

Part

The Content Rules

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The Case for Content

About a year or so ago, Ann was thinking of buying a digital camera to take on a trip to Armenia. She's not an expert photographer, so she didn't need anything with bells and whistles. She merely wanted something as slim and light as an ATM card to slip in her pocket (and cheap, too, in case it fell out). She wanted it to do nothing more than quickly and easily record the memories she would make there.

The problem, of course, wasn't that she couldn't find something to fit the bill. Rather, she couldn't decide from among the array of choices. Each of the major camera makers (Canon, Kodak, Sony, Nikon, Pentax, and so on) had a product that was suitable. So which was the right camera for her?

A few years ago, she might have flipped through a back issue of *Consumer Reports* for some advice or consulted a buying guide. But this time, she started her search online, consulting the camera makers' own websites to compare features and read reviews.

She also sought advice from friends and followers on social networks such as Twitter. Somewhere along the way, her search caught the attention of Kodak's then-chief marketing officer (CMO), Jeffrey Hayzlett, whose team monitors Twitter for queries such as Ann's. Jeffrey subsequently reached out to Ann directly on Twitter to suggest his company's own point-and-shoot pipsqueak, the EasyShare. Oh, and if she had any unanswered queries about point-and-shoot products, Jeffrey added, ask away!

It's cool that the CMO of a \$7.6 billion company reached out to a single consumer. But what's really going on isn't just cool; it's a major shift in how companies are marketing themselves online. Kodak might be on Twitter, but it and other companies are also creating blogs, publishing podcasts and webinars, launching Facebook pages, and more. Kodak knows that it doesn't have to wait for *Consumer Reports* to review its latest point-and-shoot; it can publish the specs itself and help customers come to Kodak.

Sears knows this, too, which is why in early 2010 it launched the Sears Yard Guru (www.searsyardguru.com) to help would-be buyers of lawn mowers narrow their search according to their own yard's size and terrain. So does industrial equipment auctioneer Ritchie Bros. Auctioneers, which publishes and maintains RitchieWiki (www.ritchiewiki.com) to share information about heavy equipment. And MC² (www.mc-2.com), an exhibit and event marketing company that churns out blogs, e-books, and white papers. And Landon Pollack, who launched his nonprofit StubbyDog (www.stubbydog.org) as an online magazine with a mission: to rebrand the much-maligned American pit bull terrier.

What's up with that? Why are companies like Kodak and Sears and Ritchie Bros., or any of those profiled in this book, bothering to invest so much in online content? Because it's both efficient and increasingly imperative that companies create online content as a cornerstone of their marketing—for three reasons:

- 1.** The notion of marketing to your customers by interrupting them repeatedly with advertising or other marketing messages is simply not enough anymore. Creating brand awareness through buying mass media or begging some attention from the newspapers, magazines, or other media that cover your market is selling your brand short.

In other words, the rules have changed. David Meerman Scott explained this first and best in his seminal book *The New Rules of Marketing & PR*: “Prior to the web, organizations had only two significant choices to attract attention: buy expensive advertising or get third-party ink from the media. But the web has changed the rules.”

- 2.** *Customer behavior and expectations are shifting.* Ann's approach to buying a point-and-shoot digital camera was

neither unusual nor unique; you've probably done similar research for your own buying decisions. Likewise, your potential customers are going online to search for information about the stuff you sell: everything from lawn mowers to cameras to consulting services to circuit-board solder paste to what band to go see on a Friday night.

Your customers read blogs, they google their purchases, and they query followers on Twitter or friends on Facebook. They are always educating themselves by researching products online before making purchases.

Overwhelmingly, consumers depend on search engines to help them shop online, writes Debra Miller on the Compete.com blog about a February 2010 study of how shoppers buy. "Three out of five shoppers said that they always or often use search engines when shopping online," reports Miller. "More consumers use search engines than they do coupon sites, retailer e-mails, consumer reviews, or shopping comparison sites." (See Figure 1.1.)

This means, of course, that your key to igniting sales is to create online content and optimize it so that it appears on the first page of search results when your customers search for you or the products or services you sell.

3. *Everyone is the media. Everyone is a publisher.* Technology has enabled connections. There is no longer a high barrier to

How frequently do you use the following tools when shopping online? Top Tow Box

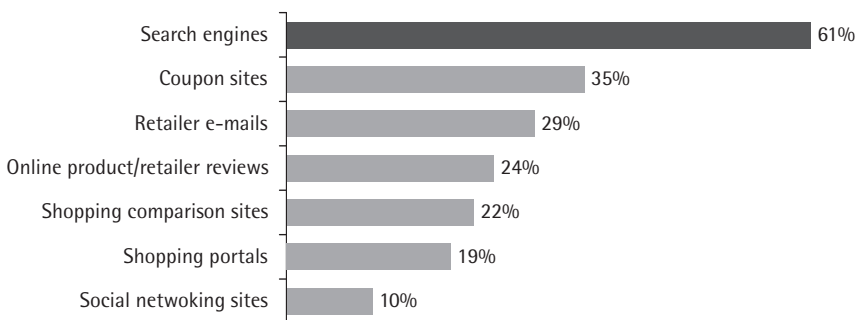


FIGURE 1.1 Research Tools for Online Shoppers

Source: <http://blog.compete.com/2010/02/22/online-shopper-intelligence-study-released>

publishing online. The ease and low cost of publishing via blogs, videos, podcasts, forums, and social networks such as Twitter and Facebook mean that businesses can reach their customers directly with relatively little cost. The idea of publishing material to attract a certain audience isn't reserved for an elite few who can afford the printing and distribution costs. "As brands, we become media," says Brian Solis, author of *Engage* (John Wiley & Sons, 2010). In other words, *you* are a publisher; *you* are the media.

What that really means is that you can reach your potential buyers directly. And, of course, they can speak directly to you as well. You now have the ability to engage in direct conversation.

What Is Content, and What Can It Do for You?

So what is content, exactly?

Content is a broad term that refers to anything created and uploaded to a website: the words, images, tools, and other things that reside there. All of the pages of your website, then, are content: the home page, the About Us page, the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) page, the product information pages, and so on. All of the things you create as part of those pages or as part of your marketing—your videos, blogs, photographs, webinars, white papers, e-books, podcasts, and so on—are content, too. And finally, all of the things you publish at outposts that are off of your own site—your Facebook page, your Twitter stream, your LinkedIn group page, for example—are forms of content.¹

Obviously, you don't have to publish through all of those channels to have a noticeable online presence. As you'll see with the

¹This is probably a good time to make a distinction between content and copywriting. The two are often confused, but web content isn't the same thing as copywriting. Copywriting is about using words to promote through advertising, sales collateral, brochures, or other marketing messages that interrupt—like radio or television advertising or direct mail. (Confusing things further, "copy" was used in the newsrooms Ann worked in to refer to news articles and other content prior to editing and printing—but that's a whole other story.)

companies we profile, your online content can take countless forms, depending on various factors: the needs and preferences of your audience, your goals, your company's expertise and brand, as well as available time, talent, and budget.

You can use the concepts in this book to infuse all of your web content with energy, life, purpose, and value. But this book maintains a specific focus on how to create content for marketing: creating and sharing relevant, valuable information that attracts people to you and creates trust, credibility, and authority (among other things) for your business and that ultimately converts visitors and browsers into buyers.

That's precisely the point of creating killer content—to convert browsers into buyers and customers into regulars or (better yet) rabid fans, ambassadors, and advocates. You do that by deepening your relationship with them, over time; by repeatedly and consistently creating content they care about and want to share freely with their friends or colleagues; and by encouraging them to engage with you and to sign up for things you publish (for example, an e-mail newsletter or a webinar) or to download a white paper or an e-book.

“The one who has the more engaging content wins, because frequent and regular contact builds a relationship,” one offers lots of opportunities for conversion, says Joe Pulizzi, author (with Newt Barrett) of *Get Content, Get Customers* (McGraw-Hill, 2009). “Advertising is a luxury,” Joe says, “but content is survival.”

Done right, the content you create will position your company not as just a seller of stuff, but as a reliable source of information. And its benefits compound, adds social media strategy consultant Jay Baer, who calls content an *information annuity*. (Don't you love that phrase?) Likewise, Marcus Sheridan of River Pools and Spas calls content “the ultimate gift that keeps on giving.” (More on Marcus and River Pools in a minute.)

Unlike other kinds of marketing, content marketing “doesn't have an expiration date,” Jay says. What you create online will be searchable indefinitely. “It generates web traffic (via search and social media linkages) and helps remove purchase impediments every day of every month. Your potential customers have questions about your company, your products, your services, your competitors. Creating

and propagating smart, optimized content that succinctly answers those questions is the most direct line to sales and loyalty.”²

Specifically, creating content as a cornerstone of your marketing can:

- ◆ Attract customers.
- ◆ Educate your buyers about a purchase they are considering.
- ◆ Overcome resistance or address objections.
- ◆ Establish your credibility, trust, and authority in your industry.
- ◆ Tell your story.
- ◆ Build buzz via social networks.
- ◆ Build a base of fans and inspire customers to love you.
- ◆ Inspire impulse buys.

Does it seem weird to talk about your marketing as *inspiring*, *credible*, or *trustworthy*, or as *telling a good story*? Does it seem radical? Does it make you a bit skeptical and nervous all at once? If so, why?

Perhaps such descriptors are more often applied to other realms—to a favorite magazine or newspaper, or maybe even to a friend—rather than to marketing. But why not steer your marketing to another level? Why not create value? Why not provide your customers with a steady flow of high-value content that, as Len Stein, marketer and founder of New York’s Visibility Public Relations describes it, is “packed with utility, seeded with inspiration, and that is honestly empathetic”? “Anything less will not suffice in a world where consumers can simply click away or spin around and mount a Web-wide counterattack on brands that refuse to walk their talk,” says Len.³

In other words, create awesome stuff! And then use what you create as the foundation for meaningful conversations to engage with your customers. Regard your content as something *more*, as something other than just words and images on a page—as an extension

²www.convinceandconvert.com/convinceconvert-news/why-content-marketing-matters-to-me-and-should-to-you.

³“Give the Brand a Personality,” *MediaPost Blogs*, www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art_aid=129043.

of your brand. Just as a person is more than flesh and bones and hair and teeth, good content, too, is more than text and graphics and video. It's an embodiment of your brand. It's designed to inspire people to read more, view more, or get to know and love your company a little more. Good content can quickly become the soul of your brand to the online world.

Web content allows your visitors to get involved—to comment, share, engage, and *click here*. As Arianna Huffington said during her keynote speech at a MarketingProfs event in Arizona in late 2008, “If you are consuming old media, you are consuming it on your couch. If you are consuming new media, you are consuming it on your horse.”

What Arianna meant was that online content both invites and demands that its participants be engaged, involved, and active—always moving forward. Old media, like TV and other forms of broadcast, just ask that we passively sit and watch.

Content drives conversations. Conversation engages your customers. Engaging with people is how your company will survive and thrive in this newly social world. In other words, online content is a powerful envoy for your business, with an ability to stir up interest, further engagement, and invite connection. And that's when things get interesting.

Good Content as a Competitive Advantage

Marcus Sheridan is one of three owners of River Pools and Spa in Warsaw, Virginia. The company installs swimming pools and hot tubs throughout Maryland and Virginia. Since joining the business in 2002, Marcus has spearheaded tremendous growth at the company. Despite years of record rainfall, a housing slump, and the slacker economy, River Pools and Spas continues to grow: in 2009, it sold more fiberglass pools than any other company in the United States, where it's among the top 5 percent of all in-ground pool companies.

A big reason for that, Marcus says, is his company's approach to business. “I used to see my company as a ‘pool company.’ [We] installed lots of swimming pools and therefore we were a pool company.”

“In hindsight, though, this mentality was all wrong,” he says. “Today, I see my business as a content marketing company. In other

words, my entire goal is to give more valuable, helpful, and remarkable content to consumers than anyone else in my field, which will in turn lead to more sales.”

Through a steady stream of blog posts and videos (the company publishes one to three a week) and an e-book on the subject of “how to buy a pool” (with the subtext “without getting ripped off”), Marcus set out to create the most educational and informative swimming pool website on the Internet.

“I want our website to be an encyclopedia of pool buying,” he says, not unlike a business trade magazine publisher might seek to have similar authority in any given industry. “I want someone with a question to come to our site and get an answer by reading it or watching it.”

The swimming pool industry is dominated by larger manufacturers, which makes it difficult for a small, young company like the nine-year-old River Pools and Spas to compete online for general search terms like *swimming pool* or *in-ground pool*. (When a potential customer searches for swimming pool information online using such terms, Google is more likely to return results for one of the big guys, not a small outfit like River Pools and Spas.)

So, instead, Marcus focuses on lower-volume, long-tail search terms to include in his website content—more specific search phrases that usually consist of three or more keywords. Such phrases may generate low volumes of searches and traffic compared with short-tail, or more generic, search terms, but they take searchers to sites with specific, deep content that closely matches what the searcher is looking for. Such an approach is akin to “not hitting a home run every time, but if you hit enough doubles and triples, you can win the game,” Marcus says.

See Figure 1.2 for a graphic representation of a long-tail keyword search.

“Most people searching online are sophisticated,” Marcus says. Most are not searching for just *pools*, as they’ve probably already done some preliminary research and narrowed their choices. “I put myself in the mind of the consumer and think, ‘What questions do I have unanswered?’” Marcus focuses on creating long-tail content that addresses those questions, creating blog posts and videos about fiberglass pool problems, fiberglass pool costs, and how to choose

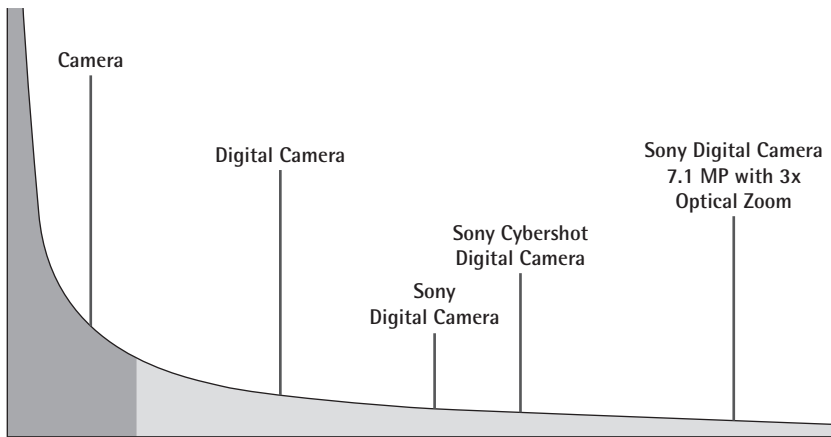


FIGURE 1.2 Long-Tail Keyword Search

Source: www.searchenginepartner.com/Latest-SEO-News/seo-trends-utilysing-lsi-and-the-long-tail.html

your pool contractor. His content educates his customers about what to look for in a manufacturer and installer of pools—the hidden costs, the budgeting process, or, as Marcus says, “the good, the bad, and the ugly of in-ground pools.”

“I point out the ugly, when others only talk about the good,” he says.

Marcus includes keywords and search terms in a meaningful way on his blog—not in an annoying, obvious way that gets in the way of the content itself. In the same way, you can include keywords you might be targeting, but in a natural, conversational manner. Don’t make yourself look like a tool or, worse, clueless by stuffing your content full of keywords without providing context and value.

Search engines love people like Marcus; those who produce content such as keyword-rich YouTube videos, blog posts, articles, and so on, consistently show up on the first page of search results for their targeted keywords. But Marcus sees the content he produces as a

competitive advantage that expands and deepens his relationships with would-be customers. In other words, his customers might find him organically through search, but they do business with him because of his willingness to talk about problems and pitfalls to avoid, which builds trust, credibility, and, ultimately, rabid fan loyalty.

Marcus calls the content he produces “the ultimate gift that keeps on giving” at every stage of a pool buyer’s journey. When potential buyers are researching pool-buying options, content brings them to the River Pools and Spas site and piques their interest. When buyers are narrowing their choices, River Pools and Spas’ content gives them the skinny on their alternatives and helps them evaluate considerations. And after the purchase, Marcus fosters rabid fan love and customer loyalty by continuing to be a resource for pool owners, with blog posts such as “Why do I have air bubbles in my pool? A troubleshooting guide.”

That model—creating content that meets a buyer’s needs throughout the journey toward purchase and fostering loyalty after the fact—is, not coincidentally, the same approach as that of countless other companies (from a Pilates studio to a solder paste company to Kodak and more) that you’ll read about here.

“The more valuable the information you can give to others, the more you will become viewed as an expert and therefore gain their trust,” Marcus says. “The person with the abundance mentality wins.”