

Crafting an Integrated Content Marketing Strategy

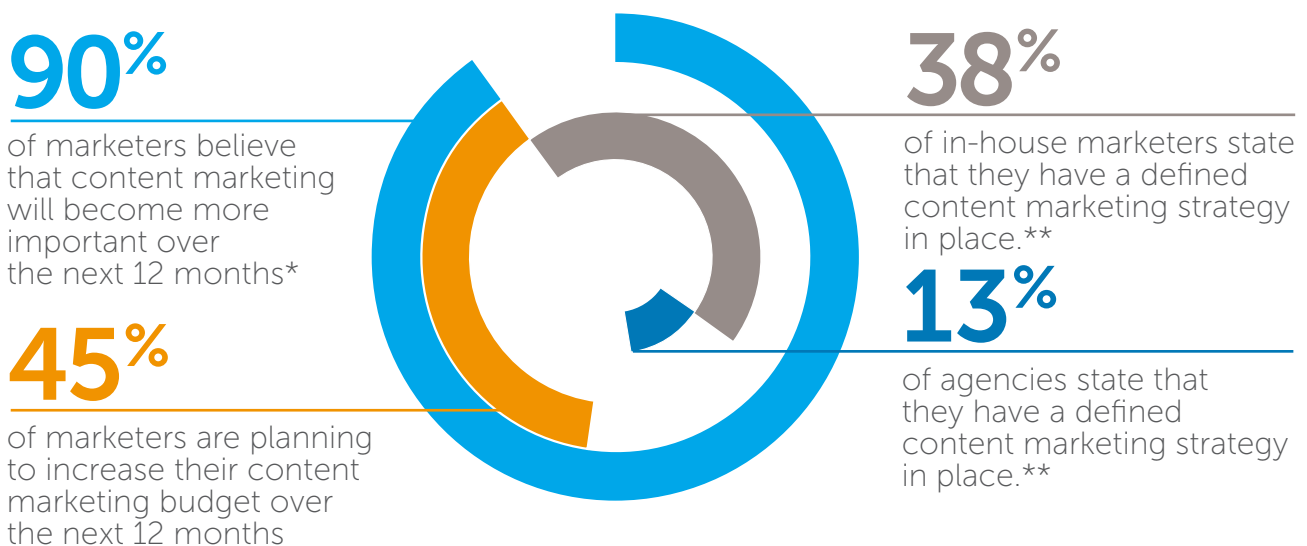
Pace Perspectives

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Content + Platform + Engagement

Content marketing as an element in the overall marketing mix has come into its own in the past year. Research has indicated it will become an even more significant factor as we move into 2013 and beyond: 90% of marketers believe that content marketing will become more important over the next 12 months*, with 45% planning to increase their content marketing budget in that same period. And yet, with this increased emphasis on content marketing, only 38% of in-house marketers and 13% of agencies state that they have a defined content marketing strategy in place.**



As content marketing's share of budget increases, so does the importance of having a sound strategy for how to employ it. This is particularly true as the range of potential content marketing tactics – content hubs and outposts, social media, video, digital magazines, blog outreach, whitepapers, webinars, etc. – become as expansive, and potentially confusing, as the tools that validate their impact.

A well-crafted strategy is key both to making sense of it all and to ensuring that the mix of content you're creating and the tactics you employ become more than just an unfocused collection of ideas – no matter how well executed.

At Pace, we've developed an approach to content marketing strategy that tackles this complex challenge by pulling from a variety of skills and disciplines. It's an integrated model that recognizes content marketing itself is a blend of digital and traditional marketing, communications, journalism, social media, and technical expertise.

Before we dig any deeper, let's start with a working definition of what content marketing strategy actually is:

"Content marketing strategy is the practice of planning the creation, distribution, activation, and optimization of thoughtful and relevant content, in order to inspire positive engagement and profitable action."

To break it down further, content marketing strategy is an interdisciplinary mix of content strategy, digital marketing, and platform planning (from mobile to web to social), focused on transforming content into a unique, pervasive, and powerful marketing asset for your organization. It is not a marketing strategy built around interrupting – the hallmark of traditional advertising – but about using content to inspire an audience to engage with your brand in ways that matter to your business.



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The Integrated Approach to Content Marketing

This definition is at the core of how Pace approaches content marketing strategy: as an integrated planning process that includes clear and measurable objectives, a deep understanding of the audience and market, and smart analytics and optimization models. This mixture supports the three core strategic pillars: content, platform, and engagement:





Environmental Insights

Processes, tools, and methodologies to help you understand your community, your competition, and the market.



Objectives

The measurable business results your content will drive, articulated using terms and metrics that align with organizational standards.



Content Strategy

Audits, assessments, and plans to enable the creation of well-targeted, highly relevant, and ultimately actionable content.



Platform Strategy

The hubs and outposts of your content distribution network that will define how and where the community encounters and engages with your content.



Engagement Strategy

Digital marketing and communications tactics (from search engine optimization (SEO) and social media to syndication and integrations) that ensure your audience discovers your content and platforms in the right mindset to drive toward desired outcomes.



Analytics, Reporting, and Optimization Frameworks

The processes and deliverables for understanding how and why your content, platforms, and engagement tactics are performing, and incorporating those learnings back into your strategy.

Laying the Foundation: Objectives

Content marketing objectives should be clearly articulated, tied to clear and measurable key performance indicator(s) (KPI), and multi-channel in nature. Content objectives are commonly grouped into three general categories: awareness, engagement, and outcomes.

Awareness

A precursor to every other objective: Did your content get exposed to our target audience? Metrics employed here include everything from visits and page views to subscriber counts, reach, and more.

Engagement

Beyond simply seeing our content, did it connect with your audience? Consider multi-channel objectives that cut across digital, social, and print, such as time spent, sharing actions or intent, comments or replies, and aggregated measures of engagement such as Facebook post feedback.

Outcomes

Where measures of return-on-investment (ROI) often get defined, and your audience in the "C-suite" pays the most attention. These objectives often include attributable revenue, assisted conversions, leads generated, marketing opt-ins, customer satisfaction targets, or cost reductions.

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Asking the Right Questions: Analysis & Insights

The key to developing great strategy – content marketing or otherwise – is understanding the environment around you. A solid analysis and insights model should go beyond industry studies and audience research, to address a range of questions important for content strategy as well as your engagement and platform considerations:

Audience & Community Insights:

Who is your target audience, what communities do they participate in, and what do we know about them?

What's changed since we last looked? This includes:

Search Analysis: What is your audience searching for online?

Social Conversation Analysis: What are they talking about through social media channels, blogs, and forums?



Current Content & Program Performance:

Analytics Insights: What can available analytics tell you about how existing content or programs are performing, and why?

Content Optimization: How is current content performing against target key performance indicators, broken out by relevant attributes? What does that tell you?

Competitive Analysis & Market Developments:

What's the competition doing, and what are relevant developments in the marketplace?

Client Inputs:

What does the broader client marketing or business strategy look like, and how does this impact your content program? Are there specific developments, priorities, or marketing calendars to consider?

Editor, Writer, and Strategist Insights:

Presumably you've hired well, and have smart, talented people on your staff. What does their own experience and knowledge of the client, audience, and market tell them?

The Three Strategic Pillars

At the core of the integrated content marketing planning process are three strategic pillars that together define your approach, tactics, and execution models: content strategy, engagement strategy, and platform strategy.



Content Strategy

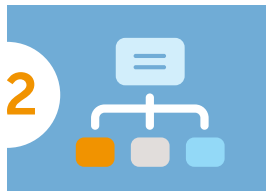
What content needs to be developed in order to connect with the right audience, drive business results, and support the overall organizational strategy?

Content strategy is the foundational centerpiece of an integrated content marketing plan, where you mix both science (insights, analytics, and analysis) and art (talent and experience from strategists and creators) to craft the right mix of tone, messaging, type, volume, and architecture to connect with and engage your audience.

Policy and process are also important elements to define in your content strategy. These can be layered on top of your content management infrastructure, organizational policy, and workflow. Content development models, guidelines, and governance frameworks are also defined at this stage.

Elements of a content strategy include:

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- Audits and assessments
- Audience segmentation and personas
- Tone and voice
- Content taxonomies
- Type mix and volume
- Editorial planning
- Native content to support the engagement strategy
- Policy and process:
 - *Content development models*
 - *Guidelines*
 - *Governance*



Engagement Strategy

How will members of our desired audience encounter all this great content and be inspired into action?

The iconic statement to the character Ray in the movie Field of Dreams, “If you build it, they will come” (to paraphrase), may sound appealing; however, it is not a realistic strategy for ensuring the success of your content. Marketers and publishers all too often fall into this trap, assuming that simply crafting great content and placing it where people can find it translates into marketing success.

This is where engagement strategy comes in. Drawing from a mix of traditional digital marketing, social media, search engine optimization (SEO), public relations, and other disciplines, engagement strategy is about content performance: ensuring that your audience discovers, engages with, and is inspired to action by your content.

An engagement strategy should include a combination of:

Demand drivers: Identifying the marketing traffic and demand generation tactics you have access to that will ensure your content is encountered at the right time and in the right context. These may include:

- Search Engine Optimization (SEO)
- Social Channels, Management, Promotions
- Email Marketing, CRM, Member Communications
- Native Advertising, Social Ads, Search Engine Marketing (SEM)
- Influencer Outreach, Earned Media

Content distribution tactics: Tapping into the available network of content hubs (such as owned websites), outposts (such as social media channels), alignment with other owned websites and marketing programs, and syndication to third-party sites, apps, social media, and related channels. Key to these efforts is creating flexible, presentation-independent content that works in a variety of channels and formats.

- Integrations: Owned Sites, Marketing Programs, Social, Apps
- Syndication: External Social, Partner Sites, Aggregation Platforms

Platform and channel optimizations: The ongoing adjustments to your platforms – tweak a landing page, change up the content mix on our Facebook feed, shift frequency and calls-to-action in the e-newsletters – to maximize performance.



Platform Strategy

Where does the content need to live or be extended in order to support the overall effort?

Platform strategy involves analysis and selection of the right mix of content platforms and channels. These need to be developed (or tapped, if already existing) to host your content so that it can successfully support the overall content marketing plan. This could potentially include a combination of digital, mobile, social, print, and content management infrastructure decisions.

Considerations at this stage include:

Content hubs and outposts: Microsites, website sections, blogs, print magazines, and all the other owned media components needed to host your content as well as engagement tactics.

Mobile platforms: Responsive design considerations, mobile sites, native apps, and other tactics to specifically address the rapidly rising mobile and tablet user experiences.

Social media channels: From mainstays such as Facebook and YouTube to the vast range of constantly emerging social networks that can be leveraged – or built from the ground up – to support content syndication needs.

Content infrastructure: Content management systems (CMS), development review/approval solutions, and other infrastructure considerations needed to ensure smooth execution of the overall strategy.



Smart reporting provides the insights and context necessary to support both immediate decision-making and ongoing content and tactic optimization.



Creating a Feedback Loop: Analytics, Reporting, and Optimization

"However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results."

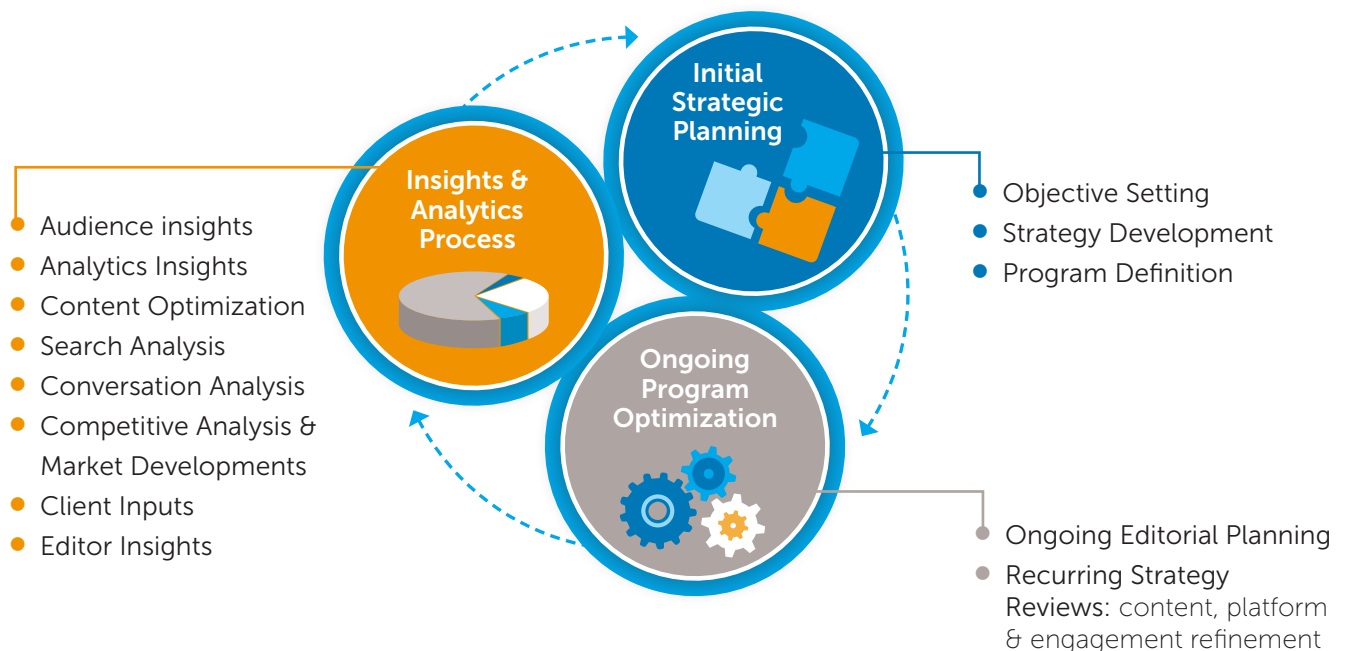
– Winston Churchill

The common trap of analytics and reporting is to pigeonhole it as something that tells you what happened, but not why and what it means for your content (or strategy) going forward. Smart reporting provides the insights and context necessary to support both immediate decision-making and ongoing content and tactic optimization.

To that end, a content marketing strategy should never be viewed as a one-and-done or linear process. It may have a defined start, but any "final" plans should be treated instead as the launching point for the next go-round of a closed feedback loop.

At Pace we call this loop our Optimization Framework, and it's where analytics partners with insights to inform an ongoing refinement of both the content and the elements of the content marketing strategy. Key participants in this loop extend beyond the analysts to include all stakeholders, from strategists to content creators, technical staff to creatives, and other stakeholders across the organization.

The Analytics & Insights Feedback Loop



Conclusion

As content marketing grows in importance and share of budgets, it's also growing in diversity and complexity. Content marketers are employing more and more tactics – 12 to 18+ on average*** – across an endlessly expanding mix of channels, platforms, and media types. Along with all that variety comes even wider uncertainty about what actually works and what's simply a distraction.

That's where a well-defined content marketing strategy comes in: A planning process that draws together editors and analysts, content strategists and digital marketers to form an integrated view into how content can be most effectively employed to drive results for your business.

However, even the most comprehensive plan is only so many documents, charts, and bullet points without the right team to execute it. At Pace, we solve for this by matching our strategists and analysts with a deep team of storytellers and creators: Editors, journalists, designers, producers, and developers who translate strategy into inspired action.

This formula for content marketing success – a data- and insights-driven integrated plan, backed by quality execution – is further explored by our Senior Vice President of Digital Solutions, Dan Dooley, in the Pace Perspective **Content Marketing: Quality Matters.**



About the Author

Kevin Briody Senior Vice President, Content Marketing

Kevin is responsible for digital and social media strategy on key accounts at Pace. He brings over 14 years of marketing, strategy and communications experience working on both the agency and client- side, including seven years at Microsoft alongside several venture-funded startups and a non-profit. He's been crafting campaigns and developing programs in community and word-of-mouth marketing—and their most recent incarnation, social media—since 2001. Before joining Pace, Kevin developed social media strategy for clients such as Chrysler, Samsung, Verizon, Microsoft, Nature Made and Nike while at Ignite Social Media. Kevin is a graduate of both the University of Oregon and University of Washington.

About Pace

Pace is North America's leading independent content agency, specializing in multichannel branded content solutions that fuel loyalty, CRM, marketing, digital and social programs for many of the world's largest brands. We have a staff of more than 300 professionals that are located in five offices across the U.S. – Greensboro, NC, New York, NY, Dallas, TX, San Antonio, TX and Rogers, AR. We help our clients navigate the complex marketing landscape to develop programs that suit their needs to deliver targeted outcomes. In 2013 Pace was named Content Agency of the Year by the Content Marketing Institute.

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*Econsultancy, October 2012

**Content Marketing Institute/MarketingProfs/Pace B2C Report, November 2012

***Content Marketing Institute/MarketingProfs B2B Report, October 2012