

# How to Launch a Content Marketing Strategy

By Sarah Johnson and Laura Sparks

What if you could build a program or process that brought potential clients to you, distinguished you, and allowed you to bill for premium services? Would you consider investing in the process?

Content marketing can do all of the above and more when executed with forethought and attention to best practices. Content marketing is based on thought leadership—a concept that isn't new or revolutionary. However, it is undervalued and often misinterpreted in public accounting firms. Generic content newsletters, a one-off article, or white paper do not add up to a content marketing campaign.

Content marketing is about “turning your insight and advice into campaigns that change people's minds and incite action.” (Source: *The B2B Content Marketing Workbook*) It is an *intentional* and *strategic* action you take to grow your business.

Distinguishing yourself in today's market is about more than flashy ad campaigns and golf sponsorships. Although these “broadcast” marketing tactics can play a role in building awareness, content is ultimately what will build trust and credibility. Content marketing is an opportunity to engage in a conversation with your key audiences. Even more important, well-developed, well-placed, and engaging content will help attract the right types of prospective clients.

## Role of content marketing

When we talk about content marketing, we are often asked what role it plays. In the context of marketing your services to prospective buyers, it is all about building trust and credibility and gaining visibility. People can't buy what they don't know exists and won't buy from someone they don't trust.

## Trust/credibility

In the *THIN BOOK OF TRUST*, author Charles Feltman discusses the four elements that comprise the language of trust:

1. sincerity;
2. reliability;
3. competence; and
4. care.

Building trust is about balancing these four elements. As you market your services, the first item with which a potential client comes into contact is often content in some form (*e.g.*, your website, brochure, or a video). This content sets an inherent expectation, begins the conversation, and reinforces the ability to build trust and credibility. Exhibit 1 provides examples regarding how to reinforce the trust you establish through your content.

## Exhibit 1: Reinforce Trust through Content

Trust Element	Content Elements
<b>Sincerity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Your words match the actions of everyone in your firm.</li><li>• Opinions are backed by sound thinking and evidence.</li></ul>
<b>Reliability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• If someone contacts you or engages with you, you respond immediately or when you say you will.</li></ul>
<b>Competence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• You share your knowledge and use terms that show your competence and experience rather than talking about what you sell.</li></ul>
<b>Care</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• You talk/write about your prospect's key issues, rather than brag or showboat about what you sell. Addressing their needs will ultimately get you more business and your content must reflect this.</li></ul>

## Visibility

Content also can make a strong impact by creating visibility or awareness. Today, buyers consume tons of content in various forms and in many different places. In fact, 60 percent of C-suite executives conduct more than six work-related searches daily, and they are typically looking for competitor analysis, customer trends, corporate developments, and technology trends.

(Source: *The Rise of the Digital C-Suite*, Google/Forbes Insights) Having timely, relevant, and insightful content that is promoted and available in different ways can help you break through noise and get much coveted attention.

### Linking content to the buying process

Understanding how your market purchases services is critical to success with any content marketing campaign intended to incite action.

Today's buyers typically follow a four-stage process when they buy that includes screening, evaluation, consideration, and procurement. Content marketing campaigns must address the first three stages and be structured in such a way that they will help enable you to move prospects through their decision-making process.

### Content development best practices and pitfalls

Writing compelling content does not come naturally. That is one of the reasons why the number-one challenge content marketers face is producing enough content, followed by the challenge of producing the kind of content that engages prospective clients. (Source: *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends*, Content Marketing Institute/MarketingProfs)

Consider the following keys to creating consistently engaging content:

- *Draw a clear picture of the individuals you are trying to reach.* Trying to speak to everyone is a sure way to engage no one. What are the top three personas that receive the most value from working with your firm? Think of a specific person who typifies each of these personas and create a character sketch of each one—the positions they hold within their organization, their main objectives, and their motivations. After all, you can tell a better story if you have a specific protagonist in mind. That is why 59 percent of B2B marketers tailor their content to a profile of individual decision makers. (Source: *B2B Content Marketing*)
- *Speak their language.* A CFO of a major hotel chain does not speak the same language as a construction company owner. What does each persona care most about? What frustrates them in their job? What is the ideal state they are seeking to achieve? Every piece of content should clearly answer the question: Why does this persona care about this issue right now?
- *Tie content to the firm's strategic objectives.* If the partners have agreed they want more business in the oil and gas sector, then content needs to address the problems executives in that sector face. One way to achieve this connection between strategy and tactics is to craft what content marketing evangelist Joe Pulizzi describes as the content mission statement. That mission statement, he says, should address the core audience target, what will be delivered to the audience, and the outcome for the audience. Notice that he doesn't recommend the mission statement address what the content will achieve for the *firm*, because the point of the content is to help the reader by presenting solutions to *his or her problems*.
- *Make your prospect feel like a hero.* Once you understand each of your buyer personas, tell stories that inspire and empower those individuals to achieve more than they thought they could. After all, no one buys until they feel like the product or service they are buying will help them achieve a clear objective.
- *Have a clear next step in mind.* A good story without a clear and motivating call to action is as useful as a screen door on a submarine. What do you want your reader/viewer to do next? Of course, this depends on where they are in the buying cycle, but generally it will be one of the following: (1) commenting on your content; (2) downloading or requesting another piece of content; or (3) picking up the phone.
- *Take some risks.* Accountants live in fear of being wrong. And they should be, when it comes to assurance and tax work. But when you are marketing in a competitive environment, the risks of blending in with the crowd are greater than the risks of being wrong. If you are not out there taking a stand and telling a unique story that moves your prospects to action, then your competitor is going to beat you to the punch. Just remember: Not sharing your perspective is akin to saying "no comment" to a reporter—you have no power to shape the conversation in which your clients, prospects, employees, and competitors are already participating.

### Where to start now

Every accounting firm is a repository of great knowledge and valuable content fodder. Yet, few firms are successfully engaging in content marketing, and one of the main reasons for this failure is that they simply do not know where to start. Following is a roadmap

**Exhibit 2: Content Calendar for Jones & Smith CPAs**

<b>Content Mission</b> Equip small-business executives with the tools and financial literacy to achieve break-through success.						
<b>Month</b>	<b>March</b>		<b>April</b>		<b>May</b>	
<b>Event</b>	Corporate tax deadline		Construction industry conference		New oil and gas partner	
<b>Message</b>	Tax strategy is secondary to business strategy		Watch cash flow carefully		Impact of key tax changes on oil and gas Industry	
<b>Audience</b>	Small-business owners		Construction company CEOs and CFOs		Oil & gas CEOs & CFOs	
<b>Vehicles</b>	Article	Video interview with clients	White paper	Blog posts	Article	On demand podcast series on tax credits for oil & gas
<b>Channels</b>	Local business journal	YouTube channel	Email campaign to conference attendees	Jones and Smith blog and construction association blog	Oil & gas association publication	Oil & gas association
<b>Subject matter experts</b>	Tax strategies partner	3 successful clients	Construction partner		Tax strategies partner & oil & gas partner	

that can put you on the path to stronger relationships with clients and prospects.

**Determine your point(s) of view and content mission.** Based on your understanding of each persona, the problems they face, and how your firm helps address those problems, what are the most important messages you want your audience to know, think, or feel? What is the big idea around which your content should revolve? Coke's big idea, for example, is to make the world a better place. An accounting firm's content mission may be to equip small-business owners with the tools and financial literacy to achieve breakthrough success.

**Create a content calendar.** Marketing departments increasingly are becoming akin to trade publishers, creating and curating information and ideas that are pertinent to their target markets. Ashley Brown, Coca-Cola's director for digital communications and social media, recently said that his team "has been re-formed in the last year to look more like an editorial team at a long-lead magazine ... with a production schedule and an editorial calendar."

What does this look like in practice? At a minimum, identify the key messages you want to convey to each of your personas, and then identify internal and external events that provide a natural opportunity to spread those messages. An example of an internal event might be the addition of a partner who has a national reputation with one of your target audiences. An external event might be a trade association meeting, or a tax-filing deadline. In Exhibit 2, you will see that we have identified foundational pieces of content (*i.e.*, articles and white papers) and "satellite" pieces (*i.e.*, blogs, videos, and industry-

specific articles). This strategy allows the firm to leverage the subject matter expert's and the writer's time.

**Aggregate third-party content.** You do not have to do all the work alone. The mainstream media, industry trade journals, blogs, and professional associations are sources of content targeted to your clients and prospects. By sharing this third-party content through blogs and social media accounts, you are establishing your firm as a go-to source of information and laying the groundwork to generate high-quality leads.

**Monitor, report, and adjust.** It is no accident that content has gained such a prominent role in marketing. Today's tools allow us to track who is reading or viewing what pieces of content and then what actions they take next. This analytical data is a goldmine for marketers and partners looking for insight into the types of content that resonate with their targets, making it possible for your content marketing strategy to constantly evolve until it is a finely tuned lead-generation machine.

If you heed these best practices and follow the roadmap provided above, you will be on the path to creating consistently engaging content that builds trust, credibility, and visibility and moves your prospects through the buying process.

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