Countdown to Content Excellence

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The 7 Secrets of Super-Successful Content Creation Teams

We know what content is and why we should create it. But do we know enough about how?

In an age when our prospects' attention has become precious, we know that we have to create compelling content to earn that attention and win their trust.

Most of us have strong opinions on what kinds of content—from blog posts to mobile apps— are most important for our respective audiences. (If you're looking for fresh ideas, consider the Content Marketing Playbook: 24 Epic Ideas for Connecting with Your Customers.)

But the how remains problematic. How do enterprises consistently create quality content that's relevant to their customers needs—and to the needs of their own bottom lines?

Through observation of clients and colleagues, I've long suspected the answer: enterprises with successful content programs are those that have conscientiously formed, managed, and rewarded teams of people capable of working collaboratively toward common content goals.

There's nothing especially controversial about good teams doing good work. But if my premise is true, it begs new questions: What distinguishes great teams from mediocre ones? What are the most successful teams doing, or doing well, that less successful teams are not? What can all enterprises learn from their most exceptional peers?

To get the answers, I interviewed a set of content superstars representing a wide range of industries, from oil and gas to professional services, to tap their ideas, opinions, and proven practices. Their insights, reinforced with my own experiences in high tech, healthcare, B2B services, and more, form the core of this ebook.

Inside, you'll find useful ideas complemented by real-life stories. Some of the suggestions seem fairly straightforward, while others might appear downright transgressive. Whether conventional or controversial, however, all these have worked for other content marketers. Now I hope that they will work for you as well!
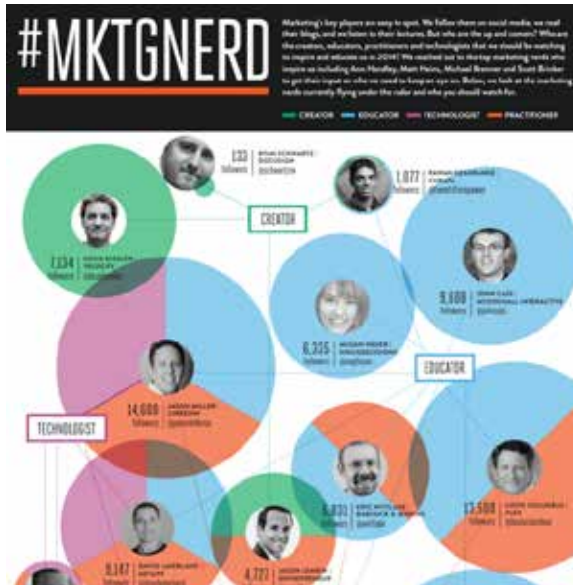
Jonathan Kranz
Kranz Communications

7

Secure high-level support

Today, most marketers have at least some understanding of what "content" means and why it's important.

But outside of marketing, in operations and finance, for example, "content marketing" often remains obscure or misunderstood, a "soft" communications effort with ambiguous rewards.

Yet extra-marketing support, from executives at the highest level, is essential for two reasons:

1 By definition, true content marketing draws on the substance of what an organization does. You need input and engagement from inside experts—such as engineers, consultants, and product managers—in order to create meaningful content.

2 Content marketing is a long game. You need buy-in from colleagues who are able to look beyond imme-diate metrics to appreciate value built and sustained over time.

At Lattice Engines, one of the keys to Amanda Maksymiw's success is her company's commitment; they don't see content marketing as another casual marketing effort, but as a core strategy for educating a market that has the potential to be its customer base.

Content Team Challenge #7

Who are your champions?

Where, in your organization, will you find the support you need to build an effective content team?

Who will stand by you?

"It's important to be willing to experiment and play with things."

—Amanda Maksymiw

Hint Huddle

How do you build support?

By articulating the connection between content marketing and a crucial business objective. In Maksymiw's case, that objective is "education." Yours might be thought-leadership, partnership/channel construction, lead generation, sales enablement, etc. Whatever it is, make it crystal clear to everyone in your organization.

BACKGROUND

Company

Lattice Engines, a creator of data-driven applications for predictive marketing and sales, with approximately 160 employees in offices across the U.S.A.

Title

Senior Content Marketing Manager

Content Types

Videos, blogs, white papers, ebooks, infographics, surveys/reports, case studies, webinars, customer-focused live events

Core Story

Embracing a new market

At Lattice, executive support drives content marketing. When Amanda came on board in 2012, the company was expanding the market for its predictive analytics tool from sales enablement to marketing, where the technology's ability to integrate thousands of data sources make it a powerful agent for lead scoring.

For Amanda, the marching orders were clear. "It all boils down," she says, "to brand awareness, demand generation, and most of all, education." Like many effective content marketers, Amanda looks for talent with the "ability to tell a clear story" who are able to brainstorm new content ideas. She takes a hands-on approach throughout the process. "I get very involved in the freelancers' work—I create outlines, review drafts, and manage revisions back and forth between the subject matter experts and their assigned writers."

Featured Content

"Marketing nerds"

One of Amanda's content strategies is to work closely with "name brand" influencers, consultants or analysts with an audience matched to Lattice's market. In 2013-2014, her company honored its influencers, and expanded their reach, through the "Marketing Nerd Program" rolled out in support of the Eloqua Experience Event. Lattice began by posting its list of favorite marketing "nerds," inviting its audience to explain why they were marketing nerds via the hashtag, #MKTGnerd. The best submissions (out of more than 200 overall) won nerd kits, complete with various gadgets and t-shirts. The Lattice team built the company's booth around the theme, and created an infographic to distribute after the event, plus a music video inspired by "Blurred Lines," that they called, "Blurred Leads."

"Marketing Nerds" won the SiriusDecisions Influencer Program of the Year Award in 2014. Better yet, Lattice surpassed its conference lead scanning and demo goals, and generated 36 late-stage opportunities leading to nine closed deals to date.

AMANDA'S TOP 3 CONTENT TEAM TIPS

1 **Clarity!** Amanda says, "It's very difficult to succeed with ad hoc efforts. You need to be clear about what you want to achieve with content marketing."

2 **Look beyond your box.** "Be willing to experiment and play with things. I follow companies outside the tech space to look for new ideas."

3 **Connect content strategy to marketing goals.** "We work closely with the marketing team to make sure everything is moving in the right direction together."

6

Align everyone around one clear mission

Traditional media outlets articulate their editorial platforms: what they stand for, their particular perspectives. Whether you share their viewpoints or not, on any given issue, you know what to expect from either Fox News or The Daily Show. Each outlet has created a clear set of expectations for its respective audience.

Your content mission should (probably) not be as polarizing as either example, but it must be as clear. Call it your take, your angle, your spin, or your point of view, you need a mission you consistently fulfill—and everyone on the team must know exactly what that mission is.

At the Content Marketing Institute, their mission is to "advance the practice of content marketing for enterprise marketers." By applying this standard, everyone knows what kinds of content would, or would not, be appropriate to develop.

Comparable missions might be:

1   "Promote the effective use of digital learning tools in K-12 education."

2   "Encourage the spread of environmentally responsible lawn care methods among suburban home owners."

3   "Help parents make healthy, yet delicious, meals for their families."

4   "Share the most advanced coding practices among application developers on the Apple platform."

Content Team Challenge #6:

Does everyone understand your mission?

Distill the meaning, the purpose and the value of your content in one simple sentence:

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Joseph "JK" Kalinowski:
Applying the branding touch

As the creative director for CMI, Joseph "JK" Kalinowski is responsible for maintaining the Institute's brand standards— an especially delicate challenge given CMI's huge volume of content and the virtual nature of its workforce. Naturally, JK applies a creative approach to creative direction.

A few of his secrets

Long-term relationships

Like many directors, JK works with freelancers. But these are not ad hoc additions to his team; they're long-term collaborators. "They have seen our brand grow, not only from the outside looking in, but as part of my team," he says. "There's not a lot of hand-holding when it comes to making sure that they stay consistent with the brand."

Balance

Strict rules and fresh creativity don't often mix well. "There's always that fine line to tip-toe when it comes to creativity and brand standards," JK says. His solution is to get involved in the ideation process with Michele and the rest of the team, then pass the concept skeleton on to his talent to "let them form it as they see fit. Communication is key—I chat with them from time to time to make sure we are staying on point."

A cool trick for stock art

Few organizations can afford custom artwork for all its content. For CMI, like most companies, that means at least some dependency on stock art. But how do you incorporate generic images into your brand standards? "After toying with multiple ideas," JK says, "I had the idea of applying a distinct filter to the images to make them more 'our own.'" Through JK's filter, otherwise stock images acquire the "golden glow" that immediately brands them as CMI.

"We always ask, 'Does this advance the practice of content marketing?'"

—Michele Linn

Hint Huddle

A clear mission not only establishes what you should talk (or write or broadcast) about, but what you should not. If it's not clear what topics or points of view should be excluded from your list of project possibilities, then your mission isn't sharp enough.

BACKGROUND

Company

Content Marketing Institute (CMI)

Title

Vice President, Content

Team Composition: 28 full-timers, an editorial team of 9, and more than 30 freelancers

Content Types

Blog, print magazine, podcasts, video, ebooks/whitepapers, in-person events, graphs, posters, research reports, virtual conferences, online training programs

Core Story

Spreading the content marketing message

When your organization is the leading voice for content marketing worldwide, it's no surprise that you create a lot of content. For Michele, the challenge is an enviable one of abundance, not scarcity. "We have content coming out of our ears," she says.

The key to success is a clear mission focused on a specific audience. "When we evaluate content," Michele says, "we always ask, 'Does this advance the practice of content marketing for enterprise marketers?' At CMI, every tactic has its own goal. We rarely pursue an idea because it would be cool to do; we do things because there's a business reason—an opportunity for impact."

Because CMI is structured as a virtual company in which every employee works from home, Michele looks for talent who can work independently and who "want to learn, want

to try new things." She's currently evaluating technology that can help CMI collaborate and monitor progress through one workflow/project management system. "Our company is small, yet project management can be a challenge for us," Michele notes. "I'm sure it's exacerbated in the large corporations of the world with hundreds of content team members."

Featured Content

Every year, CMI invests in a vast survey of content marketers to produce reports on "benchmarks, budgets and trends" in the B2B and the B2C spaces. The fruit of this research becomes five different core reports released annually in October through December, and further spin-off reports for various industries and sectors released the following January through April.

Why the huge investment? "When I look at one of our main goals, converting people to email subscribers, I see that our research consistently performs well year after year," says Michele. "Plus, it's a great jumping-off point for other content."

MICHELE'S TOP 3 TIPS

1 **Mission awareness.** "Everyone on our team needs to understand the lens through which we create content."

2 **Customer awareness.** "We're not talking to content marketers in general; we're talking specifically to enterprise content marketers, both the practitioners and executive leadership."

3 **Prioritized topics.** "You need clear topic priorities that organize the way you tell your story, and help you plan ways to re-purpose your content."

5

Build your team in concentric rings

Creating good content is not cheap. Even the largest enterprises must be mindful of budget, carefully balancing their resources against their requirements.

But regardless of scale, organizations with successful content programs almost always share a common characteristic: their content teams are usually made of three parts or "rings."

1   **Full-timers:** In the center of the team, a small set of full-time marketing staff establish editorial direction, manage projects, monitor progress, supervise talent, and report to executives. Here, a small size can be a big advantage—it's much easier to maintain focus and creative control when the number of decision makers is kept to a minimum.

2   **Extra-marketing staffers**: These are the in-house non-marketing, non-communication professionals who contribute expertise, stories, insights, examples, and ideas—the substance of your content. A larger pool is better, but you can anticipate that a smaller core will emerge as the most frequent and capable contributors.

3   **Outside support:** You may be able to hire a writer, an editor or even a videographer, but chances are, to execute your content mission you'll want to develop a broad network of freelance talent—writers, photographers, designers, illustrators, etc.—who can fulfill your content projects as needed, without imposing unnecessary demands on your overhead.

Content Team Challenge #5:

Does your team have the right mix of capabilities?

Who's available to propose and manage content assignments (the full-time core); to contribute stories and ideas (your middle ring of colleagues); and to create the content itself (some staffers backed with outside consultants and freelancers)?

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"I'm incredibly lucky to have so many talented subject matter experts at my fingertips."

—Martha Gallagher

BACKGROUND

Company

Radius, a global services and software company that helps businesses expand into foreign markets.

Title

Senior Manager, Content Marketing & Communications

Team Composition: 7 marketing pros, dozens of internal SMEs, an ecosystem of freelancers

Content Types

Blogs, ebooks, webinars, SlideShares, case studies, videos

Core Story

Managing a merger

In April 2014, High Street Partners merged with its chief competitor, Nair & Co., to become Radius, exploding from 220 people to 700+ with offices in the U.S., Asia, and Europe. In the immediate aftermath, Martha Gallagher had just a matter of weeks to rebrand the content the previous companies had created. But on the plus side, she had access to more than 45 additional advisors with expertise in a wide range of industries and business topics.

"I'm incredibly lucky to have so many talented subject matter experts at my fingertips,"Martha says. Yet managing them can be quite a challenge, given the volume of work and the scope of Radius' ambitions. Over time, Martha has constructed a methodology in which she interviews SMEs to solicit ideas, and assigns the resulting concepts to appropriate freelancers within her ecosystem of vendors. Recently, Radius created a new position of Managing Editor to expand its content creation. Now Martha's biggest obstacle "is developing a more formal system and process that would help us scale."

Featured Content

"Winning globally: A playbook for international expansion teams"

Radius has decided to take the idea of "pillar content" (see tip #3) to the extreme: a multi-chapter ebook, under the lead of Larry Harding, vice chairman and executive director for corporate development, that articulates every step of the international expansion process and maps each step to the internal teams—finance, human resources, legal, etc.—responsible for their fulfillment.

Released in stages, each chapter of Winning Globally has become the foundation for webinars, SlideShare decks, and blog posts. "Releasing it chapter by chapter is an experiment," Martha says, that allows Radius to build and sustain a reputation for thought leadership over time.

MARTHA'S TOP 3 CONTENT TEAM TIPS

1 **Make it easy:** SMEs are busy, and their time is billable, so Martha takes pains to reduce their workloads. She interviews them to identify their areas of interest and generate ideas, then hires ghostwriters to create the resulting content.

2 **Hire journalists:** "They love to write, they're really good researchers, and they have great interviewing skills," Martha says.

3 **Executive guidance:** Given the number of experts and the volume of potential work, leadership is crucial. Martha has created a core content team at the executive level whose mandate is to prioritize the company's content efforts based on mission, strategy, and objectives.

Hint Huddle

Sometimes the middle ring is the most challenging to cultivate. After all, the core is made of true believers, and the outer ring has, at the very least, a mercenary interest in cooperation. But your non-marketing colleagues may resent content requests as an intrusion upon their other duties. A suggestion: don't worry about winning over everyone at once. Instead, find one or two champions and give them a hearty helping of spotlight love. When their colleagues see (read: envy) all the attention they're getting, they're far more likely to find an interest in collaborating with you.

4

Plan ahead for "spontaneous" creativity

Creativity may feel like magic, but in reality, it's the consequence of many reasonable decisions, most of them made well in advance of the "magic" act. As the leader of a content team, you want to build and maintain a context, a combination of attitudes and work practices, that make spontaneous creativity a more likely possibility.

You can encourage creativity by:

Setting clear goals—then stepping back: As Tim Washer suggests in his case study, most creative people do their best work when they have some elbow room and are not micromanaged.

Entertaining the odd: Innovative ideas will seem weird almost by definition—after all, if it's really new, you haven't seen or heard it before. Listen to your discomfort, but don't obey it. Remember, most people thought Walt Disney's theme park idea was crazy, simply because they hadn't seen anything like it before.

Restraining the naysayers: You know who they are. While they may have meaningful input on content goals, they're probably not the right people to review content execution because they'll always be the first to throw wet blankets on creative fires.

Accepting little failures: Not everything is going to work. But it's better to accept the occasional failure as the price of innovative content, than impose a climate of fear that chills creativity.

Looking beyond: Too often, marketers looking for ideas confine their vision to their own industry. Look beyond it to other fields, other disciplines, other industries. Many of the best ideas come from unexpected places.

Content Team Challenge #4:

How do you encourage creativity?

Suppose you kept an "inspiration" box. What kinds of clippings, articles, pictures, books, DVDs, CDs, and other artifacts or items would you put inside it?

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> "If you don't have the right production team, it won't work, no matter how brilliant the idea is."
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> —Tim Washer

Hint Huddle

An important, and often overlooked, key to encouraging creativity is respect. In too many offices, content assignments—such as blog posts and other social media contributions—are treated as add-ons to staffers' other duties, without allowance for additional time. Piling on uncompensated work breeds resentment, not creativity. If you want people to give their best, give them the (paid) time for it.

BACKGROUND

Company

Ridiculous Media LLC, an independent video production house

Title

Founder, boss

Team Composition: Tim, plus freelancers and vendors

Content Types

Video, blog, speaking events

Core Story

Sneaking creativity into content

Tim Washer is a seriously funny man. In addition to comedy writing and performance (with a resume that includes Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, The Onion Sports Network, and Conan O'Brien), Tim offers custom video production services, through Ridiculous Media, to very large and important companies. While many content creators are content to "exceed customer expectations," Tim is dedicated to subverting them, presenting witty, deeply intelligent productions that defy convention—and achieve remarkably high response rates.

"You should push things a bit," says Tim. "Sometimes, that means working outside the organization." Tim believes the best work comes from small teams who are free to execute bold ideas as long as they conform to the client's ethical guidelines and defined marketing objectives. In Tim's world, attitude is every bit as important as storytelling skill. Tim cites John Cleese of Monty Python, "If there's just one person in the room who expresses doubt, the whole project will be shut down. If you don't have the right production team, it won't work, no matter how brilliant the idea is."

Featured Content

The fourth way to say "I love you"—The Cisco ASR 9000 router

A router is a router, and if one followed the traditional route of B2B marketing communications, there's little more to say beyond a bulleted list of features and functions. But Tim took advantage of a launch date within kissing reach of Valentine's Day, and within his video, packaged the Cisco ASR 9000 router as the "ultimate expression of everlasting affection."

Yes, like bonbons in a box, all the key features are there: up to 6.4 terabits per second, 400 GBPS per slot, and 6X mobile backhaul capacity. But Tim presents these within a story rich with hearts, flowers, and swelling music, positioning the router as the surprise alternative to candy and candlelight dinners. The humor made the features memorable, and the intended audience rewarded the client by making the product promotion a YouTube sensation.

TIM'S TOP 3 CONTENT TEAM TIPS

1 **"Disrupt" the committee:** Tim believes you should keep the project committee small and limit its authority to setting the objectives. "The productions that have been breakout hits have been the ones where we've limited the approval team to only one to three people" he says. "Just tell me the marketing objectives, then let me pitch a couple of ideas, write a script, take a few notes, then shoot the thing."

2 **Look for alternative vendors:** "Approved vendors" may be very resistant to taking creative risks that might rock the boat—and sink their future prospects with the client. Look for alternatives that you can sneak inside the house through other channels, such as the client's brand or PR agency.

3 **Get a champion:** Win over a high-level authority figure first, then present the creative project to the committee together as a fait accompli.

3

Concentrate on core content

Consider the wisdom of adopting a "pillar content" strategy, in which you focus your efforts on a few core, or "pillar," pieces of content—such as ebooks, magazines, or a video series—from which many smaller pieces can cascade, like blog posts, articles, podcasts, and Tweets.

The beauty of this strategy is two-fold:

1 It gives your content plan a meaningful and cost-effective focus. Your pillar content can receive the bulk of your time and budget, without sacrificing the need for variety.

2 You can recycle core content, multiplying the value of your investments. Think of this as the "buffalo" strategy, in honor of the Plains Indians who used every part of the animal: flesh for meat, bones for tool, hides for clothes and shelter. One ebook, for example, can also become the source material for a series of blog posts, a podcast interview, an info-graphic, a webinar, etc.

Content Team Challenge #3:

What should be your core content?

Pillars stand on strong business foundations. Think of the top two or three ways you can leverage your greatest assets expertise, customer reach, product novelty) to make news-worthy content that attracts attention.

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"You don't have to hit the customer over the head with the brand."

—Ryan Petersen

BACKGROUND

Company

CDW, a provider of technology products and services for business, government, education and healthcare

Title

Senior Manager, Content Marketing

Team Composition: 7 internal editors, content agency support that includes about two dozen staffers, dozens of freelance writers and photographers

Content Types

Print magazines, content microsites, blog, videos, white papers, infographics, technology guides, enewsletters, social media, webinars, case studies, mobile apps/ebooks

Core Story

Shifting focus from products to services

As the digital landscape evolves, CDW has shifted its focus from retailing hardware and software to delivering services and solutions. This products-to-services transition is neatly mirrored by its content. More than a decade ago, CDW's primary customer communication was its print product catalogs. Through focus groups, the team learned that when product descriptions were accompanied by case studies and articles, pass-along value increased exponentially. The product catalogs became "magalogs," hybrid pieces that combined editorial and product content.

From there, full-fledged magazines were a natural development. Today, CDW publishes five magazines, each concentrating on an important customer segment: *BizTech, EdTech: Focus on K-12, EdTech: Focus on Higher Education, FedTech* (federal government audience), and *StateTech* (state and local government audience). The magazines are part of a "pillar content" strategy in which content produced for the periodicals is regularly repurposed to support the company's marketing campaigns and social media venues.

"We spotlight our customers and make them look like rock stars," Ryan says. "It shows them that we understand their issues and concerns." For Ryan, the key to success is customer empathy. "You don't have to hit the customer over the head with the brand," he says. "It's really about being useful."

Featured Content

Behind-the-scenes support for an NFL team

A few years ago, CDW assisted a pro football team with a major technology implementation within its new stadium. CDW served as one of the main IT partners, "providing solutions for the point-of-sales systems, back office servers, networking, data storage and communications," Ryan says.

BizTech featured an article, "Home Sweet Dome," that became the starting point for a fully integrated ad campaign highlighting the stadium's success. "We talked to customers who said they thought we were just a commerce website," Ryan explains. "But reading the stadium article helped opened doors—and minds—to CDW's expertise and services. It reframed how customers saw CDW."

RYAN'S TOP 3 CONTENT TEAM TIPS

1 **Common strategy:** Everyone on the team, Ryan says, "has to know what your goals and objectives are, and how your content can support that."

2 **Internal collaboration:** "Resist silos," says Ryan.

   "I think of content as a starting point; everything else amplifies it. Collaboration is key—if you create great content but no one can find it, it's a waste of time."

3 **Turn up the creativity:** "Don't be afraid of trying new things. One of the great things about content marketing is that you can always turn up the creativity to find new ways to connect with customers."

Hint Huddle

Sometimes your best secret weapon is your customers themselves. People, especially executives, love to know what their peers are thinking. Some of the most effective core content comes from transforming the results of customer surveys, annotated with insights, into reports on industry trends, plans, and best practices.

2

Create repeatable processes

Sure, rejoice in the popular one-off that creates the occasional peak in traffic, or "likes," shares, clicks, etc. But the real value of content marketing emerges over time, as a consistent stream of valued work builds trust, credibility, and authority with your target audience.

To get that consistency, you must concentrate on content tactics you can do repeatedly, resting on processes that simplify replication. Considerations for making content processes repeatable include:

Nature of expertise: Is your topic area inherently verbal or visual? Most professional services firms are best served by content tactics rooted in the written word, and depend on processes that commit ideas to paper (or scripts). But there are a wide swathe of industries—in design, architecture, and the arts, for example—that are deeply visual, and can best realize their talents through illustrations, photos, animations, etc.

Nature of talent: What is your team good at? Writing? Public speaking? Teaching? Can they use body language or voices as effective communication instruments? You want to direct natural talents to their most rewarding channels.

Nature of resources: Be ruthlessly pragmatic. A successful blog, for example, requires participation from people who can regularly commit their time to it. If you're interested in video or podcasting, you'll need, not just an investment in equipment, but preferably a dedicated space that makes repeated efforts easier.

Nature of budget: For those projects you cannot fulfill in-house, do you have the budget necessary to hire outside talent?

Nature of audience: How does your audience prefer to consume media? The things you choose to repeat should synch with your market's preference for what they want to see and read and how they want to do so.

Content Team Challenge #2:

What can you do over and over again?

Given the set of characteristics above, what two or three content tactics can you execute regularly, and what do you need to streamline their creation?

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> "I don't need you to be a great writer,
> but I need you to be a great storyteller."
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> —Ted Karczewski

Hint Huddle

There are some activities that will naturally fill you and your team with energy, and others that will drain it. Your subjective experience matters. While it may be necessary to tackle an exhausting project now and again, you will only be able to sustain those efforts you repeatedly find rewarding.

BACKGROUND

Company

Skyword, a content marketing platform and service provider headquartered in Boston, with additional offices in Pittsburgh, Palo Alto, and New York City

Title

Content Marketing Manager

9 marketing staff members; a team of freelance writers, designers, and videographers; in-house subject matter experts

Content Types

Short and long blogs, white papers, ebooks, original research, videos, social content, infographics, newsletters, webinars, one-pagers, live events

Core Story

Collaboration as method and mission

As befitting a company that produces a platform for connecting content creators and managers, Skyword sees collaboration as something more than a means to an end; for Ted and his colleagues, it's a mission, one that leads to higher volume of great content, with a whole lot less stress.

"We want to connect through real stories, and make champions of customers who have successfully executed on content," Ted says. In practice, Ted has to "assemble" these stories from a broad network of internal experts and outside freelancers. "I don't need you to be a great writer, but I need you to be a great storyteller. I'm looking for anyone who's passionate about some aspect of digital marketing. Then I work with them to help them find their own voice."

Featured Content

Competing against the big advertising periodicals

The best exemplar of Ted's collaborative approach is Skyword's flagship publication, the Content Standard. Its purpose is ambitious: "We compete against Ad Age and Adweek," says Ted.

The editorial process is a model of collective effort. Pitches can come from anywhere—internal experts, freelancers, Ted's intuitive sense of story. After matching ideas with writers "based on alignment of expertise," Ted works with the contributors to draft outlines together. First drafts go through a chain of authorities including copy and managing editors, and the CMO, who checks the pieces' fit with Skyword's overall marketing objectives. Before publication, a program manager makes last minute headline and SEO adjustments.

The most remarkable aspect of this process? From concept to execution, the entire project takes less than a dozen days; ten are typically allotted to the writing of the draft, and the editorial exchanges can be completed in one day. This, Ted insists, "is the power of managing the collaborative process in the cloud."

TED'S TOP 3 CONTENT TEAM TIPS

1 **Start small:** "It can be tempting to start out producing sixty articles a month," Ted says. "But until you put the process and system in place—onboarding the creative and refining the strategy—you won't be able to explode out the gate."

2 **Match motives:** "You can't assign projects at random. You need to spend time with stakeholders and creatives to understand what drives and motivates them. Then you can pair their interests with your objectives."

3 **Story, story, story:** Ted believes that consumers care more about the power of a given story than where it comes from."Tell a cohesive story wherever your audience may find it. Tell it consistently, amplify it, and distribute it everywhere imaginable."

1

Invest in training

It may be a cliché, but there's at least some truth to the popular claim that, "our people are our greatest asset." And nowhere is it more true than in content marketing, where expertise, talent, passion, and authenticity are absolutely essential to success.

But if your people are truly an asset, then like any asset, they must be cultivated—the more you put into them, the more you'll get out.

Content teams typically benefit from training in:

Identifying exciting content topics and matching them to appropriate tactics.

Developing general skills that can be applied to a wide range of content types, such as story telling, translating technical virtues into business and/or social benefits, and eliminating jargon.

Learning how to create specific kinds of content, such as blog posts, articles, white papers, podcasts, slide presentations, etc.

Improving interviewing skills.

Applying lessons from persona profiles to creating content.

Acquiring social media tips, tactics, and best practices.

Crafting offers and calls to action.

Because lessons learned deliver lasting returns, training is second only to hiring as the most important way you can build and improve an excellent content team.

Content Team Challenge #1:

What should your team be able to do or do better?

Dream big--list the top five things you would like your team to learn:

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"We may not be in front of our customers, but we have to think like sales people."

—Homer Starkey

Hint Huddle

Another cliché with a germ of truth: you get what you pay for. It is possible to get some form of training on just about any topic through the Internet. But nothing beats hands-on, in-person education for delivering feedback and personalized attention. If outcomes truly matter, consider making the investment in live learning.

BACKGROUND

Company

Schlumberger, the world's leading supplier of technology to customers working in the oil and gas industry worldwide

Title

Creative Director, Schlumberger Digital Marketing

Content Team Composition: 8 copywriters, 6 art directors, 6 designers, 3 media relations specialists, plus a creative director, online content manager, media relations manager, and managing editor

Content Types

Articles, animations, videos, infographics, booklets

Core Story

Content as salesmanship

"We may not be in front of our customers, but we have to think like sales people," says Homer. His team has two big objectives: create materials that engage and educate customers, and attract qualified leads online. Most of this work is done in-house, rather than with an agency. "We do a better job delivering a message," Homer says, "because we're immersed in this business every day."

Given the complexity of the subject matter and Schlumberger's preference for creating content themselves, staff training is critical. Part of the training is technical, but a good chunk of it is about establishing and reinforcing content creation skills. Schlumberger has conducted four in-house writing workshops to date, and intends to run more.

While the teaching of specific skills (such as storytelling, writing headlines and subheads, turning technical features into business benefits) is important, Homer sees as much or even greater value in the creative jolt these workshops deliver. "As they create content and synthesize lots of technical information, I want them to think about the foundations of their work. Why did they come up with a particular piece? Why did they write it

in that particular way? They need a kind of meta-cognition, to be thinking about what they're thinking about."

Featured Content

Creative analogies for a core benefit

Among its many innovations, Schlumberger offers the HiWAY flow channel fracturing technique that dramatically reduces the amount of water and proppant (material used to maintain an opening) used in hydraulic fracturing. Homer's team came up with a brilliant infographic that represents the virtue of the process simply and memorably. Example: To illustrate the volume of proppant saved, the infographic uses the analogy of the Titanic (it would fill five of them), the Washington Monument (23), and railroad trains—15,000 cars stretching 120 miles long.

"This is a typical example of our team working together: writer, designer, online specialist," says Homer. "I didn't propose it to them; they proposed it to me. This is the fruit of having confidence in our teams and trusting them to come up with different ways of getting our message across."

HOMER'S TOP 3 CONTENT TEAM TIPS

1 **Collective focus:** "Everyone understands the Schlumberger brand," Homer says. "We deal in facts, not claims, and when we say we can do something, we have to offer proof."

2 **"Q stop":** "If there's any unclear communication or evidence of poor quality, anyone can stop the job," he says. These halts, called "Q stops," empower everyone to take responsibility. "If something is off, someone will call attention to it—it won't just slide. Ninety-five percent of the time the team will resolve the issue on its own."

3 **Learning time:** "We spend a lot of time with our internal clients, listening to product champions and other key stakeholders, like our engineers."

HiWAY is a mark of Schlumberger. All rights reserved.

Conclusion

Great content doesn't come out of nowhere...

It comes out of great content creation teams.

Sure, you can map matrixes and strategize strategies, but in the end, it all comes down to people.
Do you have the team you need? And if so, is it performing as effectively as you might wish?
Use the following checklist as a gut check to assess the strengths and weaknesses of your crew:

- Do you and your team have the high-level support you need?

- Can you count on your champions to back your efforts over the long haul?

- Have you tied your content objectives to your organization's larger purpose?

- Do you have a clear content mission—and does everyone know what it is?

- Can your team use your mission as a litmus test that tells you what you should, and should not, create?

- Is your team composed of multiple "rings" for flexibility and efficiency?

- Are you able to cultivate the in-house subject matter experts you need?

- Does your business culture encourage, or stymy, creativity?

- Do your team members have the time they need to do good work?

- Can you create pillar content for the core of your content strategy?

- Are you able to recycle or reuse your content for maximum (and efficient) impact?

- Have you established repeatable processes for creating quality content?

- Does your team have all the skills they need to succeed?

- Do you have access to training that can amplify both the quality and volume of content your team can create?

I hope you've found these seven "secrets" helpful, and their accompanying case studies inspiring.
If you want to discuss ways to make your content team more effective, feel free to contact me at jonkranz@kranzcom.com.

Thank you!

Jonathan Kranz

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