



Conversion Content Marketing



Content marketing influences prospective customers with authority, liking and reciprocity.

Content marketing, in the words of Chris Brogan, can really “shake the tree.”

Thriving at the intersection of SEO and social media, content marketing has become central to digital marketing strategy. Its objective is simple: create genuinely useful or entertaining content for many specific niches of your target audience—not to overtly promote your business, but to build rapport and brand equity—and give it away for free.

Content marketing influences prospective customers with authority, liking and reciprocity (in the terms of Robert Cialdini). It educates them about new ideas and opportunities that will nudge them toward your funnel. But generally, it doesn't attempt to convert people immediately, instead sowing seeds to be harvested later.

In contrast, landing page optimization has traditionally focused on a much shorter time horizon, aiming to convert people right away on their visit to a particular page. Typically, a visitor must convert to receive the value promised by the landing page, such as a white paper or webinar. Different variations of the page are tried using A/B and multivariate testing to see which induces the highest conversion rate.

If content marketing is about romancing prospects, old-school landing page optimization is more like honing pick-up lines.

The new school: conversion content marketing

The problem with “pick-up line” landing pages is that when they're used indiscriminately, they're annoying. In most circumstances, prospects don't want to be picked up. They want to have a little conversation first, learn something about you, warm up to your charms.

On the other hand, a lot of content marketing—especially the ubiquitous blog post—is like the shy admirer who never musters the courage to ask for a date. The prospect might be interested in a closer connection, but when that seducible moment passes, their attention flits elsewhere and may never return.

In terms of the READY Framework for Conversion Optimization, content marketing is often Relevant, Engaging and Authoritative, but has no Directional or Yield-optimal momentum. This is because it usually excels at the first three, yet fails to capitalize on the strength of the last two.

The happy medium is a hybrid: *conversion content marketing*.

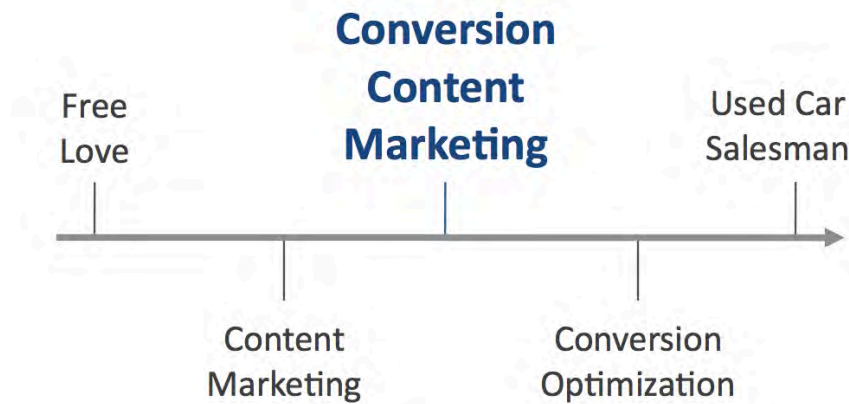
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Conversion content marketing extends a content strategy with savvy but appropriate conversion optimization tactics and techniques. The combination of these two world views lead to the following four principles.

Principle #1: Conversion is optional

Content marketing works best when visitors get value without having to give anything in return—other than their time and attention. That time and attention is what you want, because it's a great starting point for a relationship with your brand. So the first principle of conversion content marketing is that conversion is optional.

Optional conversion means that if your content is a white paper, visitors can download it without filling out a form. If it's a recorded webinar, they can watch it without registering. If it's a collection of best practices, a cool infographic, a slide presentation, etc., it's simply right there for them to consume. It's not dangled like a carrot, but shared like a free sample at the cookie stand.

The conversion is offered as a natural extension of the content. If a visitor likes your content, they have a logical next step to take. For instance, you might offer:

- An option to sign up for bonus/premium/extended content
- An option to subscribe to a relevant newsletter or alert service
- An option to have someone contact them on that specific topic
- An option to make a pertinent purchase ("don't shill, help fulfill")

The call-to-action is more subtle than in traditional landing page optimization. It's presented, genuinely, as a way to help the visitor move forward—but only if they want. You might ask for the conversion, but you don't demand it. If your conversion rate is 15%, you still want the other 85% to leave better off with a terrific brand impression.

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...as a rule of thumb, 60% of your effort should be creating new content and 40% should be testing and refining it.



Principle #2: Testing is mandatory

In content marketing, once something is published, it's usually etched in stone (or at least wet concrete). Rather than continue to tweak that piece, the marketer moves on to the next idea. This produces a continuous stream of new content, which is great, but little iterative improvement on any one piece of content. Blogs epitomize this firehose approach.

In contrast, the mantra of conversion optimization is test, test, test. Testing boosts your performance, and more broadly, boosts your learning about what works and why. But optimization marketers sometimes take this to an extreme, getting stuck on optimizing a single page ad infinitum.

Conversion content marketing is a 60/40 blend of the two. Testing is mandatory—if you're not testing, you're squandering your traffic. But as a rule of thumb, 60% of your effort should be creating new content and 40% should be testing and refining it.

Of course, testing requires measurement to define improvement. Conversion rate is still a key metric, even if the conversion is optional. It indicates how good an experience visitors had with your content and the appeal of your discretionary call-to-action. But conversion rate shouldn't be the sole metric, as you want to protect the brand value of your free content. You should also weigh visitors, SEO rank, social media sharing and "microconversions" such as number of pages viewed, downloads, video views, etc.

Good testing aims to boost conversion rates without negatively affecting content metrics.

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Principle #3: Format is flexible

Landing page optimization produces, well, landing pages. Content marketing, on the other hand, takes form in a variety of shapes and sizes (although blog posts are probably the most popular). Conversion content marketing embraces the idea that format is flexible and pushes it to the next level.

Conversion content should be published in the form that maximizes the value—and the holistic experience—delivered to visitors. Don't be constrained to boring, cookie-cutter landing page or blog templates. Great content experiences can take many different shapes:

- A stand-alone page that presents the content creatively
- A microsite with several interconnected pages
- A wizard that guides visitors through a series of steps
- A web application that has a custom flow of interaction

Multi-page experiences enable innovative content presentations and can make large content more consumable. They're a modern reincarnation of the microsite—not a fluffy, Flash showpiece from the past, but an SEO-primed cluster of focused, engaging HTM content.

Design and layout of individual pages complements the content, but also balances the secondary mission of incorporating conversion points in an elegant way. Calls-to-action should be attractive, but not distracting. You want to make it easy for people to take a relevant next step, but you don't want visitors to feel pushed.

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...the more specific and targeted you are to a particular audience, the better you will perform.

Perfecting this synergy is the sweet spot for testing.



Principle #4: Scale is vertical

Both content marketing and landing page optimization have converged on the same insight: the more specific and targeted you are to a particular audience, the better you will perform. It's not about creating "one page to rule them all." Instead, you achieve your best results by producing many different experiences, each crafted for a distinct idea and audience segment.

This is why conversion content marketing should follow the 60/40 rule described earlier and put the majority of its effort on producing new material. The only difference between this and general content marketing is that you want to design the optional conversions to match.

Scale is vertical means that you grow content conversion marketing by constantly addressing new niches, new issues, new applications, new verticals, etc., where your expertise can deliver value—and gently connect the dots to your products and services. (I actually believe a focus on ever more diversified audience segments, across multiple touchpoints and stages of the marketing funnel, is a strategy for scaling the new marketing organization as a whole.)

Agile marketing practices can really help your conversion content marketing scale efficiently.

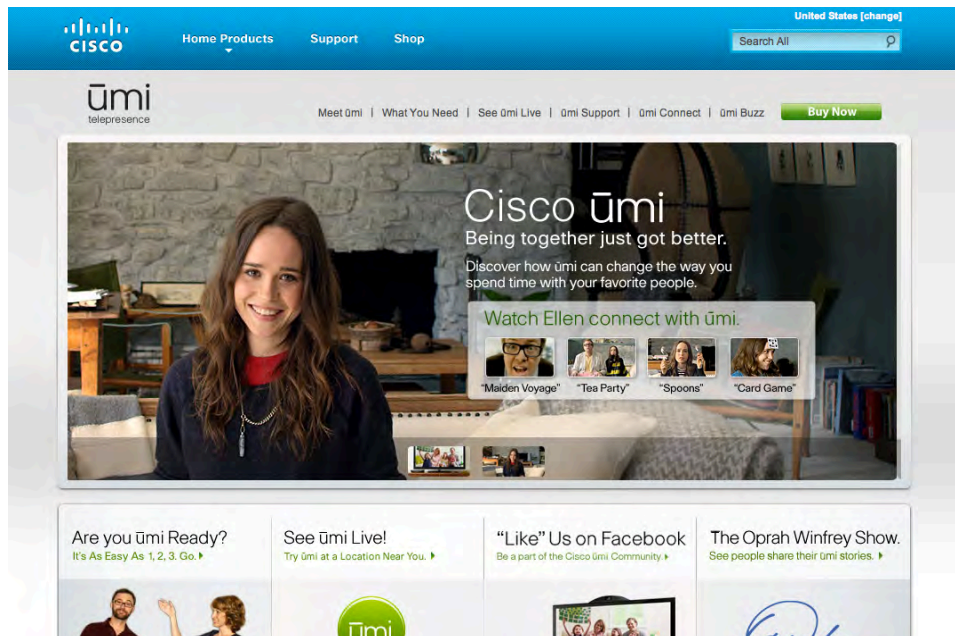
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Principle #5: Content is king

The essence of conversion content marketing is that content is king. The call-to-action, which is often glorified in conversion circles is certainly important. But frankly, it's not as important as the content for which that call-to-action is associated.

So what does a great, content-driven experience built for conversion need to include?

- Depth
- Quality
- Humanization
- Specificity
- Differentiation

The experience should provide enough depth that the user is compelled to take the next step. This means providing visuals of how your product or service works, including pricing information if appropriate, and detailing out any fine print.

Your content-driven experience must also demonstrate the quality of your offering. To this end, you should include elements of social proof like customer testimonials, press clippings, and the logos of widely recognizable customers.

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In order to create an emotional connection between the user and your content, you should humanize it. You can do this by providing the bios and headshots of your team or including video of your best customers talking about or demonstrating use of your offerings..

And remember, content is only king if it resonates with your audience. Conversion content marketers must take care to personalize copy and offers to different customer segments based on their wants or needs.

Finally, content becomes a beloved king if it's differentiated from all the other content out there. Don't be afraid to test big, bold ideas when it comes to form, function or layout to see what resonates best with users.



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Principle #6: Produce Copiously

Your conversion content marketing efforts need a portfolio strategy. Each portfolio should contain specific messaging and offers for the various audience segments that you're targeting in a particular campaign. This means you need to create multiple versions of each piece of content with specific headlines, subheads, pictures, offers and so on. The core message will remain the same, but personalization is often the key high-ROI results in conversion content marketing campaigns.

Content marketers and conversion optimization professionals: you have a glorious collaboration ahead.

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