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# The Evolution of Content Marketing with Case Studies

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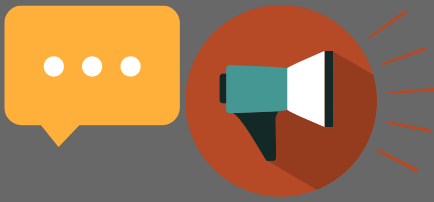


# Content Marketing Playbook

Sarosha Imtiaz

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# Introduction to Content Marketing

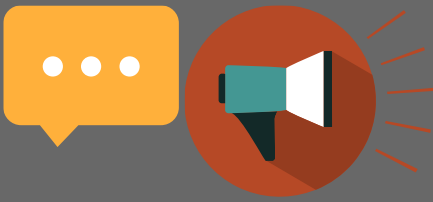
Traditional marketing is on the decline, especially as more companies shift towards a digital approach. This has paved the road for content marketing, an innovative online method to reach clearly-defined audiences by focusing on creating and distributing valuable, relevant and consistent content to ultimately drive profitable customer action. The content produced is information that often helps customers understand a product's value and helps them decide whether they should dedicate the appropriate time and financial resources to purchase. Properly educating customers on the benefits of the product or service a company offers is often the difference between visitors purchasing their offering over a competitor. While traditional marketing uses a one-size-fits-all approach where techniques like beautiful imagery, powerful copy and humour are used to gain attention, content marketing focuses on a specific target audience during their discovery phase and appeals to them directly rather than everyone at once.

Every content marketing strategy has an underlying objective of selling a benefit to a customer in exchange for them visiting their website to purchase a product or service. One of the most used techniques is blogging, which gives companies a way to communicate directly with customers to create sales opportunities, bring awareness to their brand, build a community or showcase new product developments. Once a user visits the company's website, they begin to employ conversion tactics to guide users to either purchase a product or submit their contact information before leaving.



Since blog posts are text-heavy, they require a significant time and mental investment for the readers to digest the information. The use of infographics, on the other hand, gives users a way to consume content using images in a visually aesthetic way. An additional technique of using visual means to invoke action is by using video to communicate company values, showcase guides or promote products. Videos can be used to invoke a vast variety of emotions from viewers. Depending on the company's campaign objective, the video may not even mention the products they offer, instead only focus on communicating a feeling which should resonate with viewers afterward.

Content and videos are effective in building a company's reputation and brand, but can still be augmented with social proof to make the organization seem more trustworthy in the eyes of its customers. Interviewing a thought leader in the industry is one of the commonly employed methods of building trust while creating unique and exclusive content. Likewise, showcasing user-generated content is a great way to help spark the imagination of their clients and give them a reason to get involved for the potential of being featured. Companies can further establish themselves by building a targeted community that groups like-minded individuals who help each other accomplish a goal using their product or service.



# Gauging the Effectiveness of Content Marketing

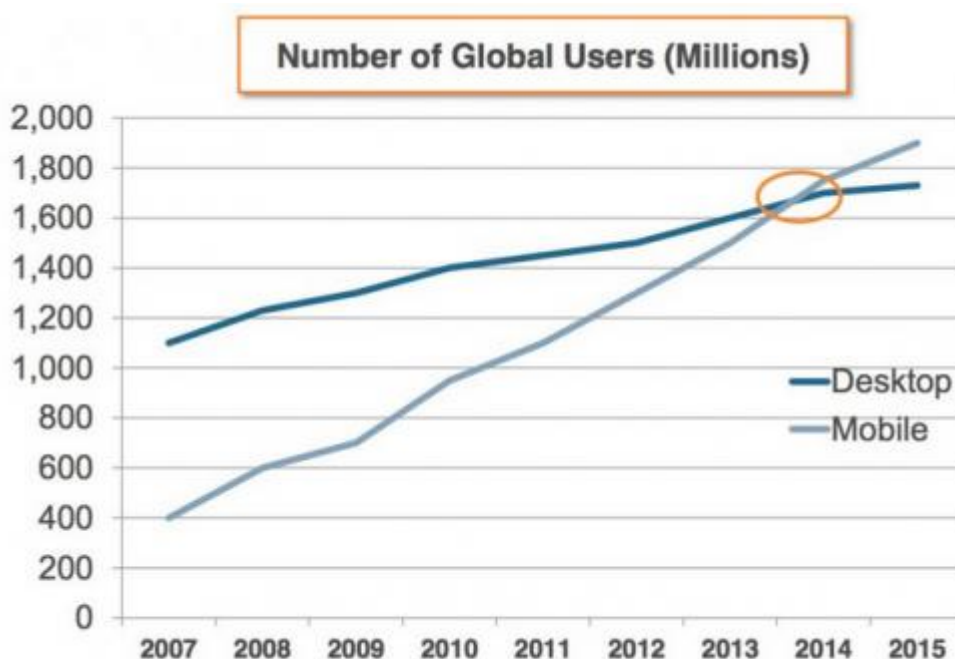
As content marketing takes the lead in digital marketing tactics, it has become a priority to create systems that can measure the effectiveness and impact of the various forms of content that is produced. Common lead generation tactics like white paper giveaways have severely lacking analytics and only measure the number of downloads the piece of content receives. Measuring content effectiveness is quite different than the standard process of measuring engagement and requires a focus on specific targeted key performance indicators (KPI's) discussed below.

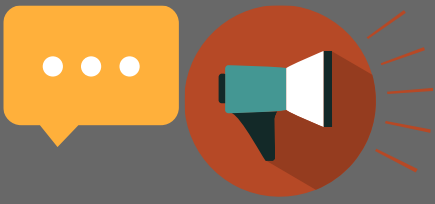
## Reach

A marketing campaign's reach can be defined through analyzing the unique visits that have viewed the content, the geography of the traffic and the mobile readership. Unique visits are the standard measure of how many people have seen company content during a 30-day window. This KPI is a good baseline indicator which can be used to compare other content types and trends over time. However, all visits should not have the same level of impact on evaluating the effectiveness of a piece of content. For example, a unique visit to a white paper would be much more valuable for lead generation than a visit on the blog page.

Geography is another key indicator of content effectiveness as it helps marketers understand where in the world their content is being read and allows them to allocate more resources in areas with high viewership. A way this can be easily tracked is through Google Analytics which provides page-level details on where visitors are coming from allowing marketers to plan their content accordingly.

Content has to be mobile-responsive with over 50% of web traffic coming through mobile devices. Marketers can use tools like Aiva to understand how much of their viewership is coming from mobile compared to desktop and even find out what devices they are using. This can help them understand the demographics of their visitors by potentially using phone models as a determinant of average income.





## Engagement

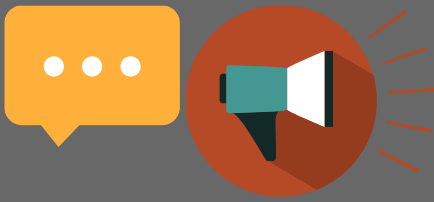
User engagement measured can in a variety of ways including the website bounce rate, the time they spend on the page, analyzing their click/hover patterns and investigating how many pages they view. An overarching goal of any content that is created is to keep visitors on the website for longer. A high bounce rate means that this goal is not being met, since seeing the content did not encourage them to visit multiple pages. Unique page-view statistics need to be combined with measuring how long people are spending on the site in order to be effective. If a 30-page piece of content receives thousands of hits but people are only spending a few seconds on the site, the strategy is probably not working.

There are many tools available that help track where visitors are interacting on pages they visit. Considering heat maps when redesigning a website experience can help pinpoint areas which can be improved in a visual way. Understanding where an audience is spending their time looking and clicking is essential to optimize content and designs based on the information collected. Another basic KPI which is sometimes overlooked is page views, which tracks the number of pages a visitor views before leaving the site. Having a high page view count for unique visitors is a strong indicator of a high-performing campaign as it often means that users are consuming more content. Marketers can even pinpoint how many pages an average user consumes before dropping off and employ conversion tactics at opportune times to promote continued browsing.

## Sentiment

With the rise of social media marketing, every piece of content available online becomes an immediate two-way conversation. This can sometimes lead to negative comments, but companies who embrace social as a channel can use this information to find potential flaws in their content creation approach. Users who care enough to openly discuss content are usually motivated and engaged which can be considered a success. Good comments can also be used as testimonials which can be used to promote the company's content by leveraging social proof.

Making content easily shareable on different platforms is critical for all content marketing strategies. With just a few shares, content has the ability to reach thousands of more eyeballs and potentially start a snowball effect. Sharing widgets found across the web make this easy for any website owner to enable social sharing on their content. Companies can use metrics from what networks their content is shared on to better understand their audience's habits and fine-tune their strategy accordingly.



## Content Credibility

Until recently, there were two types of content, either it was factual or obviously wrong. This notion has changed dramatically since the recent US election, which according to a study by BuzzFeed<sup>1</sup> has caused the rise of “Fake News”, a story that has been written and published with the intent to mislead others in an attempt to gain something financially or politically. Many claim that this type of content was one of Donald Trump’s primary tactics used to claim presidency of the United States. The root cause of the problem is that people inherently believe what they are told to, especially when it comes from a powerful source. Since the president gathers his facts from non-credible sources like Breitbart, he believed what he was saying was factual and consequently so did his followers.

### Total Facebook Engagements for Top 20 Election Stories

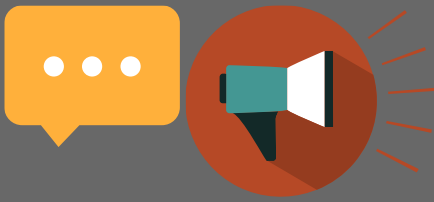


This brings up the question of “fake news” in content marketing, and how one can be truly sure that the content they are consuming is factual. Content marketers now have the added responsibility to ensure that their information comes from credible sources rather than using any random facts found online. Nevertheless, there are several measures these marketers can take to ensure that the content they create is credible by making a good first impression and incorporating social proof.

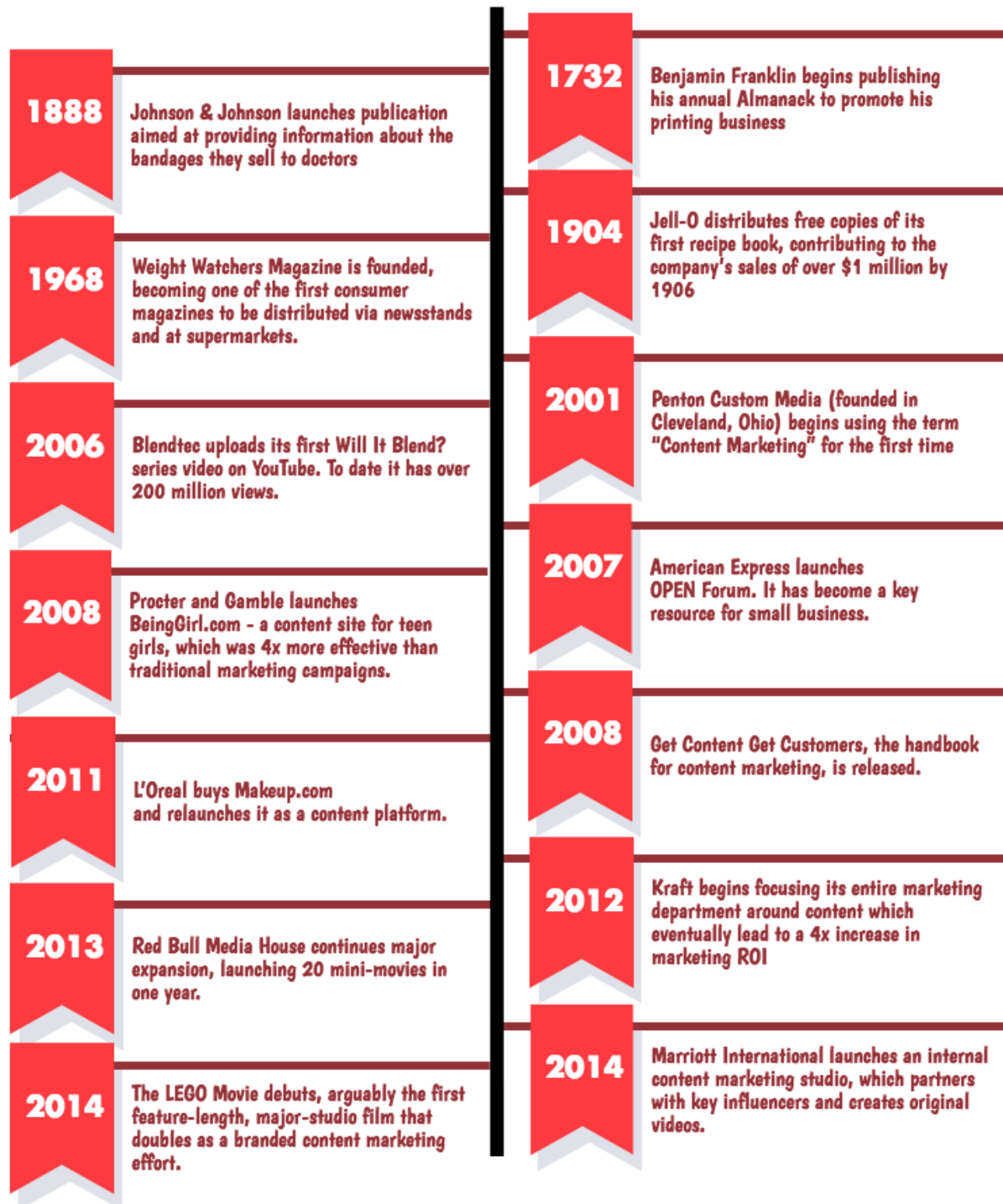
In order to make a good first impression, scheduled content is a necessity. If a brand always posts once a week and suddenly stops posting for a year, the subsequent posting will lose some credibility immediately. Statistics are commonly found in majority of content, but need to be sourced in order to be trustworthy. Tactics which are seen as red flags when using statistics include using a source name without hyperlinking, linking a source’s home page rather than a specific article and links to sources which have no references to a stat. Perfecting the grammar, spelling, usage and scannability before posting any content is essential in creating credible content.

The easiest way to incorporate social proof is to leverage influencers. By referencing or co-creating alongside thought leaders in the industry, the credibility of the content created is immediately improved. Another way companies can show trustworthiness is by having their employees become brand ambassadors to help relate to audiences on a personal level. Real life examples showing how companies have helped customers via testimonials also help build brand credibility. Finally, the ideal way to build brand credibility is to create the best content. If a company is able to consistently create high-value, well-polished content, they will naturally build a loyal, trusting following.

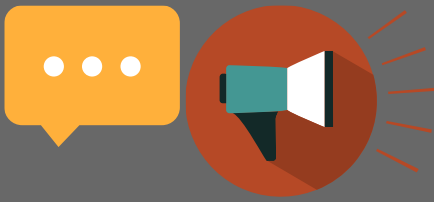
<sup>1</sup> Silverman, Craig (2016), “This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook,” *Buzzfeed*, (accessed April 22, 2017), [available at <https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook?>].



## A Brief History of Content Marketing







## Emerging Trends in Content Marketing

Content marketing has drastically changed over the past 5 years and transitioned from an afterthought to being a cornerstone in most successful marketing strategies. This rise can be attributed to a shift in consumer loyalty to brands that drive value to their lives apart from the products and services they offer.

Native advertising is a technique in the marketing world that disguises ads as useful content instead of blatantly advertising a product or service. Until a few years ago, enterprises spent about 80% of their budgets on content creation and 20% on content promotion. This has effectively reversed as successful enterprises seek to create differentiated content and spend time figuring out the best way to promote their brand in subtle ways. In the future, as native advertisements blend into the web browsing experience, it will become tougher to discern between ads and news.

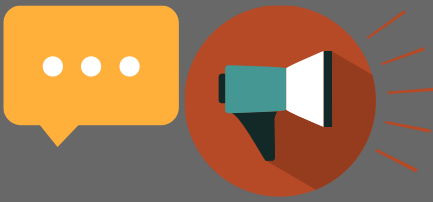
Snapchat is a massive distribution platform for native advertising to the millennial population. One way that brands can use Snapchat to promote new content is by using branded filters. Movie premieres including *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Jungle Book* and *The Peanuts Movie* have all used Snapchat filters to educate Snapchat's user base of over 400 million people about their upcoming release through a shareable interactive experience. The app's Discover page is a hub for content marketing with publishers posting daily updates which include subtle mentions of their advertisers. For example, a story talking about the best ways to clean a house may be sponsored by Dust Buster. NewsCred took a deeper dive to understand how users behave on Snapchat and results are below.<sup>2</sup>



Finally, the marketing world is excited to start using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to automate menial tasks in the industry. AI can be used in a multitude of ways to increase the efficiency of marketers by automatically generating starting content, deploying chatbots to interact with users when they are unable to speak with potential clients and customizing newsfeed algorithms using Machine Learning to quickly consume content that intrigues them. Companies can use AI to better understand their audience by using predictive intelligence. They can use these insights to personalize content on a per customer level without needing to do any additional work. There are several other upcoming companies that seek to automate other processes in the marketing world, including one whose goal is to eliminate the need to create A/B testing variations and instead use AI to optimize conversion automatically. This would drastically lessen the amount of work that marketers spend creating manual variations using a guess and check method and instead focus on designing new experiences.

Disruption is happening rapidly in the content marketing space, making it tough to predict what the landscape will look like in the next few years. However, it is evident that marketers will be working alongside machines to become more efficient and their efforts will be focused on driving value for their customers rather than promoting products.

<sup>2</sup> Biale, Alexa (2016), "Infographic: How Consumers Really Use Snapchat," *Insights*, (accessed April 22, 2017), [available at <https://insights.newscred.com/infographic-how-consumers-really-use-snapchat/>].



## Conclusion

Content marketing has evolved significantly since its conception over 200 years ago. The industry has transformed from a clever technique to promote a printing business, to the majority of content being produced online and advertised worldwide with the click of a button. The ultimate goal of this content has always been to provide value to a specific audience in the hopes they reciprocate by purchasing a product or service. Due to recent events, the credibility of content is under constant scrutiny, which has made it vital for readers to not believe everything they read unless it is properly sourced and verifiable. Soon technology will work alongside humans in their marketing efforts to streamline their processes, making people more efficient in their everyday lives and even help pinpoint false statements to stop the spread of “fake news”. Content marketing is the cornerstone of inbound marketing strategies implemented by most successful companies globally. It continues to be augmented by innovative technologies and will consequently be the core technique to facilitate organic business growth for the foreseeable future.

### Case Studies

Companies globally have succeeded in using content marketing in disruptive new ways to stay ahead of their competition. In order to stay relevant, a company’s strategies and content types must be adapted rapidly depending on what resonates with their customer base. Several companies have differentiated themselves based on their novel content strategies and are discussed in detail below.





## Case Study: IKEA

### Background of the company

IKEA is an internationally established home furnishing retailer. Founded in 1943, it has grown rapidly and has become the world's largest retailer of its kind in the world. The company has 315 locations spread worldwide, over 147000 employees and close to 775 million customers in the past year, resulting in over \$50 billion of revenue. The majority of IKEA's furniture is ready to assemble by their customers and able to be stored in a very efficient manner due to its flat packaging style. This lets them minimize the production costs on their 12000-plus products which include home furniture and related accessories. Their products are available in-store and featured on their website. All IKEA brick and mortar stores include restaurants and cafes which serve typical Swedish food offered at very low prices.



IKEA's vision is 'to create a better everyday life for the many people' and seeks to accomplish this by offering a wide range of well-designed, functional home furnishing products at low enough prices that appeal to the majority of people around the world. The techniques they use to get the lowest possible market rates include optimizing their value chain, building long-term relationships with their suppliers, investing in automated production and producing large volumes of merchandise.



## Content Marketing Approach

IKEA has one of the most diverse content marketing approaches in their industry, ranging from direct-mail campaigns to VR experiences which all focus on improving people's everyday lives. To do this, IKEA devotes an abundance of resources into understanding the problems people face in their everyday lives and what is important to them. Typically companies would settle for consumer information from surveys and reports, but IKEA goes out of its way to physically send design experts into people's homes to listen to their potential customer's concerns and provide feedback. This gives their marketing team access to real life personal information rather than relying on just surveys or data, which they then leverage to tell compelling stories about real customers.

The most basic of IKEA's content marketing strategies is their catalogue, which they have been distributing by direct-mail for over half a century. These catalogues, which contain over 300 pages and 12000 products, were printed a total of 219 million times. Each edition of the catalogue consumes approximately 70% of IKEA's yearly marketing budget and employees over 280 people in the process. Though at first glance, their catalogue seems like a low-tech content marketing strategy, IKEA's investment in innovation has made it a technological marvel. In 2006, IKEA featured its first computer generated image of a wooden chair, which was indistinguishable by their customers from the real product. According to The CGSociety, in 2013 around 12% of the images were computer generated and by 2014 this number leaped to 75%.<sup>3</sup> By investing in technology, IKEA was able to transform a typically manual task of capturing imagery and arranging on a page into an automated one, establishing themselves both as a thought leader in the industry and allowing them to distribute their most effective content marketing strategy in a more efficient manner.

They continued to build their technological edge with the release of their augmented reality (AR) features alongside their standard catalogue. This allowed their customers to experience extended digital content and add a new dimension to the

shopping experience. Customers could unlock 50 additional pages of digital content including videos, furnishing tips and room designs by downloading the IKEA catalogue mobile application and scanning a portion of their physical copy. This resulted in their app being downloaded a surplus of 8.5 million times upon the release of their 2014 catalogue. Their augmented reality feature allowed their customers to place furniture in their homes using their mobile phones to see whether the style and colour worked with their interior design and decide what to buy prior to visiting the IKEA store.

Alongside their catalogue, IKEA intelligently uses video marketing to supplement their efforts in clever ways. An example of this is their "BookBook" campaign, which launched as a parody to Apple's iPhone 6 announcement and showcased their catalogue as an alternative to the rise of e-books or digital books. As a result, they accumulated over 18 million hits on YouTube and globally acclaim for their comedic approach to promoting their brand. This dedication to video is a long-standing technique employed by IKEA to attract customers. Their first web series was called "Easy to Assemble" released in 2008 and ran for four seasons. The series featured a fictional version of an actress who leaves her Hollywood career to work at IKEA and won multiple Webby and Streamy awards for its unique approach to video marketing.

IKEA also encourages their users to get involved and show off their own designs and creativity. In 2011, they launched Share Space, a community photo sharing site which has become the brand's hub for user generated content. By using a microsite, they encourage their users to share ideas that inspire them and learn from others as they browse, comment on and save other people's layouts. By allowing consumers to provide inspiration for one another, this project highlights IKEA's overarching goal of making people's lives better at home.

<sup>3</sup> Parkin, Kirsty (2014), "Building 3D with Ikea," *The CGSociety*, (accessed April 16, 2017), [available at [http://www.cgsociety.org/index.php/CGSFeatures/CGSFeatureSpecial/building\\_3d\\_with\\_ikea](http://www.cgsociety.org/index.php/CGSFeatures/CGSFeatureSpecial/building_3d_with_ikea)].



## Competitive Landscape

IKEA's content marketing strategy differentiates itself from its competition which ranges from low-end retailers who offer a worse product for a lower price and others which offer a higher price point for a better product.



Walmart is the largest retailer in the US, and though they have a diverse product pool, are still one of IKEA's main competitors for value priced furniture products. They use an omnichannel content strategy which creates a full content ecosystem around their products. This includes offering occasion relevant offers and providing engaging content to hubs which receive the most traffic. This encompasses the Food & Entertainment section having a dynamic grocery list which can be populated based on popular recipes and the Mother and Baby section which focuses on community galleries and videos. Apart from creating content, Walmart also uses engaging TV and online advertisements to communicate content to its potential customers. They focus on creating "liquid content" which could be used interchangeably across social and ad platforms alike. Walmart uses their weekly online ads to promote sponsored supplier content alongside contextual recommendations, for example, an advertisement for peaches may link to a peach jam ad for a supplier.



Ashley Furniture sells higher-end furniture and typically relies on commonly implemented digital marketing techniques like SEO, paid advertisements and social media marketing to generate a bulk of their sales. They started executing their social media strategy later than their competition in late 2010. Their content attempts to encourage conversation amongst consumers about their products. Ashley Furniture also uses social media to provide their readers useful content like how to best clean their furniture. To encourage their fan base to interact with their social media pages, they work alongside a charity organization called City of Hope to whom they donate 25 cents to every time their page is liked. Another tactic Ashley Furniture has adopted is using contests and giveaways to build email lists of potential customers. An example of this is that they offered a free gas giveaway and a \$500 shopping spree which required a cell phone number or email address to opt-in. Mobile Marketer analyzed Ashley Furniture's results and observed that by advertising secret sales to these targeted customers, they were able to generate over \$130,000 of sales with a majority coming from their mobile users.<sup>4</sup> For every dollar they spent in this ad campaign, they were able to get over 75 times return on their investment.



Wayfair is an online home goods retailer that gets over 10 million unique hits every month in the US alone and does not have any retail locations. Search, display and retargeting ads are the cornerstones of their strategy. They manage almost 8 million search keywords which all lead users to their website along with a robust Facebook marketing strategy. Wayfair's retargeting strategy aims to not be annoying or scare off newer customers and only targets customers who have abandoned their cart at the purchasing stage. Direct to consumer advertising techniques like commercials and YouTube ads is another way Wayfair uses content marketing to their advantage. They started off by airing on more than 90 cable tv networks with a lively ad which featured their furniture automatically arranging themselves in a house. These ads let them further understand their audience and fine-tune the rest of their digital strategy.





## Strategy Goals and Effectiveness

IKEA's brand goals can be split up into a few main categories, their low-price advantage, their digitally augmented catalogue and their in-store experience.

IKEA seeks to provide furniture at a low price that is affordable to as many homeowners as possible. The main way they're able to do this is by creating easy to assemble furniture in bulk that is packed and sold in efficient packaging. Their pricing is so aggressive that despite external factors like inflation and product costs, there is still a 2-3% decrease in cost every year on existing products.

Their catalogue is their major industry advantage when it comes to content, bringing in numerous new customers every year and offering their existing users a way to digitally interact with their products in innovative new ways. They used AR to let readers place furniture in their home to help them plan and know what they wanted prior to coming in-store. Further leveraging their catalogue's market dominance through video and comedy, IKEA gained international acclaim for their brilliant strategy.

The in-store experience of IKEA is a marketing marvel on its own as they guide their users through a maze and showcase their entire line of products throughout the store. This means that even if a customer is only at their location to get a singular item, they are still looking at the rest of their diverse product line.

## Marketing Shortfalls

IKEA was heavily critiqued in their push into the American market, since not enough market research was conducted prior to their entry. The furniture market in the United States was a heavily fragmented market where the top 10 retailers were only responsible for 14.2% market share in the industry. The low-end providers included Walmart and Target which sold products at a discount, and consequently lower quality. Higher end providers are consulted on the interior design and offered well-built furniture that would last a lifetime to make up for their high cost.

When IKEA attempted to launch, they did not account for the change in measurement required to sell to the American population and instead sold instructions which contained metric measurements. This had a significant negative impact, especially when their pre-set sizes did not fit into households. Forcing the homeowners to assemble their own furniture was also not immediately accepted by the US population, as they were not used to a self-service model. These errors have not hurt the company long term, as they have more sales in the US than any other furniture provider except Ashley Furniture.

## Case Study: Expedia

### Background of Company

Expedia is the world's leading online travel service and the eighth largest travel agency in the US. Their competitive advantage lies in their Expert Searching and Pricing technology which delivers a comprehensive list of all flight options available online. It also allows their customers to dynamically build complete trips that feature flights, hotels, ground transportation and destination related activities, offering special prices as more are bundled together. Alongside their online platform, they also own a corporate focused travel agency called Travelscape allowing them to cross-sell and bring their innovative booking system to any third party as a private label.

Expedia started off as a Microsoft spinoff and launched in 1996 as the first online travel service offered by a major technology corporation. Within 5 years, Expedia was already profitable, reporting a profit of \$4.4 million, resulting in USA Networks acquiring the company for \$1.5 billion. To date, Expedia has made 15 acquisitions itself, namely Travelscape (\$90 million in 2000), Orbitz (\$1.6 billion in 2015) and HomeAway (\$3.9 billion in 2015) to strengthen its stranglehold on the online travel industry. They employee over 20,000 people around the world and generate over \$8.7 billion a year in revenue.



Expedia's Aquisitions

## Content Marketing Approach

Expedia heavily divulges in content marketing efforts to build awareness about their brand. Their illustrious marketing efforts started with a single page advertisement in the Wall Street Journal that urged customers to access the “same travel system” used by travel agents. The result was over a million dollars in bookings in only a week span. Immediately following this, Expedia started their associates program which gave suppliers and other companies access to Expedia’s system, in exchange for co-branding resulting in another boost in sales. As the industry has moved to a digital advertising approach, Expedia has adapted their strategy to the changing times focusing their efforts on social media, video marketing as well as creating immersive infographics.

Social media marketing has become a cornerstone of many online companies as a technique to build their brand. However, few companies capitalize on the vastly different types of traffic which come to each of the major social channels. Expedia markets on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram in different ways depending on their target audience and leverages them to create great content to supplement the brand’s efforts.

Expedia has their largest following on Facebook with over 6.4 million followers worldwide. Their Facebook and Twitter channels are open lines of communication and can be interacted with directly to chat with Expedia representatives. The material that Expedia shares rely on high visual quality and showcases vacation destination around the world. The photos and videos are all high quality and attempt to show off the culture of the different countries that their system can plan trips for their fans to visit. Contests on Facebook are one of Expedia’s staples to collect lots of user generated content. They encourage their Facebook fans to use various hashtags to document trips around the

world and in an exchange offer them a chance to win \$10,000 to a destination of their choice. They use calls to action on their page to make it quick and easy to enter these contests and find out more information like “Book Now” and “Learn More” which redirect users to the relevant pages.

Expedia has several Twitter accounts for the various regions they have offices in, their main account @Expedia, has over 389,000 followers to date. They are more active on Twitter than on Facebook, with an average of 4-5 posts a day. By sharing real-time content including live tweets from events and live streamed AMA’s (Ask me Anything) promoted with a unique hashtag #ExpediaChat. Expedia excels at encouraging users to interact with their tweets by giving them an opportunity to chat with experts and share their own experiences. Since they sometimes retweet/post content generated by their users, it incentivizes them to tweet often in an attempt to be featured. Another unique way that Expedia uses Twitter is by using it as a channel to send their fans into gamified experiences focused on selling more vacations. A campaign they ran in 2015 called #MatchMadeInTravel, leveraged Tinder’s success in a travel based setting where users could swipe left or right to pick their perfect vacation destination. Expedia’s marketing team also takes advantage of trending hashtags like #WorldEmojiDay to further promote their brand to the masses.



Expedia uses LinkedIn as a creative recruiting channel and posts career-related content to promote their employer brand. The main indicator is the company profile, as they have an employee focused company description which shows off personality and gives the impression of a fun work environment and the linked website features their careers page and not their homepage like most other companies. They have a lot of interest as an employer with over 140,000 followers and their updates receive a high level of engagement averaging 100-400 likes and comments from other LinkedIn users. They take the time to respond to many comments that are made on their posts, especially those of potential employees. Their content is mainly a combination of job advertisements and updates about the Expedia executive team, including their future plans as a company. They share numerous photographs and updates about projects they are working on and issues they care about such as LGBT equality. They use storytelling to aid their recruiting efforts by referring to "Life at Expedia" through the perspective of an employee rather than as a corporation. This channel is one with the fewest posts, as is the nature of LinkedIn, and sometimes shares the same content as other channels, but far more infrequently.

Instagram is a great way to showcase imagery and branded content, which Expedia has made full use of while gaining 144,000 followers. Their Instagram marketing strategy is very similar to their approach on Facebook where they focus on high-quality imagery and hold contests to incentivize their audience to submit pictures of their travels. However, they use unique, platform-specific features to make it easy for their followers to enter competitions which grow their user base at the same time. For example, to enter a contest to potentially win a trip to Hawaii, users were required to follow the brand as well as tag a friend in the comments while another asked users to share their travel photos using a branded hashtag. These approaches both encourage engagement on their posts and expand the reach of their brand on Instagram.

Since Instagram only allows one link to be shared, they constantly change their bio to reflect their most recent campaign for easy access. Their posts often capitalize on events and offer mobile users to easily gain coupons via text, which at the same time builds their lead list.

Apart from social, Expedia targets potential buyers using clever video campaigns, which seek to accomplish an overall purpose rather than pushing the brand's values. One of their most successful web campaigns was called "Find Yours" used emotional videos alongside charitable donations to gain massive amounts of shares. They allowed their users to share content from any of their channels to garner a donation including Facebook Shares, Retweeting, SMS Donation Matching, and a microsite dedicated to spreading the word. To target the millennial population, Expedia launched a significantly different campaign, showing Expedia interns debunk common travel myths in hilarious fashion. All of their videos receive an average of over 10 million views on YouTube.

Finally, Expedia effectively uses infographics in creative ways to immerse their audiences. One great example is a visual chart that encourages people to categorize themselves as a certain type of traveler by using a series of questions. These mini storytelling efforts allow Expedia to flex their creativity by showing the data they've collected over thousands of bookings in an easy to consume way. People who come across the infographic just need to follow along and answer simple questions in order to be categorized based on their travel habits and gain insights into their personality. They took this idea to another level with the release of their Expedia Travel Profile which automatically tracked a Facebook user's travels using their personal data and aggregated facts into an infographic which could be shared. The application captured 'number of countries visited', 'highest place been', 'most interesting transport taken', 'total miles traveled' and 'famous drinks in cities you have drunk in' plus other interesting stats which friends could

## Competitive Landscape

Due to Expedia's aggressive acquisition strategy, not many of their competitors are left in the market. Their main outstanding competitor is the Priceline Group whose content marketing approach is detailed below.

The Priceline Group is a conglomerate of Booking.com, Kayak, Agoda.com, Retalcars.com and OpenTable, which all work together to give their users a unified buying experience, much like Expedia. Priceline is focused on delivering an optimal mobile experience and creates an aura of mystery around which brand of hotel you're getting until you've already paid for it, unlike any other booking platform. This anonymity encourages hotels to lower their rates without risk of upsetting customers who are paying more. These lead to phenomenal margins which far exceed those collected by Expedia.



In terms of content marketing, the Priceline Group uses influencers to help spread the word about their services. Unlike some other companies, they do not use the influencer to promote themselves, but instead have the personality face a common issue of booking a last minute flight, and happen to use the Priceline service to complete the transaction. This video was watched over 5 million times on Facebook and had over 100,000 likes. They also partner with Instagram influencers and send them to different locations you can book through Priceline. This lets the influencer create content in their own style and share it with their follower-base. They also have some bigger stars like William Shatner and Kaley Cuoco, who they feature in online/TV commercials.

The content that Priceline circulates is based on real trips and real needs to save money. They talk about things like going on a trip to see your friends from college, a night out with friends or another trip which did not require advance planning since Priceline was used. The focus is on taking advantage of the moment and taking a trip instead of thinking twice. From a customer perspective, their advantage lies in the support they provide. Priceline is infamous for always replying back to disgruntled customers with personalized messages that are focused on improving their experience.

## Strategy Goals and Effectiveness

Expedia is the biggest online travel agency in the world. To date, they have partnered with over 10,000 hotels, airlines and have a global presence in about 60 countries.

Expedia seeks to give its users a one-stop shop for all of their travel needs and typically acquires any of its competitors who reach critical mass. Social media is a cornerstone of their successful content marketing strategy as their social platforms offer benefits to their users which encourage them to share content or post their own. They have massive follower bases on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, which are used to promote contests and collect user-generated content as well as LinkedIn that encourages their followers to work for their company in subtle ways.

Their “Find Yours” campaign received glowing reviews for its use of emotion to sell a product. The message they’re trying to drive home is compelling and reflects the segmented, customizable and unique nature of a personalized trip. This campaign was so successful in fact, that they expanded their campaign into a standalone Facebook app which let users to easily compile vacation photos into a short, stylized video, which got raving reviews.

Finally, their Infographic strategy again uses storytelling to immerse users in an experience rather than merely consuming content. Their graphics have a goal which incentivizes visitors to go through a funnel and invest time into learning more about their services without realizing it. They took infographic creation to a personal level with their Expedia Travel Profile and has been constantly pushing the limits of content marketing in the online travel agency space.

## Marketing Shortfalls

Expedia’s aggressive growth has left them as the largest online travel agency, but not necessarily the most profitable one. Travel Weekly recounted, as Expedia accelerated partner and customer acquisition, their margin took a considerable hit, dipping as low as 7% for sales made on their partner company, Orbitz.<sup>5</sup> Their market also has a low barrier to entry, springing many spin-off companies who try to compete by offering lower rates.

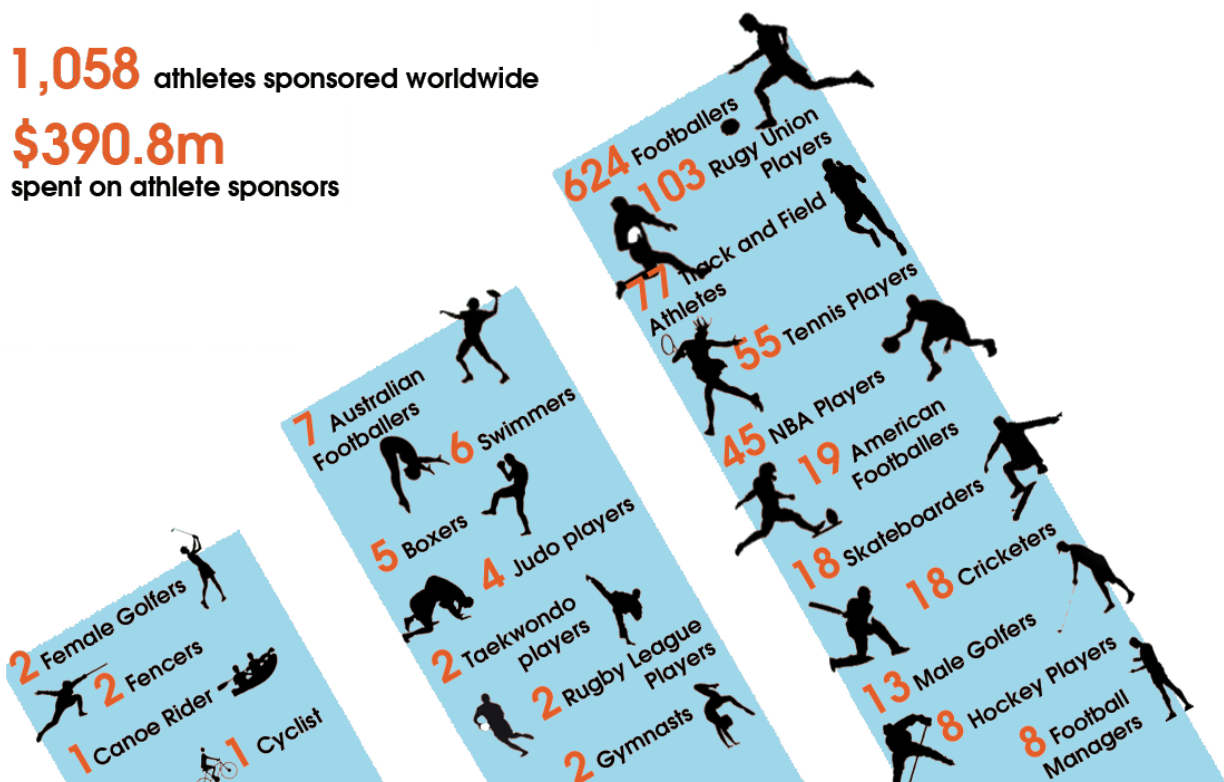
Another shortfall of Expedia is their relatively poor customer service. Their Facebook account is notoriously bad and typically has a 24 hour minimum response time, which is unfeasible in many circumstances when booking a last minute flight. Furthermore, Expedia does not provide a unique benefit to their customers like Priceline does, which makes them easier to disrupt in the long term.

<sup>5</sup> King, Danny & Rice, Kate (2015), “Expedia and Priceline attain dominance with different strategies,” *Travel Weekly*, (accessed April 17, 2017), [available at <http://www.travelweekly.com/Travel-News/Travel-Agent-Issues/Expedia-and-Priceline-attain-dominance-with-different-strategies>].

## Case Study: Adidas

### Background of Company

Adidas is a German multinational corporation that designs and manufactures shoes, clothes and accessories. The group consists of Reebok, Runtastic (an Australian fitness technology company) and a stake of FC Bayern Munich. They employ over 50,000 people worldwide and their revenue was listed at €19.29 billion. Adidas started off as a footwear company, specializing in soccer-related wear but quickly transitioned into a company which manufactured and distributed all kinds of clothing. Today they are the largest sportswear manufacturer in Europe and the second biggest in the world with clothing created for baseball, basketball, cricket, golf, gymnastics, lacrosse, rugby, running, skateboarding, tennis and even Kabaddi (a highly popular sport in Asian countries).



A key core of Adidas's business model are sponsorships which help grow the Adidas brand. They sponsor famous soccer clubs such as Real Madrid, Chelsea, Milan and Juventus who all sport jerseys featuring the Adidas logo. In 2014, Adidas and Manchester United agreed to a ten-year kit deal which had a guaranteed minimum value of \$1.29 billion, making it the most valuable sports deal in history. They also sponsor several professional golf and basketball players, however, their most lucrative deals all take place in the soccer world. Internationally recognized players like David Beckham and Lionel Messi publically endorse the Adidas brand and share their content on social media to their millions of fans.



## Content Marketing Approach

Adidas relies on content marketing to educate the world about its values as a brand and uses sponsorships with athletes to help promote their message to sports fans all around the world. The main way the brand communicates with their audience is through social media channels including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube where the focus is providing high-quality visual content to their fans for sharing. Apart from social media, Adidas has used globally acclaimed ground-breaking marketing techniques during the World Cup and has recently launched a robust content-powered community geared towards entrepreneurial athletes.

Adidas is a massive organization with several social media accounts for different sectors of their business. Their main verified Twitter account has over 3 million followers and their content is around promoting their products, showcasing their sponsored athletes wearing their apparel and retweeting their other brand accounts. Unlike other companies, Adidas prepares content specifically for use in real-time events. For example, if two of their sponsored players score in the same soccer game and are both sporting Adidas apparel, they would tweet a pre-prepared image of these athletes with a trending hashtag to maximize engagement. Since few global brands get involved in live events, they consistently get high engagement on their posts.

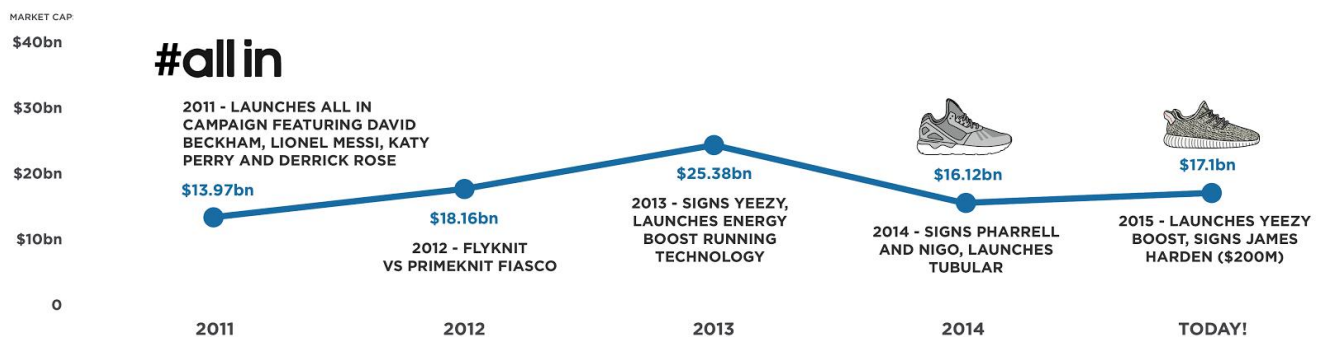
Cross-promotion is a core marketing strategy Adidas employees on their Facebook account. They have an extremely large fan base on their main account with over 26 million likes since they are a globally recognized brand. Instead of their home page, their Facebook page links to a microsite which features testimonials from famous athletes and encourages their site visitors to share their story as well with the hashtag #HERETOCREATE. Adidas integrates their other brand channels seamlessly into Facebook by allowing visitors to watch videos that are aggregated together in the "Videos" tab.

They also strategically "like" pages that are created for their clients, athletes they work with and their professional sports partners. This allows them to reach more eyeballs via the newsfeed and encourages their partners to consequently share their content as well. For example, if Adidas launches a new product, their follower base will see a new product that they can purchase, while a team's follower base will anticipate seeing their favourite team wearing new equipment.

Instagram is Adidas's most visually aesthetic channel, and their followers reward them with high levels engagement. Since they have a vast set of products with a creative content marketing team, they are able to make posts which get over 100,000 likes in the span of a day. The purpose of their Instagram account is not to generate revenue by selling products but instead, seeks to generate awareness of the brand. Adidas regularly generates content relevant to real-time events and is able to leverage this to get even more followers. An instance of this was when Adidas supplied the match balls for the FIFA Women's World Cup in Montreal. To promote this content, Adidas posted an image of the final match ball with a view of the stadium and geo-tagged their post to Montreal so that anyone searching for the location would also be able to discover the content instead of only their followers.

YouTube is another channel Adidas leverages to showcase their own content while promoting other sectors. They make optimal use of their featured channels section, redirecting interested visitors to other places they can enjoy Adidas created content. These videos typically feature famous athletes and sponsors who promote their brand and are typically very high production value. Each of their videos typically receives over a million hits, with their most watched video receiving over 30 million hits.

During the World Cup, Adidas was applauded for their content marketing efforts which provided live content based on different outcomes in the tournament. Adidas called this an investment in “anticipated content” which was an aggressive effort to create thousands of videos based on all of the different outcomes which could have occurred. This meant that a majority of this content would be unused, but the videos viewed around the globe would be relevant to the real time event. Adidas also brought forward an effective slogan “All in or nothing” which ended up going viral and people associating the message and the tournament as a whole with their branding due to their aggressive content strategy. According to AdWeek, this resulted in 1.59 million conversations about their brand, a 5.8 million increase in followers on social media channels and over 917,000 mentions of its hashtag #allin on Twitter.<sup>6</sup>



Unlike their previous content marketing efforts which focused on spreading the Adidas brand to everyone, they recently launched GamePlan A, a targeted microsite towards “creators and entrepreneurial minds with an athlete’s heart”. This site was vastly different in terms of content as it only targets employees, prospective talent, and corporate brand advocates. To ensure that the content created was based on a data-driven approach, Adidas developed a content creation journey which helps their marketing team find the right content to publish. This methodology includes a brainstorming stage, an overarching theme, a trigger to invoke action from their readers, a pre-determined category, and a content guide to distribute to interested content creators. The overarching goal of this site is to promote an athletic lifestyle with creative and entrepreneurial ambitions.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, Lauren (2014), “6 Brands That Saw Huge Digital Lifts During World Cup,” *Adweek*, (accessed April 22, 2017), [available at <http://www.adweek.com/digital/6-brands-saw-huge-digital-lifts-during-world-cup-158926/>].





## Competitive Landscape

Adidas is the third largest retailer of sports products in North America where it trails Nike and newcomer Under Armour, who both pursue similar content marketing strategies. Since Adidas has primarily been focused on soccer, it has opened the door for the other sportswear companies to take over other markets who are able to focus a diverse product line and customer base.

Nike is an American corporation that produces sportswear and is the most valuable brand among sports businesses. Nike owns several additional apparel brands including Air Jordan, Hurley International, and Converse which generate the company over \$30 billion in yearly revenue. Their content marketing is internationally acclaimed with two Nike videos winning Emmy Awards for best commercial. They also claimed a lucrative deal with the NBA replacing Adidas as their official jersey provider. Content is the main reason that Nike was able to bloom into the globally recognized brand they are today. It started off with Bill Bowerman, a co-founder of Nike, figuring out that jogging is an activity that improves the health of an individual and writing a book to share his findings. All of their subsequent marketing efforts have all been based on putting their customers' interests first and promoting their beliefs as a company. They based their product on a need in the market rather than a want, creating the first wave of "jogging shoes". Nike constantly adapts to current marketing trends which is clear by their focus on television in the 80s and 90s then shifting to modern social media today. The strategy that Nike implements on social platforms like Instagram is focused on providing motivational messages to their audience rather than blatantly promoting their products. Instead, they subtly tie into the brand's history while directing users to interest-specific Nike sub-accounts using strategic tagging. Over the years, Nike has stayed true to their message of helping customers be better at what they love to do by always promoting the benefits of their products rather than its features.

Under Armour is the newcomer in the sportswear world, but has already risen to second place in the North American market. They have over 11,000 employees and generated \$3.69 billion revenue last year. Unlike its competitors, Under Armour did not start off as a shoe company, instead began when their founder discovered a solution that prevented sweat-soaked apparel and turned it into sportswear. Furthermore, they acquired two technology companies including a digital map maker and a nutrition counting app. Under Armour's content marketing efforts are similar to their competitors as they used celebrity exposure to accelerate their growth. They were featured in Any Given Sunday and capitalized on the exposure by taking out a full-page ad in ESPN magazine. Their celebrity success continued with the signing of the eventual MVPs of both NBA and NFL, Stephen Curry and Cam Newton respectively. They also were able to sign a deal with the MLB to become the official sponsor for all of their athletic wear by 2020. Under Armour was recently recognized by Facebook as having one of the best campaigns on the platform. Though their accounts have significantly less following than their competitors since they don't have different sub-brands, they are able to effectively tell a compelling and concise message. Under Armour also built an award-winning microsite as a part of their women-focused "I will what I want" campaign which featured an interactive model working out in an empty gym.





## Strategy Goals and Effectiveness

The Adidas brand is focused on creating great content, mainly in the soccer world. Their strategy focuses on creating visually aesthetic videos and imagery without the use of any stock images that effectively promotes their brand and beliefs. Their social strategy receives a lot of engagement from their fans and is seen as one of their greatest strengths.

Adidas's claim to fame in the content marketing world took place during the world cup where they created thousands of videos based on all of the possible outcomes of the tournament. This was the first time real-time video content was distributed at a mass scale and received international acclaim for its creativity resulting in a significant uptick in social followers.

Finally, Adidas has shown that it's adaptable when content marketing trends change. They noticed that their user base was not benefiting from a vague content marketing effort, and instead focused on creating content geared towards entrepreneurial athletes. Content Marketing Institute analyzed Adidas' microsite GamePlan A to observed they received very positive feedback from their community and their conversion rates increased by over 150%.<sup>7</sup> Instead of promoting their brand like their previous marketing efforts, the new approach is more customer centric.

## Marketing Shortfalls

Adidas has been heavily criticized for their business practices and ethics, which has led to business damaging bad publicity. The most severe claims surround Adidas's manufacturing process which has been criticized as being a sweatshop, particularly in Indonesia. When searching for a supplier, they were quick to reject many companies who supported unions and instead sought the lowest price. By subcontracting the work to different manufacturers, it became difficult for them to uphold their labour standards. Adidas shows little regard for its employees as when workers tried to strike for higher pay, they were all fired with no compensation. This led to a campaign has being started by United Students Against Sweatshops calling for universities around the world to cut ties with Adidas. The fallout from these claims has hurt their business, as it makes it more difficult for them to find suppliers in the long term and creates mistrust with their customers.

As a company, Adidas has also made some poor product and pricing decisions which created animosity amongst minority groups. In 2011, New Zealand sports fans were charged double for their team's apparel and when they started ordering from overseas, Adidas enforced agreements to prevent the purchases from taking place. This led to their main retailer starting to price the items lower, causing losses to Adidas. They are also not popular amongst environmentalists as they worked with a paper producer that was labeled as a "forest criminal" until they cut ties with them in 2011. Finally, Adidas briefly released a very unpopular line of footwear which featured shackles, which was considered offensive, appalling and insensitive to the African-American community.

<sup>7</sup> McDermott, Clare (2016), "How to Differentiate Content in a Crowded Field [Example from Adidas]," *Content Marketing Institute*, (accessed April 23, 2017), [available at <http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2016/11/differentiate-content-adidas/>].