

LEXICON ESSAY: CONTENT MARKETING

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& ITS IMPACT ON DONOR RELATIONS

Content | Strategic Planning | Transmedia

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Nonprofit organizations are relying more on content marketing than ever before with 76% claiming to use this as a tool of promotion (Barry, 2016). This form of marketing is heavily focused on the creation and sharing of online materials, making it an effective means of reaching people while also cost effective. Content marketing can be defined in several ways, but for our purpose we will define the term as such: “a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience—and, ultimately, to drive action” (Pullizi, 2015). The key reason this definition is so relevant to our conversation is due to the “drive to action” or calling upon participants to get involved in a mission they are passionate about, which is directly related to the nonprofit sector. This call to action is precisely why content marketing is so effective in the nonprofit sector, along with the price tag compared to other forms. We will be analyzing content marketing and how it is effectively used in the nonprofit sector today. We will also examine the challenges nonprofits face when using content marketing, and how to negate them- later focusing on how this impacts donor relations and retention.

A Brief Overview of Content Marketing History

The origin of content marketing is debated by several experts in the field. There is some discussion of cave paintings actually coining the practice of content marketing, while others believe it was the Gutenberg printing press acting as a platform to launch mass production of marketing materials. Others believe the true origin is more recent, beginning with the production of web materials and online sharing (White, 2016). Regardless of the debate, it seems this organic process of content marketing has developed and grown through time.

Let's begin by going back to 1895 when John Deere launched a customer magazine still known today as *The Furrow*. This was used as an informational marketing tool, focused on a non-

bias platform, to help provide information and community to John Deere customers. The success of this marketing material is still apparent today, with 1.5 million copies circulating in 40 countries, translated in 12 languages. One can follow similar success through history with the *Jell-O Recipe Book* in 1904. Frank Woodward purchased Jell-O in 1899 for \$450, only to find sales “slow and disheartening” (Jell-O). As a result, Woodward “decided to print a huge quantity of Jell-O cookbooks to be distributed by his salesmen throughout the United States. It was content marketing at its best” (Kuperman, 2011).

More current releases such as Reb Bull’s *Red Bulletin* in 2007 and *Chief Content Officer magazine* by CMI are rooted in the same content marketing tactics as those produced over 100 years ago. However, we begin to see a shift in content marketing approaches in the 1990’s when the internet takes hold (CMI, 2012). Once the invention of the internet occurred, content marketing gained another addition through a web-based platform. In 1996, we see an emergence of new content marketing as “Placeware, a spin-off of Xerox’s PARC Laboratory, (begins) offering web conference services” (CMI). We also begin to see more sophisticated uses of technology through the Nike Run App, and most recent, Coca-Cola’s release of their 2020 marketing plan focused on storytelling in order to promote their product. These innovations stem directly from the content marketing approaches used many years ago, but now use the internet to be more effective or something along those lines to tie the paragraphs ideas together.

Why Content Is Queen

With such a long standing history, one may wonder why content marketing is so successful. There are several factors at play here, but an important aspect to consider is the amount of advertisement consumption occurring each day. According to a market research study carried out three years ago, people consume over 5,000 advertisements per day (Johnson). With

such an overflow of advertising traffic, how can content marketing still be effective? Pratik Dholakiya, Co-Founder of E2M Solutions, provides more context when stating "consumers are looking for *authenticity*, they are looking for *relevancy* and they are demanding *valuable* information--especially in a world where information is so readily available... all of this comes in the form of content" (Page, 2016).

What allows content marketing to be so successful is the ability to provide valuable information to consumers. Unlike other forms of marketing which often pitch products or services, this approach is focused on providing useful and truly relevant information to prospects that helps to solve an issue (CMI). Not only is this form of marketing offering information to the consumer, but when done successfully, this content is acting as a resource that can then influence the related field. In response, this marketing can also increase an organization's value, allowing them to reach more people and continue to engage those already involved.

Content Marketing in the Nonprofit Sector



Establishing a content marketing strategy can seem like an easy step in a business plan, but many organizations in the nonprofit sector are facing several challenges. The infographic to the left cites only one quarter of organizations have a content marketing strategy that is also documented (Pulizzi & Barry, 2016). As previously mentioned, 76% of nonprofit organizations are using content marketing. However, only 26% of organizations believe their current content marketing approach is working- with only 1% believing their approach is very effective (Pulizzi & Barry). Not only are organizations struggling to develop a successful content marketing strategy, but they also find it difficult to gauge and measure key performance

indicators when they do. Many of these issues may stem from the lack of strategic planning within nonprofit organizations, as well as a few other factors. Mark Hrywna, of *The NonProfit Times*, attributes these challenges to staff shortage, budget restraints, new/engaging content, lack of training on new digital strategies/tactics, as well as providing return on investment internally (2016).

Taking a further look into nonprofit marketing research from 2016, we find a couple approaches to negate the downfalls occurring. Once a content marketing strategy is established and documented, organizations should schedule meeting times to discuss the functions of their strategy. It is found that “50% of the most effective nonprofit marketers (vs. 24% of the least effective) meet daily or weekly to discuss their content marketing program- with 46% of employees believing these meetings are valuable in helping the success of a content marketing plan” (Pulizzi & Barry). Through this statistic we find how important communication is to the success of a content marketing plan. Another means of negation is to simply create more content or content containing more value. In 2016, 69% of nonprofits planned to create more content than they did in 2015 (Pulizzi & Barry). In order for a content marketing plan to be successful, this statistic must be considered.

Another aspect to consider is the use of web platforms as a cost effective approach to providing content. Now, more than ever, organizations are turning to this medium as a marketing tool. The Content Marketing Institute compared the effectiveness of traditional and web designed tools for nonprofits in the graph to the right (2016).



Although we see in-person events as the most effective tactic, the next three rankings are all shared through the internet. When developing web content, nonprofits should consider utilizing infographics, illustrations/ photos, and videos as these have the largest increase in effectiveness since 2015 (Pulizzi & Barry). When analyzing social media platforms as a means to deliver marketing materials, the most effective platforms are Facebook at 70%, Twitter at 51%, and YouTube 45% (Pulizzi & Barry). In the same study, we also find the most beneficial online advertising method purchased is search engine marketing (SEM).

Although these statistics may seem daunting and appear to make content marketing a difficult task for nonprofits, there are organizations who have developed a strategy and found success. While researching, I found one charity in particular that pulled me in - charity: water. After visiting their website to quickly gather more information, 45 minutes later, I found myself watching videos and reading about the incredible work this charity is doing. Their content marketing was so successfully implemented, I spent time retaining the content they were providing instead of directly analyzing the marketing itself. This charity utilized their web presence to directly communicate the impact donors are making by presenting the number of people affected, where the work is being done, stories of how people's lives had changed due to this work, and even providing meaningful stories of those who work within the charity itself. Every marketing piece I read was relevant, valuable content for those visiting the site. I ended up donating before continuing to write this paper – that is how successful their content marketing is.

Content Marketing and Donor Relations

Before the discussion of donor retention, it is important to note how crucial content marketing is for organizations and fundraising. In a CMI study researchers found “84% of nonprofit marketers say increased fundraising is an important content marketing metric; 30% say

it is the most important metric” (Pulizzi & Barry, 2016). Content marketing is a major tool in communicating with and retaining donors, and can be very effective when used properly.

According to Frank Barry, in nonprofit organizations the average retention rate of a newly required donor is 27% and this number is declining. He also mentions “nearly 3 out of 4 new donors leave and *never* come back” (2014). In the political climate we are facing today, with the potential defunding of nonprofits, donor retention is more important than ever. Utilizing tools, such as content marketing, can be a helpful aide in retaining the ever important donors.

Adrian Sargeant says “a 10% increase in donor retention can increase the lifetime value of your donor database by 200%” (2014). So how do we get there? Frank Barry took the time to interview 12 donor relations professional - many mentioned focusing on authenticity and value in the relationships while carrying out consistent and strategic planning. Shannon Doolittle, from DooGooder, states “remember, the goal isn’t retention, it’s meaningful relationships” (Barry, 2014). We can utilize our previous conversation regarding the use of content marketing in nonprofit organizations and directly apply it to donor relations.

As previously mentioned, content marketing is done successfully when organizations are positioning themselves as a relevant resource in the field. It is an understanding that a first time donor already has a connection to the organization they give to in some way. An example referred to in Barry’s work is the National Wildlife Federation’s. This organization is establishing themselves as a resource in the field by providing video content and magazines to educate the public through many channels (2014). Once a donor gives to this organization they will be more likely to continue giving due to the consistent interactions occurring through content marketing. Smaller organizations can develop a similar reputation by becoming a local resource to those interested in their field. While developing content, it is important to consider

the ability to share materials through many social media platforms. If an organization can create content donors are passionate about, they will share the materials which will allow the organization's marketing materials to reach more people. Potential approaches might be to create a local magazine, a video stream, or provide opportunities to educate while promoting their organization.

Another crucial step in donor retention is a quick, meaningful response. When a donor gives online it is important to respond with content marketing materials that reinforces their decision to give. Organizations could send a quick thank you message along with a video to further inform donors of the impact they are making by giving. This helps to further engage a donor and also establish a relationship with them. According to an "Experian Marketing Services report, the first email someone receives after a transaction achieves transaction rates and revenue that are 10 times higher than what is achieved through bulk emails." These messages also are five times more likely to be opened and four times more likely to have more clicks (Barry, 2014). Even though this report is not focused on the nonprofit sector, we see the impact timely and valuable content has when responding to those interested in or supporting an organization. After email contact, it is important to further communication by presenting donors with content marketing materials that provide supplementary information about the organization. This could include the mission of the organization, reports or research that has been published, or personal stories of those who have been impacted by the work done within the organization. Donor retention can grow into a robust plan, but through content marketing organizations have the ability to further develop relations with donors in a simple, but effective manner.

Content, Transmedia, & Strategic Planning

Content, strategic planning, and transmedia are three terms directly related to content marketing within the nonprofit sector.

From my background in studio arts I have always defined content as what is being depicted or a work's essence. This definition is also applicable to content marketing because we are often discussing the messages sent to participants through content marketing materials. Content is, in itself, *the* most important aspect of content marketing. Without relevant and valuable content, a strategy will be ineffective and fail. Content has the ability to impact participants on an emotional level making a lasting impact, or be informative enough for organizations to engage people daily. As stated above, *content is queen*.

Transmedia is also a very important term when discussing content marketing. Although this is not previously mentioned, transmedia is the technique of telling a story across multiple platforms and formats using current digital technologies. The immense relevancy of transmedia to content marketing causes it to be a strategy known as transmedia content strategy. Marketing professionals will use this in combination to traditional content marketing in order to develop cohesive messages through many platforms. As Denise Zimmerman, of CMI, states "a consistent transmedia content strategy will not only help facilitate stronger and more meaningful connections with your customers, but it can also significantly extend the value of your content and amplify its overall impact" (2012). When utilizing this strategy, organizations are delivering cohesive content through several tech-based platforms. The key to doing this is making sure materials are easy to find, easy to share, and transverse many channels and platforms.

Last term, I defined strategic planning within arts management as a set of comprehensive choices that have been prioritized and documented to manage resources available in an organization to assist in meeting goals and objectives. This definition is useful when implementing a content media strategy as mentioned in *Content Marketing in the Nonprofit Sector* above. However, strategic planning is also an important aspect of donor retention. Without a strategic plan, organizations are often left with ineffective and immeasurable approaches to solving issues. In reflection to our conversation, strategic planning is an essential part of content marketing and donor relations.

Conclusion

Overall, we find content marketing to be extensive in theory, but when directly applied to an organization's needs, it can be very effective. Content marketing provides a cost effective opportunity for organizations to develop valuable relationships with donors and participants, share meaningful information relevant to the field. It is no easy task to implement an effective content marketing campaign, but when organizations take the initiative to develop a strategic plan, it can provide endless opportunities for their organization to grow and further engage participants.

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