Ultimately, brand trust does not lie completely within the control of marketers. They must look to incorporate third-party sources to validate the brand's mission and build customer loyalty.

Shift to Authentic Voices to Promote Brand Trust and Avoid Content Bias

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Questions posed by: Bazaarvoice
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Q. What is the role of content for the digital-first business?

A. Today, digital-first businesses strategize how they can leverage their digital capabilities for new value creation. All businesses convey the value of their products/services via content consumed both online and offline to reach a defined outcome. IDC found that in 2023, 90% of marketing leaders want to gain net-new customers and 87% want to grow brand awareness and value. Therefore, high-performing content marketing is at the top of every CMO's strategy and budget list. However, polling a group of CMOs about the role of content marketing would likely yield different definitions and, more importantly, different approaches to how content is created, curated, and used to meet defined business outcomes.

IDC defines content marketing as any marketing technique whereby media and published information is used to influence buyer behavior or stimulate action leading to commercial relationships and business outcomes. Optimally executed, content marketing delivers useful, relevant assets that buyers consider a beneficial service rather than an interruption. From the lens of business outcomes, marketers must align the best form of content with the role it plays in the journey progression to convert sales, raise brand awareness, increase loyalty, or another objective.

In the digital era, no one piece of content will serve all customers. A spectrum of content is required to best connect with customers and drive loyalty. IDC found the most important elements to maximize the overall effectiveness of a marketing strategy are creating new and interesting content (57%), being channel specific (47%), and making real-time adjustments (43%). Therefore, data insights on content preferences, channel reach, and conversion success should be used to define a digital strategy that maximizes the supply and demand of effective content. IDC found that 43% of B2B marketers feel that their overall effectiveness falls behind that of their peers.

Case in point: B2B companies are not leveraging buyers and influencers at the same level as B2C companies and are missing the opportunity to reach buyers in their partner or media channels with an authentic voice. For example, in-person references are not as effective as independently generated user reviews. Also, virtual events should be used to garner attendee feedback, which can be an influencer marketing asset. B2B companies can take a page from the B2C marketing handbook, specifically in the areas of content curation and placement (media/channel strategy).

Q. Do marketers have a content bias?

A. We all have a bias, and that bias leans toward creating our own branded content because that's how it has always been done. But content bias is more far-reaching. Consider the following bias scenarios:

- » **Strategy:** Blindly repeating what worked in the past without consideration of current economic or social currents
- » **Process:** Creating content based on where the most money has already been invested, such as a specific channel or event
- » **People:** Creating content based on available in-house skills, job assignment, or functional division (e.g., product marketing builds product content, creative team builds video content), limiting content spectrum
- » **Education:** Lacking awareness of new or trending types of content, limiting the ability to connect with consumers in a form they prefer or have come to expect in a trusted relationship

In some ways, a bias does not seem to be a negative. Merchandisers and commerce teams will be biased toward "supply-side" content that will help tell their product vision and drive sales conversions. Personal bias is also at risk of rearing its head when marketers create content as a reflection of their brand proposition without considering how the consumer views the brand or product. Additionally, brand marketers will look through the lens of consumer bias to iterate content by audience segment or channel flavor. Unfortunately, this traditional funnel approach does not fit today's multidimensional customer journey that flows between channels and actions. IDC found that buyers face the following challenges: lack of high-quality content (90%), too much marketing hype/empty buzzwords (43%), and lack of truly independent, unbiased information (39%).

The consequence of content bias is friction to the process or inability to meet demands. An unbiased content approach allows teams to take advantage of unexpected events. For example, user-generated content (UGC) is often unexpected but can be serendipitous, such as the marketing prowess of Oreo's viral response to the 2013 Super Bowl blackout: "You can still dunk in the dark." Teams need to be empowered to leverage this type of content at speed. Does an in-house team need to create a highly produced video if a quick video from a user captures the message and satisfies an instant gratification culture?

Additionally, marketing is already facing high demand for unique content; customers are hungry for the most relevant asset that guides their decision, answers a question, and so forth. UGC has proven to be engaging, dynamic, and authentic, but brands are reluctant to stand it up next to their professionally crafted messages, or they believe "it can't be good if not invented here." Marketers need to vary the content used in the digital experience to help them move beyond their unintentional bias.

Q. How does a content's value influence investment areas?

A. A content's value comes in many forms: cost to create or acquire, conversion rate, time to create or influence the brand. On the surface, content marketing tactics have catered to lowering creation costs while driving higher conversion rates influenced by the pressure on discretionary budgets to achieve higher ROI in a shorter time frame. However, teams should find the right balance between paid, owned, earned, and shared content that aligns with various value measures. A common measure is cost per asset, to which marketers can leverage sourced content that is scalable and low cost to help with strained budgets. Time is another cost measure: How quickly can you generate content or surface it to the consumer? While the cost per asset can showcase monetary value, the value of an asset is also tied to the value of its source. The reality is, everyone creates content — internally from creatives to executives, externally from customers and advocates — they each bring their unique voice and valued perspective. People want "prove it to me" or "see myself using the product" authentic content — even in B2B, prospects seek references and validation of product usage, scale, and so forth.

Value is also in the eye of the beholder. The value of a customer engagement has been driven by relevant and topical content recommendations. Along the customer journey, content plays a critical role in the level of effort a customer invests to complete a task. The value of a piece of content is raised as it reduces the rate to outcome. To assist, audience segmentation can provide insight into trends and behaviors that influence the type/quantity of the content that generates better engagement. IDC found that customers use social networks in multiple buying tasks: obtain additional info about vendor, product, or service (66%); exchange ideas and best practices (63%); and provide peer references and referrals (60%).

However, social programs account for only 3.1% of the marketing budget. Marketing teams must balance investment in the customer experience with the company's brand directive. When companies build brand value, the goal is to entice consumers to develop a strong relationship with the brands they trust, purchase more, and continue visiting and recommending their favorite branded websites and owned properties. And more importantly, the brand can drive the supply to meet the demand for multiple channels.

Q. How can sourced content help with conversion and digital acceleration?

A. First, teams need to reframe their thinking about sourced content (which historically was to limit low-cost or free content in favor of branded assets). Instead, they should consider the engagement factor. As consumers progress deeper into the journey, they are investing their time in the experience. Getting to a conversion (of any type) is a long-term relationship, and it will change how they view and interact with the content. Injecting UGC into the process will aid digital acceleration in both scale and coverage. Brand owners cannot create new or niche content fast enough to meet shoppers' needs.

IDC estimates enterprise content's portion of the global datasphere will grow from 47EB in 2021 to 155EB by 2026 — a rapid rate stressing an already shorthanded content marketing team. Sourced content can help supplement gaps in product coverage guided by consumer requests. Given that the majority of Gen Zers and millennials are mainstream digital content creators, they can help keep pace with consumer expectations and tell your brand story in a way that resonates with the consumer at various stages.

Using sourced and organic content together will also maximize reuse and expand the user's choice in content types. The content supply chain is a flywheel that is moving from creation/curation to distribution to consumption to analysis, which influences the next iteration of creation/curation ... and so on. Beyond social media, content submitted by journalists and industry professionals provides an opportunity for content monetization and greater reach. Content from these other sources can be syndicated to amplify user engagement or create navigable social shopping moments (i.e., sending customers from social media to direct product purchase). Further, marketers should measure UGC's contribution to the conversion outcome by tracking the length of user engagement or shares/recommendations and whether it helped simplify the customer journey on a specific business transaction.

About the Analyst

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Marci Maddox is responsible for research related to content marketing, rich media, and immersive assets that drive relevant, personalized, and engaging digital experiences. Leveraging 20 years in content and experience applications, Marci analyzes the impact that new technology trends have on the way organizations create and deliver persuasive content to improve customer lifetime value and user engagement.

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