

think<shift

# CONTENT MARKETING MANIFESTO

Strategies that draw a crowd & build brand value

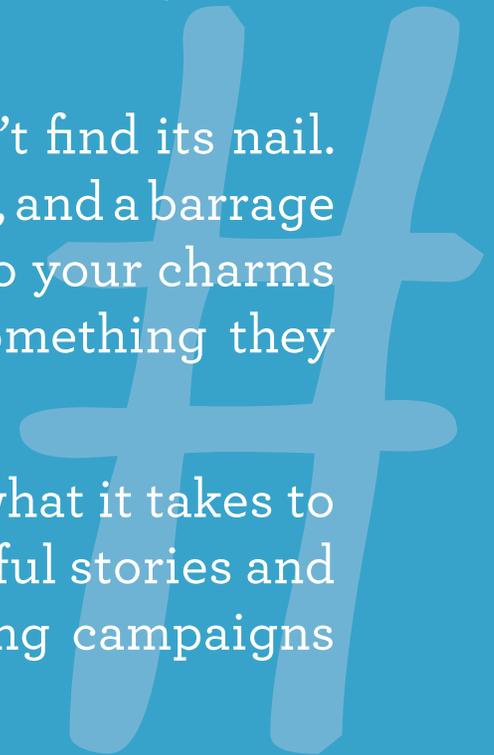


# THINKING BIG? CREATE A CONTENT STRATEGY THAT DRAWS A CROWD.

Revolutionaries aim to inspire, persuade, spark a fire. When they're sustainable businesses, they also need to educate, fight cynicism and bring people in the door. Content marketing is one of the best tools for the job.

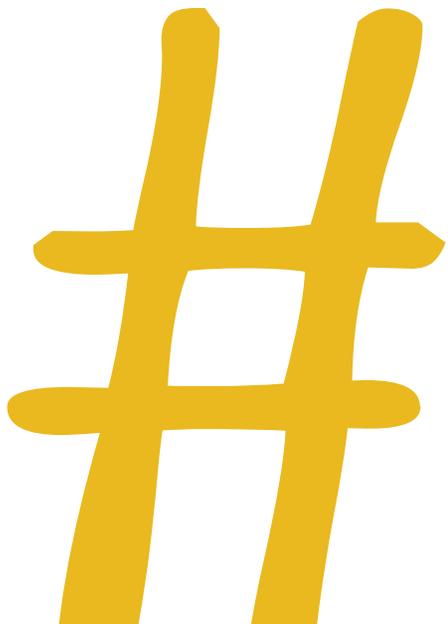
Too often, though, it feels like a hammer that can't find its nail. Marketers are churning out more content than ever, and a barrage of content can't pummel people into submitting to your charms or joining your cause. You have to give them something they value. Does your content marketing do that?

This collection of Thinkshift™ articles considers what it takes to succeed in content marketing, from finding powerful stories and consistently creating quality content to promoting campaigns and measuring success.



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Great content teams think like a publisher	3
Content marketing that tastes great, in all formats	5
The essential elements of content quality	8
Customer stories: the Swiss Army knife of marketing	10
Got content marketing? You need some PR with that	12
Content needs a push (or three) to give it a life	14
How to find out if your content is earning its keep	16

# GREAT CONTENT TEAMS THINK LIKE A PUBLISHER

What's the secret to compelling content?  
Approach it with a publisher's perspective,  
not with a marketer's mindset.



**T**his concept is hard to glean from the scores of “best content marketing” articles out there. Those are worth reading for inspiration, but their focus on excellent output tends to obscure the strategy that produces and promotes the content. This [Contently article](#) on the traits of a great content marketing mindset comes closer than most—though it may leave the impression that the surest route to mastery is to hire a top-level magazine editor.

Even if you have the resources for that, you won't get the most out of it without a publisher's mindset.

## **Obsess on your audience**

The publisher's mindset starts, as the Contently article instructs, with getting into the heads of the people you want to reach—not with what you want to say (that's a marketer's mindset). What does your target audience care about, hope for, fear, value? What might tempt them away from spending their spare moments

**What do you  
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watching [Samantha Bee clips](#)? Where do they look for such delights and how do they consume them?

Once you have that down, what do you have to say that speaks to those interests? If the answer is, “Our awesome product/service will solve their problems and make them feel amazing,” go back to square one. The right answer is not about selling. It’s about providing sought-after intelligence. For example: *Our market is trying to do X, so they’re looking at trend Y. We have ABC thoughts about those issues, which stem from this [amazing thing we do].*

### **Round up the right talent**

Now, who can produce this content? This is where you might consider poaching an editor or writer from your audience’s favorite publication. Or giving a content marketing agency a whirl. It’s safe to say that Pete from accounting (who has time

on his hands), those two execs who are really good writers (but have no time on their hands), and a newbie freelancer who will give you 400 words for \$40 are not promising options.

Mining in-house subject matter expertise is essential. Just be real about your in-house content *creation* expertise.

### **Give it business rigor**

This all leads to the business plan. (Publishers are all about the business.) What will it take to get the program off the ground? How will you promote and use your content? When can you expect a return? What will make the venture worthwhile?

If adopting a publisher’s approach sounds like a lot of work, it is. And if “good enough” rather than “great” is your aim, there are routes to that too. They’re just not as fun to write about.

*April 2016*

# CONTENT MARKETING THAT TASTES GREAT, IN ALL FORMATS

Search for great brand content and you get video and more ... video. Yes, we too have grooved on branded cat videos, but there are plenty of other ways to attract, educate and motivate.



**H**ere are a few recent examples of emulation-worthy content, mostly from sustainable brands, in other formats. And some video.

## **Quizzes: they're irresistible**

Levi Strauss had a hit with its [water use quiz](#) because it's simple, beautiful and eye-opening—and quizzes are highly shareable. It's also unique: the company's content team used data from Levi's lifecycle assessment, which studied the full

environmental impact of a core set of products from cradle to grave, to give quiz takers an idea of how much water they waste and whether they wash their jeans more or less often than their peers. (Details are in [this interview](#) with senior digital manager Michelle Wright.)

Another example, from our own files: RoseRyan's tongue-in-cheek ["What Kind of Finance Pro Are You?"](#) personality quiz. We let our funniest writer loose on the world of finance to

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create a piece that earned the Silicon Valley consulting firm coverage in *CFO Magazine*. It proved that finance pros can have a sense of humor—and more than a few users told the firm they found it weirdly insightful. (It appears that many finance pros are artisans, which could be a cause for worry or celebration.)

### **Stories about people: also irresistible**

*Meet the Cabot Farm Families* is one of the best people-centered content campaigns in recent memory. It tells the stories of Cabot Creamery Cooperative members through gorgeous black-and-white photography, narratives and an interactive map. Cabot integrates the content seamlessly into its website and uses it effectively across social media channels. The campaign also encourages people to tour the farms. What better way to educate about sustainable farming and show cheese lovers where their food comes from?

### **Want to be a star? Make your own movie**

Patagonia is introducing its new line of trail food, Patagonia Provisions, with a 25-minute film—a length and format that allows powerful storytelling. *Unbroken Ground* uses the stories of Patagonia's suppliers to explore agricultural approaches that could change our relationship to the land and oceans. Patagonia is touring the film at events that feature the food and people who appear in the film. It's one of the most thoughtful introductions of a sustainable product we've seen.

### **Substance: it's what a white paper needs**

Edison Energy's *The New Energy Future—Challenges and Opportunities in Corporate Energy Management* is a model of what a white paper should be. Based on extensive survey and interview research, the paper explores corporate perceptions of the energy

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savings opportunity—and why that opportunity is still largely unrealized. Clear, readable prose and graphics make the data easily digestible, and *The New Energy Future* makes a case for the company’s services without explicitly promoting them—as a good white paper should.

### **Can you include ice cream? Go for it**

Perhaps the ultimate in content marketing for a sustainable brand, the Ben & Jerry’s Democracy Is in Your Hands campaign uses brand power to promote a public good, employing nearly every tool in the kit. There is a [video](#)—and it’s a real, rousing call to action. A [website](#) provides background on the campaign’s twin issues of expanding voting rights and getting big money out the political process, helps people register to vote and take other actions, and includes a frankly worded FAQ that answers real questions (“Aren’t you

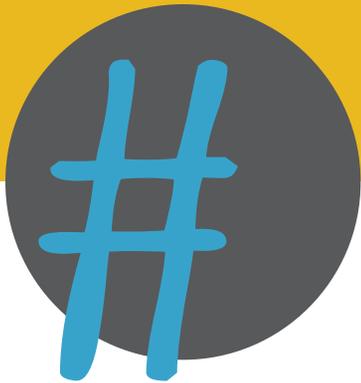
a corporation getting involved in the political system?” for one). And of course, there’s a campaign ice cream, Empower Mint.

Few of us can deliver content via ice cream (it’s hard to beat that for visceral appeal), but whatever your secret sauce is, it can flavor your content marketing in whatever format fits—and leave people craving more.

*July 2016*

# THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF CONTENT QUALITY

As more companies jump on the content marketing bandwagon, the competition for readers and viewers grows ever more intense.



**A**nd so does this warning: if you want your content to stand out and be shared, it had better be good. But what is good? Any evaluation is somewhat subjective, but we've identified five essential elements that all quality content shares.

## 1. Insight

The best content provides genuine insight and moves a conversation forward. It draws on lessons from experience, a news story or

innovations in other fields. It presents research or a big new idea. Or it challenges received wisdom. If you're producing content to support a thought leadership strategy, insight is essential. It not only gets you noticed, but it also provides value for readers.

## 2. Consumability

Quality content goes down as easily as ice cream on a summer day. It's a pleasure to read or to view. It's lively, cohesive and clear. Readers without

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a graduate degree can understand it, yet it's still intelligent. It's presented in a way that grabs attention and pulls people through to the end. And it looks good—it's free of distracting errors and tacky art.

### **3. Credibility**

Content marketing is all about establishing a bond of trustworthiness and value with your audience. If you want people to trust your content (and your company), it has to be accurate, well supported and plausible. Generalities, exaggerations and marketing hype are enemies of credibility. Fact-checking is your friend.

### **4. Generosity**

“How can we help people?” is a great way to approach content development. Content that's obviously self-serving doesn't educate or inspire, and it won't draw an audience. Professional services firms in particular tend to worry

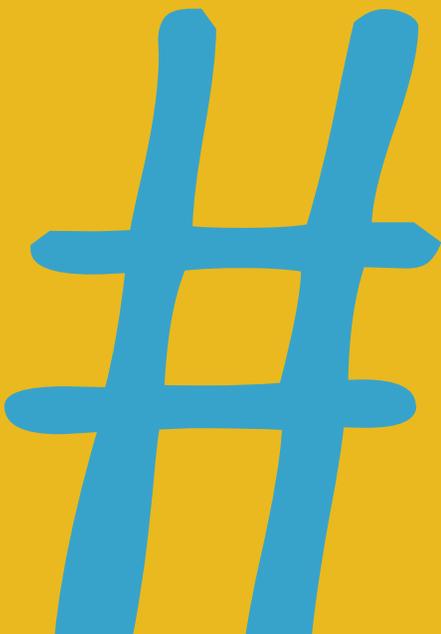
about giving away the store, but look around: the most successful content marketers are the most generous.

### **5. Freshness**

You may not have new ideas, but you definitely have a personality—use it! A fresh take on a perennial topic, a humorous approach to bland how-to material, personal anecdotes and novel presentation can all make your content stand out. Creative content is more memorable and has a longer shelf life than bland content.

“Good” is a judgment involving a significant amount of subjectivity, but if your content hits these marks, you can be confident of its quality. And quality content is more likely to be shared—and remembered.

*September 2014*



# CUSTOMER STORIES: THE SWISS ARMY KNIFE OF MARKETING

Customer stories are so useful in so many situations that every enterprise should have them on hand at all times.



**T**heir value is easy to see: who can say you're awesome more credibly than your customers and clients? What's not always easy to see is what makes a *good* customer story or case study—the kind that's persuasive, compelling and usable all over the place.

Good customer stories aren't just about good customers, or about how good you are to them. The most effective stories illustrate the type of customer you work with, how you

work with them, and why that work is valuable. Following are four key elements of stories that get the job done—and then some.

**1. The right subject.** When considering story candidates, ask yourself, are you truly proud of your work? Can you talk about results? (Some customers are willing to say nice things but are leery of revealing specifics; sometimes you've made the customer happy but can't point to any outcomes.) Is the client

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willing to talk to reporters? (This is important if you plan to use the story in a media campaign.) Is the client someone prospects will relate to? Is their business representative of your market or a segment of it?

**2. A propulsive story.** A good story draws readers in and pulls them through to the end. And while it needs a beginning, middle and end, it often shouldn't start at what you think of as the beginning. Why? The beginning is usually boring. (I got up this morning and made coffee. Then blah, blah, blah.) The classic case study format—challenge, solution, results—is classic for a reason. Even if you don't follow it literally, it's a good touchstone: the customer's challenge is likely to be an intriguing starting point.

**3. Personality.** Canned, generic quotes make for bland, unmemorable stories. And the less genuine a story sounds, the less credible it is.

The best stories incorporate actual quotes in a customer's real voice, and possibly your team members' voices. Customer stories may even recount a stumble or two on the way to success.

**4. Results.** The more specific you can be about the benefits you delivered, the better. At the same time, it's smart to think broadly about what constitutes a result—quantitative measures aren't everything. What did your work enable the customer to do that they couldn't have done otherwise? Are there benefits for the customer's community? Did you help the customer do something innovative? Did you do something innovative?

Get all these elements right, and you'll have a customer story with true value all around—a marketing Swiss Army knife (even if you can't open a bottle of wine with it).

*October 2013*

# GOT CONTENT MARKETING? YOU NEED SOME PR WITH THAT

Consider: America has nearly five PR people for every reporter, twice as many as a decade ago. That means competition for reporters' attention is fiercer than ever.



**I**t also means PR teams need to be lucky as well as savvy and creative to get coverage, especially absent major news.

At the same time, the tilting PR-to-journalist ratio reflects a dwindling number of journalism jobs, and more publications than ever rely on contributed articles to fill their news holes. As citizens and former journalists, this makes Thinkshifters sad. As communications consultants, we have to say: this presents an

opportunity to get around the PR problem while increasing returns from your content marketing investment.

## **Provocative = pitchable**

To realize this value, content marketing and PR teams need to work together to identify content that's provocative, deep or newsworthy enough to be pitchable: it takes an extra level of skill, creativity and collaboration to get

**Your investment should result in content that has a life outside your own channels and powers consistent PR results.**

your content placed in established publications. Most pieces will need some recasting to serve both content marketing and PR needs. But it's worth the effort.

If you produce a well-researched white paper as a lead-generation tool, for example, you can extract the highlights in an executive-bylined article. If you create narrative-style customer case studies that illustrate successful problem-solving, you can pitch them to trade publications (minus the blatant product promotion) as well as feature them on your website or in your newsletter.

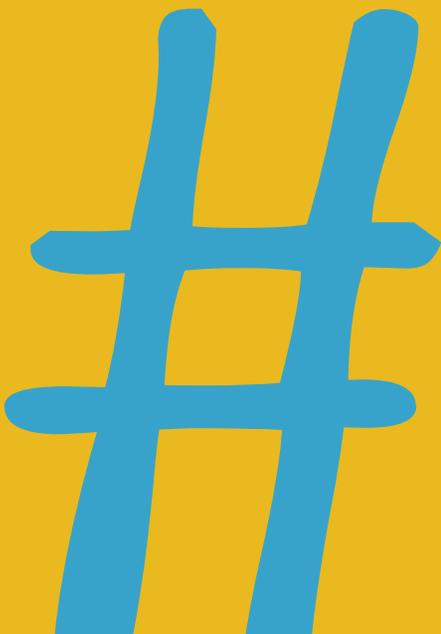
### **Be a resource**

Additional exposure to people you might not be reaching otherwise is only one benefit of using content as a basis for PR outreach. Bylined articles demonstrate your executives' expertise and knowledge, positioning them as thought leaders

in your market and making them attractive as sources for reporters. Published articles can also help your PR team interest a reporter in a fuller exploration of the topic—quoting your expert, of course.

Content marketing strategists often advise people to think like a publisher (see page 3). That advice typically is geared toward building engagement with your own platforms (blogs, social media channels, online magazines). But embracing a publisher's mindset also means producing engaging, substantive content that starts conversations, contributes to your field or provides genuinely useful information. That should result in content that has a life outside your own channels and powers consistent PR results.

*June 2016*



# CONTENT NEEDS A PUSH (OR THREE) TO GIVE IT A LIFE

One of the most pernicious myths about content marketing is “If we build great brand content, they will come.”



Or maybe it's simply wishful thinking that people will seek out and find brand content on their own. Either way, the reality is that even the most compelling content does not have its own gravitational field.

Producing quality content, alas, is just the start of a content marketing program. Once you have the content, you need to lead people to it and push it in front of their faces (in a nice way). That means emailing,

posting, tweeting and talking about it; sharing it, online and in person; and revisiting it periodically (because plenty of people missed it the first time).

Whether you do all these things or just a few, it helps to have a systematic plan that puts your content in front of the people you want to see it. Here are few things you can do to get your content the attention it deserves:

**Even the most compelling content does not have its own gravitational field.**

- Promote it repeatedly through all your social media channels (one post is a feather in the wind). Don't be afraid to promote evergreen content weeks or even months after it's created.
- Share it with online and social communities that are talking about the topic or are likely to be interested in it. (Respect group guidelines on sharing and self-promotion, but keep in mind that genuinely useful content is almost always welcome.)
- Ditto, for influencers (don't forget to ask them to share).
- Have your sales staff personally send tip sheets, reports and substantive blog posts to clients, prospects and partners who might be interested.
- Have your PR team mine it for story ideas or use it to update reporters in your field.
- Submit it as an article to third-party sites (partners, trade organizations, media sites and so on), reshaped to fit if necessary.
- Bring hard copies to events or use it to promote or follow up on relevant events.

All this requires ongoing attention and the cooperation of more than just the marketing team, so yes, it can be a lot of work. But if you don't do these things, chances are your excellent analysis and advice will live a lonely, unfulfilled life, talking to itself in a corner.

*November 2014*

# HOW TO FIND OUT IF YOUR CONTENT IS EARNING ITS KEEP

Even the best-run content programs need fine-tuning. At some point you need to know if your content is earning its keep—and plot a turnaround if it's not.



**I**n short, you need data. The metrics you place the most weight on will vary depending on what you're trying to achieve. Before you start, choose a manageable number of relevant measures and set baselines to track progress. Generally, we recommend evaluating content performance in the following categories.

**Marketing.** Goals in this category are the easiest to measure. If you want to increase traffic to your website, build your email list or promote

reports and other content, the signs of success are there to be counted: content views, web traffic, list sign-ups, lead conversions and others. Also look for popularity spikes when you cover a particular topic—those are clues to content strengths.

Building a mailing list (aka capturing leads) is unquestionably valuable, but by itself, it's a relatively shallow measure for most nonconsumer brands. Are people signing up because they want your newsletter

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content or because they're getting 15 percent off their next purchase? Are new subscribers the people you want to reach? Once they're on your list, are they opening emails and clicking, or are they unsubscribing? Better to have a smaller, devoted following than a mindless, inactive horde.

**Branding.** Building brand value and shaping opinions about your company are key content marketing goals—especially for B2B service firms and mission-driven companies like B Corps and social enterprises.

It's a longer-term game, and changes in brand awareness this can be tough to determine. If you're at sea here, you're not alone: a survey by the content marketing platform provider Contently found that most content marketers said they couldn't measure whether their content was changing opinions about their brand or increasing the likelihood that people would buy. Many also couldn't measure brand awareness or how

much attention people are paying to their content.

There are ways to gauge brand awareness, however. How long do people spend with your content? Are they asking for demos or a conversation? (Make sure to give them obvious calls to action.) Does your content get referenced, lead to speaking invitations or get republished by credible third parties? Do influential people share or comment? (Popular posts that take you in an unwanted direction can't be counted as a success. If you want only to be popular, we have two words: *kitten videos*.)

**Execution goals.** This is about the effectiveness of your process—if your content programs are not delivering, the problem may be in the execution. Are your most knowledgeable people creating content? Does the quality (of both execution and ideas) reflect well on your brand? Is the content right for your business strategy

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and marketing goals? Is the team producing and promoting content per schedule? Are employees engaged and sharing?

Finally, remember that things you can count are not the only measures of success. Anecdotal, qualitative feedback matters, particularly when tracking intangibles like brand awareness, changing perceptions and inclination to buy. This post describes how to gather that kind of input; mostly, you just have to ask, and make it a habit.

Ultimately, systematic progress evaluations justify resources and reveal problems that might not be obvious. They also provide a baseline for experimentation—and who doesn't want the freedom to play?

*March & July 2015  
September 2014*



BRAND BUILDING FOR  
REVOLUTIONARIES

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We build brand value, fuel growth and advance mission goals for trailblazing sustainable businesses, cleantech companies and social enterprises. We do it by uncovering what's best in their brand, expressing it in rich stories, and amplifying it through PR, thought leadership and content marketing programs.

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