



THE  
CONTENT  
ADVISORY

# Content Marketing in Crisis

*Re-Building the Business Case for Content Marketing & Owned Media Experiences*

*By Robert Rose, Chief Strategy Officer, Content Advisory*



## INTRODUCTION – WADING THROUGH THE RUT OF DISILLUSIONMENT

“The only difference between a rut and a grave is the dimensions.”

- Ellen Glasgow

Lately, I've been experiencing a bit of an existential crisis. After dedicating much of my career over the last half-dozen years to content marketing, I've come to discover that, not only is this particular marketing approach currently in its death throes, the practice may not even exist.

Based on some of the recent headlines in both trade magazines, blogs, and even a few technology publications, one would have to assume the 100+ companies I've worked with over the last 36 months were simply tilting at windmills. Had they somehow gotten themselves caught up in a “content marketing” cult, requiring a Don Draper-esque "4 P's" intervention to bring them back into reality? Or, are brands like Red Bull, LEGO, and Visa just special because they have inherently interesting content and, therefore, represent the tiny fraction of companies that *actually could* replace traditional marketing and advertising with an "overhyped, buzzword-y" concept like content marketing?

Well, I have bad news. Are you ready for it? Here it is:

***Content Marketing isn't a replacement for advertising, or any other form of classic marketing.***

Whew, is everyone okay? Do you need a minute to catch your breath? Maybe now we can stop with all the frantic posts that scream, “*Oh my god, why is the internet filled with crappy brand content... content marketing is dead!*”

No? Still feel the need to rant and rage? Well, I suppose I can roll with that, so let's move on.

### **Yes, Virginia, Content Marketing Does Exist**

First, let's just agree that the business practice of creating and deploying useful, relevant, owned media content for the purpose of building an audience isn't a figment of our collective imagination — it does actually exist.

Want proof? L'Oreal just launched Fab Beauty, a completely unbranded site focused on helping salon owners optimize their business practices. Or, how about Marriott? They are a self-proclaimed “media company” now, launching a content studio that will produce both long-form and short-form content. Or, consider Pepsi – and their declaration that

they will not only launch a content studio to create long form content for their brand, but will also (for a price) create content for other brands. And think about this: If you were to ask what media company has the best coverage of soldering materials, I'd tell you it's not a media company at all. It's Indium, which publishes 17 different blogs on the subject in six different languages. Or, consider a recent report authored by Rebecca Lieb, in which she details how General Electric CMO Linda Boff has "*pulled back from television advertising, excepting live events, due to fragmented consumer attention and a lack of engagement. Meanwhile, the company has doubled down on content marketing initiatives.*"

What these businesses seem to recognize (and what others are ignoring) is the tremendous value that exists in creating, managing, and publishing valuable content — not as a complete replacement for advertising, but rather as an additional component of the overarching business strategy. In other words, they're not looking to replace advertising with content — they're *evolving their content* to make *advertising* better.

### So, Where's the Beef?

The general tenor of these content-marketing-as-a-bullshit-buzzword articles boils down to what I call the “you suck at it” argument: Basically, they assert that media companies can create awesome content, but brands can't (or won't) manage this; thus their conclusion is that content marketing itself doesn't work.

On this matter, I have more bad news: It's true; we do mostly suck at it. Content Marketing is really difficult to do well, let alone at the level of scale enterprise brands typically expect to be achievable. But, yeah, welcome to Marketing in 2016. It's hard. In fact, at CMI we've found that brands often achieve success with their content only *after* they've done one (or both) of the following two things:

1. They've actually **committed** to content marketing as a *strategic* initiative, investing in the business process and developing capable in-house talent (a la GE's investment in Thomas Kellner, a former *Forbes* reporter and Columbia School of Journalism graduate, as their managing editor for GE Reports).
2. Alternately, they acquired an already-successful media property — for example, L'Oreal's initial purchase of Makeup.com, Arrow Electronics' acquisition of United Technical Publishing or even Johnson & Johnson's purchase of BabyCenter.com. (Of note is that J&J acquired BabyCenter in 2001 for \$10 million; or about three-tenths of one percent of their current advertising budget.

See, in most cases where we are seeing success, it is due to the company's view of content as a *strategic business activity* that just happens to be performed by marketers, rather than as a marketing and advertising *tactic* that gets applied for the expressed purpose of amplifying upper-funnel marketing results. So, it isn't that marketing should alter the purpose of content; it's that content contributes a new form and functionality to the practice of marketing.

As content marketers have been saying for years, our practice isn't something new — for example, Eugene Schueller, the founder of L'Oreal, started out as an editor who, in the 1920's, founded *Votre Beauté*, one of the first women's beauty magazines. It's the operational aspects involved in managing content that most modern marketing departments and agencies are finding to be a challenge. Like nearly every other aspect of marketing, content marketing is more complex and more dynamic than ever before — in fact, changes are likely happening right underneath our feet, as we speak.

What counts most is that we look at the approach as a means of providing specific and multiple lines of business value. It's not solely a replacement for top-of-the-funnel activities — though, when done well, it actually *can* drive results like an additional 1,500 sales appointments and a \$1 billion pipeline, as it did for Xerox. Or, content marketing done well may have nothing to do with purchase intent; instead, perhaps it can increase the effectiveness of a business's advertising spend four-fold, as it did for Kraft. It may also be the future of R&D, informing the product and marketing teams with insightful consumer behavior, which it's doing for Johnson and Jonson's Babycenter.com

As these examples, and many others, show, there is real business value to be found in spending at least a portion of our strategic efforts on delivering content-driven, experiential value to customers. As Henry Ford said, "*whether you think you can, or think you can't – you're right.*" Existential or not, I don't see how you can possibly go wrong with believing we can.

But, let's hold that conclusion for a moment. Let's take a step back and actually look at the practice that we're attempting to create in our business. Let's rebuild the business case for Content Marketing in the Enterprise.

Ready?

## REBUILDING THE BUSINESS CASE

*“There's battle lines being drawn  
Nobody's right if everybody's wrong  
Young people speaking their minds  
Getting so much resistance from behind”  
- Buffalo Springfield*

At almost every content marketing conference session, or workshop I see or conduct, someone from a brand comes up to the speaker and asks the same question about content marketing:

*“How do I convince my boss that Content Marketing is worth doing?”*

This is the part where the speaker sighs, smiles, and agrees “yes, it’s hard”. You might try buying my book, and giving it to them”, they’ll say. These are all stalling tactics by the way – we’re trying to actually think of what to say. But, lately, I’ve taken a bit of a different tack. See, the question that we’re asking isn’t really the question we want answered. As marketers we are saying “gee, there are all these really interesting examples of companies doing interesting and productive things with content – how do I convince my boss that we should do that.” Then, what the boss is actually hearing is:

“why we should invest in content, when that’s seemingly ALL we do.” That “I don’t get it” look on their face is basically – “we already create a HUGE amount of content that costs us a big amount of money – where’s the return for what you’re asking for?”

**In other words – we’re asking for a car – and the CEO is saying “what the hell have you been doing with all the parts that we’ve been buying?”**

Make no bones about it – this pushback is going to hit every aspect of content strategy and the business this year. I’m already starting to feel it. The last two advisory engagement inquiries we received weren’t about how to start a strategic content approach – they were how to fix one that’s clearly broken. “Beware,” one of them said. “Our CEO now doesn’t believe that content is a necessary strategy in our business.”

Somebody else (seemingly gleefully) pointed out to me an article in the Wall Street Journal that questioned the efficacy of content. Apparently GoPro laid off 100 people and lost its head of content. Of course the author of the article didn’t mention that said head of content had taken a job as CEO at SurveyMonkey and had also been named to the board of GoPro. The author hinted that the “bloom is off the rose” for brands acting as publishers.

Here's the thing that will either comfort you or keep you up at night. Ready for it?

**Nobody has this figured out. Nobody.**

Whether you're a small business or a Fortune 100 global conglomerate, we're all feeling our way, exploring, on a journey together.

For the last few years when we got it right, we were "early adopters" and "outliers" and "case studies." When we got it wrong? Well, nobody really heard about that. But, guess what? It happens to everybody.

As we enter this era of pushback, the successes will come to those who are patient. It won't be enough to get early wins. We have to sustain the effort. Those who do will still be the outliers, the case studies. The difference will be the failures. You'll start to hear more and more about them.

But – let's look at the common pushbacks and address them one by one.

**Let Me Count The Ways**

In CMI's 2017 research across more than 3,500 marketers, we looked at those that felt that their success in content marketing was decreasing over time. The top five answers (basically everything with more than 30% responding) were:

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Not enough time devoted                      | 51% |
| Management Changes, Staffing issues          | 48% |
| Content Creation Challenges                  | 46% |
| Lack of a strategy (or inability to adjust)  | 38% |
| Content Marketing not a high enough priority | 35% |
| Content Marketing budget issues              | 31% |

So – just to the point made above – those marketers that are not feeling successful with content marketing, the main reason for the frustration is that we are in a catch-22 situation. We're so focused on creating more and more content, we feel like we don't have enough time, or budget, or what we lack the business priority to focus on it. So, this is where the "you-suck-at-it" push back then comes from senior management. Why should we invest MORE in content, when we already suck at the content we're creating.

Now – no one actually says this. We use much more “business” language for this. We get these questions:

1. There is too much content already – how will we stand out in our industry
2. This approach is costing more than advertising
3. We can’t create great content
4. We can’t tie the content marketing approach to revenue

So let’s first acknowledge something. Every single one of these is true. But now, let’s address these one by one.

1. **There is too much content already – how will we stand out in our industry?**

This is also known as the “content shock” argument, where we look at the noise out there and, as if it were a thunderstorm, say “well it’s just too nasty to go outside.” But, here’s the thing: this storm isn’t going to blow over. The “storm” of content started just after Gutenberg invented the printing press, expanded with the invention of mass media technology such as radio, television, and now the internet.

My answer to this question is “what’s the alternative?” Do we really expect the content “storm” to subside and for it to become less noisy. Do we really believe that direct advertising, marketing, social or other mechanisms for conversing with our customers will become easier, or less complex over time? Yes, there is too much content in our industry. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t create content. It just means we have to be GREAT at it.

2. **Content Marketing costs more than advertising**

Somewhere in the collective conscious of marketing – especially digital marketing - “advertising” became the de facto standard for how much things should cost. Any approach that comes along is put through the same filter: is it cheaper or more expensive than advertising? If it’s cheaper it must be worth doing, and if it’s more expensive it’s not.

The troubling thing about this question is that it assumes two things. The first thing it assumes is that “advertising” and the costs associated with it is as good as it’s going to get, and won’t degrade any further. In other words, it may actually be true that Content Marketing is more expensive than advertising today. But what if advertising completely fails one day, and we haven’t invested in any alternative form of marketing. And that brings us to the second assumption about advertising: that content marketing is a replacement for advertising. This isn’t true. Content Marketing provides multiple lines of value (as we’ll see) and actually can make paid media approaches like advertising more effective over the long run.

### 3. **We can't create great content**

If our business was hurting, and the head of product management came to the CEO and said – “we can't create great products”, how might the CEO react? What if that situation was reversed. In either case, the head of product management is either looking for a job, or someone who actually can create great products. The ability to create great products and services is CORE to our business.

So, if we're treating content seriously, why would we expect anything less. The reason that this assertion is true is almost certainly because we haven't tried very hard. We haven't truly exercised the muscle of creating great content – because we are so wrapped up in creating content that describes the value of our product. Have we trained our folks to create great content? Have we hired people who know how to create great content? Whatever the reason is – this is something that is not an objection to the approach – it's an objection to our skills in the approach.

### 4. **We can't tie Content Marketing to Revenue**

The short answer here is – “then don't.” There are myriad other ways to associate content marketing with business value. Revenue is but one of those values. If you can tie ANY of your marketing and advertising to revenue, then you can tie content marketing to revenue. But, if we dig deeper, the real assertion here is that it's “too fuzzy” to associate with a sale – and thus it's hard to draw a straight line to revenue. Now, this may be true – but it's not an argument for content marketing broadly – this is simply a challenge to our measurement capability.

More sales, or more direct revenue, is but one very simple way to apply a value proposition to content marketing. Don't trap your business into the fallacy that the only thing content marketing is good for is as an alternative to direct marketing.

## **Content Marketing Is Not Supercharged Campaign Marketing**

The sum of all of this is that content marketing is NOT supercharged campaign marketing. It is not an approach that is meant to supplant direct campaign based marketing and advertising. It is an approach that makes the entire approach of marketing better.

You've seen the definition from CMI before that describes “content marketing” as “owning the media as opposed to renting it.” “Owned” is the key word in that sentence. Because what it suggests is that the content has a purpose to draw in a subscribed audience. And, here's the key: if content marketing is to provide ANY value to the business it MUST create a subscribed, engaged audience. If it doesn't, then the content is worthless.

This is what's at the heart of the frustration. Our content – the stuff we churn out day after day after day – is simply about high consumption, and not about driving the result of a subscribed engaged audience. This is the critical difference. **Content Marketing isn't about the content. Content Marketing is about the audience. The audience is the value.**

## WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

*“Tell me how you measure me and I will tell you how I will behave. If you measure me in an illogical way... do not complain about illogical behavior.”*  
—Eliyahu Goldratt

### THE NEW BOSS – SAME AS THE OLD BOSS

In our experience, there is no shortage of innovative ideas in companies. However, a huge wealth of ideas never gets a chance to be expressed.

Leadership in companies often talks the talk of innovation, but rarely walk the walk. A great example of this comes from the world of PR Agencies. We all know that for the last 10 years, the PR Agency business has been under a fundamental disruption.

One senior manager in one of the largest PR Agencies in the world recently told us:

*“We often have all-hands meetings where senior management gives a very inspirational speech, about how we must be innovative and deliver new content marketing, and strategic social media solutions to our clients. And then, once the speech is over, we all go back to our cubes and try to get reporters on the phone to get coverage for our clients.”*

Companies want their marketers to be innovative – you know as long as they can prove ROI on that innovative new thing they want to try.

But there is another miscommunication here as well.

### Starting a Stopping List

At the end of almost every advisory session that I do – after the group has spent the entire day talking about either the launch of a new content initiative or the creation of a centralized, strategic content function in the business – a funny thing happens.

Someone (sometimes it's me, but most of the time it's someone who has been quiet for much of the meeting) says something like this:

“Um, we should probably align our expectations with reality.”

The room goes quiet. Heads nod. The realization sets in: This is going to be hard. Real people are going to have to DO all this stuff. As the heads nod, the inevitable objections arise:

- “We still have to support the sales guys with the materials they need.”
- “We still have to publish those four customer newsletters every week.”
- “We still have to update the customer-resource website.”
- “We still have to launch that new-product website next quarter.”

Having watched groups go through this arc of realization over and over, I start these sessions – even before we get to the new initiative – by asking about all the things that the content team is doing. Then I ask why they do each thing, and we list all the juicy reasons.

At the end of the day, when the heads nod, I trot out their list and ask, “Which of these things can you stop doing?” People look at each other. Uncomfortable laughter. “None of it. Senior management will want us to keep doing it all.”

The business case we have to build now isn't why we should do the new thing. It's why we should stop doing the old thing.

As business professor Michael Porter famously says, “The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.” Whenever we tackle a new content initiative – a blog, a resource center, a customer help publication – one of the worst outcomes is to avoid addressing what we're going to stop doing.

So when you find yourself putting together content objectives that will result in to-do lists, take the time to create a to-stop-doing list. How about the newsletter that goes to 20,000 customers who don't read it? How about the resource center that no one uses?

Before you start something new, start a stopping list.

But when you ARE ready to start... Remember...

***Content marketing is a strategic business activity that marketers perform.***

Whether your company has a marketing army of one or a 100, setting and achieving shared goals should serve as the core of your ongoing success.

However, it's critical to understand one way that marketing differs from many business or marketing activities: *It is not a campaign.* Each and every content marketing initiative you embark upon should be designed to operate continuously, over the long term, rather than terminating at any set point.

In this, content marketing is much more like developing a product than running a campaign. In time, content marketing will produce assets that help you to achieve *campaign-oriented goals*. But, if you view content as simply an alternate format for producing direct marketing collateral, you'll lose out on 90% of its potential to drive value for your business.

**Build goals around your ideas, not your assets**

Content is a different type of marketing investment: It doesn't just create campaign assets – it creates *ideas*, some of which can exist for long periods of time and may increase in value *over time*.

Thus, the primary question you should answer when developing a strategic plan and establishing your over-arching content marketing goals is:

**How do we create business value from an *idea* of content?**

*How can this initiative provide multiple lines of value to the business, over time?*

You will truly only be able to answer the big question after you have assembled the rest of your strategy. Until then, you are either working from a business mandate, or a hypothetical guess.

Start by creating a **content marketing mission**, which includes defining multiple goals that will support your program. Ultimately, the content marketing mission you create should answer four fundamental questions:

- **What are your business goals** (i.e., the results we expect to achieve through content marketing)?
- **To whom can you deliver value in order to satisfy these goals** (i.e., the audience we will target)?
- **What is the valuable content experience** (independent of the products/services you offer) you will deliver at the particular stage of our customer's journey?

- **How is your voice/value unique** (i.e., what is your "content tilt" – i.e., the unique content experience that only you can provide)?

How do you define your goals? You will likely discover is that, to deliver against multiple goals, you will need to monetize the *ideas behind your assets* – not the digital content assets themselves. For example, let's take the simplest form of owned media – the blog. It is not any one individual blog post that will provide the multiple lines of strategic value. It is the fact that people subscribe to the blog more broadly (the bigger idea) that enables you to deliver that value. Here are three types of goals:

- **Campaign goals** may be met because subscribers actually turn into leads more readily, or they purchase more, or go through your sales process faster.
- **Cost savings goals** may actually precede the campaign goals and come from the rich data generated by an owned media platform. You may start to understand which paid campaigns actually generate the highest quality prospects, creating a more effective paid media strategy.
- **Business value** may come from actually monetizing physical events. Just look at companies like Hubspot or Salesforce.com and how they have monetized their marketing events by offering paid sponsorship opportunities.

In short: different kinds of value (or achieved goals) can be delivered from multiple vantage points of a content marketing operation – but only if your mission is focused on a central idea that unifies all your distinct content goals.

### **Conclusion – The Future of Marketing Isn't Automated**

Marketing practitioners have largely taken the term "marketing automation" literally. As a result, they've automated a process that should instead be *augmented* with valuable content. Content Marketing isn't a replacement for marketing – it is an evolution, an augmentation to a more holistic customer experience strategy. Thus, the answer is never "more", it is always "more valuable". Rather than using marketing as a fancy and expensive content gun – blasting out every available message in the hopes that some of it sticks – successful marketing teams of today, and the immediate future will be those that actively utilize a smart, content strategy to reduce the amount of output, and increase the valuable experiences being created.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert helps marketers become stellar storytellers.

For more than 20 years, Robert has been helping marketers tell their story more effectively through digital media. Over the last five years, Robert has worked with more than 500 companies of all sizes, including 15 of the Fortune 100. He's provided strategic marketing advice and counsel global brands such as Capital One, Dell, Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard, Microsoft, The Bill Melinda Gates Foundation and UPS. Robert is currently the Chief Strategy Advisor for the Content Marketing Institute.



for  
&

Robert's second book – Experiences: The Seventh Era of Marketing has been called a “treatise, and a call to arms for marketers to lead business innovation in the 21st century.” His first book, Managing Content Marketing, spent two weeks as a top ten marketing book on Amazon.com and is generally considered to be the “owners manual” of the Content Marketing process.

Robert is also the co-host of the podcast PNR's This Old Marketing, frequently a top 20 marketing podcast on iTunes, with more than 50,000 monthly downloads across 100 countries, and consistently one of the top rated marketing podcasts.

In addition to consulting, Robert is a frequent keynote speaker, host and workshop facilitator, advising top professionals in the successful strategy of content marketing and Web site management. Robert is, and has been, widely quoted worldwide in the press, including publications such as The Guardian, Wall Street Journal, Wired, CBS Interactive and BusinessWeek.

## A SPECIAL OFFER

If you've gotten this far, perhaps you'd like to go a bit further.

Let us know if you'd like us to come in and do an advisory or education for your team or your executives. Let's convince them of the change, and rebuild the business case together.

**Contact:**

By Email: [info@thecontentadvisory.net](mailto:info@thecontentadvisory.net)

Web Form (if you like those better): <http://thecontentadvisory.net/contact-us/>

Phone: 323-230-0243