

&MARKETING

Cut the Fluff:

**How to Create Content
That Actually Grows
Your Customer Base**

Introduction:

70% of marketers are actively investing in content marketing. While this statistic confirms content's **reigning title of king on the internet**, companies often make the mistake of generating blogs, eBooks, and social media posts blindly. This results in content marketing that lacks a real strategy, a concrete plan, or a way to track tangible return on investment.

Businesses that hinge growth on a “throw content on your website and see what sticks” approach are quick to claim content doesn’t work, as haphazard attempts rarely generate meaningful results. The problem, though, isn’t that content marketing doesn’t work, but rather that companies make one (or more) of the following mistakes:

- **Creating a strategy based on audience assumptions.**
- **Creating content they want to read, rather than content their audience is looking for.**
- **Skipping the strategy step altogether and jumping headfirst into execution without a real plan.**
- **Failing to align content creation and promotion with business goals and lead generation.**
- **Writing without ensuring the content matches brand voice and messaging.**
- **Creating content that’s heavy in jargon and “fluff,” but light in emotional connection and compelling data points.**



What do all of these mistaken approaches have in common?

They lack data.

The key to driving tangible ROI and business growth through content marketing is rooting your content strategy in data. This might seem counterintuitive at first, but don't flinch at the idea of pairing your right-brain data nerds with your left-brain storytellers. Creativity and analytical minds don't need to work in silos. These two sides of the brain produce the best results when they come together.

Data builds trust and authority, while storytelling triggers emotion. Merge the two, and the dots from awareness to conversion become stronger than ever.

In this eBook, we've outlined &Marketing's tried and true process for creating and executing a data-driven content strategy that replaces fluff and jargon with thoughtfully crafted copy that converts.



Step One: Establish Your Goals

You'll never get where you're going if you don't have a destination in mind.

When you think about how you want your business to grow, consider what that growth looks like and the ways content can help you get there. You have to establish concrete goals to determine what success looks like, and what strategy can help you achieve it. Ask yourself the following questions before you begin crafting a content strategy:

1. **What are my overall business goals?**
2. **How can content marketing impact these goals?**
3. **What data do I need to forecast and project what's achievable?**
4. **How can I measure my progress and success?**

By identifying what the finish line looks like, you can map out the path to reaching it and ensure your content strategy isn't based on guesswork. Establish quantifiable goals before you even start so you can be ready to measure tangible content results and demonstrate real ROI.

Step Two: Do Your Research

Some companies fall prey to “writer’s ego” — they write content that they care about versus what their customers want to read. Or, they make assumptions about what their audience wants to read. In either case, doing research on your audience and compiling data is the solution.

An advanced tool like Power BI will help you organize, align, and visualize all of your data from various marketing channels in one place, so you can create comparisons and generate actionable insights (we have an **entire suite of services** dedicated to this).

There are three core types of research you should do in this initial phase:

1. **Market Research**
2. **Keyword Research**
3. **Competitor Research**

Market Research

You started your business because you saw a problem you can help solve. That core problem is one experienced by a core demographic, and the solution is sought out by a key decision-maker. If your business is B2C, the decision-maker is your consumer. If your business is B2B, your decision-maker is likely someone on the executive level.

Take the time to identify who these decision-makers are, what their pain points are, and where they “hang out.” In other words, where do they consume information and spend time looking for a solution to the problem that you solve? Which websites do they visit? Which social media platforms do they use?

Perform primary market research by surveying your current and prospective buyers. If you have an existing website, make sure your Google Analytics and Google Search Console are connected so you can see where your web traffic is coming from. If your business is too new for this type of research, dig into your industry’s statistics and current trends.

Keyword Research

What do you usually do when you have a problem you need to solve? Chances are high you head to Google and type in a question or phrase that reflects your issue. Therefore, when your target audience searches Google for help with a problem your business solves, you want your content to show up in those search results. Over **half of businesses** use organic search traffic to measure the success of their content because:

- **71% of all website traffic comes from Google searches.**
- **87% of mobile consumers turn to search engines first to address their needs.**
- **SEO leads are 8.5 times as likely to convert than outbound advertising leads.**

Additionally, **54% percent of all searches** result in a click on one of the top three results on the first page of Google.

This is because:

1. **We have a short attention span.**
2. **We trust Google to give us the most valuable information first.**

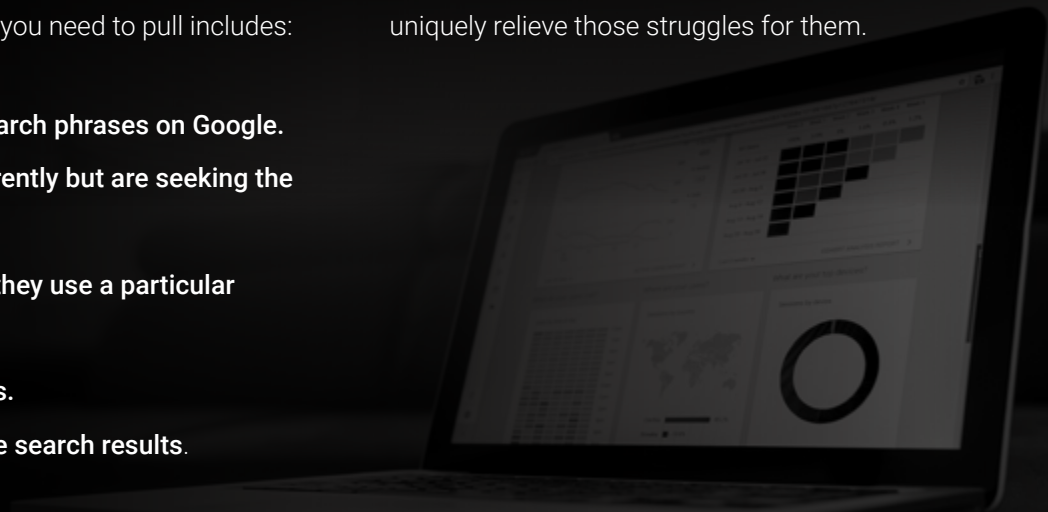
Keyword research is essential to help your audience find your content. The practice of creating content Google loves is called search engine optimization (SEO), where you identify and implement the keywords with the greatest opportunity to rank on Google and drive qualified leads to your website (check out our **Content Marketing ROI Calculator** to predict which keywords will generate the most organic website traffic and conversions, without spending money on digital advertising).

Keyword Research Cont.

You can perform keyword research using free tools like UberSuggest, Keywords Everywhere, Google Keyword Planner, or SEMRush, combined with the data you're seeing in Google Analytics. When done manually, this kind of research can take days, from meticulous data mining to uncovering and analyzing the insights revealed and the story that data tells. More comprehensive Business Intelligence tools (like the aforementioned Power BI) takes all of your data from every source and aggregates it to provide a visual of the relationships between all of the data points, the trends they reveal, and the insights you can use to implement your content plan. Some of the data you need to pull includes:

- **Google trends:** This is just what it sounds like — trending search phrases on Google.
- **Related searches:** Keywords and phrases worded a bit differently but are seeking the same information.
- **People also ask:** Similar questions people are asking when they use a particular keyword.
- **Related websites:** Other websites that offer similar solutions.
- **Top ranking content:** The first 20 pieces of content in Google search results.

This data will give you a better understanding of the keywords people are using when they search for a solution to their problem. When you leverage these keywords to create content, you are creating an opportunity for your audience to find your business as the answer. Use it to further uncover your audience's pain points and how you can uniquely relieve those struggles for them.



Competitor Research

When you perform your market and keyword research, a core part of that deep dive is going to involve uncovering what your top competitors are doing. You don't want to copy them, but you need to find out what's working for them and how you can do it better.

Browse the social media accounts of the big players in your market. What kind of content are people commenting on and liking? What's getting the most traction?

Examining the existing top-ranking content for the keywords you uncovered above will give you a strong idea of what kind of content is already performing well with your audience. Read the pieces that show up on the first page of Google and identify the ways you can provide a better answer.

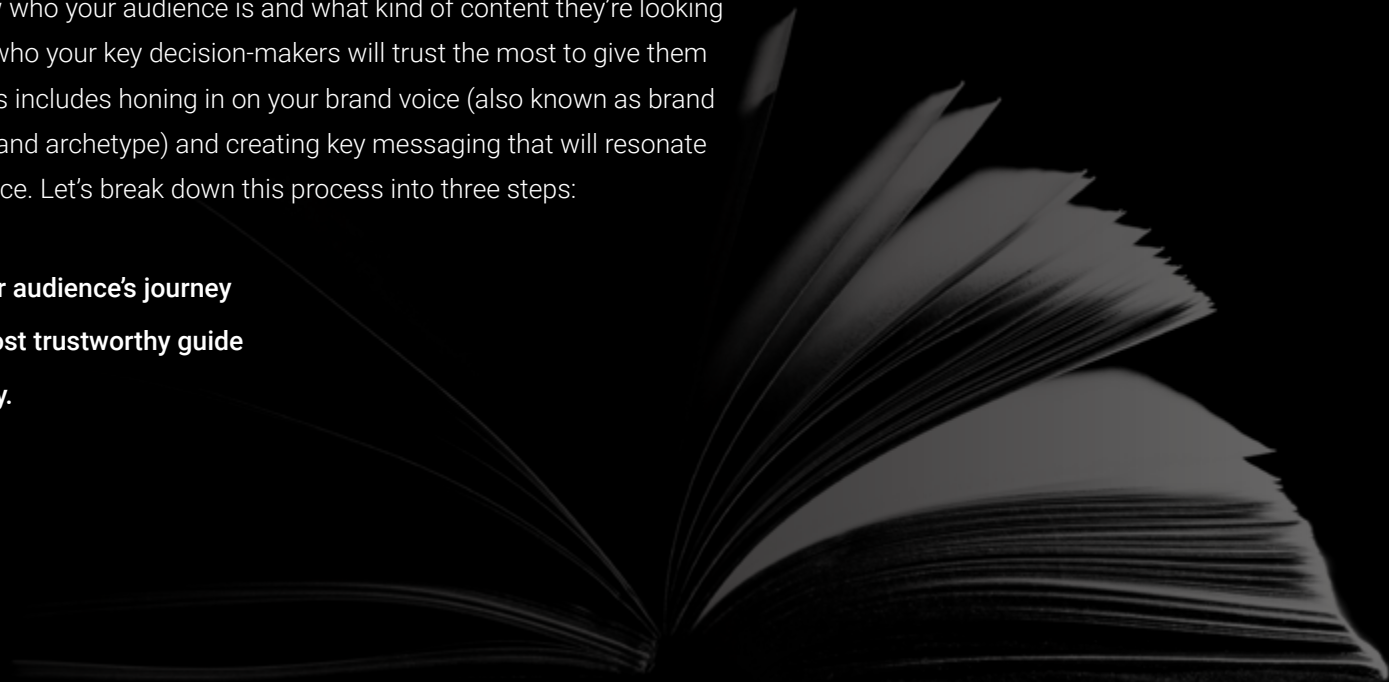
Now that you have identified what your audience is looking for, it's time to figure out how you can uniquely provide those resources to them.

Step Three:

Define Your Brand Voice and Messaging

Congratulations! You now know who your audience is and what kind of content they're looking for. The next step is to identify who your key decision-makers will trust the most to give them the help they need. This process includes honing in on your brand voice (also known as brand personality, brand identity, or brand archetype) and creating key messaging that will resonate and build trust with your audience. Let's break down this process into three steps:

1. **Understand your role in your audience's journey**
2. **Identify yourself as their most trustworthy guide**
3. **Tell them a compelling story.**



Understand your role in your audience's journey

The biggest mistake brands (along with many marketing agencies and departments) make when trying to connect with and convert decision-makers through content is by centering themselves instead of their audience.

Your potential buyer should be the hero of your brand, not you.

When your brand makes itself the hero instead of the customer or consumer, you position yourself to compete against them rather than win them over.

Think about it this way: When you choose to purchase a product or service, it's because you have been led to believe your needs as a buyer are the most important. People buy things because they are made to feel seen, heard, and understood, not because a brand has bragged about how wonderful they are.



Identify yourself as their most trustworthy guide

So, if you're not the hero, then who are you?

Take a moment to remember your favorite films. Who helps the hero find happily ever after? The answer is almost always a wise and experienced guide. In order to step into the role of the guide for your hero, you need to communicate with empathy and authority to create a connection and build trust.

Think about what kind of personality your hero would respect and follow for guidance and embody that archetype in your brand voice. Would your hero respond with admiration or admonishment if you crack a joke? Curse? Use sarcasm? Convey emotion? Craft your brand's voice and messaging around the guidance your hero will connect with and listen to.



Tell them a compelling story

People are more distracted than ever before, particularly online. **General attention span has lowered** from 20 seconds to just 8 seconds, and website viewers are only spending 10-15 seconds on a website before leaving. That's about the equivalent of the attention span of a goldfish. Website visitors want to quickly find the information they need to help with their struggle and move on.

Hulu's Head of Creative, **Scott Donaton**, said:

"Intrusive, interruptive, self-centered marketing no longer works the way it once did, and its effectiveness will only continue to diminish in the social age. The question is what will replace the legacy model. There's a one-word answer: stories."

Because humans are (thankfully!) more complex than goldfish, we're primed to have our attention grabbed and retained by one thing: a compelling story.

Stories spark an **actual chemical response** in our brains, like a literal switchboard. They grab our attention and propel us outside of our own fantasies and into a world that gives our thoughts and emotions both direction and connection. If you **create a compelling brand narrative** for your hero where you build their trust and make them "feel" something, you can begin to build a long-term relationship where they keep coming back for more.



Step Four:

Create & Execute Your Content Plan

So you have your goals, your keywords, and your story, with all of the compelling characters in mind. What now? It's time to put all of that foundational work into action with the creation and execution of a strategic content marketing plan.

This is where so many businesses fail to take flight with a content strategy. The research and planning feel like the fun part, but the execution seems daunting. But now that you know what direction your content should take, you can stick the landing by:

Using your keywords and audience research to identify content ideas that will resonate with them. Take those “People Also Ask” questions from Google and turn them into articles or infographics where you can answer those questions through a compelling story using your unique voice and guidance.

Create & Execute Your Content Plan Cont.

Compose a list of content ideas by topic to lead prospects through a journey from brand awareness to conversion (also known as a sales funnel). This journey not only guides your hero to their happily ever after, but it also establishes longevity and solidifies your place as their go-to resource for solutions to their problems.

Create a comprehensive content marketing calendar. This calendar will be your marketing GPS. Use it to organize and guide all phases of writing, publishing, distributing, and promoting your content via your website, social media, and email.

Write, write, write! Communicate your guidance in a way that's clear, concise, and compelling. Great copywriting breaks down complex information into digestible pieces and gives your audience a path to success with a clear call to action. Your writing is the thread that ties together your data, your story, and your hero's journey to their happy ending. Plus, don't forget the SEO! Craft your copy to be keyword-rich (without overstuffing!).

Promote your content. Don't rely on SEO alone to do the distribution work for you. Organic growth on Google takes time, usually 3-6 months, to begin working. Share your content through social media, email, and collaborations with partners to generate engagement and potential leads more quickly.

Step Five: Assess & Optimize

This is where those measurements and projections we mentioned back in step one come in to play. Track the performance of your content, monitor the results of each tactic, and measure it against the forecast you made when you established your goals. Collect and analyze your data weekly and pay attention to what's working and what's not.

Use this information to pivot if you need to by doing more of the things that are gaining traction and less of the things that fell flat. The more you learn and optimize, the more powerful your growth will be.

Ultimately, this last step is an ongoing one. Your content strategy is a living, breathing thing that should be regularly revisited as you gather more data. Create your calendar on a quarterly basis and make changes to optimize your approach as you learn new things about your audience.

Conclusion:

You may have come to the conclusion that developing and executing a content strategy that converts is much more work than you thought. If you have, good! Because it is. But, by doing the research up front and taking a thoughtful approach to identifying your audience and what matters to them, your sales will ultimately come in faster and stronger.

When you do the heavy lifting at the beginning of the process, you'll not only eliminate chaos, you will lay the foundation for measuring concrete ROI and revenue for your business that is tied directly to your content plan.

The relationship between data and creativity, between science and art, is the most important one in marketing. Invest your time and energy in it, and you are bound to find a successful marriage that lasts — and sells.



About the Authors:

Beth McDonough

Content Manager and Copywriter Beth McDonough brings nearly a decade of professional writing and editing to the team at &Marketing. With extensive experience in an array of fields that range from entertainment publications to a Fortune 500 energy company, Beth has the ability to produce written content that speaks directly to the needs of a breadth of clients and channel their brand personality into a compelling story.



Emily Valeo

Marketing Manager and Content Specialist Emily Valeo is a creative storyteller specialized in project management and content marketing. With six years of experience working with both large and small businesses across various industries, Emily is passionate about helping clients succeed through her close attention to detail, strong work ethic, critical thinking skills, and compelling storytelling.

About &Marketing

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