

# How to recognise a content marketing agency

by Robin Barnes 06 September 2013 09:17 4 comments

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## **Content marketing is now a £1bn industry, so say the CMA.**

But what exactly is it that marks a good content agency out from the growing crowds? Is it any more than being able to create something cool that cuts through the clutter?

The other day I was talking with some of my industry peers about how ‘content marketing’ has become a magnet for all kinds of different marketing outfits: PR, video production, digital, SEO and

social media.

And yet, it’s the agencies with print publishing backgrounds that have found themselves at the forefront of content marketing.

For anyone smart enough to look beyond the ‘old media dinosaurs’ stereotype, the reason is obvious. ‘Always on content’ is nothing new to someone used to working on a daily title.

From the editor's meeting at 8am to the ‘breaking news’ revisions made throughout the night, a journalist’s job has long been to work to the content calendar and produce a relentless flow of high-quality material – offering the audience something fresh, relevant and yet arresting every day, and driven by the knowledge that your salary depends on them reading it.

It’s this ‘always on’ capability that is at the core of a good content marketing agency today – creating assets not just in print but also for the super-fast digital news feed. But while this kind of agility is essential, it isn’t enough on its own to guarantee success.

So, what else marks out a strong content marketing agency in today’s world? Here are five characteristics that will help you recognise one when you see it:

## **1. Truly multi-platform**

While it’s great to have all those skills from a heritage in print or a background in video, being able to make that content work across channels is essential.

According to the Content Marketing Institute, **UK marketers use on average 13 different channels and formats for disseminating their content** (more, incidentally than in the US) so it’s neither practical nor cost effective for brands to use a single-discipline agency.

Having said that, a single agency is unlikely to be able to do everything, which leads us onto the next point...

## **2. A team player**

‘Always on’ might not be all that new, but it does mean there’s a lot to do. So being a content marketing agency today means working in partnership with other agencies and, crucially, the client, who will increasingly be building its own content production capability.

The field of content needn’t be a competitive landgrab. An agency which can work well with others while providing a selfless and coherent strategy for mixing multiple sets of resources will be a winner.

## **3. Commercial**

An agency that can turn the client’s owned content portfolio into a valuable media asset will deliver great ROI through content marketing.

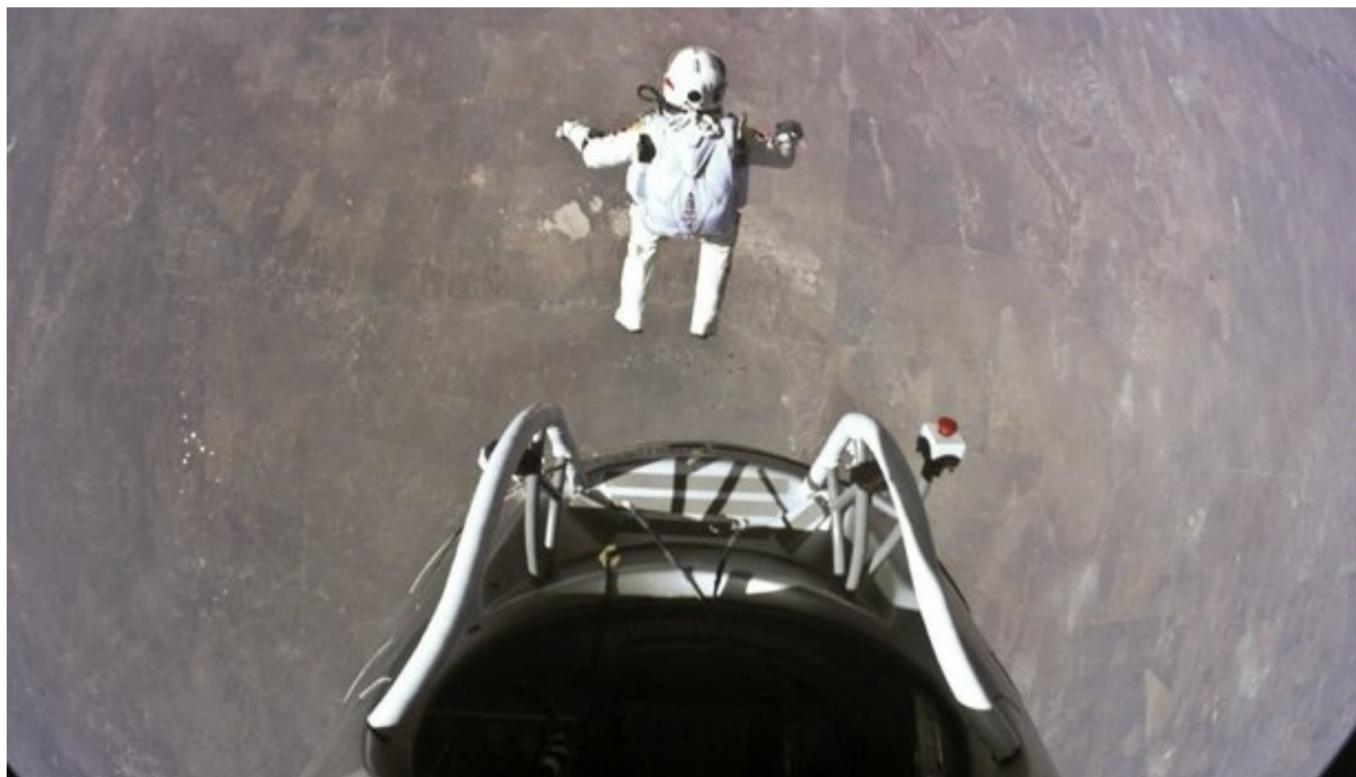
This is precisely the kind of operation that British Airways' BA Media unit has been pioneering for several years, developing a portfolio of media opportunities for advertisers that monetise content online, in print, on board and in airport lounges.

## 4. Insightful

The audience is at the heart of good content marketing, so a strong agency will maintain a single-minded focus on understanding it.

But while it's tempting to rely on digital insight tools, the best agencies will always speak to your audience, face-to-face, and find out what makes them tick. By doing this (probably bumping into some big data along the way), an agency might just hit on the insight that can take a brand's content to a whole new level.

Redbull, of course, is the classic example. By extending its reach into areas that its audience genuinely cares about, it's arguably now better known for its extreme sports content than it is for energy drinks.



## 5. A byword for quality

Don't settle for the mediocre, no matter how successful that might be in your analytics. Great writing is still great writing and great film is great film, and your audience will thank you for it with their time, money and heart.

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**Robin Barnes is Digital Director at content marketing agency Cedar and a guest blogger on Econsultancy.**

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**Topics:** Content Strategy & Operations

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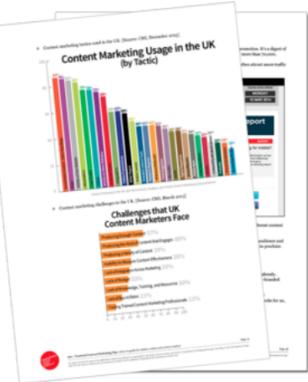
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**Jonathan**

10:09AM on 6th  
September 2013

Interesting piece Robin and one which made me reflect on our own position. Working with a range of clients from multi million pound businesses to very small local businesses has taught us that whilst content is definitely king, the desire to adopt a strategy pursuing it is not so strong.

Larger businesses by and large get the concept and working with them over time they can see the value but smaller firms are reluctant to pay for something that doesn't get immediate results.

The key part of your piece however is the 'team player' area. Even with the best intentions we've found few agencies around that are prepared to be team players and it quickly descends into a silo mentality which never benefits the client.

The future as I see it is that pure SEO and Digital agencies will extend their sphere of operations to bring content marketing 'in house', or vice versa, so they can package it for the clients and control the work.

I'd welcome any other views on this?

**John Courtney****SMALL BUSINESS**

*CEO and Executive  
Chairman at PAY ON  
RESULTS SEO, PPC &  
CRO from Strategy  
Internet Marketing*

8:53AM on 9th September  
2013

Jonathan

With regard to being a team player, at Strategy we try to focus on what is best for the client (cheesy but true) and that naturally leads to being a team player. For example, as well as producing guest blogs, infographics, videos etc one of the important strands of Content Marketing we produce for our clients in online PR, as this can get very high domain authority and relevant links. However, the client many have a traditional PR agency focusing on column inches offline. Working together with offline PR helps them and helps us, and in turn helps the client. And because the client sees more results, being a team player means we are more likely to keep the client longer.

As to digital agencies bringing content marketing in house, this is happening to some degree already. However, content marketing means a good number of resources (we have 50 in house plus 100+ in our Writing Academy plus 20+ in our Creative Academy plus hundreds of bloggers in our Blogging Edge platform) and smaller agencies dont have that, so we provide that service to them and their clients.

**Mark Inskip****SMALL BUSINESS**

*MD at Manifesto Growth  
Ltd*

2:13PM on 9th September  
2013

The points you make here, Robin, are certainly a valid and insightful observation of content marketing. However, for me the single most important aspect of this is the concept of content working on a multi-platform level.

The harsh reality for the bulk of content marketers is that this is still an area where they fall flat. The content marketing industry may well deserve a pat on the back for its quality, but it needs a kick up the behind when it comes to delivery.

It's no longer lazy and poor quality journalism that's the problem – far from it – instead, it's the difficulty of accessing that content on the wide range of devices the modern consumer uses that is the stumbling block. If consumers are not able to consume your content on the device they want to, then it renders that content redundant and universally useless. Worse still, it harms the brand as it makes it look inept.

Today, managing customer-facing content has evolved into a complex process, driven in no small part by the fact that consumer expectations have risen exponentially. To be able to cope with this, brands need to have a fully integrated approach to their content, which covers all the channels they operate in, and ensures their story is told not only in

an interactive way, but also a consistent way – regardless of how and where that content is being accessed.

Anyone producing first-class content for clients needs to ask themselves whether that content can be as easily consumed on a Galaxy S3 as Panasonic Smart TV. If not, then they need to go back to the drawing board.



**Jonathan**

10:30AM on 10th  
September 2013

Interesting thoughts from John and Mark.

John,

I love the cheesy but true bit! That resonates with us as well as we bend over backwards to make sure we help clients (I've even lost money doing just that...) however despite our best efforts and intentions we've still found silos appearing.

We go over and above what is asked for (and paid for in some cases) as I'm sure you do however we have found other firms are not quite as focused on the customer as perhaps they should be.

We also work with offline PR and have had some good localised success with this however the point that Mark makes about multi platform is a very good one.

I would however say that it's not just about the platform; yes the delivery channel is important but there is still too much rubbish ploughed onto the internet on a daily basis. Just go and look at the output of some of the bigger PR distribution websites and you will see what I mean - not a shred of added value anywhere just rubbish content contrived to get a backlink. Until we get away from the churn of this content and onto some real customer added value we are still missing out on the crucial bit.

Robin nailed it in point 5 - don't settle for mediocre.

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