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How To Build an Effective Digital Content Marketing Strategy



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Introduction

“Content” is all the rage in digital marketing, and it has been ever since brands realized their first websites gave them the power and means of production to publish their own messages and information without depending on the press or advertising to distribute it. Looking at content as a marketing communications tactic, without a unifying strategy to build and deliver it as demand for it grows, is a recipe for missed opportunities, mixed messages, high costs and big risks to the brand. How a marketer plans to design and deliver content will ultimately determine how it is distributed and measured for success and further optimization based on reader feedback and behavior.

If you don't have a comprehensive content strategy in place, you're not alone. According to the Altimeter Group, a consulting firm based in San Mateo, CA, [70% of marketers lack a consistent or integrated content strategy](#). This is a quick guide on how to lay the foundations for a sensible content marketing strategy, based on technologies and structures we've seen succeed with our customers and the Acquia Platform.

Marketing content is — and let's be honest — biased “advertorial” with far less objectivity and value than a customer's honest review, the unfiltered words of the press, or the published opinions of an industry analyst. The burden is on the content team to design and develop honest content, informed by insights gained through careful research and experience.

Determining what matters to the reader must be uncovered using data from CRM records, historical web logs, social media trends, analyst reports, etc. Crunching numbers is only one step, however, towards gaining a better understanding of the audience. There is no substitute for talking directly to customers, or for talking to those inside the organization who talk to customers. Sales teams, field reps, and customer support are all excellent sources to gain deeper customer insights and to fact-check data.

“In my experience, having worked with brands across verticals and industries, the most important part of building a successful content strategy is finding that crucial intersection of customer need and brand value. Being customer first is a great mantra, but a model that many brands are challenged to fully adopt. A more reasonable approach is to objectively identify, through research and insights, customer needs and triggers throughout their buying or engagement journey.”

— Laura Weedon, Director of Strategy and Planning, Mirum

Governing Content

In a [2015 Demand Gen report](#), 67% of B2B buyers said that this year they will rely more on content for research purposes and to make B2B purchasing decisions. As a result of content's growing importance to an organization — from hitting sales targets to telling the corporate story — brands and enterprises are generating massive amounts of content, leading to what many call “content chaos.” Chaos occurs when content is created independently, across a single organization, by multiple departments and multiple teams, in multiple languages and geographies, with different agendas and audiences in mind. With content existing in so many different locations, it becomes difficult to even find content, let alone efficiently manage it.

There is virtually no major brand or company that maintains just one website. Mid- to large-sized companies often have multiple sites under their control. In fact, according to a 2015 study by Forrester Research, the typical enterprise organization has more than 250 sites associated with its brands and products. Content of one form or another is needed for each and every site, channel, and touchpoint, ranging from the main brand homepage and individual brand or product sites, outwards to feed social media and mobile apps. Content is also needed for distribution outside of the organization's own sites, making it even more important for enterprises to have the right strategy and technical tools in place.

Some of the true pain comes not from populating content across multiple sites, but instead from updating and maintaining even the most mundane content, such as terms and conditions, boilerplate copy, disclaimers, copyright information, etc. Without a content strategy in place for maintaining all content across all sites and channels, updating each of these becomes a time-consuming, manual task with high risk for human error. A decimal point in the wrong place or outdated legal copy can lead to a costly headache for an organization in a closely regulated industry such as pharmaceuticals or financial services. If a mandate from legal comes down that a piece of content needs to be removed from all global sites by the end of the day, how can the digital team possibly meet that deadline without a process and the right tools in place to do so? The most boring piece of content is oftentimes the one that could cause the biggest nightmares.

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Building A Content Strategy

In building a content strategy, it's important that all content authors and managers be aligned through a well-defined process. The first step in creating this process is to determine what you want your content to do, and setting realistic goals to get you there. Are you looking to drive engagement? Do you want to generate revenue? Are you teaching an existing user something about the use of your product? Are you showcasing a customer? Are you citing news related to your customer's interests? Knowing what purpose your content serves helps you create the right content to achieve those goals.

Determine who does what:

Identifying roles and workflow is key to successful content production and governance, especially if you need to scale. Who are your authors? Where is the information coming from? Who has the final say on what goes live, and when? What is the process for creating a new piece of content or updating an existing one? Knowing who is responsible for what throughout the content production and distribution journey helps to streamline the process.

Set standards and best

practices: Defining processes and establishing guidelines for reviews and approvals across the entire organization will help keep the various content creators on the same page and keep content production moving at a steady pace. Governance is critical to effective content management.

Figure out what content you

have: Before you dedicate your time and resources to creating content, consider what might already be available. Performing a content audit can help you find existing content that can be reused or repurposed instead of spending time creating/recreating it. It also helps to understand your content gaps, and where you should devote your time.

Build your content marketing technology stack.

When it comes to content distribution, automation, discovery, and aggregation, it's not all on you and your team. There are a wide variety of tools and technologies available to help further streamline your process, personalize your digital experiences, and extend your reach.

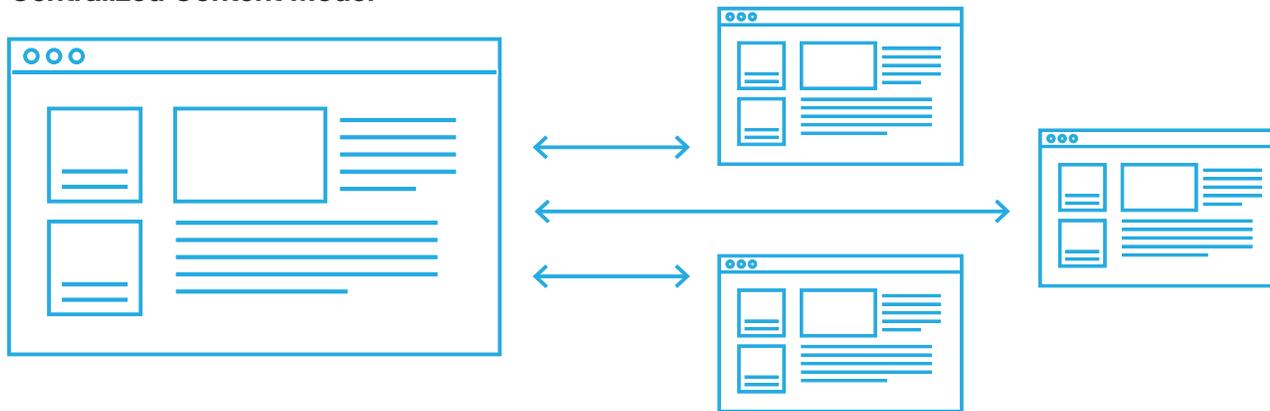
Having a solid content strategy in place isn't a nice-to-have, it's a need-to-have. Establishing the right content tools and technologies to support your overall strategy helps to not just distribute content and keep websites fresh, but to also mitigate the risk associated with outdated, inaccurate, or non-compliant content. Consumers are tech savvy and even a minor error in a product description can come back to haunt you. A successful content strategy should keep everyone producing and managing content within your organization on the same page. The right content plan paired with the right technology stack is the key.

Content Distribution Models: Centralized or Decentralized

Creating and syndicating quality content has become a top marketing priority for businesses large and small, regardless of industry. Marketers are constantly working toward the right content balance, one that strikes the right tone, provides the correct information, and engages the audience, all while meeting customer expectations. With so much focus on production of content, however, the distribution of finished content can often become secondary. Content has no purpose if your audience can't access it. Having a content distribution plan is almost as important as the creation of the content itself.

Content distribution considerations include not just what content is available, but also where it can and needs to be syndicated. Choosing the right content distribution model depends largely on an organization's omnichannel presence. Do you have a primary global site that houses the majority of your organization's content? Does that content need to be distributed to secondary sites? Are external sites also receiving content from the primary site? Or are many secondary sites sending content to other secondary sites in a peer-to-peer content sharing network? Most organizations will fall into the following distribution models: Centralized or Decentralized.

Centralized Content Model

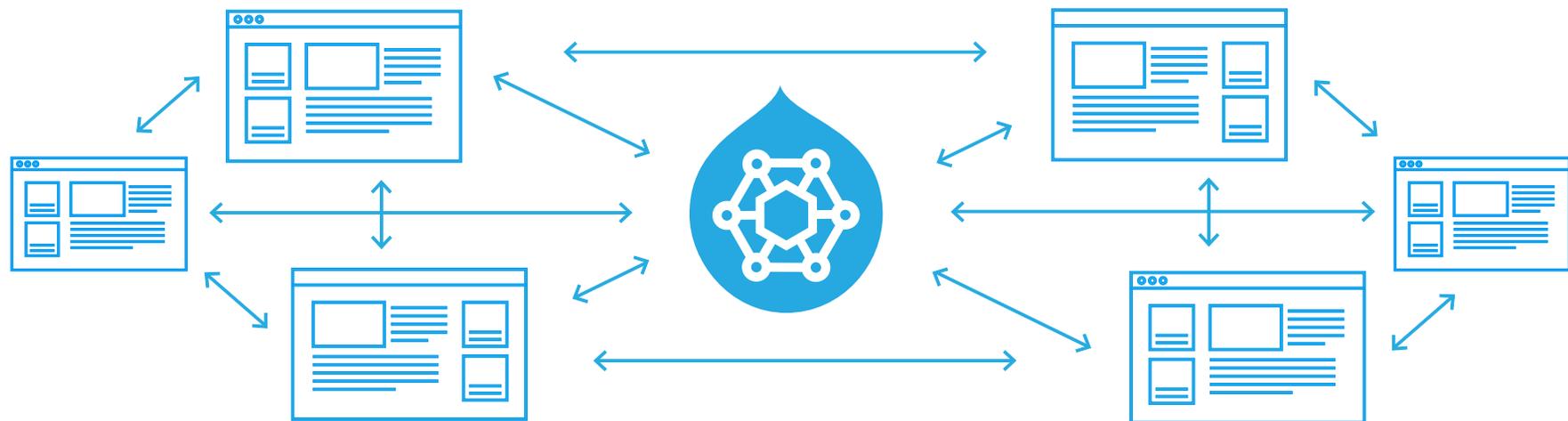


A centralized content model is also referred to as a hub and spoke model. In this scenario, one primary site sends content to a network of secondary sites. This is ideal for a large organization that is looking to share corporate marketing materials across their network of sites and channels, while maintaining consistent brands and campaigns. One site serves as the anchor, distributing content out to global sites, product sites, etc..

A perfect use case for the centralized model is the United Nations. The UN has a primary website, as well as 160 country sites that each have their own marketing teams and content. If there is a new global initiative or important information that needs to be shared, new study results on malaria for example, a marketer at the UN's global headquarters could distribute information to all of its secondary sites in addition to publishing the content on the UN's primary site. In this centralized scenario, content is being pushed out to secondary sites from the primary site.

Sometimes, however, the most interesting, relevant, or important content exists on secondary sites. It might be the case that a primary site imports content from a secondary site, so that it can then distribute that very same content out across the broader organization to other secondary sites. The primary site in these two examples is the center of the organization's content distribution model - a centralized content model.

Decentralized Content Model



In the absence of one main website to distribute content out to additional sites, a decentralized content model can be adopted. This means that content is shared through a peer-to-peer content sharing network, where many independently-operated sites share content with each other.

For example, a sports network may be made up of many different regional sites. If a team from Boston is playing in Seattle, the Boston affiliate may want to reuse the Seattle affiliate's coverage of the game on their own regional site. Collecting news and reporting in real-time used to be a hassle, and relied too heavily on email. If you were the Seattle affiliate, you'd have to ask if anyone in the network wanted updates on the game, and then you'd have to email your coverage to the interested parties. This process was cumbersome; you would have to check email, remember the schedule, rely on other affiliates for updated stories, make sure you were providing updates to everyone that wanted them, and then copy and paste any content shared. Today, there are ways around relying on email to distribute and reuse content in a decentralized content model.

Selecting and implementing the right content distribution model is critical for success. Your content model will play a role in determining what content and when content gets distributed to your sites, and more importantly, to your customers. Content production shows no signs of slowing down. The only way to streamline the process and work as efficiently as possible is to make content distribution a priority.

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Using Technology to Overcome Content Challenges

While a top priority for most enterprises today, content strategy comes with many challenges. How much content should you be producing? Are you oversaturating your audience with too much content, or are you leaving them hanging with too little content? How do you create content that your audience wants to read, watch, or see? And how do you keep up with the audience demand for fresh, completely personalized content, delivered to them at the exact moment they need it?

Luckily, there is a whole world of marketing technology designed to deal with these common [content strategy](#) challenges.

Selecting, implementing, and using the right content tools can greatly help businesses face and overcome their content challenges. These solutions can streamline processes, provide information to efficiently make better content decisions, and free up time spent organizing and searching for content that could be used to actually create content. Let's break it down by three of the most common content challenges facing businesses today.

Challenge #1: Creating Enough Content

Despite the importance of content, content teams are usually small and budgets are tight. The best writers can only crank out so many articles, blogs, and papers. Even if your organization is full of content creators, there is likely a core team, most likely within marketing or public relations, that handles the distribution and editorial oversight of all content. This team needs to be able to scale in order to continue to provide content, hit deadlines, and engage audiences.



How Technology Can Help: Enabling the Reuse of Existing Content

With content creators working fast and furiously, it's hard to always be aware of existing content. Content creation is often siloed across different authors, teams, departments or even third-parties, which means that the widespread availability of content within your network can easily be unknown to you. Technology can help. One solution is to implement a content repository within your organization. Whether your organization uses a centralized or decentralized content model, a content repository would ultimately give everyone within your network access to the most relevant, up-to-date content available across a diverse network of sites and channels. This solution streamlines the content creation process, makes it easier to find existing content, and reduces the time and costs associated with needlessly re-creating content.

Challenge #2: Maximizing Your Content Efforts / Time Spent on Content

So now that all of your organization's content is located in one place, you need to be able to find that content. Combing through articles and blog posts and papers and product descriptions takes up too much valuable time. That time spent searching could be spent creating.

How Technology Can Help: Search Functionality

Having the capability to search for content saved in a content repository is essential to leveraging that repository to its full potential. How else can you have full visibility into what content is available? Some tools offer basic search functionality. Some tools are a bit more advanced. Some tools offer the capability to save previously searched terms, so that you can expedite your content search process. Others allow you to set up feeds and updates that automatically import the content you need. Imagine what you could do with the time you save.



Challenge #3: Creating the Right Content for Your Audience

According to Hubspot, in 2015, [54% of B2B marketers](#) and [50% of B2C marketers](#) cited “producing engaging content” as their top content challenge. It’s no secret that content that is relevant, accurate, and provides your audience with the exact information they want is the most likely to have the highest engagement.

No business can be everything to everyone; to try is almost certain doom. So, how do you provide engaging content to a variety of different audiences? New customers want to feel welcomed, while existing customers want to feel remembered and understood. New business prospects might want case studies and information on your successful projects, whereas existing clients, who have a deeper understanding of your business, might want to see your new products or ventures. You need to be able to provide each of your audience segments with what they need. But how?

How Technology Can Help: Collecting and Analyzing Customer Data

There is no way you can provide personalized content unless you know who you’re talking to. There are several different personalization options that collect user data from both known and anonymous users. This data can then be used to divide your audience into segments based on location, purchase history, etc. Once you know who your audience is, you can determine what content they want, and how best to deliver it.

Marketing tools and technologies vary widely in functionality, purpose, and price, but with so many options available, it’s not hard to piece together the right tech stack to fit your needs. Let technology take the burden off of the content author, and let them do what they were hired to do - create the best possible content and deliver engaging digital experiences.

“One of the biggest challenges when it comes to content strategy is balancing user needs with business objectives. Often times these aren’t the same thing, and are maybe even at odds. Businesses tend to err on the side of saying what they want people to hear, not what will help solve users’ problems. Finding the right balance is key.”

— Judd Mercer, Creative Director,
Elevated Third

Building Your Content Marketing Stack

By now you've realized how important a solid content strategy is and how marketing tools and technologies can help you reach your content goals. While content creation is best left to writers and subject matter experts, technologies to manage, search for, and optimize that content are necessary to improve customer engagement and extend reach. However, no one tool or software does it all. In order to meet your organization's content marketing needs, your tech stack will likely be made up of a compilation of various different technologies and legacy systems.

Content Management

As you embark on building your tech stack, whether from scratch or around your existing technology footprint, it is likely you will be managing your content primarily in web content management (WCM) and/or digital asset management (DAM) solutions.

A WCM is designed to create, publish, and manage website content. A DAM, on the other hand, is intended to help manage the workflows, manipulation, digital rights, and storage of rich media content (ie. photos and videos). Today, many DAM capabilities are being built directly into WCMs.

While these systems are important, and often necessary, for the overall organization and distribution of content across an enterprise, there are often functionality gaps and missing capabilities, such as the strength of search functionality, the automation of content delivery, and the ability to easily communicate with various other technologies. A WCM is very strong at managing content already located within the system. Content created and located outside of that WCM in other sites or systems, however, can be difficult to distribute out to and use with other technologies. Adding to the inherent complexities of content strategy and management, different departments within an organization sometimes have their own WCM and/or their own DAM. In these scenarios, content becomes siloed because it is organized on a department level rather than on a corporate level. Adding content marketing technologies into your mix of current WCM and DAM investments will help you to close these functionality gaps.

Core Content Marketing Components

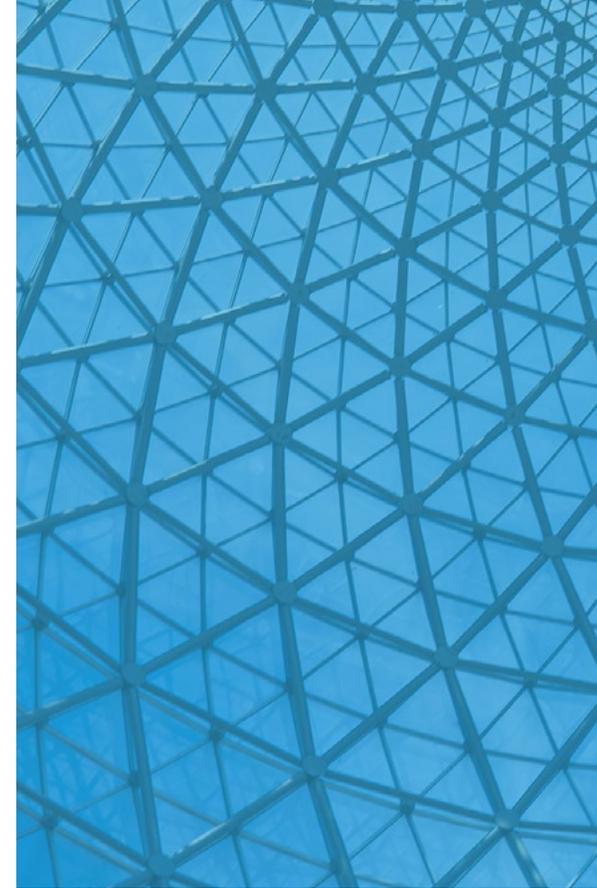
There are hundreds of content marketing tools, software, and applications, spanning every aspect of content marketing, including writing services, promotion tools, curation, automation, personalization, and analytics. How do you even begin to build an effective tech stack to help meet your content marketing goals? By starting with the fundamentals that every content marketing team needs, regardless of industry: planning and workflow, curation and distribution, and measurement and reporting.

Planning and Workflow

The first step in any content strategy is process. Making sure you have tools in place that allow you to plan, execute, and manage content in your native workflow is critical to success. Are you taking an agile approach to content or is an editorial calendar a more effective way to manage projects? Tools like Workbench, InMotionNow, JIRA, or Content Marketing Platforms (CMPs) can help you manage workflow, tasks, and projects internally and across other teams and departments.

Curation and Distribution

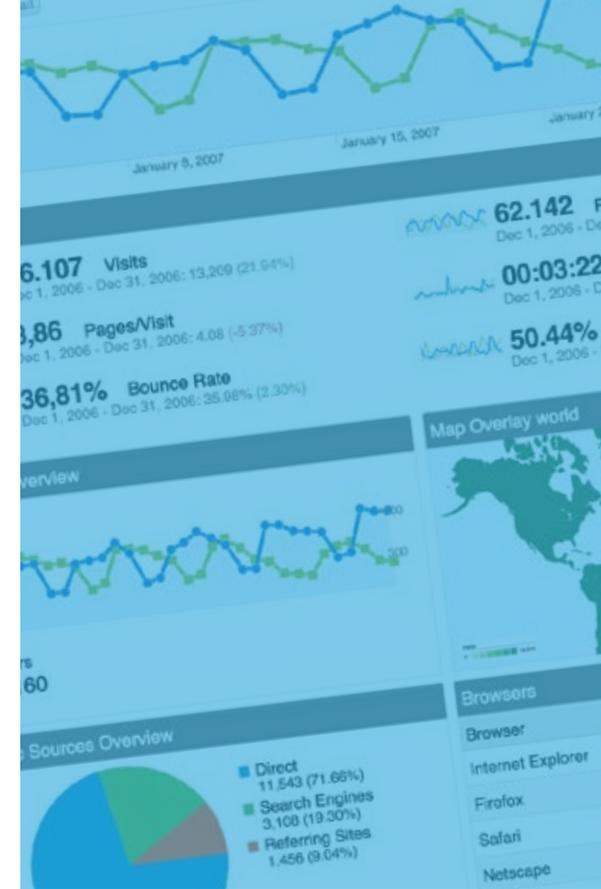
Not all content needs to be new content. In fact, there is often unrealized value in using content already in existence. Curating content from other sites and departments within your organization, or even third parties like analysts, bloggers, and external experts, can add value to your content organization. In addition to increasing the ROI on content produced, content curation and distribution reduces your likelihood of wasting time and resources duplicating content. Many organizations resort to custom built solutions to help address this issue. Unfortunately, building and maintaining custom built solutions comes at a very high cost. The best way to maximize your content curation and distribution effort is to look for content marketing tools, like Acquia Content Hub, that connect all of your content sources and channels.



Reporting and Measurement

If you don't know how your content is performing, how can you possibly know if it's having an impact? Adding in a business intelligence and/or analytics tool like Google Analytics or Tableau is perhaps the most important part of your content marketing stack. Depending on the needs of your organization and the level of analysis required, you might have multiple analytics tools in place to give you a more detailed view of your customers.

By building your content marketing stack, you allow technology to support your business goals and automate previously manual tasks, like [multisite content distribution](#). In doing so, you can free up valuable time that's needed to create new content. Let your technology serve as a member of your team, empowering you to produce and syndicate the right content out to the right audience.



Conclusion

The need for content is only going to continue to grow as digital expands beyond the traditional website experience to new channels. This shift has already begun with mobile and continues through the Internet of Things. Regardless of device or channel, there will always be a need for relevant, useful, and engaging content that is tailored to the customer.

“I know it sounds cliché, but the single biggest mistake we see is crafting a content strategy to suit internal stakeholders and agendas, rather than taking a user-centric approach to your content planning.” - Adam DeGiorgio, Director & Sales, Salsa Digital

Luckily, while the need for content keeps growing, so too does the technology to support it. Any organization that hopes to achieve success needs a solid content strategy that incorporates the right tools and tech to allow content authors to create, manage, and distribute content effectively. The key to managing today’s content at scale is having a solid content strategy in place and utilizing technology to put the needs of the customer first.

“I know it sounds cliché, but the single biggest mistake we see is crafting a content strategy to suit internal stakeholders and agendas, rather than taking a user-centric approach to your content planning.”

— Adam DeGiorgio, Director & Sales,
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