

MICROSOFT PRESENTS

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CONTENT:

New Ways to Connect Across the Customer Journey

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ABSTRACT

Content is the hottest topic in marketing as every brand is seeking more relevant and meaningful ways to engage with customers. This paper examines how emerging technologies are influencing content strategy and enabling marketers to reach customers with content and influence at every point in the buying cycle.



CONTENT & CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

CONTENT IS THE LIFEblood OF YOUR BRAND STORY. IT IS EVERYTHING YOU PUBLISH, FROM AD COPY TO DIRECT MAIL TO THE ARTICLES YOU SPONSOR ON WEBSITES. IT IS ALSO THE STORIES YOUR CUSTOMERS TELL ABOUT YOUR BRAND THROUGH SOCIAL CHANNELS. HOW CAN BRANDS USE EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES TO CONNECT SILOED CONTENT PROCESSES WITHIN THE BUSINESS AND THE CUSTOMER COMMUNITY, AND EXERT INFLUENCE ACROSS THE ENTIRE CUSTOMER JOURNEY?

The pride Mike Evans felt in putting together his new Backyard Gourmet gas grill after several hours' work was short-lived when he discovered two important-looking parts remaining at the bottom of the product box. Undaunted, he used his mobile device to take pictures of the orphaned valves and fired up the Backyard Gourmet app, which, among other things, included an assembly troubleshooting feature.

The app identified the parts and overlaid their correct locations. It also connected Mike to two instructional videos—one produced by the company, and one from a retired civil engineer in Australia who was the top-ranked user/expert for this particular model—and pointed him to several discussion threads on the Backyard Gourmet user forum that guided him through the proper reassembly step by step.

Data systems captured the interaction and asked his permission to enroll him in several relevant social sites and lists where grilling enthusiasts trade tips, including the Backyard

Gourmet auto-curated weekly newsletter. The system also generated a note to the product manager indicating this was the tenth time this month that a customer was confused about this particular assembly step. The PM created a service bulletin and a personal email to the affected consumers, and instructed his design team to address the problem on the next model.

Mike's experience with the app and the related content reinforced his initial decision to go with Backyard Gourmet over the competitors. Over the next few months, he became a five-star content contributor and one of the most persuasive ambassadors for the brand through his social network. Some of his real-time conversations with prospective buyers led directly to sales, earning him points and discounts to use at a variety of specialty food stores and sites. Backyard Gourmet calculated that his influence returned 15x the investment in the systems required to support and deliver content, and management began using his story as a template for after-sale engagement best practices.

The future of content marketing is not necessarily about managing new channels effectively, but about managing existing channels more strategically.

HOW CONTENT FUNCTIONS AS MARKETING

THE BUZZ IN THE MARKETING WORLD TODAY is that “all brands must become content publishers.” That’s a bit misleading because most brands are already content publishers. It’s just that the content they publish—product documentation, service information, direct mail newsletters, updates and announcements on social media—is rarely seen as part of an integrated process connected to marketing or as a connected strategy across different platforms (that is, a *content strategy* rather than a web strategy, mobile strategy, social strategy, etc.).

It’s also an incomplete prescription. Brands are not the only ones publishing content on their behalf. Consumers

are participants in, and sometimes the main drivers of, brand stories in a variety of forums. This kind of content scares marketers because it is outside their control. It only shows up on their dashboards after the fact, as a change in social sentiment or a PR emergency demanding immediate response. But user-created content, or brand-created content that has been curated and redistributed by individuals, exerts a powerful influence on consumers and contains important lessons for brands willing to listen.

Brands, therefore, must not become just publishers, but enablers of a publishing ecosystem and facilitators of the social life of content.

From Advertising to Content

A few factors are driving the increased focus on content marketing. First, the rapid shift from web to mobile is forcing a shift in thinking. Smaller screens make it difficult to display banner ads or create the kind of peripheral vision distractions that advertisers have used to drive traffic. Many of these tactics were seeing diminishing returns anyway.

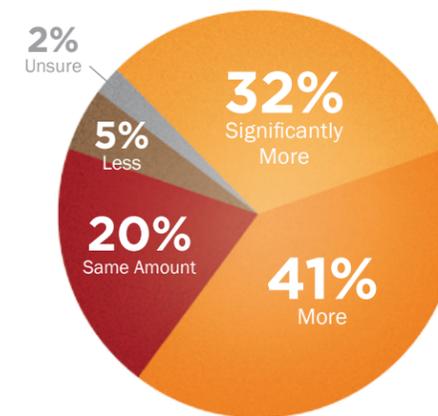
Second, changing patterns of video consumption are diminishing the reach and measurability of broadcast advertising. Consumers who stream, time-shift, download, or binge-view video, or divide their attention between multiple screens while watching entertainment programming, don’t get the same exposure to brand and

promotional messages as real-time viewers. In addition, the highest prized audience for most advertisers—Millennials—watch very little broadcast TV and are hard to reach through old media models.

By contrast, people across all demographics view content because it interests them, regardless of device, medium, and delivery mechanism. When brand is integrated organically with content, consumers pay qualitative attention and form durable associations between the brand, the content, and the context. This is a much richer form of engagement and a better return on investment for marketers who can do it successfully.

This kind of relevant, destination-driven content is shareable in ways that interruptive ads aren’t. The explosion of social platforms like Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram, and others allow individuals to curate content, images, and multimedia, imbuing the curated items with their own personal brand and influence. Along with Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, email, and IM, these sharing environments add the power of social influence to the inherent appeal and trustworthiness of the content. When content takes on this “social life,” it grows in credibility and influence across the customer journey. This enables brands to significantly amplify the reach of paid media and directly affect everything from brand perception to sales conversion to loyalty.

Marketers Are Turning to Content for B2B
Change in Amount of B2B Content Creation 2012–2013



According to a Content Marketing Institute/MarketingProfs survey, 73 percent of B2B marketers say they are producing more content now compared to a year ago (Study published October 1, 2013).

Native Content: Blurring the Lines

The explosion of new channels for reaching audiences online, through mobile devices, or through digital content services (such as Xbox Live, Netflix, Hulu, BuzzFeed) creates opportunities for brands to develop a different sort of marketing content: informational and entertainment-oriented materials that don’t look or feel as promotional as advertisements, and thus drive deeper reactions and deeper engagement.

Content-based marketing is more closely integrated with non-marketing content in the way it is presented, blurring the lines between editorial and advertising. Though this model seems hot and new, the digital trend of native content—sponsored stories, white papers, slideshows, and lists that appear alongside the editorially produced material on a site or in an app—is simply an extension of the older “advertorial” format that brands used to rent space in the news and opinion pages of magazines and newspapers. It is also a close cousin of product placement, where brands and logos are more or less discretely incorporated into entertainment programming.

An Ad by Any Other Name

The proliferation of content marketing has given rise to a virtual lexicon of terms describing closely related concepts. Here’s a handy guide:

SPONSORED CONTENT: Written, graphic, video, or interactive content produced or commissioned by the brand, expanding on the brand story in interesting narrative ways. Sponsored content could connect directly to a product or service (for example, Canon’s series on pro tips for better photos), obliquely to the brand story (Cole Hahn’s “Born in 1928” campaign, meant to build brand cache around creative innovators), or just provide diversion and humor (most of what’s posted on Cheezburger.com).

NATIVE ADVERTISING: Sponsored content placed alongside editorial content on a news or entertainment site, or in a context where the audience is expecting “neutral” editorial or institutional content. Sites like the Huffington Post, Daily Mail, and Business Insider are known for trafficking native advertising in line with independently produced or commissioned news and features.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP: Typically B2B content written or sponsored by a brand to capture the attention of strategic business leaders and influencers. Thought leadership can take the form of white papers, blog posts, infographics, case studies, or technical briefings, and can be found on sites like the IBM-supported Internet Evolution or the Adobe-sponsored CMO.com.

PUBLIC RELATIONS: Information and content generated by the brand and passed along to professional writers and publications for inclusion in putatively neutral journalistic features.

ADVERTORIAL: An opinion or position piece bylined by a company or individual clearly associated with the company, presenting the company’s perspective on a current issue.

“ASTROTURFING” AND “SOCK PUPPETRY”: Sponsored or brand-generated opinions, reviews, or content masquerading as disinterested, authentic grass-roots expression. As the derogatory terms indicate, this species of content marketing is widely considered unethical and deceptive.

Interruption Interrupted

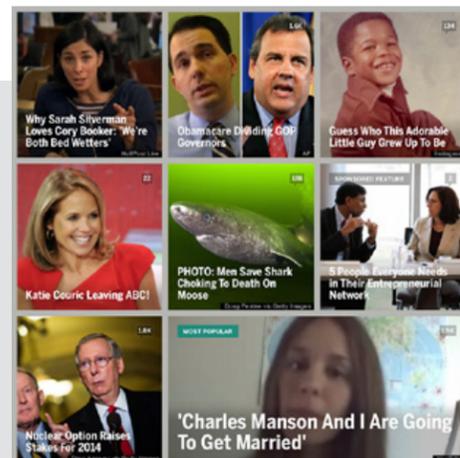
The goal in all these cases is to capture consumers' attention with material that interests them inherently, minimizing the disruption and annoyance that comes with ads that interrupt the reading or viewing experience with purely promotional messages.

Doing native content successfully requires a deft touch. Most people react poorly to attempts to deceive them with content that looks authentic and neutral, but actually contains marketing spin. However, lots of people will click on a provocative or interesting link—even one marked as sponsored content—if the entertainment or informational payoff seems worthwhile or if it comes recommended by a trusted source. BuzzFeed and the Daily Mail are two businesses

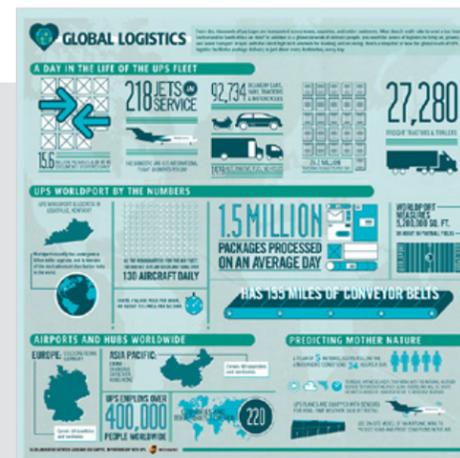
that have done exceptionally well with this model, though reliable metrics for quality engagement remain elusive.

As exciting as this trend seems to be for certain brands, it is not the endpoint in the discussion of content marketing. In fact, it is only the beginning. People will also seek out and share content that is directly relevant to them when they are considering a product purchase, and will continue to engage with brands to enrich their product/brand experience after the sale. The immediate future of content marketing is finding ways to extend the brand experience across that entire customer journey, taking full advantage of innovations in technology and changing consumer social behavior.

Examples of native content:



News aggregator The Huffington Post frequently features native content alongside editorial, as in this homepage from the mobile site.



Visual content like this UPS-sponsored infographic capture 40–60x the attention of text-only.

Relevance Is the Key to Content Success

As content becomes a more critical element in the marketing mix, marketers need metrics that not only measure the performance of content retrospectively (how did it influence the *last* purchase?), but also help predict and target customers looking to make their *next* purchase. Failing to do so puts transactions at risk as customers abandon irrelevant and generic-sounding brand content during their decision-making process.

Brands can dramatically improve conversions if they are able to target the right content to each customer as he or she moves from consideration to purchase. However, providing this kind of relevance requires a precise understanding of each customer's interests at the individual level, in real time, and at scale. This type of capability represents the leading edge

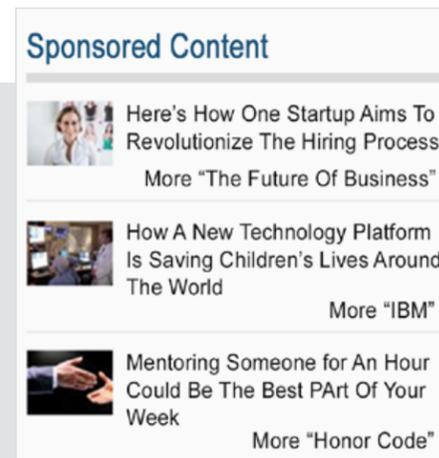
of today's marketing analytics toolkits and will become increasingly prevalent as content marketers seek competitive advantage during the next 3–5 years.

Idio, a UK-based startup that recently expanded to the US market, is one of several companies offering advanced analytics solutions at the intersection of content and data. By dynamically analyzing each customer's pattern of content consumption—what they read, whom they communicate with, what they search for—the software can help identify when consideration is moving toward intent to purchase, and can help marketers land the right message for the customer at the right moment in the customer journey.

“Right now, content marketing is like the Internet in the 1990s,” said

Damon Ragusa, President of Idio US. “Everyone is focused on creating more content but our understanding of how content can drive performance hasn't quite caught up.” Ragusa says brands and publishers can use content intelligence technology to kill two birds with one stone: by automating content management, and analyzing how their content can drive business results through 1:1 personalization.

His company, along with several others in the space, are bringing the specialization and energy of an entrepreneurial startup to speed innovation around these issues. For more on this dynamic, see our previous paper, [How Startups Are Reinventing Marketing from the Bottom Up](#).



Business sites like The Business Insider feature more B2B-oriented content such as sponsored thought-leadership, white papers and research.



Game Informer, published by the retail chain Game Stop, is the top digital publication in the world with almost 3 million online subscribers.

CONTENT ACROSS THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

IN 2009, McKinsey and Company produced the analysis of the customer decision process—the customer journey, in their parlance—that defines current thinking on the subject. McKinsey demonstrated how the old funnel theory of marketing, where customers gradually whittled down their brand options as they moved from awareness to consideration to purchase, has been replaced by a more complex cycle that extends beyond the sale itself and feeds back to influence future buying decisions.

According to McKinsey, brand awareness is limited during the initial consideration phase, widens as customers begin the process of active evaluation (comparing products, assessing features and benefits), and can remain in flux up until the moment of purchase—particularly when customers are buying

at a physical retail store and are confronted with actual items. The post-purchase exposure to the brand can reinforce the buy decision, turning passive “satisfied customers” into repeat customers and, more importantly, active brand ambassadors whose advocacy can influence subsequent shoppers.

There is no longer a simple path to purchase at scale. It's all personalized and serendipitous.



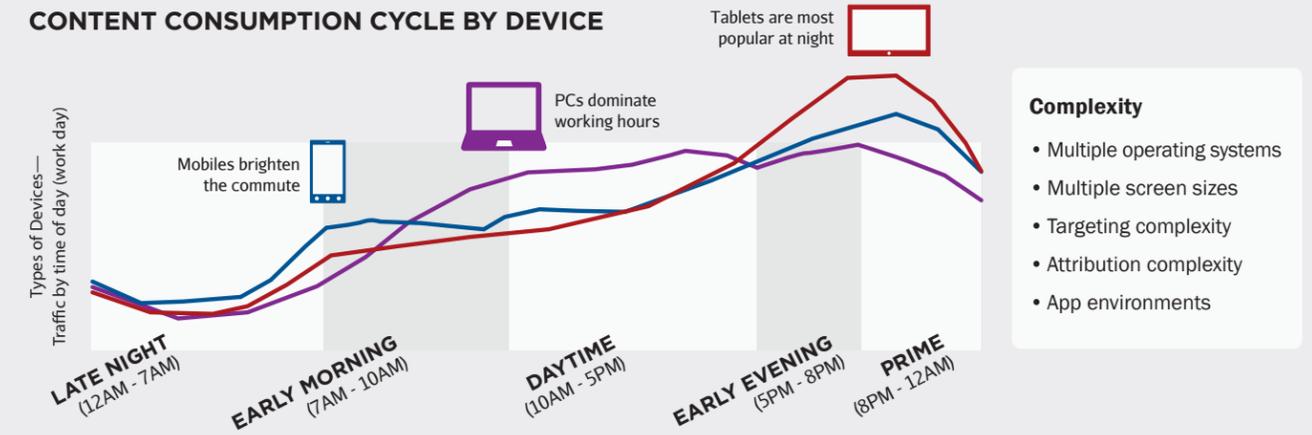
Figure 1: New model of the customer journey according to McKinsey and Company.

Multiscreen, Multitouch

When it comes to digital marketing, there is another dimension to add to this engagement model. The proliferation of new devices—smartphones, tablets, smart TVs, next-generation video gaming consoles, connected information systems in cars and public spaces, and a new wave of wearable computers on

the horizon—has created an embarrassment of riches for marketers looking to target customers digitally. Marketers need to synchronize delivery of content across the buying cycle, but also across multiple screens, hitting the right device with the right form of content at the right moment.

CONTENT CONSUMPTION CYCLE BY DEVICE



- Complexity**
- Multiple operating systems
 - Multiple screen sizes
 - Targeting complexity
 - Attribution complexity
 - App environments

E-Marketer reports that between Q1 2012 and Q1 2013 tablet search grew 85% and mobile search grew 90%.

Social Content Is Key

McKinsey’s findings take on added significance in the age of social media, where user reviews, comments, ratings, and recommendations play an enormous role during the decisive “active evaluation” segment of the buy cycle. Customers are highly influenced by word-of-mouth recommendations, especially from people in their social circle. They are also more likely to pay attention to content that is passed along or curated by trusted sources perceived to be independent of the brand.

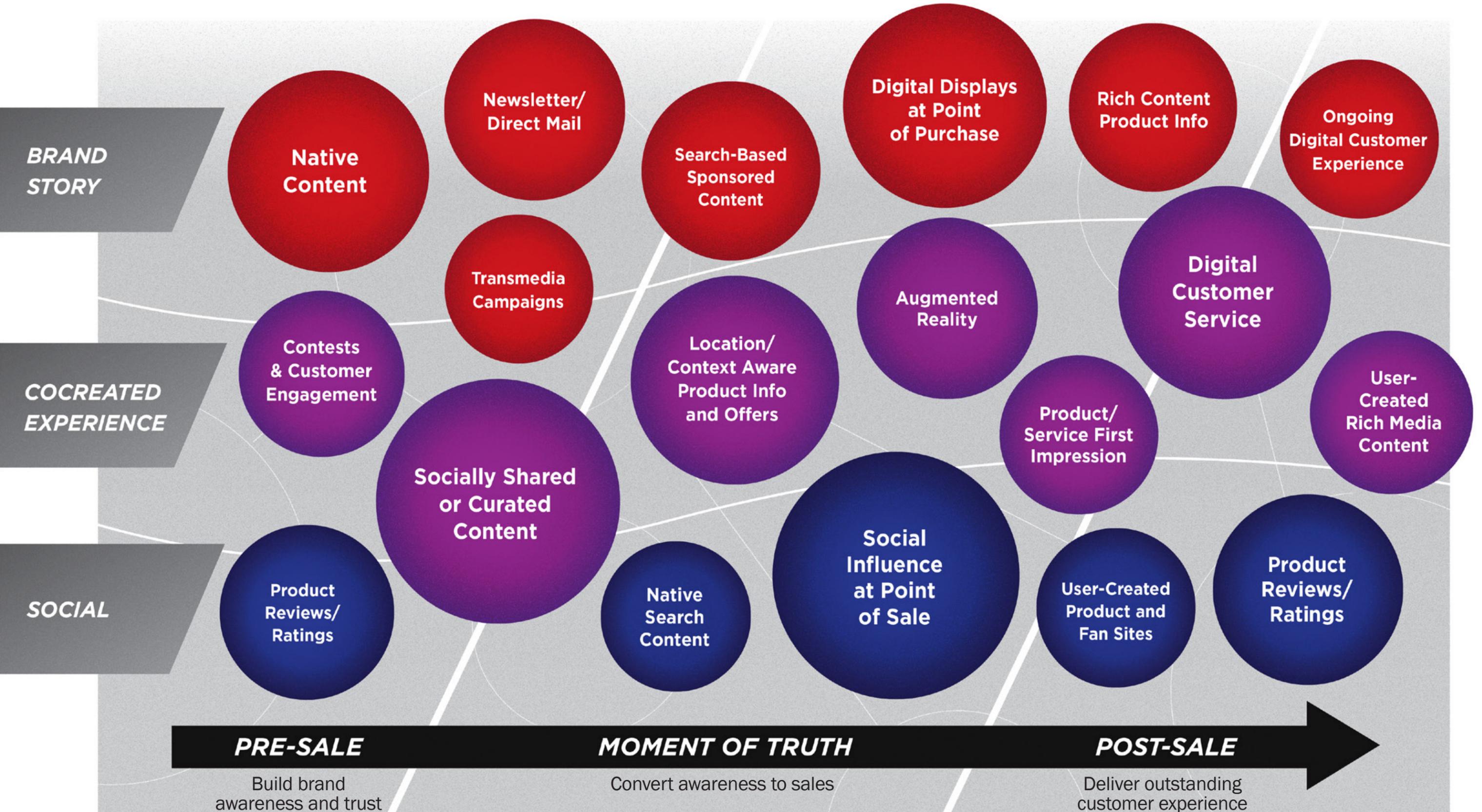
Brands therefore have a strong interest in working with their loyal customers to cocreate content, promote user-created

content, and make brand content easily shareable through a variety of channels. This effort need not be limited to traditional kinds of promotional content or strictly social campaigns. The expanding universe of digital media, devices, apps, and platforms gives rise to opportunities of all kinds and at all levels of investment to connect customers with trusted, credible content at touchpoints across the customer journey.

Said one expert we spoke to, “There is no longer a simple path to purchase at scale. It’s all personalized and serendipitous.”

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CONTENT ACROSS THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

THIS CHART PRESENTS A FRAMEWORK for how different types of content function across different touchpoints of the customer journey, and across the continuum of content types, from brand-generated marketing to user-created social content, as well as the middle ground of “cocreated experiences” that involve the participation of both the brand and the customer.



Pre-Sale: Cocreating Trust and Influence

The leftmost edge of the chart shows content that influences prospects early in the buying cycle, either in the consideration stage or active evaluation process as defined by McKinsey. Many of the techniques of pre-sale customer engagement through content are already part of the marketing arsenal. Experts we interviewed for this report see increasing opportunities for integration of social media as the key to increasing their effectiveness moving forward.

NATIVE CONTENT: Native content consists of sponsored editorial or institutional pieces, typically lifestyle features, tips and advice, “did you know...” pieces, or more rigorous B2B material such as white papers or corporate positions on issues. It can also include custom-developed branded apps and video games, music or video programming, infographics, comics and graphic novels, or works produced or curated by well-known creators. For the moment, native content is used almost exclusively to build brand awareness and affinity at scale. As metrics improve, marketers will be able to target and personalize native content more precisely both in terms of context and timing.

NEWSLETTER/DIRECT MAIL: Direct email is still one of the best ways to reach individual consumers through a channel that the majority of people check frequently. The art of creating emails that get opened and read is a sophisticated, if somewhat underappreciated, aspect of content execution, and is being enhanced by more advanced data-based targeting platforms like ExactTarget that optimize time, place, and device to deliver the content. Personalized notes can also be directed to social platforms or to apps that display a notification alert, prompting consumers to check and open the item. Auto-curated personal newsletters, such as those generated by the paper.ly application, are one example of a solution that covers the social, personal and data-driven dimensions of this approach. Expect to see brands innovating along this model as they find better ways to target and measure performance.

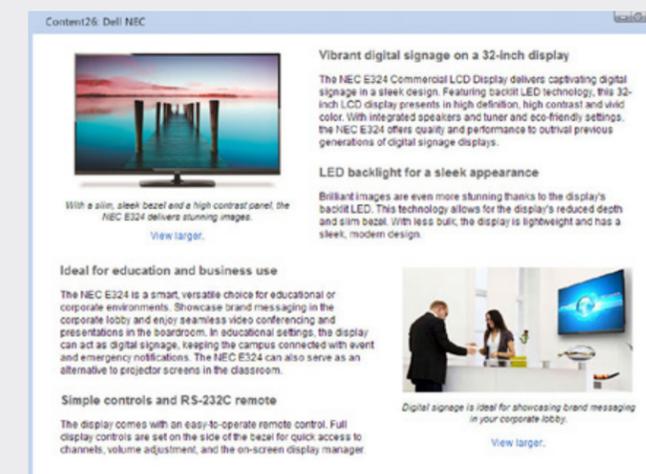
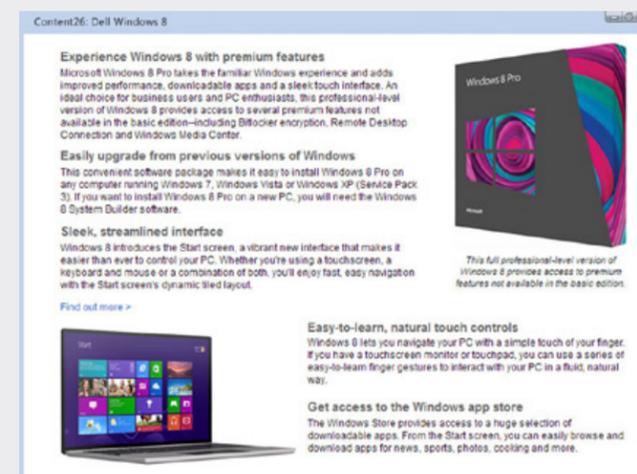
TRANSMEDIA CAMPAIGNS: Transmedia campaigns are typically story-driven or event-driven initiatives coordinated across

multiple media platforms. They are sometimes tied in to entertainment programs not explicitly affiliated with the brand, such as Audi’s extensive involvement with Marvel’s Iron Man property. Content plays a huge role in the success of transmedia, as the storytelling and imagery are central to the sense of audience immersion that gives the campaign its power.

CONTESTS AND CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT: Content often plays an important role in contests and engagement campaigns where brands reach out to customers to produce their own featured content for the brand. One recent high-profile example was BlackBerry’s use of best-selling fantasy author Neil Gaiman (who boasts nearly 2 million Twitter followers) as the lynchpin of the “Keep Moving” contest, where consumers sent Gaiman story ideas to realize.

SOCIALLY SHARED OR CURATED CONTENT: Outside content about the brand, such as third-party product reviews, articles, blog posts, and other commentary, can dramatically influence customer perceptions, particularly when customers are actively researching brands and models. Brands can improve the discoverability and search engine rankings of favorable or influential reviews, and use the brand’s own social and content channels to direct traffic to sites that present helpful content in the right context, and potentially route customers to the communities and individuals who can provide high-quality content for each stage of the customer journey.

PRODUCT REVIEWS AND RATINGS: Customer-penned reviews and ratings can be hosted at dedicated platforms such as Yelp, Angie’s List, TripAdvisor, and so on, or on retail sites like Amazon or Walmart. According to research published by Dimensional Research in 2013, 90 percent of consumers are influenced by online reviews.¹ As such, they are probably the single most important items of content in the sales cycle. Attempts to game the system with canned content and “sock puppet” reviewers are extremely high risk for established brands considering the downside costs of being exposed.² Better to encourage, incent, and make it easy for satisfied customers to write reviews and post them on high-traffic sites.



Example product page copy for Dell Computers developed by Content26. Used by permission.

Optimizing the Consideration Process Online

Upwards of 50% of all consumers in the United States start their product research online. Around 30 percent start with Amazon. But then the average shopper will check 3–4 additional sites for the same product—sometimes even after adding the item to their shopping cart at one or more sites—before completing the purchase.

Those customers are looking for consistent product information as they click from product page to product page, but because of legacy content practices, they don’t often get one. That can lead to lost sales, abandoned shopping carts, and consumer frustration.

“Brands typically provide content to big retailers through dedicated channel managers,” said Mark White, president of Content26, a specialty firm that develops online product copy for major consumer brands such as Unilever, Samsung, Intel, and Johnson & Johnson. But with the ability to

compare products and prices across channels instantly online, or even in the store on a mobile device, consumers are no longer following the same playbook.

In addition, each major e-commerce site has its own technical specifications for the product page, which encourages the creation of many different, potentially incoherent, versions of the same product content. Content26 works with brands and platforms to help rationalize a crucial component of content marketing that tends to get overlooked, or falls between the cracks separating marketing, merchandising, and operations.

“We help brands tell one story across all those online destinations, so we can maximize the chance of conversion no matter where the customer starts,” said White. “We’re able to consolidate all of the marketing assets a company has to create an online branding experience for their consumers.”

content26
CONTENT SOLUTIONS



Mark White, President of Content26

Moment of Truth: Personalizing Content to Close the Deal

Content can influence buyers when they are in the final stage of the purchase decision if it is delivered at the right time, at the right location, in the right format, to the right device. The increasing sophistication of mobile devices, location-based systems, and data-driven personalization is making it possible to target this content with greater precision. Because this is how marketing connects most directly to sales and revenue, and technology is advancing rapidly around location awareness, mobile devices, and data, we see this as a prime area for rapid innovation and new opportunities for marketers.

SEARCH-BASED SPONSORED CONTENT: Search platforms such as Google and Bing are continuing to develop richer opportunities for sponsored search results that make it easier for advertisers to convert curiosity into sales with a single click and capture user attention with more prominent and functional banner ads. In the near future, search-based ads are likely to include embedded media and interactive functionality, ads that bring social recommendations based on the user's network of connection, and personalized pricing based on each user's unique data profile and loyalty status.

DIGITAL DISPLAYS AT POINT OF PURCHASE: Lower-cost flat-panel HD displays are transforming the physical retail space, bringing vivid content to the point of purchase. Retailers like Build-a-Bear are already using touch-screen, gesture-based, and haptic interfaces to deliver unique experiences for customers. Soon we will see these screens delivering personalized content to shoppers nearby by using proximity sensors, facial recognition, and apps installed on people's mobile devices to connect to each customer's individual data profile. This will allow for the delivery of targeted offers, social recommendations, and personalized pricing at the decisive moment when customers are evaluating product purchases in store.

RICH CONTENT PRODUCT INFO AND DIGITAL PACKAGING: One plausible scenario for the future of retail is that physical stores become showrooms for products that customers order online—especially for big-ticket purchases that are costly to carry as inventory. Audi, for example, is pioneering this approach with its Audi City virtual dealerships. In this case, many products are likely to contain digital displays or digital packaging that enables the manufacturer to deliver rich, personalized content to individual shoppers reflecting their explicit (as declared via app or web during the product evaluation stage) or implicit (data-based, social) preferences, as well as the opportunity to customize products for ordering.

AUGMENTED REALITY: Augmented reality (AR) overlays digital data onto physical objects when viewed with a mobile device. For example, Quick Read (QR) codes—typically ugly squares of digital gibberish that appear on event posters and product packages—unlock additional content when customers scan them using a smartphone app. Successor technologies such as Mobile Visual Search (MVS) provide the same kind of functionality without the aesthetic objections, using object recognition and other implicit visual cues to identify and overlay the correct content seamlessly. The mobile phone app Shazam uses audio recognition for the same effect, and is increasingly being used to add an AR component to broadcast ads. As these approaches gain momentum, the underlying content delivery mechanisms will become more sophisticated, data-driven, and personalized, ultimately providing each individual with a custom set of content, promotional, social, and pricing data.

LOCATION-AWARE PRODUCT INFORMATION AND OFFERS: Geofencing, which uses location data to target delivery of mobile content (offers, coupons, notifications) to users within a defined perimeter, is poised to go mainstream during the holiday season of 2013 and will soon be a ubiquitous feature of retail marketing. To avoid consumer fatigue, advertisers will quickly need to combine location data with customer profiles,

social data, and device-specific capabilities (for example, different formats for smartphones, heads-up displays, and lightweight wearables like data watches) to target ads, offers, and content with greater precision. If innovation can outrun backlash, this will be fertile ground for marketers to deliver content in the buying context to maximize sales conversions.

ORGANIC SEARCH CONTENT: We are likely to see some of the same innovations from sponsored search—embedded rich content, one-click transaction, personalization, and social data—appear in organic search content. Bing's integration of Facebook data into search, for example, adds a powerful social component to content discovery and can help persuade shoppers by showing their friends' relationships with brands alongside algorithmically generated results. As search engines make it more difficult for sponsors to game the system using SEO techniques developed in the '90s and '00s, users will look to native search results with greater trust, providing reputable companies with more opportunities to deliver content at what Google calls the "Zero Moment of Truth."

SOCIAL INFLUENCE AT THE POINT OF SALE: Given the massive influence of social recommendations and word-of-mouth from trusted sources, the greatest opportunity to increase conversions at the point of sale lies in connecting new customers with independent brand ambassadors (ideally, ones personally known to the customer) while they are in the final stages of purchase consideration. This involves connecting user data such as real-time browsing status and location with social data, generating notifications along the lines of "your friend Isabella is shopping for jeans and accessories right now—send her a message telling her your favorites!"—something likely to set off a cacophony of privacy alarm bells. Finding the right set of incentives for customers to opt in to this kind of system is a business challenge for marketers, but those that find the formula will benefit tremendously.



Post-Sale: Recruiting Brand Ambassadors

McKinsey's customer journey research clearly shows how satisfied customers feed back into the loop as influencers of the next wave of prospects. This is why brands are increasingly focusing on the post-sale experience as a way to not only lock in loyalty, but to activate a corps of convincing and credible advocates to reinforce top-down marketing efforts with a groundswell of grass roots efforts. Content plays a role in that strategy at every level, from reinforcing the brand experience to cocreating social content with customers to smoothly integrating independently produced social content with the brand.

ONGOING DIGITAL PRODUCT EXPERIENCE: More companies are using apps and the web to deliver an ongoing brand experience to keep customers excited and loyal. For example, the video game retailer GameStop offers customers a subscription to its tablet-based *Game Informer Magazine*, which boasts a digital subscriber base of nearly 3 million (by

far the largest circulation of any digital publication). These types of apps and publications are sources of shareable content, contests, product demos, and other features that reward loyalty and encourage brand fans to reach out to their social networks. By measuring the popularity of content and functions distributed in these channels, brands can learn more about how customers are using their products, which can feed back into the product development process.

DIGITAL CUSTOMER SERVICE: For the majority of customers, the web has become the first destination for product support, documentation, FAQs, and interactive support. It is tempting to dismiss this type of brand content as less compelling or strategic than, say, sponsored posts on high-traffic websites. But, as many brands have discovered, poor service carries a high reputational cost as disgruntled customers have many outlets for venting their dissatisfaction. Some companies are now upgrading their service content, including developing



Unboxing Day

Unboxing videos, homemade clips of users opening the packages of new products to capture their first experience with a purchase, have been a huge phenomenon on YouTube for the past several years and can generate invaluable grass-roots buzz among the most engaged consumer segments. Bethesda Game Studios, makers of the best-selling Elder Scrolls games, sent some swag to superfan Dan Bull, who recorded a real-time account of opening the envelopes and becoming increasingly excited and enthusiastic about what he found inside. The video has logged more than 2.8 million views on YouTube—not a bad return on investment for some t-shirts, sample games, and a PipBoy.



mobile apps to make access more convenient. Often, however, the best service advice for a company's products comes from the customer community itself (see *user-created content and fan sites* on this page). Promoting and enhancing that channel can do more to shore up the customer service experience than direct investments in service delivery. Service channels also give brands another touchpoint for qualitative feedback on products, services, and operations.

PRODUCT/SERVICE FIRST IMPRESSION:

The sense of excitement—or disappointment—that accompanies the customer's first experience with a product or service shapes their perception of the brand. Companies like Apple and Volkswagen reportedly spend vast resources designing these experiences in the minutest detail. Though a minority of customers fully appreciate these efforts, those who

do tend to be credible and influential: the kind who post authentic and spontaneous "unboxing" videos (see above) that generate millions of YouTube views.

USER-CREATED CONTENT AND FAN SITES:

Since the advent of the Internet, brands have been looking for ways to turn customers into volunteer marketing and media developers. Social platforms like Facebook provide opportunities for customers to associate publicly and stay connected to brands they like, but deeper engagements take place on more content-rich platforms, discussion groups, and forums. New metrics are providing greater insights into how collaboration and influence work on these sites: which kinds of contributors are the most valuable and credible to the community, what types of content are likely to be curated and shared, and what incentive structures (games, contests, badges,

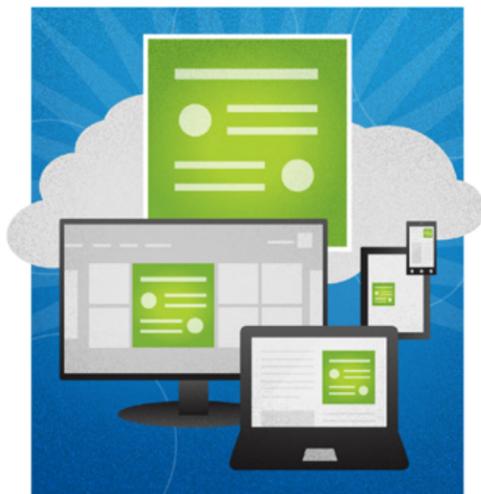
leaderboards, etc.) can be used to recruit marginally affiliated participants into higher levels of engagement. Brands can work with super fans to promote and augment these sites, making them more appealing destinations and also creating incentives for others to follow suit.

PRODUCT REVIEWS/RATINGS:

And now we're back where we started: user ratings, testimonials, recommendations, and personal stories that, anecdotally and in the aggregate, provide the most persuasive sales and marketing content available. Currently users are bombarded with requests for ratings and feedback at the conclusion of every transaction or service encounter. Innovations will soon allow companies to streamline that process and make it more implicit—maybe by serving up a simple one or two question screen on the user's mobile device as soon as the encounter is completed.

EMERGING TECHNOLOGY ENABLING THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CONTENT

THE ABILITY TO EXTEND CONTENT across the customer journey in some of the more futuristic ways described above depends on a few underlying technology innovations. As we saw in the first two papers in this series (*Dollars, Bits and Atoms: A Roadmap to the Future of Marketing* and *How Startups are Turning Marketing Upside Down*), companies large and small are investing heavily in bringing these capabilities to market; many are here today or very close. Marketing organizations should work closely with their IT counterparts to keep abreast of the development and maturation of platforms that support the following.



ANAMORPHIC CONTENT: One of the biggest challenges for content distribution is the plethora of technical and design standards for each site, platform, and device. This increases the cost and complexity of managing a unified content strategy because each item must be manually formatted to each different specification. One solution under development is “anamorphic content” (the term *anamorphic* refers to movie formats that can adapt to standard and widescreen automatically): content developed in a single standard template that can automatically configure and format itself according to the target environment. This means ads developed for one retail website would render properly on any website, within search listings, on mobile devices, at point of purchase, or wherever. It also means companies could maintain a single, centrally managed content repository where changes made to the master content listing would automatically propagate to every instance and format in the digital domain to ensure consistency.

DISCOVERABLE MEDIA: Despite improvements in metadata, a vast quantity of online content remains untagged or unstructured—and thus difficult to find and measure. Improvements in image recognition, facial recognition, text capture, and context awareness will make this kind of content more discoverable by search and data mining processes and easier to integrate into a measurable, comprehensive digital content strategy.



PORTABLE METADATA: One downside of social sharing of marketing material is that content that is shared, reposted, or redistributed is usually removed from its original context. Photos taken from fashion sites, for example, have no links back to the site of origin and provide no way for people to initiate a transaction or request for additional information. After years of promises, it now appears that we will soon see standard frameworks for “portable metadata” embedded into content at a granular level so that ownership, copyright, trackback, and transactional capabilities can travel with text, photos, and videos that have been cut-and-pasted, shared, pinned, or otherwise digitally distributed. This will not only dramatically improve measurement of content performance, but also lower the cost and IP risk to content marketers for pursuing more open social strategies.



DATA-SHARING APPS (“APPS TALKING TO APPS”): Several of the more complex content forecasts above depend on apps sharing and operating on different types of data (for example, current location + current device info + social graph + browsing history + customer history with a particular retailer) at a level of openness that does not yet exist. There are several ways this could be managed: at the central layer, through the cloud, or within/between the apps. Investments in all three areas are ongoing.

RICHER SOCIAL METRICS: The social, user-created experiences that help brands amplify the reach and influence of their content, promote loyalty, and influence future buyers depend on the collaboration of anonymous users and communities, which can be unpredictable. How much should brands participate in this process, and at what point does their involvement invite backlash? Close study of online collaboration and communities is starting to yield data showing the leverage points where community managers can reduce friction and reward subtle behaviors that promote better experiences (such as contributors who organize comment threads or resolve disputes between other members). Brands can support user-created communities and content by reinforcing these with incentives and **gamification** (contests, recognition for high achievers, etc.), turning haphazard and serendipitous collaboration into something more robust, systematic, and predictable.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR EXECUTIVES

CONTENT MARKETING IS TRENDY FOR A REASON:

It addresses a few key problems in the current environment and provides opportunities to drive tangible results not just for brand awareness, but for customer engagement, sales conversion, loyalty, and retention. Here are some considerations and observations based on our conversations with CMOs and content experts:

- **Content is strategic across marketing, sales, service, and operations:** Some organizations are responding to this by elevating content management to the senior executive level with a chief content officer. Others are consolidating content management responsibilities through the CMO, chief customer experience officer, or similar title with the authority to standardize disparate content development and management practices, develop a single voice of the brand, and bring together company-created and consumer-created content.
- **The right content strategy can build sales and loyalty, not just brand awareness:** Today's focus on content marketing as a supplement or substitute for advertising only addresses one of the benefits. Content is a key part of shaping the entire customer experience, particularly when combined with social media and produced in collaboration with consumer brand loyalists.
- **Emerging digital technologies are enabling better development, delivery, and measurement of content across the customer journey:** Social, mobile, and location-based technologies, in combination with data-driven personalization, can help brands target content to customers in the context of their decision-making process. Providing this content at the right time and place, in the right context, and on the right device will determine success.
- **Social content has qualitative as well as quantitative value:** While brands are focused on broad metrics like social sentiment, shares, upvotes, and ratings, they should not overlook the opportunity to gain qualitative feedback from customers who are engaging either directly (through brand-managed channels) or indirectly (on independent

communities and outside sites) with the brand. Often these "brand hackers" and superfans will discover new uses or new product innovations, marginal improvements that can add significant value, or new contexts and new audiences where the brand is relevant. The deeper the content and the deeper the engagement, the more of these serendipitous opportunities are likely to emerge.

Despite these opportunities, organizations should keep in mind:

- **Content best practices are still a black box.** Data can give us a better understanding of consumer behavior around content, but there are not yet clear answers to what makes some content compelling and shareable, while material in a similar format languishes. Ongoing research into the "Serendipity Economy" may provide better methods soon, but for the time being, creating great content remains more of an art than a science.
- **Content roles and skills are still evolving:** The title of "content strategist" is appearing on more and more organization charts, but beyond a few clear leaders in the area, few executives and HR departments understand what skills are required to make that role effective. Third-party sites and educational institutions are developing practices and certifications around content. Companies and marketing professional organizations should work with them to ensure that training and credentials match actual organizational needs.
- **Digital content strategy needs a platform approach:** In the heat of battle, marketing organizations tend to see the elements of a successful content strategy—content creation, distribution across multiple media channels and formats, measurement, and engagement of social assets—as separate silos requiring separate investments. As the true scope and value of content marketing emerges, organizations should consider the strategic value of a technology platform that provides all the necessary capabilities through a centrally managed, secure architecture and a consistent user experience across devices.

CONTENT MARKETING BY THE NUMBERS

Data points driving the brand publishing boom:

- **90% of consumers are influenced by ONLINE REVIEWS/RATINGS.**
—Dimension Research
- **84% of consumers report acting on recommendations from TRUSTED SOURCES.**
—Nielsen Global Survey of Trust in Advertising, 2013
- **68% of consumers read content from BRANDS THEY LOVE.**
—Content Marketing Association, 2013
- **82% of B2B BUYERS have shared white papers with colleagues. 79% share case studies, 73% share webinars.**
—B2B Buyers Survey, 2012
- **ADVERTISERS spent nearly \$44 BILLION on CONTENT CREATION in 2013—UP 9.2% since 2012.**
—Custom Content Council, 2013
- **78% of CMOs see CONTENT as the future of marketing.**
—Leaders West
- **65% of ADVERTISERS AND MARKETERS are likely to invest in native content in the next 6 months.**
—Advertiser Perceptions, 2013
- **81% of survey respondents are CREATING CONTENT explicitly for use in social media.**
—Custom Content Council, 2013

About This Report:

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CONTENT is the third in a series of research papers looking at the convergence of digital technology and marketing during the next 5–7 years. Researchers gathered material and conducted interviews from February through June, 2013. Sponsorship for this research was provided by the Microsoft Developer Platform Evangelist (DPE) and Corporate Marketing (CMG) groups. All interview subjects were apprised of this in advance. Participation or citation in this report does not imply any relationship with or endorsement of Microsoft or its products. Contents of this report are © 2013 MediaPlant, LLC. Permission required to quote extended excerpts, redistribute, or syndicate.

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About MediaPlant:

MEDIAPLANT is a communications firm specializing in B2B marketing, strategy, and technical development. Founded in 1999, the company and its principle partners have completed projects for Microsoft, HP, Herman Miller, Watchguard, Ford Motors, and many other global leaders. MediaPlant has offices in the Pioneer Square neighborhood of downtown Seattle, Washington. For more information, see www.mediaplant.net.

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Notes and References:

¹ <http://www.zendesk.com/resources/customer-service-and-lifetime-customer-value>

² <http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidvinjamuri/2012/09/12/do-consumer-reviews-have-a-future-why-amazons-sock-puppet-scandal-is-bigger-than-it-appears/>

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