



Recapture Their Attention With White Papers

A White Paper For Content Marketers
by Brian Boys

Content marketing has reached its bubble phase. The rapidly increasing flood of blog posts and social media updates has outstripped consumers' ability to read them.

If marketers want to earn back the attention of their prospective customers, they must produce the type of content people are actively searching for: Long-format, thoroughly researched, and targeted at solving their real problems.

The type of content that fills all these requirements is white papers.

Marketers have embraced the content revolution, bypassing the traditional media gatekeepers to interact directly with their prospects and customers. Marketing directors who used to oversee paid advertising campaigns are now using those resources to create blog content and social media campaigns.

But with a glut of available content to browse and share, it's becoming more difficult to build a sizable, sustained audience, and much more difficult to create content that will go viral.

The Approaching "Content Shock"

Potential customers, who have a finite amount of time to spend online, are ignoring more and more marketing content. While the number of available paid online impressions continues to skyrocket, the percentage of consumers who give their attention to any given message continues to fall.

Companies that do not change their content marketing methods will continue to see declining reach, engagement, and effectiveness.

According to the Content Marketing Institute, 86% of businesses they surveyed are using a content marketing strategy. And even after last year's record output, 70% of them are planning on producing even more content this year.

Additionally, the number of available publishing and social sharing platforms has also been expanding, further diluting brands' reach, and stagnating the growth of industry giants like Facebook and Twitter.

In 2014 social marketing expert Mark Schaefer warned that with the amount of content available doubling every 9 to 24 months (depending on which research was used), the current model is not sustainable.

Schaefer points out that our ability to consume that content (the demand) is finite. There are only so many hours in a day.

"Even if we consume content while we eat, work and drive," Schaefer writes, "there is a theoretical and inviolable limit to consumption, which we are now approaching."

He concludes that this intersection of finite content consumption and rising content availability is already creating a marketing earthquake. He calls it The Content Shock.

The Decline, By The Numbers

According to Ayaz Nanji, co-founder of Inbound ContentWorks, brands are producing much more content now, but the engagement with each piece of content is less than it was two years ago.

He cites a report from competitive intelligence firm TrackMaven, which was based on 24 months of marketing activity (January 2013 through December 2014) for 8,800 B2C and B2B brands, including 7.2 billion combined interactions on 13.8 million pieces of content across seven digital marketing channels (blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Google+, and LinkedIn).

The analysis found the output of content per brand increased 78%, on average, from the start of 2013 to the end of 2014, but content engagement decreased 60%, on average.

In other words, brands are generating a higher volume of content per channel, but individual pieces of content are receiving fewer interactions (clicks, likes, comments, favorites, retweets, etc.) per 1,000 followers.

This drop in effectiveness is causing marketers to reassess how they invest their time and resources. They must find new ways to communicate, if they are going to meet their goals.

Going Back To Paid Placement

When executives learn that their increased spending on a content marketing strategy isn't meeting their goals for customer acquisition and retention, companies might be tempted to return to traditional advertising to get their message out. After all, TV, radio, and print attract measurable audiences and lend credibility to their advertisers.

Unfortunately, consumers are avoiding traditional advertising messages. Paid ads have also seen a rapid expansion, leaving few places that aren't branded or sponsored. Consumers have responded by changing the radio station when the ad comes on, skipping commercials on their DVRs, and running ad blocking software on their web browsers.

Instead of building engagement, traditional advertising turns audiences off. Even brands that are "everywhere" are largely ignored.

According to the Content Marketing Institute, consumers have become so adept at online “surfing,” they now take in the information they want while completely tuning out ad banners and buttons (making them irrelevant).

Traditional paid advertising will continue to see eroding effectiveness and so will not benefit from the oversupply of content.

But maybe marketers just aren't trying hard enough.

Making Up The Difference Through Volume

Another possibility marketers are pursuing is to simply produce more content. The reasoning goes that if a company that is posting to their blog once a week is seeing a drop in readership, they can try to make up for it by doubling their publishing schedule. If one post gets 500 views, then surely two posts should get 1,000.

Nathan Ellering of CoSchedule, an editorial calendar service for bloggers that relies heavily on traffic generated by content, writes about his company's experiment with this tactic. They wanted to see what would happen if they doubled the number of blog posts they publish each week and increased updates on their social channels.

Ellering states that before running the test he was convinced that more content and more social sharing would equal more traffic. But after testing it, he realized he was wrong.

Despite putting in significantly more work, they actually saw a negative result. He says, "Our social shares dropped and our blog traffic wasn't too impressive either."

So if simply increasing the volume of content doesn't result in better engagement, should marketers give up on the content strategy altogether?

Not at all. The fundamentals of the content marketing strategy still hold true: Potential customers don't want to be sold to. They want to search for and find content that will educate them so they can make a purchasing decision on their own terms.

To be successful, marketers simply need to let their content "grow up." Make it less about little diversions and more about in-depth information that's worth downloading and sharing.

The Content Form That Engages

Consumers have demonstrated that they don't want the *quantity* of content increased. They want the *quality* increased. If the content piece meets their expectations and solves their problems—it doesn't matter if it's 15 or 20 pages long—they will read it all the way through.

But to get this kind of attention, the piece must reward them for putting in the time to read it. This is exactly what white papers are designed to do.

According to Gordon Graham, one of North America's top white paper copywriters and author of *White Papers For Dummies*, people who download and read white papers have a higher expectation for the format. These readers are looking for and expecting something more substantial than a blog post or infographic. He says, "White paper readers are seeking useful information to help them understand an issue, solve a problem, or make a decision."

Graham cites a survey of IT managers conducted by Forbes and TechTarget which showed that 79% of these professionals read white papers to stay on top of new trends and 69% read white papers to research products and vendors. They view them as providing critical information for doing their job.

A properly written white paper will offer a detailed solution to a significant problem. But even better in the eyes of prospects, it will also address the best arguments for going with a solution *other* than the one that's finally recommended. The reader understands that if they take the time to read the whole white paper, they will be amply rewarded for their effort: They will have all the information needed to make an informed decision in their own best interest.

This kind of content won't need to be pushed in front of prospects. They will come looking for it. And that's the surest sign of a successful content marketing strategy.

Earning The Permission To Sell

At the heart of content marketing is the premise that information should only be given when a prospect requests it—otherwise known as "permission marketing."

When the prospect is in charge of the flow of information, they will determine when it's time to buy. At that point they won't need to be pressured by a salesman.

Seth Godin, who coined the term "permission marketing" back in 2008, saw it as part of a larger trend where the explosion of available information has shifted the balance of power to the consumer.

Godin writes, "Permission marketing is the privilege (not the right) of delivering anticipated, personal and relevant messages to people who actually want to get them. It recognizes the new power of the best consumers to ignore marketing. It realizes that treating people with respect is the best way to earn their attention."

Consumers will not knowingly use a search engine to find a sales pitch. They don't need to because they have ad messages pushed at them a thousand times a day on the web and social media. They will, however, search for solutions to their problems, or for information about products they know will solve those problems.

According to Brian Halligan, CEO of Hubspot, consumers' ability to find the information they want means marketers can no longer act like they are in control of the conversation.

"Back in the day, brands held most of the power, vendors were the power brokers, and

marketing was all about the four Ps—product, price, place and promotion. Today, the digital, social and mobile revolution has changed buyer expectations of how vendors should market, sell and service them—and shifted the power to the buyer."

With a tap of a smart phone, buyers can get information, ratings and opinions about you and your competitors. But a knowledgeable customer is not a bad thing. If a company's product or service is superior, self-educated consumers will be the easiest prospects to close.

Education Creates Better Customers

As Visioncope founder Thomas Winninger notes, one of the most important things any business can do is to teach customers how to value shop.

Winninger writes, "If the only way you are educating your customers is with a sign stating your best price, they can get the same introduction to math at the discount store down the street."

Because a properly written white paper focuses on informing not selling, it's a completely educational content format. If it has the information and expert analysis he's looking for, a prospect will actively search for it and read it from beginning to end,

Structured To Engage

With so much content to choose from, potential customers necessarily give as little time as possible to deciding if they want to read something. Even if they make it past the headline of an article, there's little chance they will spend more than a few seconds skimming—unless, like a white paper, the piece promises the solution to a significant problem. Then they will read just far enough to see if the promise is really kept.

Because of its argument structure, a well-planned white paper is designed to engage the reader and lead them point-by-point to the solution.

Ryan Malone, founder and CEO of SmartBug Media points out that white papers remain effective because they combine the persuasiveness of an article with the product information of a brochure.

Malone says, "Many decision makers prefer white papers because they can digest quite a bit of information in a relatively compact time frame. Effective white papers are written and laid out so that it's easy for the reader to quickly scan to get the gist, while making it simple for the reader to find in-depth details that they'll need in the decision making process."

This unique combination of in-depth and easy-to-digest is what makes white papers so effective.

Thoughtful Piece, Exciting Results

While white papers have the image of being sober and unexciting, if they hit the right topic and give thorough answers to the questions nobody else is answering, they can cause quite a

bit of excitement—and immediate sales.

Gordon Graham cites the example of Vircom, a Montreal-based anti-spam software developer. The company released a white paper squarely within their area of expertise titled *Why Spammers Spam*.

It addressed a problem that plagues businesses of all sizes, promised readers an authoritative view into the world of bulk email abusers, and offered effective ways to stop them.

Gordon reports that as soon as they offered the white paper on their site, they began getting downloads. In fact, they had such a spike in web traffic, they wondered if someone had launched a denial-of-service (DoS) attack against the company. After the smoke cleared, their white paper *Why Spammers Spam* had been downloaded more than 2,200 times and had generated an estimated \$96,500 in sales.

Easy To Share

In addition to their ability to engage readers and drive response, white papers have several other advantages over typical content pieces.

They are more portable. While a blog post can be shared, it remains part of a website. As a self-contained PDF file, a white paper can be read offline, easily forwarded, and is always optimized for printing.

Grow An Email List

Because a white paper is perceived to have value, it can be used as a premium, given only in exchange for an email address or other info. And content that's seen as worth something is more likely to be read.

Build Professional Authority

Finally, and possibly the biggest advantage of all, writing a white paper builds authority. A prospective customer who sees that it's well-written will consider the author to be an expert on the subject. And that will make the prospect more likely to want to work with the author.

Valerie Levin, who writes for social media management firm Oktopost, says that white papers are uniquely suited to establishing expertise.

Levin says that while blog posts, case studies, and slide decks are all powerful, crucial content marketing tools, white papers provide educational value that goes one step further.

She writes, "Publishing a white paper that takes a comprehensive and persuasive approach to a topic can generate more sales, credibility and trust."

Rising Above The Content Flood

A majority of companies have jumped on the content marketing bandwagon, unleashing a flood of blog posts, videos, social media updates, and infographics to audiences already overloaded with content. As expected, traffic statistics are showing that consumers are choosing to engage with less and less of it.

Unfortunately, as marketers see the dropping readership for their content, most have already shown their commitment to producing even more more—accelerating the cycle.

In an online landscape where consumers are facing "content fatigue," white papers are bucking the trend. They're standing out as the valuable, long-format, information piece consumers search out and request. Additionally, because creating a white paper takes a significant commitment to researching and writing, the majority of companies will not produce them. This gives those that are willing to invest in them an even bigger advantage.

Marketers who want to rise above the content flood will do well to add white papers to their repertoire.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Boys is a content specialist and author of *How To Write A White Paper In One Day*. His one week course by the same name teaches non-copywriters how draft their own 2,000 word white paper in one day. Following a 15 year career as an award-winning advertising copywriter, Brian has worked independently for the past 10 years, specializing in helping organizations of all sizes more effectively engage with their clients.

His course on writing white papers is at WhitePaperInOneDay.com.
Contact Brian at (541) 654-3438 | boys.brian@gmail.com

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