



ABERDEEN

CONTENT
GUIDEBOOK
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GROUP

“Content is King!”

That’s the advice we’ve been hearing in marketing circles for the past several years now. And as a result, content has proliferated to the point of saturation. But most companies are creating content without any real strategy—churning out content simply for content’s sake.

But the mere act of creating content doesn’t guarantee its success as an effective marketing tool, especially if it’s created without any direction. This

“gut feeling” approach isn’t beneficial for anyone: neither the companies nor their potential customers. In fact, **only 16% of all marketers have a content marketing program in place that is measurably delivering business value over time.**¹

This guidebook is designed to outline content marketing trends for 2016 along with best practices and pitfalls to avoid when planning your content strategy.

CHANGING TRENDS

The biggest trends in content for 2016 will involve aligning content strategy with other business strategies, along with increased use of data and analytics to determine content performance and ROI.

Aligning Content Strategy with SEO

Although content and SEO metrics shouldn't answer to one another, an alignment can empower both. Identifying high-performing and relevant keywords can provide marketing with cues for the kind of content that can be created to cover popular topics and answer customer questions. Additionally, adding keyword metadata to content like videos, infographics, and images ensures they are optimized for search.

Aligning Content Strategy with Sales Enablement

Collaboration between sales and marketing is key to developing strategies that feed a company's bottom line. Sales organizations can leverage their field experience—since they're in the field talking with customers and prospects, they often can provide insights into the kinds of content buyers are looking for. At the same time, marketing can ease the sales team's burden by producing content designed to nurture prospects through each step of the buyer's journey. Create content that promotes conversations between your sales team and their prospects at the correct stage of the sales process.



92% of Best-in-Class marketing organizations report that supporting the sales team is an integral part of their marketing strategy²



Best-in-Class marketers are 56% more likely to use analytics and data visualization platforms³

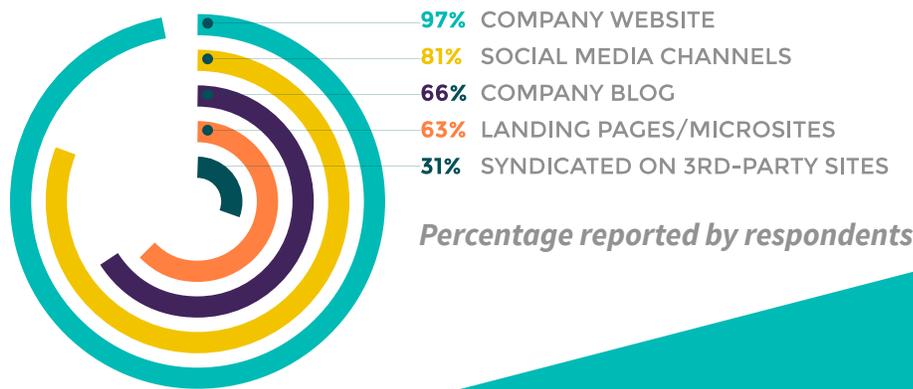
The days of creating content in droves just to see what sticks are over. Data can and should be used by both sales and marketing to better understand the types of customers that should be targeted—instead of simple segmentation, highly focused account targeting can help drive content strategy. Studying customer data to identify repeatable trends is where most marketers start. Take a step beyond to look at other indicators like complimentary installed technology or even broader categories like those companies who have implemented cloud-based or on-premise solutions to narrow down your list of target accounts.

Marketers should build each piece of content with an eye towards how its usage can best be tracked or measured in each program or channel through which it is distributed. Google Analytics UTM tracking codes and marketing automation platforms are a marketer's best friend in following the content delivery path from lead to revenue. **Best-in-Class marketers don't assume what content will or won't work. They can attribute marketing-qualified leads to specific pieces of content, measure specific content assets' performance, calculate lead scoring based on interactions with content, and prove content marketing impacts to revenue.**

Distribution Strategy

Once your content is created, it needs to be distributed to the appropriate audiences. Determining which channels you will use to publish your content is just as important as the care put into creating it. Using a single channel to publish, like your company’s website, may be insufficient to reach enough people who will consume the content. Knowing how and where your customers are discovering your content can help you devise a strategy that addresses cadence and tone, along with where and when to publish.

Figure 1: Where Marketers Most Commonly Distribute Content⁴



When to Use Content

Savvy marketers know how to balance content creation and distribution, including when a certain content asset should be deployed. Not every piece of content should necessarily be publicly and immediately published.

A robust content strategy should include a variety of assets—including white papers, eBooks, videos, infographics, etc.—customized to target the desired verticals while also mapping to sales objectives in each stage of the buyer’s journey.

Publishing content using multiple channels is certainly appropriate for those assets designed for the **discovery phase of the buyer’s journey**. This type of **content is intended for a wider audience just beginning to identify problems within their organization that need to be solved**, and it can be beneficial to reach as many people as possible with these informational messages.

For content aligned with the **consideration phase of the buyer's journey**, you might consider a **roughly equivalent mix of widespread, public distribution along with assets distributed only by sellers**. For public distribution, you need to look beyond your own website. Identify the places your prospective buyers frequent and make sure your content is front and center—and has a call to action that leads them to your site. Draw them into your brand by piquing their interest around solving their business problems and create a demand generation funnel within your site that leads them from one content offer to the next, asking very few form questions at a time. Progressive profiling is a huge help in getting to know your buyers. Arm your sellers with email messages, shareable social promotions, and content that they can self-serve to help them establish themselves a trusted advisor to your buyers.

During the **evaluation phase of the buyer's journey**, the purchase decision is near. At this point, **the content should address specific benefits and use cases for your solution—including third-party content that can reinforce purchase decisions**. Some of your content assets centered on the evaluation phase can be appropriate for public distribution, but the majority may be delivered directly by your sales team. Pipeline acceleration programs are key during this phase; content that helps the buyer build a case for choosing you should be at the forefront of your content strategy. This type of content can be tightly focused and highly customized to address a customer's specific solution. Sellers should be trained and ready to use this content in a way that meets sales objectives as well as enhances buyer education and perspective.



Best-in-Class marketers are 44% more likely than all others to align their content to the buyers' journey⁵



What Makes Content Exceptional?

Although what constitutes “exceptional” content can be subjective, there are a number of quantifiable factors that can contribute to the success of a content asset. In sum, **content should educate the buyer to take action, demonstrate a credible voice in the industry, and add value—not only to the marketing campaign, but the company’s overall goals—and most importantly is useful to the reader.** Below are some characteristics that can help you produce effective content:



✔ Grabs attention

With the glut of content currently being produced, your content will need to break through the “noise” to get noticed. Create appealing content by combining good design with engaging storytelling. Headlines are key!



✔ Educates the reader

Content should provide food for thought, including evaluating their current situation with respect to their peers in the marketplace, as well as how to improve the state of their department or organization.



✔ Connects a problem with your solution

Even the content created for the discovery phase of the buyer’s journey should identify, although in a generalized way, a problem the reader has and how a solution like your offering could solve those problems—especially problems a buyer didn’t know existed before reading.



✔ Accomplishes a specific goal

Whether you aim to drive traffic to your website or increase sales conversion, content should be designed to meet one or more business objectives.



✔ Avoids sales messages

Content that reads like a used car salesman’s pitch won’t be well received by its readers. Focus on product features, benefits, and solutions to create content with an authentic voice. Be sure to include the “what’s in it” for your target audience.



✔ Easily consumed

In today's fast-paced world, people have increasingly less time for research, even for business-critical solutions. Creating brief, "snackable" content that quickly gets to the point can help a lead rapidly determine whether your solution merits further investigation.



✔ Mobile ready

With the work-from-anywhere approach that most companies have embraced, savvy marketers are building content that displays well and can be consumed across all devices. 53% of Emails Opened on Mobile; Outlook Opens Decrease 33% according to Litmus.



✔ Interactive

Compelling and shareable, interactive content can keep your customers engaged as well as entertained. A few ideas for interactive content include quizzes, which can help you learn more about a lead as they complete the quiz. Assessments can provide insights into the state of the customer's business—for both you and the customer. Calculators and solution builders help a customer understand exactly how your solution can affect their bottom line.

What to Avoid

✘ Just because you're creating content doesn't mean you're succeeding at content marketing.

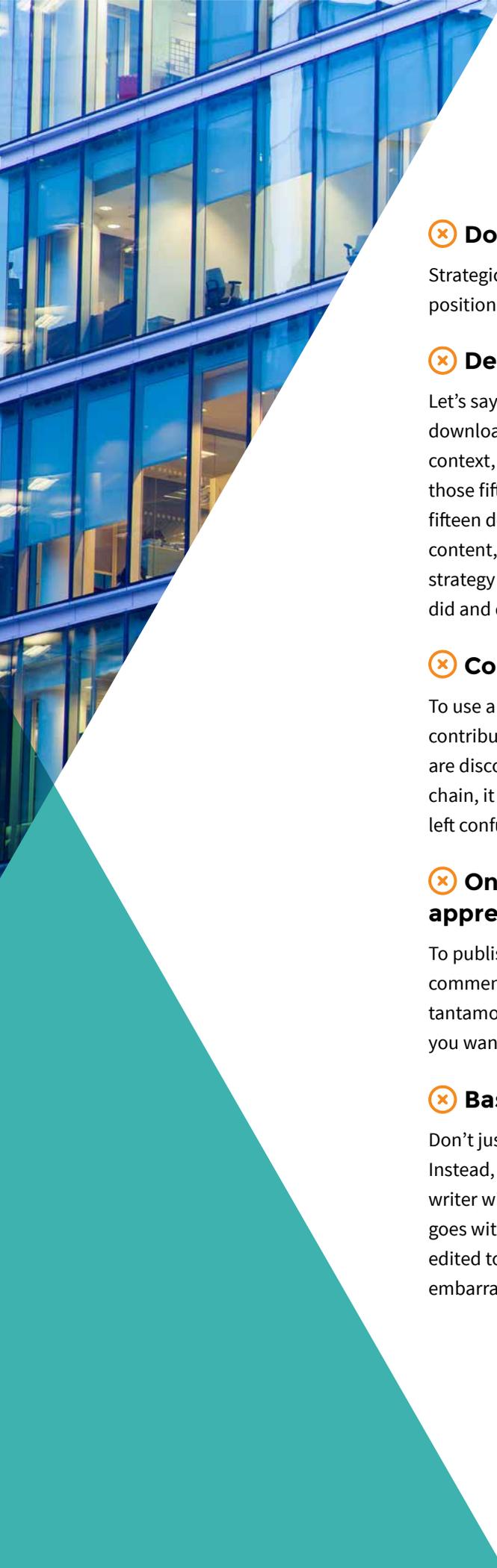
There are at least as many thoughts about what not to do as there are best practices for successful content. Below is a list of "don'ts" to consider as you move forward with your content marketing strategy.

✘ Publishing content for content's sake benefits no one.

If you're generating and publishing content without a strategy, you're flying blind. Your content should demonstrate thought leadership and contain compelling insights, not just paragraphs full of marketing fluff.

✘ Content shouldn't be treated as an afterthought.

Many companies make the mistake of generating content only when they have time. That would be akin to a sales force only selling when they have time; make sure your marketing organization prioritizes content.



⊗ **Don't just share your own content.**

Strategically sharing others' interesting and relevant content can help position you as a thought leader.

⊗ **Define success goals before analytics.**

Let's say you've learned that in the past month your white paper has been downloaded fifteen times. What exactly does that tell you? Without additional context, the answer will be a wild guess. You'd be better off knowing that those fifteen downloads were 10% higher than last month, or that of those fifteen downloads, two became marketing qualified leads. Set goals for your content, and retire the assets that underperform. Even a bad goal-setting strategy is better than none at all—at least over time you can determine what did and didn't work so it can be revised.

⊗ **Content should align with your brand.**

To use a highly exaggerated example, if your software or hardware contributed to one of the Mars rovers, sharing a story about what those rovers are discovering could be appropriate for your brand. But if you're a grocery chain, it makes very little sense to share such a story, and your readers will be left confused.

⊗ **One-sided conversations. Your audience appreciates interaction.**

To publish plenty of content without following up with responses to comments, making comments of your own, and asking questions is tantamount to ignoring the people who could become your buyers. Would you want to do business with someone who wouldn't speak to you?

⊗ **Basic writing and editing.**

Don't just create a list of topics and hire a writer for a few dollars per article. Instead, engage a professional with experience writing quality content. That writer will likely cost more, but you get what you pay for. And, it probably goes without saying, but ensuring that your content has been proofread and edited to be properly spelled and grammatically correct will help you avoid embarrassment that could lead your audience to look elsewhere.

Extensions from One Type of Content to Another

It's logical to create content that extends from one type to another; for example, you could create a set of assets with the same theme for each of the stages of the buyer's journey. But not every customer will have followed exactly the same path during their journey; they have in effect followed a "choose your own adventure" to get to you, so be sure you have enough content to appeal to diverse personalities.

For example, a discovery phase piece might set the stage by identifying problems for a particular industry and hinting at solutions. A consideration phase piece might delve a bit deeper into how to solve the problem first identified in the discovery piece. And the evaluation content could focus on specific case studies with a proof of concept.

Another benefit to maintaining two-way conversations with your audience is that they can provide you with feedback that can prompt you to create additional content. And your sales team can also give you insights into the kinds of content that helped convince them to buy. Be open to the feedback you receive, and use it to inspire new content that relates to your existing assets.

Perhaps you learn that specific facts or figures stood out for certain people; that could prompt you to create an infographic that highlights just that portion of existing content. Or maybe you create a series of videos that each demonstrate one aspect of how your product can solve a specific problem. You could also consider using a "snackable" piece of content as a teaser for a more detailed long-form content asset like a white paper or eBook.

Some of your content will naturally fit together, such as content personalized to target a particular industry. Arming your company with a variety of related content will help draw in leads from multiple sources. As always, be sure to measure each asset's efficacy and retire those that don't deliver.



Other Considerations for Effective Content

We've touched on some of these ideas in this guidebook, but let's go into detail about some concepts that didn't fit neatly into the previous sections. Even when you succeed at eliminating all "salesiness" from your content's tone and approach, your audience might not be completely inclined to believe every word you have to say. After all, it is a marketer's job to portray the company in the best possible light. Think about it this way: do you believe everything you read, hear, or see?

Publisher content can be an extremely valuable tool in your content strategy. **Curating content from a respected publisher, especially from industry experts who understand the market—including public speakers, industry pundits, bloggers, or journalists—can help add credibility to your story.** Many of these individuals already have established recognition with at least some of your target audience, and can potentially increase your reach as well.

Asking your existing customers to write reviews and testimonials can also benefit your content strategy. Your leads, particularly those in the evaluation phase, will appreciate hearing from others who have already gone through the process of consideration, evaluation, and purchase. These testimonials can help convince your audience that your solution works as advertised.

User-generated content can take many forms, including wikis, discussion forums, product reviews, tweets, podcasts, and more. Take a moment to

consider, for example, the user-generated content you yourself might have seen or read created by fans of Apple products. Even though your company might not have an army of a zillion fans, it's possible that someone out there has created their own "how-to" guide or blog post about one or more of your products. This type of user-generated content can function as its own kind of testimonial; in some cases, they can be even more effective since they were created unprompted. And don't be afraid to look into negative comments about your company and its products and services—you can leverage negative reviews into content that addresses those specific issues.

Research-driven narrative can tell stories that generalizations can't. These are stories that bubble up when patterns emerge in data; you can use these to communicate industry trends, relationships, correlations, comparisons, and counterintuitive or surprising data. For example, you might identify a trend toward a specific industry faring particularly well as they move to the cloud; or the relationship between a system upgrade and the number of support calls that result.

By using data and feedback to find out the key elements that matter to your buyers, you can curate user-generated content that can work alongside your internally generated content. Both can work in concert to educate and inform your audience as well as fit into your overall content strategy.



2016 Trending Content

Aberdeen's research has shown that aligning content to particular marketing/sales funnel stages and channels greatly improve your success rate. Put on top of the fact that it can take up to 10 interactions to drive a lead to revenue, you need to have a variety of content to get to that close. Before finalizing your marketing mix, you must always study your buyer, how they make decisions about purchasing your particular product or service, where they go to get educated, who they trust, and how they consume content.

TOP OF FUNNEL

BLOG POSTS are a great way to raise your profile and drive SEO traffic for your brand. A blog post is often your visitor's first taste of what your company has to offer, so make the tone consistent and always have a compelling CTA to push them to want to learn more about your brand's offerings. **Marketers who have prioritized blogging are 13x more likely to enjoy positive ROI.**⁷

What not to do:

- *Use corporate-speak:* Don't get caught up in your own acronyms or terminology. Write in the same language as your readers so that they will begin to feel like you know and understand them.
- *Start off trying to sell:* A blog is meant to educate, loosen the status quo, and begin a relationship. Focus on helping your readers so you can earn the right to sell to them once they get to know you.



The majority of Best-in-Class content marketers use at least seven different content types for their websites⁶



Infographics are the perfect fuel for social media campaigns. Highly engaging when done well, easily shareable, and often pinned to cube walls—if you hit the right balance of helpful information and design. **Brands who use infographics grow in traffic an average of 12% more than those that don't.**⁸

What not to do:

- *Get caught up in the design:* Your infographic may be beautiful, but if the story it tries to tell is not relevant to the audience, it will be ignored.
- *Cram too much in:* Infographics have to be readable. Don't sacrifice legibility for trying to tell a complete story in words—let the image do the heavy lifting.



Videos have become a must-have for every marketing mix due to the rise of the mobile workforce and need for instant gratification. Short and sweet is best—and don't forget to follow Ann Handley's advice in *Everybody Writes*—**content needs to be useful, relevant, timely, and well done—even in video.** 75% of senior-level executives watch work-related videos on at least a weekly basis, and 54% share work-related videos with their colleagues at least weekly.⁹

What not to do:

- *Lead viewers to a dead end:* Always have a compelling call to action at the end of your video.
- *Make a bad first impression:* The first 15 seconds are crucial. Don't be boring—start off with your most compelling message from the get-go.



Checklists are the unsung hero of the demand gen marketing mix. Checklists are huge helpers in SEO if they are built on topics that your buyers are searching for.

What not to do:

- *Focus on the obvious:* Give your audience at least one new thing to think about.
- *Make it boring:* Introduce some personality into your recommended “to-dos” to engage your audience.



MIDDLE OF FUNNEL

Third-party reports

Partner with industry superstars, publishers, or trusted advisors to develop content that outlines how to address a given business problem that your service happens to solve. Doing so brings credibility to the topic when your prospects learn what “good” looks like. **According to the CMO Council, three of the five most sought-after content types include non-vendor originated content.**

What not to do:

- *Over-engineer:* Don't look for independent content to provide explicit validation for your solution.
- *Think small:* This is content that your buyers crave, so be sure to weave a wide web for distributing this content through marketing and sales. Smart, independent content will make your sales force shine.

White Papers

For many technology sales, potential buyers need more details on how to solve their specific business problem in a new way. **Showcase your expertise on the subject at hand** without actually selling your service. Taking an educational and consultative approach will draw prospects further along their buying journey and begin to build trust with you as a subject matter expert.

What not to do:

- *Be afraid to get technical:* A white paper is your chance to show what you are made of—how your company is an expert on your chosen topic. Break complex subjects down into ideas that your readers can understand and act on.
- *Use a tired title:* The title of your white paper has to hook in your reader and it should include an engaging cover page—graphics or photographs will draw your reader in.





EBooks

A fun way to educate, and are more visual and mobile friendly than a white paper. Many personas respond better to this eye-candy and are then drawn in by the core of what you have to say.

What not to do:

- *Leave it on the shelf:* What good is a great eBook if no one knows about it? Promote the heck out of it.
- *Skimp on creativity:* While your eBook needs to tell a solid, relevant story, it also needs cool creative, layout, and visuals to support your copy.

BOTTOM OF FUNNEL

Product Spec Sheets

Many modern marketers feel that product spec sheets or data sheets have “jumped the shark,” but as a purchase becomes imminent, now is the time to unveil all of your product’s bells and whistles.

What not to do:

- *Take it lightly:* put as much effort into telling a meaningful story that goes beyond techs and specs as the rest of your content.
- *Talk about yourself:* focus on your buyer and what you can do for them. Always start off with “you” messaging.

Case Studies

Nothing closes business better than hearing directly from an actual user. Case studies add validation and credibility to your marketing mix and often help close the sale.

What not to do:

- *Lack vision:* A good case study needs to be interesting and compelling. Make sure to focus on measurable results and not just how much your customer loves your sales rep or customer service.
- *Create them in only one format:* While some people enjoy reading, others may prefer audio, video, or visual content. Maximize your studies by making them available in a variety of formats.





Now that you have great content, learn how to predict and pinpoint purchase intent to build out your next killer campaign.

GET THE GUIDE

Conclusion

Everyone knows the only constant is change, and trends in content marketing are certainly not immune. By incorporating these ideas into your own strategy, you can create more of what works and eliminate what doesn't work. Continuously examining analytics to verify your findings will help you fine-tune your strategy over time as you keep your eye toward boosting the bottom line.

Sources:

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³ *The Data on Data-Driven Marketing: Where Data & Analytics Make a Difference*, January 2016

⁴ *The Best-in-Class Content Marketing Website: Finding the Right Mix*, September 2015

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⁸ *NeoMam Studios*

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About Aberdeen Group

Aberdeen Group is the leader in bringing big data and content marketing services together for sales and marketing professionals. Our solutions provide proprietary intelligence on who their ideal target audiences are, what they are interested in now, how to connect with them and what content to share with them. The Aberdeen integrated marketing solution provides our customers with a unique ability to reach the best opportunities.

Learn more at aberdeenservices.com.