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The song remains the same

The future of content marketing may be digital but the fundamentals are unchanged, says Dan Davey



It may not have escaped your notice that a digital transformation is sweeping through the publishing world, and content marketing will also have to evolve to keep pace. It does not feel that long ago since we were working solely on print magazines in the cosy world of customer publishing.

Suddenly, it is all about content marketing agencies shaping effective multi-platform content. Anyone familiar with Stephen Hall's excellent novel *The Raw Shark Texts* might wonder whether we have all been exposed to one of Dr Trey Fidorus's language viruses, so quickly have the phrases 'content marketing' and 'native advertising' become popular buzzwords.

But what is really new? Catchphrases come and go with a frequency that suggests that Hall's Dr Fidorus has an entire team focused solely on marketing. But underneath this apparent change, the fundamentals of telling a good story in a way that engages readers and customers remain the same. Good editorial boils down to five rules.

1. Find the best talent to be original

As the maxim goes, a job is only worth doing

if it is done well – in content marketing, more so. The demands on audiences' time means no company can afford to cut corners on talent; disappoint a time-poor reader and they are likely to forget you.

You may not be able to hire Ian McEwan to narrate your company's history, or Aardman to animate it, but contracting at the high-end is a must. That means tapping up talent that has a rich history working for high-profile brands, as staffers or freelancers, and finding the best journalists, illustrators and photographers.

2. Be clear in your commission

You do not want to sully a good idea with poor execution, and between the two comes the under-appreciated craft of commissioning. Do it well and your commissioning note will set out what you want from a piece of work – as well as the means by which to judge the outcome.

On the creative side, briefs should offer both a guide and a source of inspiration for the creative to follow and, hopefully, improve.

3. Pay people quickly

From markets for finance to used cars, integrity is key. Those seeking content need to preserve this by reliably and promptly paying talent they hire. A reputation for paying on time helps you attract the best talent, which in turn will help you get the most return for the money you spend.

4. Keep the idea simple and the execution clear

It might sound like blurb from a soap commercial but simple is beautiful. If your audience cannot understand the idea behind the content, then you will quickly trash the entire enterprise.

The boom in 'Five ways to' articles on the web reflects this need for forthright purity, as does the fact that Google is now primed to answer search requests formed by questions, not just keywords.

5. Be controversial, think digital

While content should not be controversial for the sake of it, neither should it be bland. It might be best to leave the task of being deliberately divisive and provocative to certain political parties, but



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Content marketplaces have opened up content marketing to businesses and brands of all sizes

stirring up debate the right way will get more reaction from an audience.

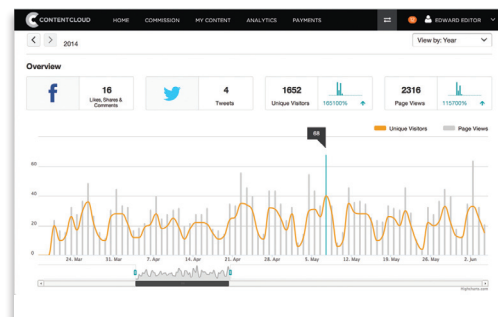
And your audience can react more quickly digitally – a hashtag here, a like thumb there or comments posted on The Guardian’s Comment is Free site. Online, success and sentiment toward your content marketing is quickly measurable.

As simple as these rules sound, the problem is that they represent an entire cupboard of plates that must be kept spinning. Luckily, help is at hand. The arrival of online content creation marketplaces means the digital world is finding solutions to some of these issues.

There is a new breed of online marketplace that allows brand owners to commission content directly from creatives, whether for a new marketing campaign, a blog post or a newsletter.

At this point I must declare my interest – an interest called Content Cloud. Other content marketplaces are available, although the quality varies and it is worth checking that the one you are considering exhibits certain key traits.

First, its markets for talent should be deep and well vetted; any client from a charity to



a bank should feel confident in being able to commission work from an experienced creative.

Second, these services must offer both time and cost savings to clients and be simple to use and cheaper than the cost of hiring a dedicated agency, at least for simple content-creation projects.

Conversely, the talent, from editors and writers to illustrators, photographers and speakers, must see an upside from the service. For freelancers, this might be predictability of work as much as price. Most systems are free for creatives although not

all offer an automated, transparent and prompt payment system.

Third, these services should provide measures of success. It should come as no surprise that the quantitative element here refers to digital. To be able to see the impact of an online feature or the ripple of an article through Twitter is as important as seeing whether a piece of editorial has been plagiarised.

That’s the drum banging over. For those still with me, what does this all mean for the future of content?

There is often a simple way and a complicated way to do things. Occasionally, a service arrives – usually driven by technology – that makes it clear which way is the simple way.

When it comes to commissioning, creating, managing and analysing content that meets the demands of brand owners and customers, there is now a simpler, cheaper way open to all.

The arrival of content marketplaces such as Content Cloud should see a levelling of the playing field, opening up content marketing for businesses and brands of all sizes. It is an exciting time for us all.