

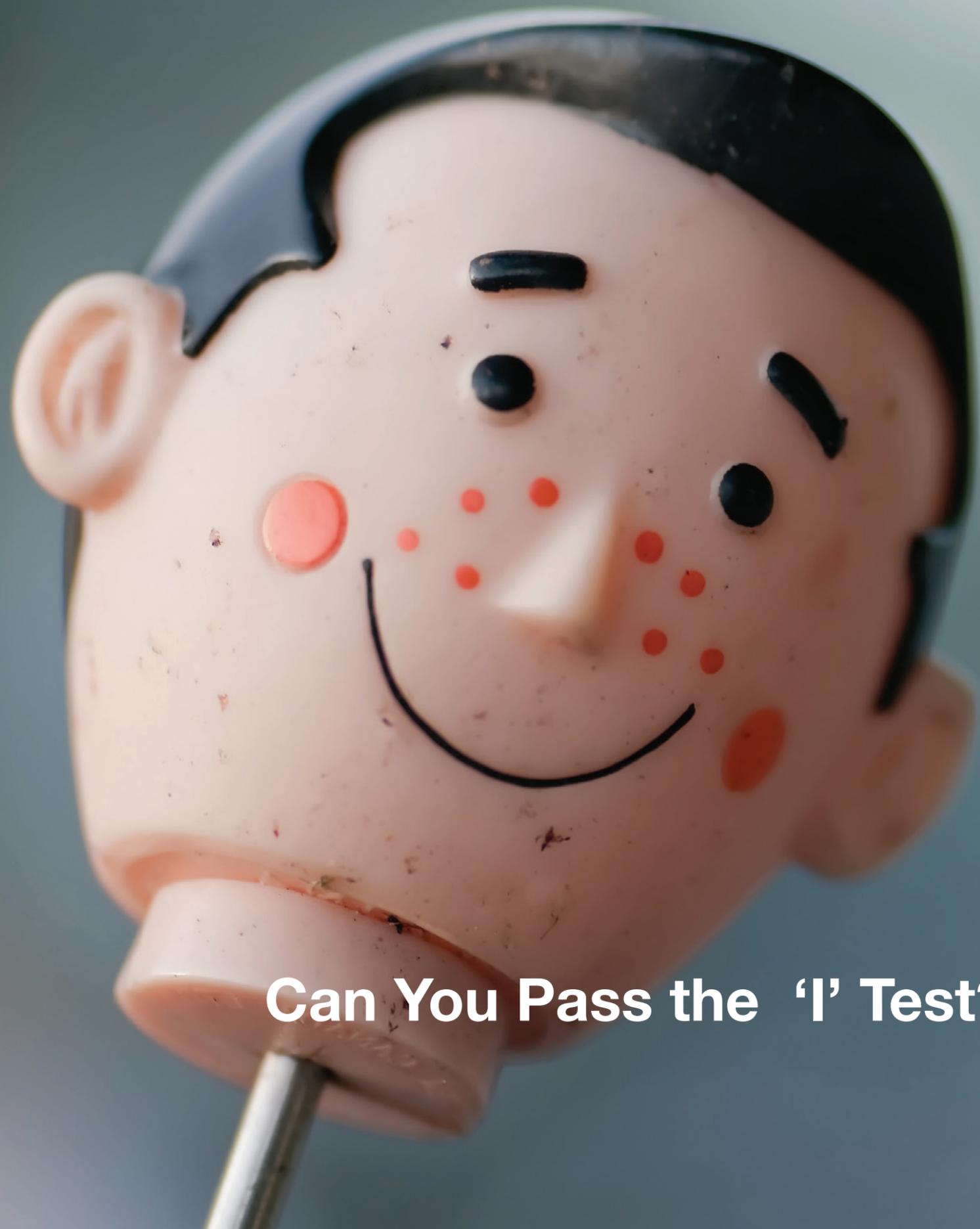


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Issue Eleven

STRATEGY • CREATIVITY • MARKETING

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Can You Pass the 'I' Test?

Stop for a moment, and think about your content marketing program. Look at it in its entirety, from the strategy and content creation to your distribution channels and metrics.

Now, complete the following statements:

"The content strategy reflects a deep understanding of (blank's) goals and objectives."

"(Blank) ultimately determines what content is produced."

"The information provided and formats used accurately reflect (blank's) priorities."

"Content goals are measured from a (blank) perspective."

If you answered "our company's," "I," "marketing's," "internal" or other similar words, then I have some bad news for you: Your content marketing program is not performing as well as it could be.

How can I be so sure? Simple. To have truly meaningful success, creative content marketing must reflect the identity of the target audience—whether that's clients, prospects, small businesses, members or donors. You have to address *their* needs, wants and dreams. And you have to do so in a manner of *their* choosing.

As Kim Caviness, Imagination's chief content officer, notes in her article on page 16, "Identity is the X factor content can't fake." When your content marketing program gets it just right, your audience will "decide (mostly unconsciously) to buy in. *They* do the heavy lifting, carrying your content into their lives and making it part of their identities in a way that will win you the thought leadership and metrics you want most."

Want another word for what Kim's talking about? Creativity. When you think about it, creativity is so much more than a clever headline, a bold image or a video of kittens falling asleep. It's really about refusing to do things the same old way. It's about digging deep to thoroughly understand your audience, to know them better than they know themselves. And it's about always pushing, looking for those insights that will allow you to strike a chord so resonant you and your audience basically become one.

Only by making your audience's identity the focus of your content will you start to see transformative results from your marketing efforts.

Jim Meyers
President & CEO
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 @jmeyers

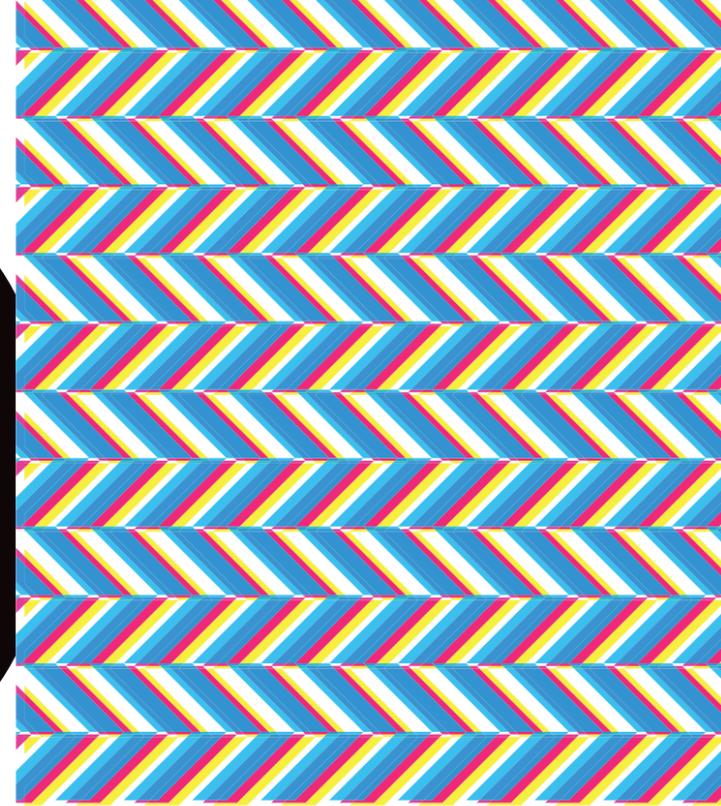
what's inside

1 Jim's Letter

If you're describing your content marketing program with inward-looking terms like "I" or "we," then you're not seeing the results you could be.

6 What's the Deal with Omnichannel?

Seems like everyone is talking about "omnichannel" marketing. Here's what some senior executives and influencers are saying in the social space.



16 Content Is Identity

Much ado is being made about storytelling—but it's no magic bullet. It's a tactic. More important is to speak to your audience's fears and needs. Connect with identity, and you'll succeed.

10 A Cure for the Content Hangover

Brands have been on a content binge in recent years, but it's their customers getting the headaches. Time for marketers to re-examine the quality of what they're producing.

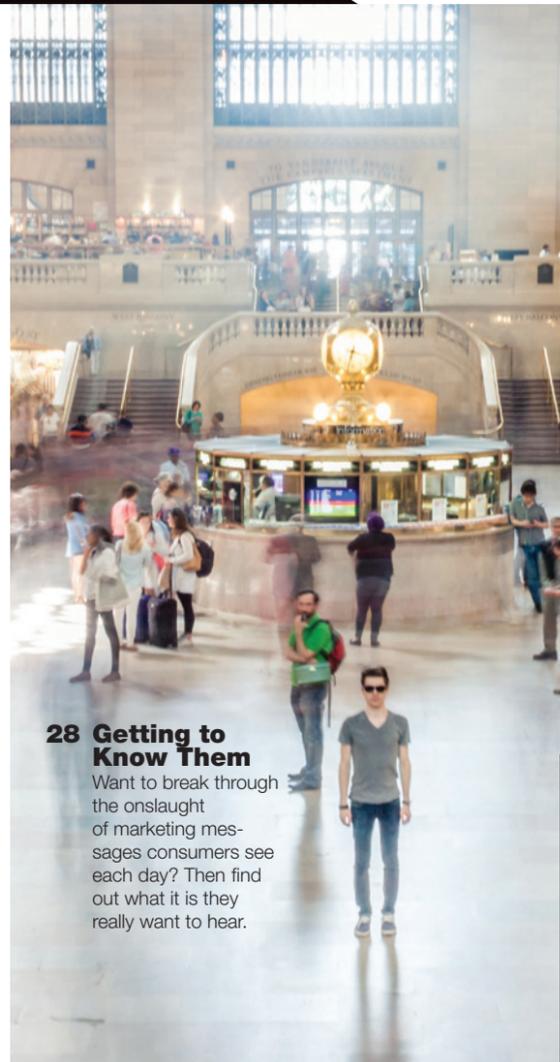
22 Plot Twist

Not every piece of content can—or should—be a story. But when the right pieces come together, stories can make for powerful marketing. Here's how.



36 So, You Want to Be a Video Star?

From virtual reality to 3-D, video innovation is happening at a rapid-fire pace. To get results, and to keep from chasing the latest fad, content marketers must remain grounded by strategy.



28 Getting to Know Them

Want to break through the onslaught of marketing messages consumers see each day? Then find out what it is they really want to hear.

44 Up Your Measure

To get a true sense of the value of your content marketing program, stop focusing on vanity metrics and track what your customers think.



48 Time and Place

Connecting with customers is as much about how and where you engage as it is about what you're saying. So we asked Imagineers: What content do you consume during your daily commute?



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Interested in learning more about how Imagination can help you achieve your content marketing objectives? Email Erin Slater, senior vice president of business development, at eslater@imaginepub.com.

who's inside

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH OMNICHANNEL?

- Engelina Jaspers, vice president, corporate marketing and global citizenship at Flex
- Marcia Tal, founder and CEO at Tal Solutions LLC
- Loni Stark, senior director, strategy and product marketing at Adobe
- Tobias Hartmann, vice president client services, global operations and international at eBay Enterprise
- Amber Armstrong, director, digital, social and influencers at IBM
- Veronica O'Shea, executive vice president worldwide sales and channels at eBay
- Bill Sussman, president and CEO at Collective Bias
- Steven Dennis, former senior vice president of strategy and marketing at Neiman Marcus Group
- Mayur Gupta, senior vice president and head of digital business at Healthgrades
- Mark Wheeler, vice president, marketing EMEA & APAC at Sitecore
- Michael Jones, senior vice president of retail and brand solutions at RetailMeNot
- Louis Columbus, director of marketing, e-commerce and analytics at Apttus
- Gijs op de Weegh, chief operating officer at Payvision
- Kevin Winneroski, category team director/global business development and key alliance management at Hewlett-Packard

- Jakki Glivicky Geiger, senior director, solutions marketing, information quality solutions, at Informatica

A CURE FOR THE CONTENT HANGOVER

- Content Marketing Institute
- Acrolinx
- Kathy McDonald, director of admissions and recruitment, Program for Experienced Learners at Eckerd College
- Altimeter
- MarketingProfs
- American Society of Association Executives
- Julie Shoop, vice president and editor-in-chief of the ASAE's *Associations Now* magazine
- Charlene Li, founder and a principal analyst with the Altimeter

CONTENT IS IDENTITY

- Rookiemag.com
- JCK Las Vegas
- JCK magazine
- JCK News Daily
- Reddit
- Refinery29
- Oprah.com
- Burberry's The Art of the Trench
- Tumblr
- HBR
- *New York Magazine*
- Airbnb
- Urban Outfitters
- Kate Spade New York
- theSkimm
- CliffsNotes
- GoPro
- Virgin
- American Express
- Old Navy
- MailChimp

PLOT TWIST

- *SMITH Magazine*
- Bell's Whisky
- *Virginia Quarterly Review* - #VQRTrueStory
- HelloFlo
- Lowes Home Improvement's Iris
- Quaker Canada's "The Recital"
- *The New York Times*

GETTING TO KNOW THEM

- Wilson Raj, global director of customer intelligence at SAS
- Adele Revella, CEO of the Buyer Persona Institute
- Forbes Insights and Turn
- Visa
- TripAdvisor
- Ginny Franks, vice president, content marketing at Regions Bank
- Lizzie Shepherd, qualitative research analyst at Frank N. Magid Associates
- Birchbox
- Vail Resorts
- EpicMix.com

SO, YOU WANT TO BE A VIDEO STAR?

- Cisco
- Kathy Button Bell, chief marketing officer of Emerson Electric Co.
- Emerson's "I Love STEM" campaign
- Hank Green, scientist and YouTube entertainer
- *The Big Bang Theory*
- *The New York Times*
- Google Cardboard VR
- Google's Inside Abbey Road
- Marriott Hotels
- Michael Dail, Marriott Hotels and Resorts' vice president of global brand marketing
- Aetna's "11 Initiative"

- Wendy Wahl, vice president of enterprise marketing at Aetna
- The Dodo
- Emily Pelleymounter, creative director of video at The Dodo

UP YOUR MEASURE

- *The Challenger Sale* by Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson

TIME AND PLACE

- TheSkimm
- The Week's daily "5 Things You Need to Know Now"
- *Business Insider*
- *This American Life*
- Content Marketing Institute's *Content Inc.*
- Fox Business News
- CNBC
- *Serial*
- *Lena Dunham's Women of the Hour*
- *The New York Times*
- Instagram
- Facebook
- *Smithsonian magazine*
- Kindle
- Flipboard
- *National Geographic*
- Mashable
- CNET
- Engadget
- Weekend Read app
- *Whiplash*
- *30 Rock*
- LinkedIn Pulse
- Re/code
- Vice
- Fast Company
- *Harvard Business Review*
- *Mark Maron*
- *Fresh Air*
- *Bill Burr*
- *Freakonomics*
- *How To Be Amazing*
- *Radiolab*
- *Modern Love*

**WHAT'S
THE
DEAL
WITH**

Omnichannel is all the buzz in content marketing. But what does the term truly mean, should brands prioritize this approach, and what's the key to getting it right? Here's what top thought leaders and senior executives are saying on social channels.

BY JORDAN BERGER AND DILLON DIATLO
MINICHANNEL?

What Is Omnichannel, Anyway?

Post from **Engelina Jaspers**, vice president, corporate marketing and global citizenship at Flex:



Excerpt: “While both integrated marketing and omnichannel marketing are focused on providing a more holistic and integrated experience across an array of customer touch points, how they go about it is quite different. Omnichannel marketing is integrated, but integrated marketing is not necessarily omnichannel.”

Post from **Marcia Tal**, founder and CEO at Tal Solutions LLC:



Excerpt: “What does an omnichannel banking experience really feel like? Personal, convenient, easy, seamless.”

Why It Matters

Post from **Loni Stark**, senior director, strategy and product marketing at Adobe:



Excerpt: “Delivering epic customer experiences is the mandate of all digital marketers who are interested in growing a loyal, deeply connected fan base. And epic customer experiences are built on seamless, omnichannel engagement.”

Post from **Tobias Hartmann**, vice president client services, global operations and international at eBay Enterprise:



Excerpt: “Omnichannel has become a retail imperative... Today’s consumers expect their shopping experiences to be seamless and consistent across all channels and devices. If they encounter friction at any point during their journey, they’re likely to switch to a competitor that will deliver [a] unified experience.”

Tweet by **Amber Armstrong**, director, digital, social and influencers at IBM, linking to post by best-selling author Shep Hyken:



Excerpt: “In the arena of e-commerce, the single stone flung by the sling represents the ease of entry into online retailing. But to really compete with today’s Goliaths, all the Davids out there need to reload with ammo that brings a customer-centric and consistent experience to online shopping.”

Getting It Right

Post from **Veronica O’Shea**, executive vice president worldwide sales and channels at eBay:



Excerpt: “To succeed in today’s omnichannel retail world, you can no longer measure success based on individual channels. Since customers regularly interact with multiple channels before making a purchase, you need to accurately measure the impact of every touchpoint across all channels, devices, and campaigns—both online and offline.”

Post from **Bill Sussman**, president and CEO at Collective Bias:



Excerpt: “Over 70% of all Internet users [are] active on social media. Keeping this in mind, retailers can build an omnichannel strategy based on social allowing them to see benefits such as gaining insight into what the consumer truly wants, amplifying sales through new social technology and creating loyal customers.”

Post from **Steven Dennis**, former senior vice president of strategy and marketing at Neiman Marcus Group:



Excerpt: “If you don’t work at Apple, Amazon or Google, chances are you need an actionable customer segmentation. Chances are you need far better insight around consumer behavior. Chances are you need to be able to differentiate your target customers by needs and value. If you don’t have the data to treat different customers differently, you are at a huge disadvantage.”

Post from **Mayur Gupta**, senior vice president and head of digital business at Healthgrades:



Excerpt: “Health care joins many other industries in its quest to deliver experiences that will drive behavioral change. Most, however, are still struggling to deploy these omnichannel strategies at scale for a simple reason: We are all operating on top of an increasingly broken and fragmented ecosystem that is focused on either channels or technology, rather than being channel-agnostic or consumer-centric.”

Post from **Mark Wheeler**, vice president, marketing EMEA & APAC at Sitecore:



Excerpt: “I bet you haven’t had many truly omnichannel experiences yet. It’s been the talk of the marketing world for some time now, but while many talk the talk, few companies have been able to walk the walk. One of the main reasons is that omnichannel demands a rethinking of your marketing beyond your marketing department.”

Brands That Get It

Post from **Michael Jones**, senior vice president of retail and brand solutions at RetailMeNot:



Excerpt: “Walgreens’ omnichannel strategy is described as the 3W’s: “Whatever. Wherever. Whenever.” With this approach, the brand sees omnichannel customers spending up to six times more than customers who only shop in its stores.”

Tweet by **Louis Columbus**, director of marketing, e-commerce and analytics at Apttus, linking to post by Shreyans Parekh, manager, strategic markets and industries at Apttus:



Excerpt: “Disney gets omnichannel right, down to the smallest details. It starts with your initial experience on the entertainment giant’s beautiful, mobile-responsive website. Once you’ve booked a trip, you can use the My Disney Experience tool to plan your entire trip, from where you’ll dine to securing your FastPass. In the park, you can use your mobile app to locate the attractions you want to see, as well as view the estimated wait time for each of them.”

Are People Over Omnichannel?

Post from **Gijs op de Weegh**, chief operating officer at Payvision:



Excerpt: “Omnichannel is considered to be almost something that is in the past, and the real focus should be both on the merchant and on the consumer, on how to drive more value for the merchant in terms of loyalty, to help them better understand their customers and shopping habits.”

Post from **Kevin Winneroski**, category team director/global business development and key alliance management at Hewlett-Packard:



Excerpt: “Real-time retail is supplanting omnichannel as the best way to describe highly agile organizations that are positioning themselves to address an always on, always connected consumer. Retailers that are committed to real-time retail share five common characteristics: They optimize their supply chains, win locally, master data analysis, create wow experiences [and] understand the power of mobile.”

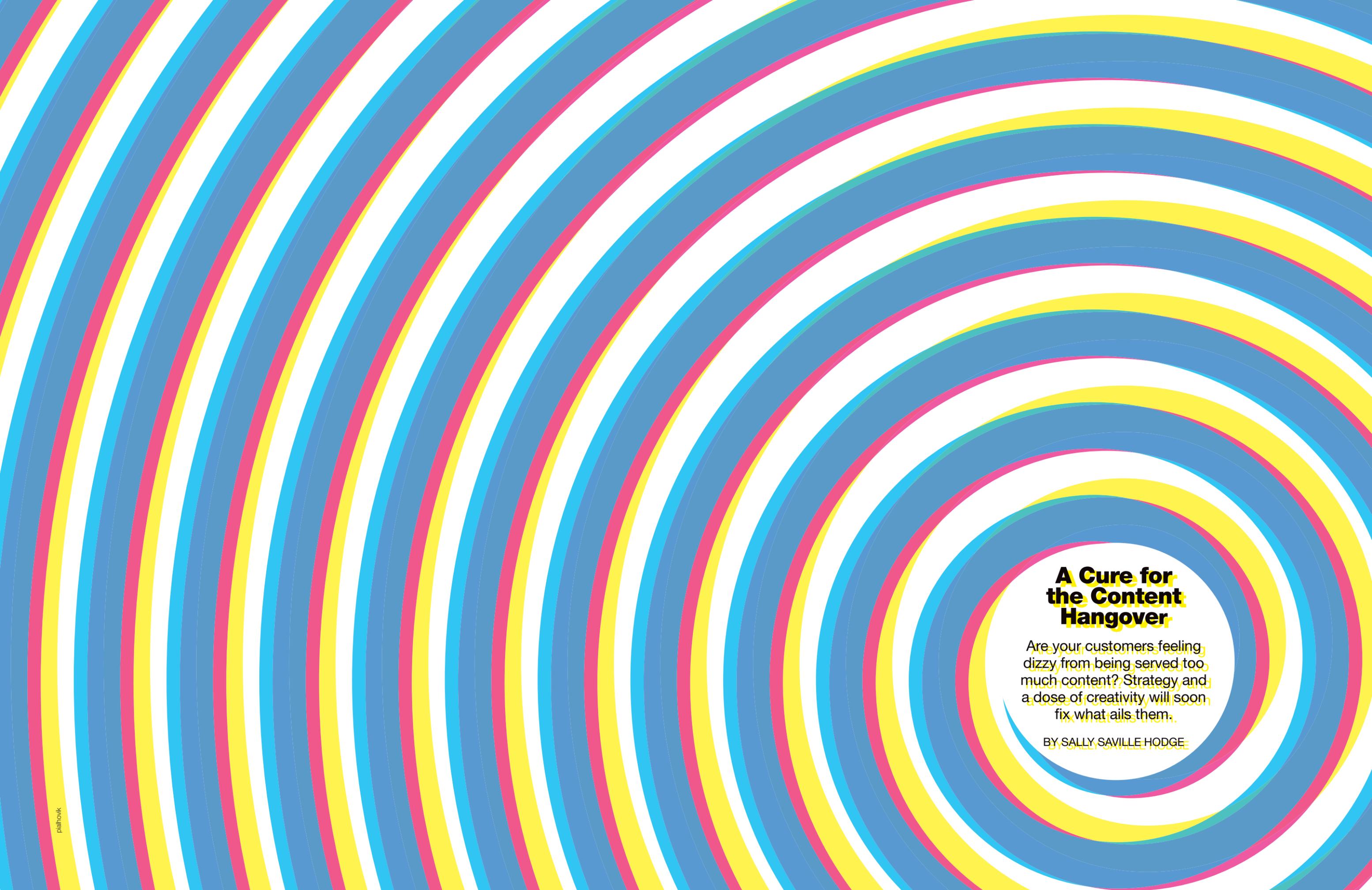
Post from **Jakki Glivicky Geiger**, senior director, marketing solutions, information quality solutions, at Informatica:



Excerpt: “A high percentage of CEOs expect CMOs to lead the integrated cross-functional customer experience. Also, customer experience is one of the top three areas of investment for CMOs in the next two years.”

Jordan Berger is a senior social journalist and Dillon Diatlo a social journalist at Imagination.

“TODAY’S CONSUMERS EXPECT THEIR SHOPPING EXPERIENCES TO BE **SEAMLESS AND CONSISTENT** ACROSS ALL CHANNELS AND DEVICES.”



A Cure for the Content Hangover

Are your customers feeling dizzy from being served too much content? Strategy and a dose of creativity will soon fix what ails them.

BY SALLY SAVILLE HODGE

Marketers

have been on a bit of content creation bender in recent years, creating pieces in every format they can think of for virtually every channel they can find. Unfortunately, as is often the case, *more* doesn't necessarily mean *better*.

According to the Content Marketing Institute and MarketingProfs, business-to-business marketers produced 70 percent more content in 2015 than in 2014. Yet, a study by Acrolinx, a content marketing software company, found 69 percent of content marketing lacks quality.

The result of this overindulgence is causing quite the headache for consumers and businesses alike. People are being bombarded by irrelevant content that carries little value and, even worse, is highly unlikely to meet marketing objectives or strengthen the relationship between the brand and its audiences.

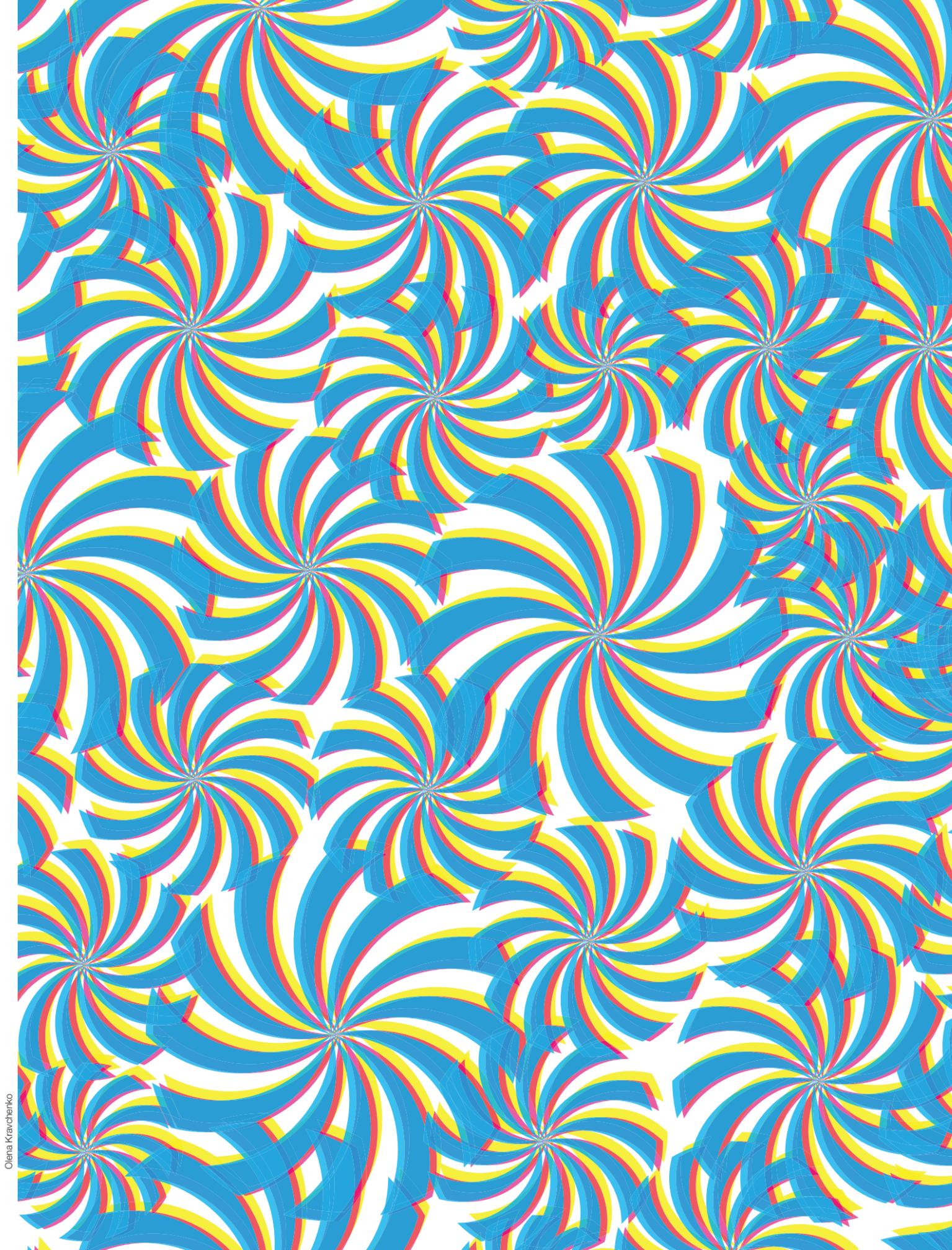
It's time for marketers to go on a cleanse in order to create more productive and more engaging content. It's also important for them to identify the behaviors that got them into this mess in the first place, so they can avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Let the Party Begin

One could arguably trace the beginning of the current content glut to marketers' efforts to improve search engine results, particularly from Google. The search engine giant is famously secretive about its search rank methodologies. Complicating matters, Google is constantly adjusting the algorithm that serves up search results, knowing those results decide the fates of websites around the world.

Originally, websites merely served as a company's front door and relied little on content and heavily on keyword relevance. Webmasters would stuff keywords into their sites, hoping that the greater occurrences of certain phrases would trigger higher rankings—and initially it did.

Seeing the results, many marketers applied the same logic to content creation: More content meant more opportunities to include more keywords, which would lead to improved search results. Better results, in turn, would drive more volume leading to more clicks, more traffic and, ideally, deeper engagement—all in the interests of new and stronger customer relationships.



Olena Kravchenko

Except, things didn't quite turn out that way. As website usage increased, greater expectations were placed on the information and services websites provided, thus forcing Google to develop additional algorithm iterations that focused more on quality and intent.

Kathy McDonald, director of admissions and recruitment, Program for Experienced Learners at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, first began testing the quantity/quality balance when her former employer, a provider of online education solutions, significantly reduced paid search.

The company adopted a content marketing program that tripled in size and output during her three years there. "We definitely had a quantity focus," she says. "All of our content was designed to do just one thing—convert leads on the page. We were constantly testing strategies like calls to action, lead forms and layouts to that end."

Still, she says, quality was key to success. Accordingly, the company outsourced much of its creative—particularly writing. In addition, the staff of internal editors grew from two people to five when she left. That helped ensure the delivery of quality content that was valuable and shareable and reached people looking for a degree, McDonald says. "I mean, let's face it. There's too much noise out there to just do content for content's sake. That's what contributes to poor quality," she says.

Invite Strategy Back to the Table

The other reason for the overabundance of low-quality content has been the lack of a clearly defined creative content marketing strategy. A study by Altimeter, a Prophet company, found that 70 percent of marketers don't have a consistent or integrated content strategy. Similarly, research conducted by CMI and MarketingProfs found that while 80 percent of business-to-business marketers had a content marketing strategy, it was not documented in nearly half of instances.

A content strategy should be guided by things like a keen understanding of the targeted audience and include things like the content types that audience prefers and the channels needed to deliver the content effectively.

Without strategy, it's too easy to get caught up in the hype. Just because this channel or that platform is trending and poses lots of cool

“But because the content was distinctive, strong, relevant and newsy, it was well-received and not seen as just another marketing message.”

possibilities, it doesn't mean that it's the right approach for every brand. Trying to fill every channel with content, especially when resources are limited, is a sure way to compromise quality.

Julie Shoop, of the American Society of Association Executives, notes that although her organization produces more content than it did even three years ago, it has been able to resist the temptation to chase after “the next new thing.” She credits that success in large part to the hard work she and others have done to ensure the content output aligns with the ASAE's business goals as well as member needs and expectations.

Shoop, who is vice president and editor-in-chief of the ASAE's *Associations Now* magazine, says the content team maintains good communi-

It's All About Nuance

The quest to find the proper balance between the quantity and quality of content is arguably harder on consumer-oriented concerns, with their need to drive more and perhaps less discerning eyeballs to the web page, ideally to result in conversions. However, this is an issue that all content marketers need to grapple with.

Charlene Li, founder and a principal analyst with the Altimeter, suggests marketers start digging deeper into the nuances when they're evaluating the effectiveness of their content programs. “Some influencers will tweet 20 times a day. I'll tweet once every other day,” she says. “It comes down to the nuances between quantity and quality in the context

cation with the larger marketing operation. Together, they make sure the content mix and distribution strategy make sense for ASAE members.

It's not that Shoop doesn't want to drive traffic and achieve greater reach, but there are other, equally important forces at play. One involves the investment of time, people and money—resources that aren't so plentiful that she wants to waste them on efforts that don't measure up from a quality perspective. A second consideration is how well content meets standards for relevance and engagement, especially when there's a lot of competition for the user's attention.

As a result, they've been able to focus resources on the more creative and effective aspects of their content program. “When we launched a daily newsletter, there was some concern,” she says. “But because the content was distinctive, strong, relevant and newsy, it was well-received and not seen as just another marketing message.”

of where you're trying to go with the audience.”

She adds it's less about the quantity of traffic being generated and more about its quality. “Is the content driving business or just eyeballs? Is it driving more traffic? Or is it less traffic but [higher] quality traffic? Are fewer people visiting but staying longer because the content has a high level of relevance?”

Ultimately, given the continuing content explosion, smart brands will realize that the ultimate effect of their preoccupation with volume is only diluting the impact of what they're producing. Those that strive for achieving a better balance in their content portfolios to emphasize content that counts are the organizations that will win the hearts and minds of their customers. ■

Sally Saville Hodge is a contributing writer for Imagination.



CONTENT IS

IDENTITY

STORYTELLING IS ALL WELL AND GOOD, BUT FOR THE REAL SECRET TO
KILLER CONTENT MARKETING, LOOK TO YOUR AUDIENCE BY KIM CAVINESS

TELL ME A STORY.

Because content marketing is so much more than storytelling.

It's like saying basketball is shooting. Yeah, sure, but what about passing, dribbling, blocking, footwork, *dunking*?

Storytelling is how I put my third-grader to bed. To soothe away the day and ease him into the darkness of night. There's no call to action beyond the occasional moral lesson and no next measurable step, thank God.

For content marketers storytelling is a tactic—a powerful one, yes. But let's be honest: It's just a tactic, nonetheless. Because storytelling is not by definition strategic or effective, results-wise. Even if it is nice to have in our so-called toolbox.

Which is why I propose a new content marketing koan: Content is identity.

The identity I speak of is not yours, brand marketer. It's theirs: Your audience's. When your content strategy is truly, deeply, strategically in sync with their needs and desires—at a personal, professional and utility level—your program is pretty much unstoppable.

When you serve up content marketing that goes for your audience's jugular, identity-wise, and offers the right information, meaning and value at the right time, they will lower their guard in gratitude.

And this is where the magic happens: They decide (mostly unconsciously) to buy in. *They* do the heavy lifting, carrying your content into their lives and making it part of their identities in a way that will win you the thought leadership and metrics you want most.

Because when done just right, content becomes identity. Think about the role Rookiemag.com plays

for brainy teen girls with fashion-blogging dreams.

And the way jewelry industry pros who attend JCK Las Vegas, *the* jewelry trade show, reach for the B2B brand's 10-time-a-year magazine and daily e-newsletter throughout the rest of the year. *JCK* magazine and *JCK* News Daily are must-reads for bijoux insiders craving industry headlines, sales trend reports and retail management smarts. One industry insider even got a tattoo of *JCK's* logo on her back—*that's* how fundamental *JCK* is to her sense of self.

Identity is the X factor content can't fake.

Factor in Their Fear

There's a mistake lots of brands make. They produce good content. It's nice and interesting, but it's not essential.

These brands forgot to ask: Does our audience *need* it? If it's not about what keeps people up at night, it's probably missing the point. And that means they'll be missing out in results.

Think hard about your end users' anxieties when doing your stakeholder interviews, crafting personas, working up the competitive analysis and assigning your content strategy. What are their deepest worries about themselves, at work and in life, as they apply to your brand topic or business product?

Identity content marketing uses whatever means necessary to power its way into your target users' fears and replace them with empowering ideas and desires. Drawing on just the right words, images, sound and formats, great content marketing creates an experience that burrows its way into their psyches and *plays* them.

Erik Snyder

ACTUALLY, DON'T.



Who Are You?

Serious intellectual or super snarky? Either will work—as long as it rings true to your audience.

BY MARLA CLARK

Consciously or not, people make assumptions about your brand based on the voice and tone you use. The vibe of the young, boho-hipster-skewing Urban Outfitters blog is a heck of a lot different than the careery-but-happy messaging of the Kate Spade New York Twitter feed, for example. Both are fashion marketers, of course, but each has established a distinct voice and tone aimed squarely at its target audience.

Voice and tone matter because consumers are more likely to purchase from a brand if they believe its personality and values align with their own. If you want your audiences to pay attention to you, you have to connect with them on a human level.

When theSkimm started making waves in mainstream (and other) media, I couldn't help but take a look to see what the fuss was about.

TheSkimm was founded by two 20-something women who wanted to make it easy for their peers—specifically, busy, professional millennial women—to keep up with world news. What theSkimm pushes to your email inbox each weekday, if you raise your hand for it, is essentially the CliffsNotes of what's happening in politics, business, foreign policy, pop culture and more—with links to other news sources for deeper reporting if you want it.

Grounding the e-newsletter's authenticity are a distinct voice and tone—think conversational, relatable, slightly snarky, fun and, above all, easy to understand and quickly consumable. It's complicated information in basic English, with an edge.

I've become a fangirl, despite being a generation removed from theSkimm's primary target audience, because I love wit, sarcasm and language that cuts through the crap. TheSkimm speaks to me.

Snark isn't the universal answer, of course. Others, including GoPro, Virgin, American Express, Old Navy and MailChimp, rely on friendliness, authority, warmth, humor and more because they understand the value of crafting a distinctive voice that will make target audiences think, "Yes. This is for me."

They know how to differentiate themselves, and, ultimately, build relationships that go beyond the transactional.

Without those efforts, you risk getting lost in the nameless, faceless chorus of corporate messaging and the 24/7 newsfeed.

Marla Clark is vice president, content at Imagination.

“IF IT'S NOT ABOUT WHAT KEEPS PEOPLE UP AT NIGHT, IT'S PROBABLY MISSING THE POINT.”

It recognizes their identity's shaky spots and props them up. That's when it becomes addictive. Even if they see it coming a mile away, your audience can't resist it. They need it. And they need you to make it for them.

Whisper Their Secret

What's your content marketing program murmuring into your audience's ears?

If your content is top-notch, it's whispering something devastatingly important. So important, your target users and readers carry you around with them and make you part of their deepest desires and aspirations.

You know it first, whispers Reddit. You got it going on, girl, whispers Refinery29. You're worth it, whispers Oprah.com. You're a style-setter, whisper Burberry's Art of the Trench site and Tumblr.

Great content whispers the secret of your audience's idealized selves. Be the one who tells it best, and you'll have your audience's hearts and minds—and wallets.

You Do You

What part of your content marketing program does something that literally no one else can do as well as you? What's your *defining* cri de coeur?

Game-changing content marketing—be it a content hub, social campaign, website, app, magazine or whatever's new and next—offers its audience at least one defining content experience it can't find anywhere else. This signals viscerally how much your brand “gets” them. And when you connect at a core identity level, your

audience will keep running back to you.

You're a leader, whispers HBR. Which is why it offers insider case studies that let you step into the shoes of business big shots. Many have copied the format, but HBR did case studies first and best.

You're plugged in, whispers *New York Magazine*. Which is why its back page Approval Matrix is the first thing I turn to and why it's been ripped off by brands far and wide but never effectively.

You're a member of our global-travel tribe, whispers Airbnb. Which is why a printout of its savvy Chicago city guide greeted my friend in her Windy City room last month. She *needed* that information, which was personalized for her exact rental location with vouched-for owner recommendations. Plus, it inspired her to (secretly) congratulate herself for not succumbing to the ease of a big-brand hotel—and to book Airbnb again. Way to play it, Airbnb.

So, keep cool until you identify what they need most. Then, lovingly and helpfully, show them their dream. Structure your content program to act as their identity mirror, reflecting their best, wisest, most beautiful selves back to them in a way that imparts deep value and drives the desired actions. That will keep them coming back and your analytics heading in the right direction.

Charm, cajole, beseech, play hard to get—whatever it takes. Just be relevant. Be the one they need most. Be there.

Be them. ■

Kim Caviness is executive vice president and chief content officer at Imagination.

If you're going to tell a story, you better make it good. There's tons of buzz around storytelling, but how do you know when it works?

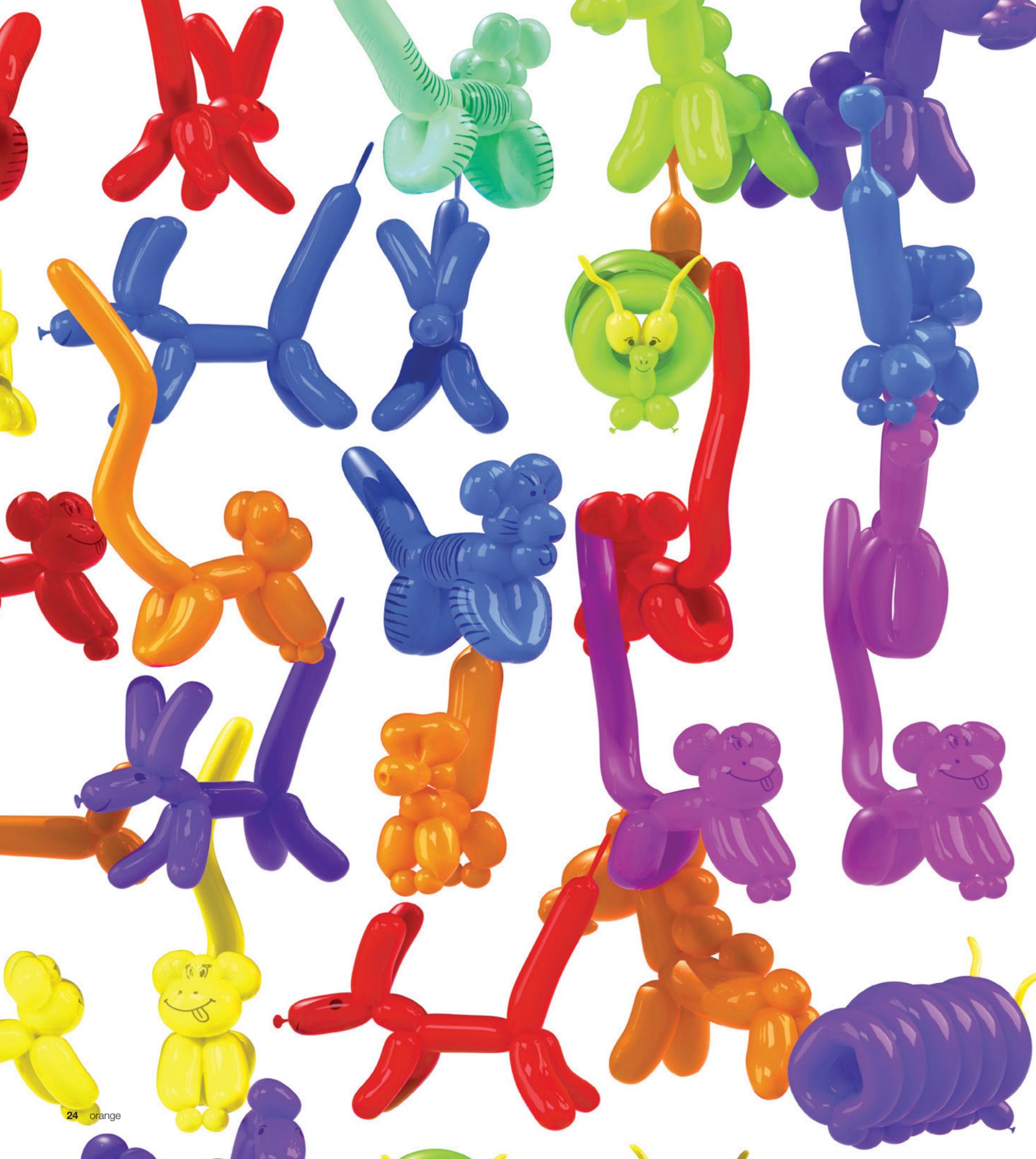
BY LIBBY ELLIS

Plot



Twist





You know the phrase, “Everyone has one book in them?” They don’t. And brands don’t all have a compelling story in them either.

Stories need characters we love and want to cheer on—or love to hate. Stories need a conflict or a problem. They need a story arc and pacing that compels people to stick with it and keep reading or watching.

What turns a great story into a great marketing piece is the writer’s ability to authentically weave in the brand and its message without disrupting the flow or annoying the reader. Not every piece of content qualifies (or even needs to qualify) as a story, of course. Your direct mailers, for example, are unlikely to tell a story.

Stories also don’t have to be long. One literary myth says Ernest Hemingway wagered \$10 that he could tell a six-word story that would make people cry. “For sale: Baby shoes. Never worn.” Oof. And a project launched by *SMITH Magazine* shows that even five acts of Shakespeare can be boiled down: “Teenagers think it’s love, then overreact.”

So what does it take to master storytelling?

1. Find a story worth telling.

The first part of killer storytelling is knowing the difference between a good story and a lousy one. Just ask yourself this: Would I tell it if I wasn’t trying to sell something?

A South African TV ad for Bell’s Whisky tells the story of an older man learning to read. We don’t know until the end that the catalyst is his desire to read his son’s book. It has all the elements: a protagonist we’re rooting for, a problem to be solved, an arc and a clear beginning, middle and end.

We forget it’s an ad until the men toast at the end with, of course, Bell’s. The ROI? More than 2.6 million YouTube views and an active comments

section where the brand is engaging with viewers.

2. Make ’em cry—or something.

The stories shared the most tug at heartstrings, make people laugh or spark outrage.

Instagram is an unlikely platform for storytelling, which is what makes *Virginia Quarterly Review’s* use of the medium so fascinating. The 91-year-old literary magazine launched #VQRTrueStory, described as a “social media experiment in nonfiction, in which stories share platforms—between Instagram, our website and the magazine.”

The stories are held to the same editorial standards as magazine articles and cover topics ranging from child marriage in India to organic farming. Combined with striking images and lots of hashtags, the beautifully crafted stories feel intimate. More than 2,000 people are following along so far.

On the flip side of the emotional spectrum is HelloFlo, which offers care packages of period products to girls. The company’s First Moon video nailed a potentially cheesy topic—mom and daughter period talk—by adding a dose of humor.

Desperate to grow up and fit in with her friends, a young girl lies about getting her period. Her mom knows (the glitter in the red nail polish the daughter uses as part of her scheme is a dead giveaway) and throws an astonishingly mortifying First Moon party as punishment. A guy arrives with coffee filters. You know, for your period. Her friends are forced to pin the pad on the period. Her grandfather bobs for ovaries.

The product placement is obvious. But you—and 35.5 million other YouTube viewers—don’t care because the writing is spot-on, and the storyline makes it well worth the two minutes it takes to watch the video.

rdnval777

A good story isn't enough. For marketers, even the most finely crafted story won't mean much if it doesn't align with business objectives.



3. Solve a problem.

People often come to your site or pick up your marketing materials because they're trying to solve a problem. Sure, consumers need to know what services you offer or what your product does. But they care more about what's in it for them.

Lowes Home Improvement's Iris is a home automation and security system, and the company offers plenty of informative articles full of rich stats on the subject. But one customer had a story to tell. In a clear and simple style, Cindy writes about how Iris lets her father, who's in the early stages of Alzheimer's, be more self-sufficient in his home across the street while giving her the peace of mind that if something goes wrong, she'll be alerted.

Her user-generated content was turned into a blog post that has all the requisite information about the product, but the real story is how Iris solved a problem for Cindy.

4. Make people the star, not your company.

So how do you get more than 11 million people to sit through a 4:40 video? Nope, not more kittens (though that might work, too). Put the focus squarely on people.

Quaker Canada's "The Recital" is the story of a girl who has the chance to do something she's always wanted to do: star in a dance recital with her dad. Added plot twist: The daughter and dad not only pull it off, but mom is surprised.

This video is almost entirely oats-free. There are a few product shots, and that's it. The takeaway: Make people the stars—not your-

company, product or service. Your company's origin story might bring a tear to your eye, but consumers don't care.

5. It's all in the telling.

Like any content marketing tactic, storytelling takes strategic planning, creativity and time.

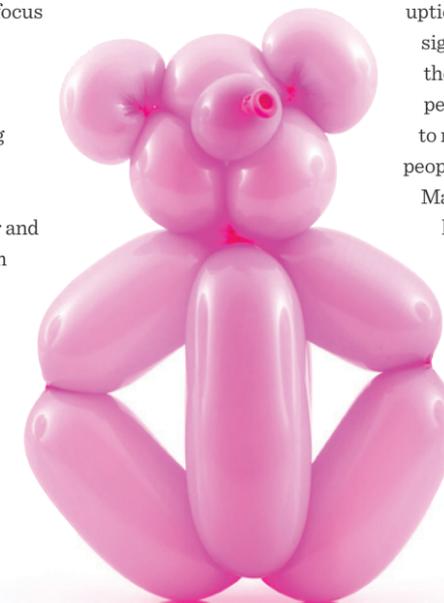
A good story isn't enough. For marketers, even the most finely crafted story won't mean much if it doesn't align with business objectives.

Then we have to think about the second half of the buzzword: telling. What's the best medium to share the story? Where does your audience live? Will they read a 2,000-word article? Watch a two-minute video? Are there reasons to break up the story for different channels?

Once all that's hammered out, how will we know it works? Arguably, the first metric for storytelling was the 1931 launch of *The New York Times* best-seller list. Today, we have Google Analytics and tons of other tools to measure reach. Set a goal for each piece of content.

Are you looking for clicks? Shares? An uptick in subscriptions? Newsletter sign-ups? How many do you need to call the piece a success? Good stories make people want to take action; it's your job to make it easy with CTAs that guide people to do what you want them to do. Marketers love stories because people love stories. They absorb them. They remember them. They can spot authenticity. So, just like people do, brands should tell stories because they are too good not to share. ■

Libby Ellis is a content director at Imagination.



Take the time to understand your audience's identity, and you'll soon create content that not only matters but also delivers results.

GETTING TO KNOW

BY JOSLIN WOODS

THEM



CREATING CONTENT JUST FOR THE SAKE of having it is a lot like small talk: It fills the silence, but it's hardly filling.

That's because consumers are inundated with more than 10,000 marketing messages each day, from brands big and small. If that content isn't created with a deep understanding of what those consumers need and want, it's simply more noise in the cacophony of content.

"You've got to go beyond the utility messages saying, 'We're good. We're faster. We're cheaper,'" says Wilson Raj, global director of customer intelligence at SAS, which specializes in business analytics software and services. Instead, you need to get to the emotive and aspirational things at the core of who your customers are.

"Your content should live at the intersection between what you have to say and what your buyer wants to hear," says Adele Revella, CEO of the Buyer Persona Institute. "Until you ask your buyers what they want to hear, you're talking about what you have to say."

“IT’S NOT A ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL BASED ON THEIR DEMOGRAPHIC.”

View Apart

Learning what your customers want to hear means knowing more than what your audience looks like. It means understanding what makes them tick, what excites them, what insecurities lurk just under the surface. Only then can your content be relevant, efficient and impactful.

Beyond Big Data

Most companies already collect data on their customers, whether it's through a CRM platform, call center, website or even an app. And it's clear why they go to all the effort to collect that information—it pays to do so. According to a report from Forbes Insights and Turn, a marketing software and analytics platform, organizations that structure their marketing efforts around insights report higher levels of customer engagement and loyalty. The report also found marketers embracing insights-driven marketing are almost three times more likely to have

increased revenue.

Take Visa, which has leveraged data to identify important customer experiences that happen before, during and after the swipe of its credit cards. For a U.S. consumer booking a trip to Mexico, for instance, that would include reading reviews on TripAdvisor, asking for advice from social networks, comparing prices and making reservations online.

From this type of insight, the company has positioned itself to deliver relevant messages at critical interaction points for its end users (and merchants), moving from a transaction-centric focus to one that's based on deeper, more meaningful relationships.

But, while data segmentation is a good starting point, it only gets you so far. “There seems to be an overreaction where brands say, ‘Hey, we need to collect more data,’ and then just start collecting stuff without understanding,

No. 1, purpose, and what that data is going to be used for,” Raj says.

For Ginny Franks, vice president, content marketing at Regions Bank, it's a matter of layering customer mindsets on top of audience personas to understand stage of life.

Franks and her team segment their audience into different mindsets. “You could have personas across various demographics—various income levels, ages—but they could all still be in a state of mind,” Franks explains. Or, you could have personas within the same demographic spanning different mindsets.

The trick is to avoid making assumptions. “It's not a one-size-fits-all based on their demographic,” she adds.

Goodbye to One-Dimensional Personas

The fact is, it's nearly impossible to build a truly effective creative content marketing program on quantitative data

ARE YOU HITTING THE MARK?

Start with a documented strategy and measurement goals, and you'll quickly learn whether you're delivering what your customers want.

BY PETER HERRNREITER

Perhaps the single biggest factor behind the success of a content program, or any marketing program for that matter, is the ability to gather insightful information about your audience and the ability to turn those insights into action. The challenge, however, is defining what those insights are and which ones are important enough to make actionable.

The truth is there isn't any single data point, KPI or dashboard that constitutes an insight. Instead, insights are a blend of data-driven marketing within the context of a thoughtful content strategy. Or, if you prefer to think of it as an equation:

Data x Brains (i.e., strategy) = Insights

The best method for guiding this entire process is your strategic brief.

The strategic brief should outline your business objectives, marketing goals, competitive landscape, personas, buyer's journey and any other key information you know, or think you know, about your audience. Once that is all documented, you can then set your KPIs and determine your measurement goals, which will determine the effectiveness of your content marketing efforts.

Success at meeting or even surpassing your goals indicates your content is highly aligned with your customers' needs, desires, interests and priorities. If you're falling short of your objectives, however, you may need to revisit one or more of the assumptions made at the beginning of the content program. For example, you may need to adjust the tone and voice used or re-examine your content distribution strategy.

Laying the strategic groundwork for your content marketing efforts, including a clear understanding as to how you expect your content to perform, will help you determine whether your messaging is truly aligned with your audience.

Peter Herrnreiter is vice president of digital strategy at Imagination.

Michelle Lawler



Reinhard Rosar

SNOW BUSINESS

How a ski resort company used insights to drive a customer-centric marketing program

The company:

Vail Resorts

The insights:

The popular ski resort operator embedded RFID tags into its ski passes and, through geolocation, is able to capture, store and analyze real-time data of every skier on the mountain (including what runs skiers are tackling, how many runs they're getting in and what elevation they're hitting).

The content:

The IT, analytics and marketing teams use this data to create relevant content interactions through the company's website and app, EpicMix.com. The platform also allows skiers to upload user-generated content.

The result:

During the first ski season of this initiative, 100,000 guests activated EpicMix accounts, and about 40 percent downloaded the mobile app. Vail Resorts subsequently received more than 35 million social impressions.

The takeaway:

"This is a brand that used data not only to do demographic kinds of content, like offers and transactional things, but also appealed to the emotions [of its audiences]—that sense of accomplishment you get after you've done several runs, or if you've graduated from the bunny slope," says Wilson Raj, global director of customer intelligence for SAS, a business analytics software and services company.

alone. Doing so implies everyone within a demographic cohort should be talked to in the same way or served the same types of content through the same channels.

"I really try to get rid of the 'two cats and a dog, three kids and a wife' kind of personas," Revella says. "Unless you're marketing dog food, [it doesn't matter if] the guy [has] a dog. Unless I'm marketing hobby items, I don't care what his hobbies are."

Instead, marketers need to look to qualitative data to bring their customers to life, to uncover their personalities and to create focal points for their content strategy.

"More and more, we find that the power of emotion is really what's the differentiator," Raj says. "How can you dig into motivators, aspirations, fears and dreams and go this extra mile?"

Consider this: Behaviors, which can be tracked through quantitative data, can change quickly—sometimes significantly—based on life circumstances. But attitudes, which can only be discovered through qualitative information, are more likely to be constant and to be inherent to your audience's identity.

If, for example, you followed a woman shopping at the grocery store, you might find that she buys food that's organic and non-GMO. But if she has another child or experiences a drop in income, that shopping behavior is subject to change. Her attitude—that it's important to feed her family in a way that teaches her children to have a healthy lifestyle and form healthy habits—isn't likely to change.

"Your attitudes get at your philosophy on life, what you prioritize and what matters most," says Lizzie Shepherd, qualitative research analyst at Frank N. Magid Associates. "It takes it a step beyond what you do and gets into why you do what you do."

As you get to know your target customers by their defining qualities, don't be afraid to zoom in on a narrow segment—or even a segment within a segment.

The beauty product company cum monthly subscription service Birchbox has had great success with its fashion advice content because it has precisely identified its target audience as young, stylish women who lead busy lives, yet aspire to keep up with the latest fads. The company has avoided falling into the all-too-common trap of casting a wide and nebulous net, such as female millennials.

Some of the most forward-thinking marketers are trying to understand not just markets but individuals and going beyond transactions to focus on relationships. If you understand your audience inside and out, your content marketing efforts will stand out from all the other clutter and noise. ■

Joslin Woods is an editor at Imagination.



Thomas Lefebvre

“YOUR ATTITUDES GET AT YOUR PHILOSOPHY ON LIFE, WHAT YOU PRIORITIZE AND WHAT MATTERS MOST.”

A person is shown from the chest up, wearing a black VR headset. Their right hand is raised, palm facing forward, with fingers slightly spread. They are wearing a red top. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a green plant on the left and a circular object on the wall.

So, You Want to Be a Video Star?

From VR to AR and beyond, video is constantly innovating. How do you know which format will win for you?

BY MEGAN DAWSON

with

With growth comes clutter. And with innovation comes temptation. Temptation to veer from strategy, ignore what you know about your audience and jump on the newest, shiniest approach.

That's just what's happening with video. A favorite medium of content marketers for its creative flexibility and ability to generate strong emotional connections with audiences, video continues to skyrocket in popularity. YouTube receives more than 1 billion monthly active users, second only to Facebook. And Cisco predicts that video will account for 80 percent of all consumer internet traffic by 2019.

"It's like *The Wizard of Oz* when it went from black and white to color," says Kathy Button Bell, chief marketing officer of Emerson Electric Co. "Nothing helps build a robust story like video."

But with this growth also comes a barrage of new technology, techniques and formats—3-D, virtual reality and Snapchat, to name just a few. Content marketers need to examine their video options carefully to ensure they're staying true to their strategic visions and not simply being swayed by the latest fads.

Taking the Virtual Reality Plunge

Giving users control over the environment means content marketers have to grapple with the question: How do you tell a story when the story is no longer in your hands? With traditional video, content marketers control what people see and for how long they see it. They can craft the narrative that best tells the story. With that out the window, the results aren't always pretty.

Here's what happened when three big brands launched VR projects.

The *New York Times* launched a free VR app designed to accompany Google Cardboard VR viewers and to simulate immersive scenes from around the world, such as child refugees coming of age in Lebanon, South Sudan and Ukraine. The press loved it; the average user did not.

Smartphone users lost interest, and many reported motion sickness. The desktop version was even less popular because users grew tired of endlessly clicking to change the point of view and navigating without direction.

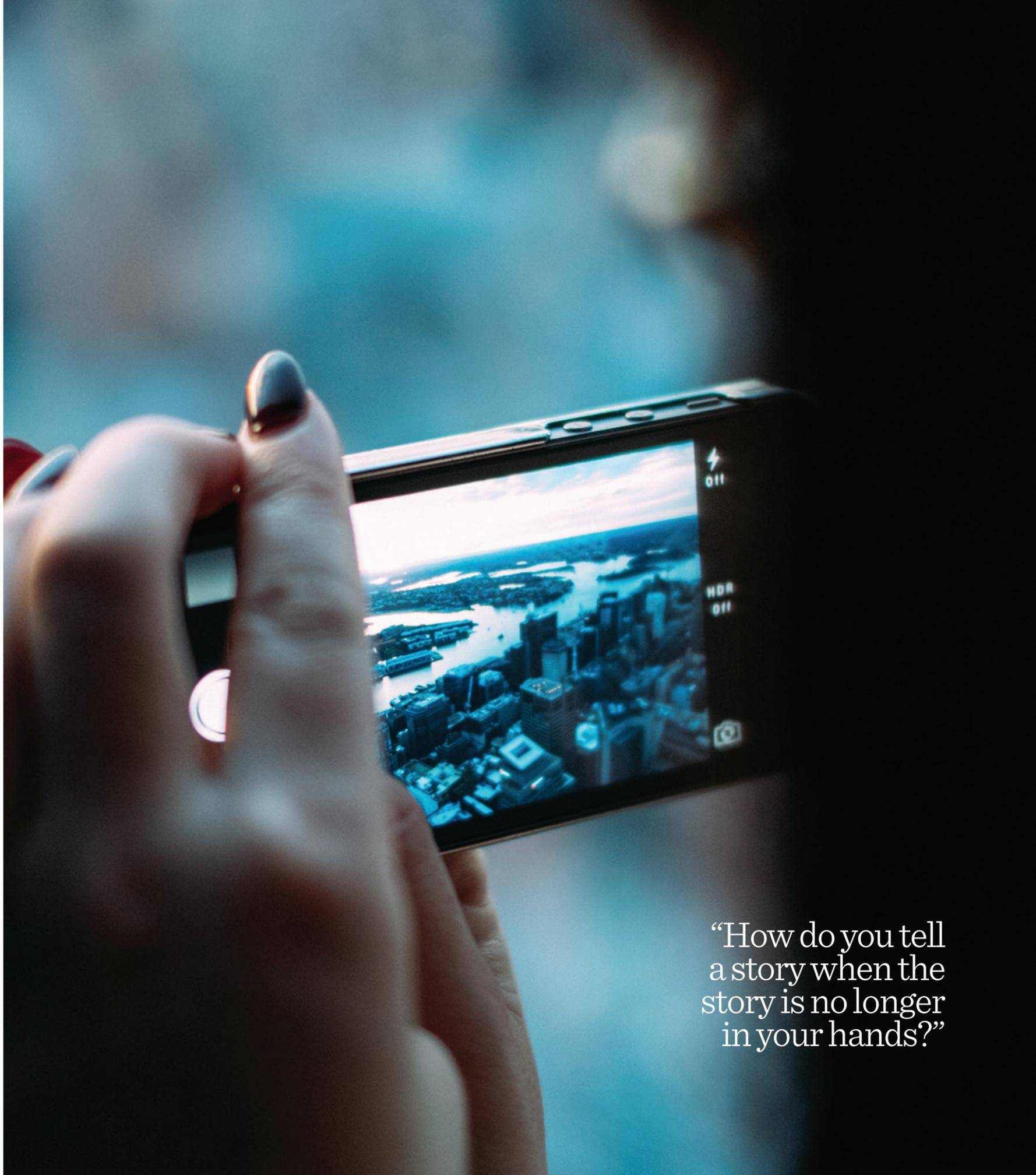
Aimless navigation through virtual reality sounds cool—for a minute. In actual reality, a loss of control over user experience can render content marketing virtually useless or even bad for the brand. As the *Times* found, when presented with the chance to control their experiences, people got annoyed. Most aren't yet comfortable with the technology, and if your audience isn't ready, you run the risk of alienating and frustrating them.

Google's Inside Abbey Road VR experience allows users to tour The Beatles' recording studios. Google provides audio and text narration that guides and informs users while arrows and buttons steer users toward more places to explore and navigate.

This semicontrolled virtual environment succeeds because it hands over the reins to the audience without discarding the structure of the story.

Marriott Hotels recently incorporated virtual reality into its video strategy to engage with the next-gen traveler. Marriott first used VR in 2014 with its Teleporter program, which allowed guests to experience fully immersive, sensory travel, such as to the

Jay Wenington



VIDEO'S GAME

It's video's world, we're just living in it.

80% of global consumer internet traffic will be video traffic in 2019, up from 64 percent in 2014

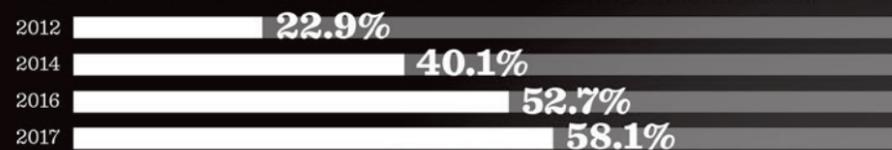
5 million years: How long it would take to watch all of the video that will cross global IP networks each month in 2019

23.3%: The increase in the average amount of time people spent consuming online video each day in 2015—this year, expect another 19.8% boost

MOBILE MONOPOLY

Mobile is expected to become the main platform for viewing online video in 2016

Percentage of time spent watching online video mobile devices accounted for worldwide:



Mobile video revenue made up 24% of publishers' overall digital revenue—a figure projected to climb to 29% by the end of this year



More than one-third of marketers say mobile video optimization requires the most time and budget compared to other digital formats

4x more likely

Smartphone viewers are 4x more likely to watch video on the most convenient accessible device—even on a crappy screen



PLAY THE VIDEO CARD

Marketers: We dare you.

More than half of marketing professionals worldwide say video has the best ROI of all content

\$7.46 billion: What advertisers spent on digital video ads in the U.S. in 2015, up 42% since 2014



\$13 billion: Projected expenditure on digital video ads by 2019

88%

of marketers who are moving their TV dollars toward digital channels are shifting that television budget to some form of video, such as desktop, mobile or over-the-top (OTT)

96%

of B2B organizations are engaged in video content marketing

56%

say sales have been positively impacted by video

41%

of those organizations plan to increase spending on video marketing in 2015

SOCIAL STUDIES

Rack up those likes, hearts and shares.

7 BILLION:

The number of mobile video views on Snapchat every day

8 BILLION:

The number of daily desktop and mobile video views on Facebook

40 YEARS'

worth of videos are watched by 10 million Periscope users every day

beaches of Hawaii or downtown London.

"We chose VR as a bold, disruptive approach to amplifying the brand's dedication to leading the future of travel," says Michael Dail, Marriott Hotels & Resorts' vice president of global brand marketing. "The key is to understand where your audience spends their time and use your resources to target specific audiences on specific platforms."

In 2015, the international hotel brand introduced VRoom Service and VR Postcards, which allow guests to immerse themselves in 360 degree, 3-D international travel to places such as Beijing, Chile and Rwanda via VR headsets from the comfort of their rooms at select Marriott Hotels.

"Most of our guests who tried VRoom Service had never experienced VR before and told us they would like to experience it again," Dail says. "We take this as a positive sign that we are successfully reaching our audience."

The Need for Clarity

Of course, the best way to avoid "shiny new object" syndrome when pursuing video is to keep your strategy document front and center. Doing so not only will keep you focused on your true objectives but also give you the freedom to intelligently take some creative risks.

Combining the traditional with the novel can mean big gains in audience and brand awareness. For example, Emerson's "I Love STEM" (science, technology, engineering and math) video campaign celebrates the company's 125-year anniversary with videos featuring scientist and YouTube entertainer Hank Green.

"The unexpectedness and juxtaposition of solid, old engineering Emerson with a hot, successful performing educator was really a pretty good mix," says Emerson's Button Bell. "We give him credibility in a completely new space, and he gives us credibility as being progressive."

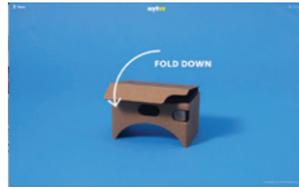
The cross-generational collaborators' visions are cosmically in sync: Both are on a mission to engage kids in STEM fields. "You're curious regardless of what camp as a viewer you came from. In either case, you're a little surprised," Button Bell says. "And surprise always works."

While looking for a fresh face for its "I Love STEM" campaign, Emerson was wary of straying too far from its brand. The science and technology hub originally considered bringing on an actor from *The Big Bang Theory* but decided it wasn't authentic to use an actor.

"Hank shows up, and you're like, 'Hey! You care about STEM education. You are the real deal,'" Button Bell says. "I would call Hank 'edu-tainment.' He's educating you at the same time he's delighting you."

The delight factor is always a winner. Since the campaign launched in February 2015, Emerson's YouTube channel grew to more than 479,000 views in 2015 from 25,000 views in 2014. The campaign resulted in 16.3 million social media impressions and 5,400 new followers across Emerson's Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn channels, marking the highest monthly engagement for the company to date.

In late 2015, health care provider Aetna Inc. renewed its successful experiential marketing and video campaign, the "11 Initiative." After a study found that each cigarette a person smokes can take 11 minutes off his or her life, Aetna created a machine that allows people to trade a cigarette for a memorable 11-minute experience (think



Brands are jumping on the video bandwagon in myriad ways (from top): *The New York Times* created a virtual reality app for Google's viewer; Marriott offers guests fully immersive 3-D travel experiences; Emerson tapped into the cache of YouTube entertainer Hank Green for its "I Love STEM" campaign; Aetna emphasizes experiences in its "11 Initiative"; and *The Dodo* goes for the heart with its curated videos.

playing with puppies or an improv performance just for you) and filmed the outcomes. The "Gain more time" video is featured across Aetna's social channels and has been viewed nearly 2.5 million times since 2014.

"The messaging around smoking cessation is often the same: Scare and shame people into quitting. And it rarely works," says Wendy Wahl, Aetna's vice president of enterprise marketing. "That's where the '11 Initiative' comes in. It's been successful because we're using storytelling to start a conversation on this important topic."

Trending: Metrics, Methodology and Mobile

As video techniques, formats and approaches continue to evolve, so, too, do the ways of measuring success. For example, do 1 million views matter? Maybe. If your goal is clicks, great. But if your goal is qualified leads, then chasing viral video instead of chasing real leads won't generate long-term success.

Marketers are beginning to move away from the video view metric and putting more weight on engagement metrics, such as time spent, view completions and more, says Dail. "Creating content that truly engages audiences is starting to become a higher priority [than clicks], and that will shape the type of content brands put out there. The benefit of digital media is that it allows us to test and learn and make real-time adjustments based on performance."

Case in point: *The Dodo*, an animal news website that curates content from existing videos on YouTube and subscription-based video sources, looks at video hits and misses to determine future content.

For example, a video of bunnies looking in mirrors was a dud, meaning viewers clicked away halfway through. "I thought it was going to be really funny. But [the bunnies] didn't move enough," says Emily Pellemounter, creative director of video. "You've got about the first three seconds of a video to make people watch it."

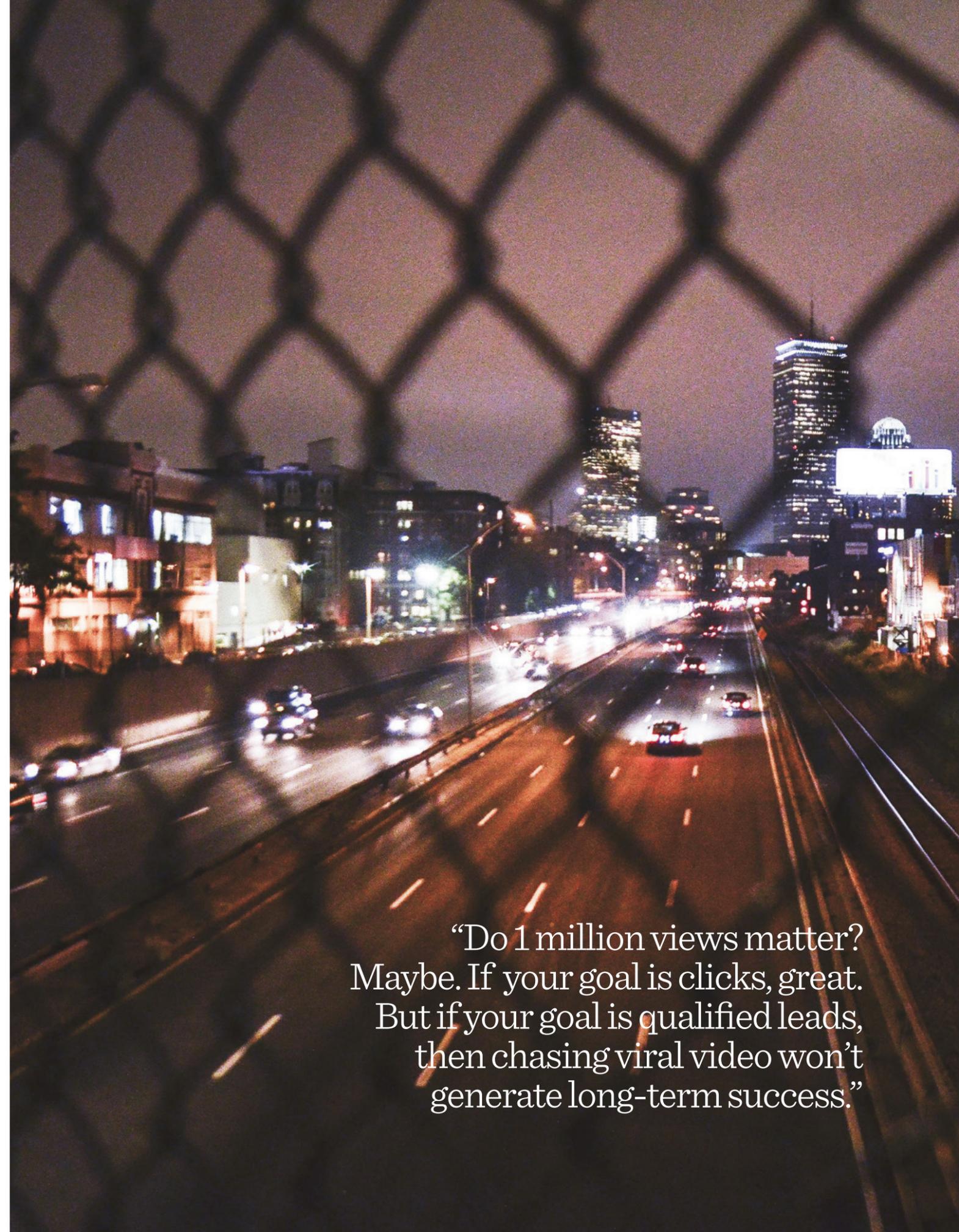
On the other hand, she notes many other *Dodo* videos have been magic—pit bulls cuddling with other animals are top performers. "The pit bull community really loves sharing pro-pit bull videos that show how cute and sweet they are to counter the stereotype," Pellemounter says. "That worked well for us, so we started replicating. We did pit bulls and kittens, pit bulls and bunnies, and pit bulls and any other kind of animal."

The other topic expected to dominate video conversations in the coming months is mobile. More than half of YouTube views come from mobile devices, and the number of hours people spent watching YouTube videos on mobile is up 100 percent year-over-year. On top of that, mobile-only Snapchat may soon eclipse both YouTube and Facebook—the photo and video-sharing app now gets more than 8 billion video views a day.

"Understanding that consumption habit will be key for brands to remain relevant in video content," Aetna's Wahl says.

Sometimes change is good. Other times, not so much. By maintaining a focus on audience and a clear vision of strategy, content marketers can find the creativity they'll need to succeed in the evolving video space. ■

Megan Dawson is an associate research editor at Imagination.



"Do 1 million views matter? Maybe. If your goal is clicks, great. But if your goal is qualified leads, then chasing viral video won't generate long-term success."

LOOK AT YOUR CONTENT MARKETING PROGRAM THROUGH THE EYES OF YOUR CUSTOMERS TO DETERMINE ITS TRUE VALUE.

BY PETER HERRNREITER



**MEASURE UP
YOURSELF**

One of the hottest topics in content marketing is measurement. Content marketers have an array of questions about it, but most deal with the issue of value: How do I measure return? What should I measure for optimal insights? How can I tell if my content marketing program is working?

The truth is, “measurement” is a terribly simplistic term in an industry that requires a strategic, customer-based approach. If you haven’t laid out your baseline strategy, then asking these measurement questions will lead you down the wrong path.

To get at the heart of the matter, instead of focusing your questions internally, think of looking externally. For your content to have value to you (i.e., meeting business objectives), it first has to be valuable to your customers. Once you do that, you can begin to reshape the questions as phases that build off one another—measured customer value (and how we do that) leads to business value (and how we determine that), which leads to growing value on an ongoing basis.

In this sense, value can be defined as: How are you influencing the customer journey? And what effect does content have on business objectives?

All three phases should be accounted for in your strategy overview or brief, but rarely are they truly understood beyond typical web or vanity metrics. It’s in the development of content program goals that marketers need to evolve from the world of “awareness” or “engagement” metrics and establish their own customized standards that will define content success in the future.

Let’s look deeper into each of the three phases.

1

CUSTOMER VALUE

Determining “value” is admittedly a difficult task, given its relative nature and subjectivity. However, when you consider value through the lens of the customer experience, it becomes clearer.

When developing your strategy, you’ll benefit from creating personas and content journey maps. Through these two exercises,

you’ll quickly be able to uncover the vital nuances that will help propel success in a tangible sense. When detailing the challenges your audiences face, for example, ask yourself: What barriers do they experience, not only in fully understanding the challenges but also in finding solutions? What solutions can your business provide to help them reframe these issues?

In the renowned sales book *The Challenger Sale*, Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson note that “solution selling” isn’t about selling so much as it is about disruption: “You’re asking customers to change their behavior—to stop acting in one way and start acting in another. . . . You have to get customers to think differently about how they operate. You need to show them a new way to think about their business.”

Granted, content marketing isn’t about selling, but in this sense content success invariably must be judged through the lens of owning and then transforming the discussion within your marketplace. Only then can you focus your attention on how these messages influence the buying cycle.

Bubbers 13

1/4 tsp
1.25 ml

2

BUSINESS VALUE

It’s still a bit odd that chief marketing officers and other senior-level marketers struggle to define how content marketing has any measurable effect on the bottom line. True, it’s very difficult—not to mention impractical—to tie a single piece of content to any single purchase. But, when deciding whether to move ahead with an investment in content, senior-level marketers must have a crystal-clear grasp of their brand in the marketplace,

their business plan and, more importantly, how their large-scale marketing strategy is going to help move the needle in this respect.

For example, while all brands hope to reap a return on their investment in the form of sales, many content programs can be designed to generate brand lift within a particular target market or to help differentiate the brand from a large competitor or within a trend.

To truly measure the business value, the strategic purpose of a program must be understood. Once that purpose is determined, the amount of investment must be relative to the anticipated return. In this sense, while there can be a measurable impact on sales, return value is finalized through the agreed-upon role content should play in your larger marketing strategy.

3

STRATEGIC VALUE

The final portion of the value-driven marketing trifecta is where content marketing has the greatest amount of legwork left.

Assessing how best to pivot or change your program based on current performance and uncovering truly meaningful insights is where low-level, individual metrics come into play. But almost more important than the KPIs is the ability of your team to read this data in the aforementioned context. That said, we are light years behind where we should be in judging effectiveness.

The current model, based on standard-issue Google Analytics statistics, while effective, doesn’t lend significant insight into how our audience is using content. Bounce rate, time on site and similar metrics should all be used, but Google Analytics plays to the lowest common denominator in some respect because it was meant as a one-size-fits-all for all websites.

Marketers need to develop their own standards of measurement and have a deep understanding of the implications of these metrics. When deciding what to track, just keep in mind that each data point is an indicator of a far more complex relationship between your content and your customers. ■

Peter Herrreiter is vice president of digital strategy at Imagination.

TIME AND PLACE

To really strike a chord with an audience, marketers have to do much more than simply provide useful or entertaining content. That's because it's as much about how, where and when you engage, as it is about what you're actually saying. And finding that sweet spot is not a "one-and-done" exercise because needs, mindsets and emotional states all change throughout the day. Sometimes people will want information to help them with their jobs or personal lives; other times, relaxation and "zoning out" is a top priority. To get a better sense of what type of content resonates with people, we asked Imagineers:

What content do you consume during your daily commute?

"In-bound each morning I listen to *Business Insider*, *This American Life* and Content Marketing Institute's *Content Inc.* podcasts. Outbound each night, it's Fox Business News and CNBC."
— Jim Meyers, president, CEO and founder

"Anything audiobook! I read all day long, so when it comes to winding down (or waking up), I like to tune into something I can passively digest and just zone out. [Podcasts like] *This American Life*, *Serial* and Lena Dunham's *Women of the Hour* all have kept me company on my commute."
— Megan Dawson, associate research editor

"The *New York Times* app when I'm awake or Instagram if I haven't had any coffee yet."
— Margaret Poe, editor

"I prefer catching up on various news articles. I use Flipboard to stay up to date on what is happening in the world. Typically my Flipboard is a mix of political news (I'm sort of a political junkie), science stories from the likes of *National Geographic*, *Mashable Science*, *CNET* and *Engadget*, travel stories (I will forever have wanderlust) and general business news from sources like *Business Insider*. This way I have a nice mix and can stay current on what is happening in the world."
— Asher Levine, manager-digital strategy

"I've been listening to the *Modern Love* podcast, and it's fantastic. Actors read essays [from the popular *The New York Times* weekly series] and, in the second half, the host interviews the author, and we get to hear what has happened since the story was published. So good!"
— Libby Ellis, content director

"I usually catch up on top news stories on my phone during my commute. TheSkimm does a great job of covering major stories while providing enough background information in a digestible format—and with a healthy dose of snark. The Week's daily "5 Things You Need to Know Now" is another strong roundup of news curated from different publications."
— Ashley Greene Bemick, editor

"I'm typically reading fiction of some sort on my Kindle. Once in a while I'll have a real-life book, but again it's usually fiction."
— Beth Gaston, content director

"Riding in is for tracking the trades, looking for ideas to inspire how we do creativity and content. My go-tos are LinkedIn Pulse, Re/code, Mashable, Quartz, Mediabistro and my Twitter feed. Heading home is for catching up on what happened in the world that day: Instagram, Facebook—with lots of staring out the L at Chicago, whose beauty, skyline and street life continue to amaze."
— Kim Caviness, executive vice president and chief content officer

"I listen to podcasts—*Mark Maron*, *Fresh Air*, *Bill Burr*, *Freakonomics*, *How To Be Amazing*, *Radiolab*, etc."
— Andrew Schultz, chief operating officer

"I read theSkimm every morning and try to read Content Marketing Institute on my commute home."
— Kristin Batz, associate editor

"I prefer reading magazines on the train over reading books. Not only is a magazine easier to hold with one hand while standing on a crowded train, they also generally have more subheads than a long book chapter, which means I'm not pausing midthought when I arrive at my stop. Lately, I've been reading my back issues of *Smithsonian* magazine. I love the variety of topics and the quality of writing and photography, and it's thought-provoking while remaining easily digestible."
— Marissa Wold Uhrina, production director

"Week-end Read is a free app that formats screenplays for easy reading on your smartphone. Reading everything from *Whiplash* to *30 Rock* makes the 50-minute ride way more enjoyable."
— Hayley Grgurich, digital media project manager/producer