marketing Professor at Alcorn State University, Graduate Programs in Business, where she teaches Social Media Marketing and other marketing courses. Her early work on business student ethics and social responsibility have been published in the Journal of

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