

Connecting Content Marketing Experiences:

Three keys to more connected and aligned technology and marketing agendas

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Introduction – The Hobson’s Choice For Marketers

It’s getting tough out there.

Today, marketers are faced with few good options when it comes to balancing their content and marketing strategies. Consumers are more widely connected than ever before, across a rapidly increasing number of devices. And marketers are simply drowning in the amount of content they are producing as they attempt to be simultaneously relevant as well as persuasive across all of those channels.

But at the same time, consumers are now becoming more sensitive than ever to the data being collected about them and how it’s being used. And yet, they now *expect* every single experience they have with a brand to be optimized and tailored specifically to their needs.


For marketers, there is probably no bigger challenge than using data to deliver more contextual or personally relevant content to their target consumer. In fact, according to one recent survey by Adobe, the top five priorities that US marketers chose for future efforts were personalization, big data, social, real-time and mobile.¹ In short: Marketers are making the delivery of data-driven, relevant content experiences across new and existing digital channels their biggest priority.

But, for most enterprises, simply making something a priority doesn’t guarantee it will actually happen. Organizational and technical siloes within businesses prevent the cultivation of a unified customer experience. Moreover, these bottlenecks inhibit any kind of insight that might enable the company to provide better, more relevant content in any one of those experiences.

For a converged content strategy to truly work for the business, the marketing team must answer the following questions:

1. How do we get better insight and access into prospective consumer behavior by means other than simply looking at existing customer records?
2. How do we rise above the noise, and scale to have presence on new and existing social and content channels?
3. How do we connect and orchestrate our own content in a way that enables us to actually deliver powerful, personally relevant, and ultimately persuasive experiences?

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So, when looking at ways to balance and prioritize the needs of the converged content strategy, the Hobson's choice facing marketers seems to be this: **Do it badly or don't do it at all.** And with the only choice being to “do it,” most marketers are trying to hedge their bets and make the most out of small, experimental campaigns.

The three questions above can, indeed, be answered. But those answers will, in large part, comprise a combination of a new outlook and approach from marketers, in addition to a strong, integrated technology to facilitate the approach. Success will require both very tight and seamless integration with content management and display solutions — as well as marketing automation, CRM, and measurement technologies. It will be a solution that enables cross-functional collaboration, publishing, contextual display, and measurement of the relevant experiences across platforms.

One important thing we have observed in high-performing marketing organizations is how a vigorous effort focused on *audience development* — the *creation and management of an engaged, activated audience* — can be a launch point for this new strategy.

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The Audience Development Imperative

DCG's experience with enterprises that are successfully navigating the convergence of a paid, owned, and earned media strategy is that they are beginning to focus on connecting owned media and assembling discrete audience development and data collection platforms that add value to the business. These successful marketers are creating highly specific content brands/platforms (separate from the corporate website or e-commerce platform) that deliver value to audiences at varying degrees of their brand experience journey.

For example, this content may be a blog that educates and creates consumer awareness to a new or novel approach to solving a problem. Consider how software company Hubspot created the entire category of "inbound marketing" by creating a branded-content approach to educating consumers about the concept. This was content so valuable that consumers wanted to share it across all the different social and content platforms that, at the time, Hubspot couldn't possibly have afforded to leverage at scale.


Or consider how an owned-content platform may be one that delivers entertainment or information beyond the product or service in exchange for consumer data. Kraft Foods, for example, has created both print and online content platforms. Subscribers gladly pay for this content, with both real money and personal data. This provides the company with a cost-efficient

process and extraordinarily rich first-party data that enables it to understand its consumer better and ultimately serve programmatic paid ads more efficiently.

Or, finally, consider how connecting the experiences between owned-media platforms helps to create more engaged customers by providing them with a more connected experience. A retail pet supply company did just this by creating an integrated series of content-driven experiences between its educational blog, its sales-focused e-commerce site, and its customer community. Relevant and knowledgeable blog posts appear next to catalog items to help educate shoppers, while e-commerce is embedded seamlessly into some facets of editorial on the blog to make it easier for shoppers to access products. And, finally, cross-sell and related products appear in the customer community to add value to the networking experience, while valuable and relevant "how-to" discussions from the community appear alongside catalog items to bolster an item's usefulness.

The key to all of these strategies is that, despite the segment of the customer's journey, or his or her existence in a CRM system, they recognize that at the heart of a successful content and converged media strategy is an *active, connected, and participatory audience*. They recognize that developing and fostering this audience separately from the customer

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database, but not necessarily in a disconnected manner, provides the following benefits to the enterprise.

1. **Subscribed-content consumption powers data collection, and data drives actionable marketing insight and capabilities.** These businesses understand that consumers are much more actively willing to provide rich data if they are receiving real value in return. This data, in turn, helps to drive a far more efficient traditional marketing and advertising engine, and a more relevant content display.
2. **Audience-focused content is shared — personalized content isn't.** Personalization is rarely personal and doesn't scale. Many successful brands recognize that they cannot, and should not, scale content and media production into truly personalized experiences across every channel. And, even if they could, they are beginning to realize that personalized content is not shared nearly as often as content that's simply relevant, useful, or entertaining.

Instead, these brands are acting like media companies and building targeted personas (or specific audiences) by creating a limited number of highly valuable, audience-focused content-driven experiences that audiences *want to subscribe to and share* with their peers.

This is what enables a brand to rise above the noise while also avoiding the need to scale to every single new social platform that emerges. In short,

instead of focusing on the “right *message* to the right *person* at the right time,” these successful content marketers are creating the “right *value* to the right *audience* in *their* time.”

3. **Evolving to audience-centric strategies, rather than campaign-centric processes, can help align content technology.** Connecting audiences to the content is a core goal of successful brands. These organizations are creating centralized audience (or marketing) databases filled with active, engaged customers who have given permission for the brand to converse with them in exchange for that value. This strategy goes beyond simple marketing automation email lists. It means providing true audience-focused solutions that can connect to prospective customers from the first time they become aware of a brand through the time they become customers, and ultimately be guided into loyalty programs or other customer service platforms. Then, these brands are integrating more lightweight content management and display technologies that can use this data to contextualize, inform, and ultimately improve connected experiences.

This evolution — and focus — of marketing can help to truly align marketing's technology needs (and where it needs to be applied in context) with other areas of the business.

Let's look at each of these three benefits and some specific methods that enterprises are using to achieve them.

Three Keys to Developing an Audience-Centric Strategy

At Digital Clarity Group, we've seen a number of truly outperforming brands begin to implement three audience-development-focused approaches that are helping drive a coherent, engaging, and scalable converged media strategy.

1. An audience-development database provides insight and better content-marketing ROI

Despite conventional wisdom, marketing automation technology solutions rarely connect content-driven experiences together to form a unified audience-development platform. To be clear, this is less of a technology limitation than an organizational one. But in both the B2B and the growing B2C space, marketing automation systems are still almost exclusively focused on connecting one website and enabling a lead-nurturing process through email. One recent survey found that in the B2B space, 78% of marketers used their marketing automation solution to help generate more leads. The second biggest use for it was to track visitors to one website, and the third-most common use (69%) was for scoring and qualifying leads coming from campaigns.²

With the pressure to launch new content platforms quickly, many brands are falling into the trap of creating entirely separate technology stacks to manage them. The corporate website is managed by an enterprise web content management system (WCMS). The blog properties are managed by blogging software. Meanwhile, the landing page and email subscriptions are managed by the marketing automation solution.

These disconnected processes make it difficult for brands to integrate consumers from platform to


platform. In other words, even if a brand is successful in getting a particular consumer subscribed to the awareness blog, there is no intelligent subscription integration between the blog, the website, or any other owned-media platform. In many cases, these prospective customers are unaware that these content platforms even exist. Or, even worse, when that audience member goes to join the "resource center" on the website or the "customer community" after signing the contract or filling out the e-commerce form, he or she is forced to rejoin, duplicating information in yet another database.

The successful brands we've observed using content marketing are separating the processes of "audience development" for marketing and audience delight purposes from the nurturing lead-development process meant to enable a purchase.

Despite the fact that they may use different tools, marketers are actually connecting content management, marketing automation, CRM, email, and social tools to create an audience profile that continues to become richer and richer with data. This subsequently informs both future content development as well as (when and if it reaches this point) the sales enablement team, the loyalty program, and/or social engagement.

Creating the customer and the brand subscriber

Consider the example of an enterprise technology company. The team there deployed a content marketing effort that included a thought leadership blog to educate consumers to the company's approach. Registration to subscribe to this blog was part of its content marketing effort to develop an



engaged audience. The ensuing goal of the strategy was not to draw these subscribers directly into a sales conversation, however, but to pull them into a more engaged “lead-nurturing process.”

Therefore, the only information required for the blog was an email address. Using a data-appending service, the company could then enhance its audience/marketing database to understand whether it was attracting customers in the right industries and preferred company sizes. This gave the brand a score for the “quality” of its audience-development efforts at the awareness level.

This profile was then integrated with the marketing automation process — thus allowing the brand to build on that profile as it invited this audience into events, webinars, sales demonstrations, etc. It had one profile for each audience member, who already had access to the website resource center (after providing a little more information). Thus, the company made it easier for that customer to feel like every content interaction was one, cohesive experience, which ultimately delivered richer intelligence to salespeople.

In short: This company understood that a successful, cohesive experience isn’t just having one type of registration form across all kinds of content. It’s about delivering the right value in exchange for the right *amount of information* and connecting content management with an audience development strategy — which, in turn, feeds the sales force automation process.

2. Connected experiences across owned-media platforms help provide the right *value* at the right time.

There is probably no bigger challenge for today’s marketer than using data to deliver more contextual or personalized content for consumers. As stated earlier, customers now expect relevant content in every experience.

As a result, many brands find themselves perpetually behind the proverbial eight ball as they try to keep up with the explosive emergence of channels, data sources, and technology to manage it all.


Earlier this year, a report by Forrester Consulting in fact found exactly this. Similar to the Adobe survey cited earlier, Forrester found marketers’ top challenge was “to personalize every single customer interaction with relevant data and offers.”³

So, the question is, what can marketers do about this?

At DCG, we believe a key step here is that many brands should focus less on “personalization” and focus more on actually reducing the amount of content. Indeed, many successful brands are developing strategies to “*persona-ize*” high-quality and valuable content that’s specific to an audience (rather than a person), which in turn encourages sharing.

In other words, the more marketers can focus on delivering increasingly relevant content to a focused *audience*, the less they have to focus on personalizing it to any specific member of that audience.

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This requires, however, much better collaboration and integration between the various content platforms that the enterprise is managing.

Delivering the relevant rather than the personal

Delivery of more relevant content earlier in the customer's experience is not only a key piece of a nascent content strategy, it can also help optimize the shopping experience later on. Consider one B2B enterprise that sells power-generating equipment. The marketing team uses its web content management solution to tag all its content, including blog posts, FAQs, and a series of registration-oriented educational webinars and white papers toward audience segments.

As visitors, both known and unknown, consume this content, they are assigned an audience segment based on rules the marketing team has established according to visitors' behavior. For example, if an unknown visitor browses a blog post on solar power and one on re-using waste, that visitor is assigned the "eco-focused" audience segment. If that visitor then goes to the "upcoming webinars" section of the website, that page is dynamically optimized for those webinars focused on renewable energy. If the visitor subsequently attends a webinar on hydroelectric power, or views the CEO's embedded YouTube video on the importance of alternative power sources, they are added to the "eco-passionate" audience. When these customers ultimately go into the shopping

experience, the catalog of products is optimized toward their passions. This audience segment also then feeds into the email newsletters the customers are subscribed to, and to which communities and customer events they are invited.

3. A strategy focused on audience development can provide for more agile technology processes.

The result of some marketers' "need for speed" when it comes to new content management platforms has been to use more lightweight and quick-to-implement solutions such as blogging software. This is, truly, one of the biggest disconnects in marketing technology today. The marketer is faced with the choice of launching a disconnected, but lightweight and fast-to-market content platform, or waiting months and months to connect a simple blog or landing page program to the enterprise content management system and digital marketing stack.

This is a myth. Today, it's not an either/or decision. There are strong, enterprise-capable systems that can also be deployed in an agile fashion.

In other words, it has nothing to do with the "size" of the technology; what matters is how it's used. It simply cannot take months to launch new customer-centric digital experiences. Today's owned-media platforms are yesterday's "media buy" for marketers. They need to be easy to build, integrate, maintain, scale, and — yes — even decommissioned if necessary.

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In a recent DCG Insight Paper I characterized such agility as one of “The Three Graces of the Digital Experience.”

High-performing organizations are re-orienting their businesses and finding that “more and faster” is the wrong pressure and that they must step out of it. The fear of moving too slowly is causing marketers to do foolish things and develop more experiences and digital content rather than optimize a set of limited, well-defined, and high-quality digital experiences.

If businesses are truly going to grasp the power of content marketing and differentiating their approach through digital experiences, it is not only an alignment between marketing groups and channels that will be needed — but also a close alignment of the technologies that support that effort.

Three layers of technology are core to an agile customer experience strategy.

1. **Data management.** The foundational layer and storage of consumer (i.e., audience) and content-consumption data. It is supported by databases and closely adheres to standards so that data can be easily extracted and used.
2. **Engagement management.** This middle layer of technology should be able to interface with anything above and below it. It provides the optimization across platforms based on business rules that can be applied to display content contextually.
3. **Content channel and experience management.** This top player should be flexible, portable, and/or disposable as any media strategy. This layer constantly changes and morphs, so it should aim for zero friction in order to add or dispose elements easily.

Audience development can be the focal point for this three-tiered approach to content technology. By focusing on developing a central audience database at the core data management layer — and then layering in content management and experience management on top of it — the marketing team can be much more adept at developing new experiences, while the data that will support the insight and display of that content remains scalable and foundational.

Foundational data value with agile content development

Consider Kraft Foods Group and what Julie Fleischer, the director of data, content, and media (an important title to note in this new process), is accomplishing with the merging of these concepts. Julie and her team track more than 20,000 attributes of more than 100 million annual visitors across the different and completely integrated digital content experiences (including a print magazine, a website, social media, email, and video). That is two trillion pieces of data being assimilated over the course of a year.

The company has integrated its core data management with multiple content platforms, such as agile WCMS tools, enterprise content and digital asset management, and even social media suites. It uses the data to provide insight into how to individually address the purchased advertising that Kraft does through its programmatic media buying. This has enabled the company to get quadruple the ROI from its creation of an integrated digital experience compared to the return from ad buying alone.⁴

Conclusion – Connect Audiences. Fast.

In *Audience: Marketing in the Age of Subscribers*, author Jeffrey K. Rohrs (who is also the vice president of marketing insights at Salesforce.com), calls audiences “assets – valuable business assets.” This is how he describes the challenge at hand:

Unfortunately, we lack the same organizational common sense when it comes to audience assets. Few executives fully appreciate the lifetime value of proprietary audiences, and yet many of them could be worth millions of dollars in future revenue.⁵

In its simplest sense, businesses must develop ways to get better insight about prospective consumers. And, to enable this, marketers must be able to connect their content properties together so that they build a rich profile of that audience over time. This requires businesses to look hard at how they organize their content management and customer data collection processes. As noted in DCG’s report “The Only Guide You’ll Ever Need to Select a Web Content Management Solution”:

Today’s industry-leading WCMS solutions offer far more than just content management. They continue to evolve towards becoming complete, integrated e-business platforms, offering capabilities that support all aspects of business, including marketing, collaboration with customers, channel partners and employees, and online fulfillment transactions...

However, to fully realize the value offered by these advanced solutions, a more comprehensive analysis of both business needs and the capabilities of the WCMS solution are essential.

The “content-at-scale” will continue to be a challenge in the coming years. But one key for marketers to get ahead of the curve will be to understand that relevant content wants to be shared, and personalized content doesn’t. By focusing on creating a limited number of highly valuable and connected content experiences,

instead of trying to personalize every channel, businesses can move their focus from how much content they are producing to *what kind* of content they are producing.

And, finally, as Tim Walters wrote in “Marketers Feel the Need for Speed: The Path to Customer Experience Excellence Begins with Agility on the Web”:

In the crucial web channel, marketers will benefit from solutions that can be sourced, learned, and launched easily and quickly, without the need for long procurement cycles, complicated implementations, or over-reliance on IT.⁶

A focal point of audience development can be one that truly aligns the marketing and technology agenda. Flexible content management focuses on creating connected and contextualized experiences, and uses integrated and/or embedded business and engagement rules to connect those experiences. And these two tiers connect to a more foundational and centralized data set (whether in CRM or marketing automation) to store rich audience profiles that deliver insight at all levels of engagement.

Consulting firm PwC has predicted that within the next five years, consumers will overwhelmingly show favor to businesses that can offer “nearly perfect execution” of “unified omnichannel experiences.”⁷ As Tim Walters concluded in his paper:

Today, many organizations justifiably wonder how they can even get started on this arduous journey. For most, the answer is simple: Begin with the web channel.

That Hobson’s choice of “do it badly or don’t do it at all” isn’t going away any time soon. Audience development can be a key component of building a more holistic customer experience strategy that delivers value across the entirety of the business. The key is to do it – and get better at it. Fast.



Endnotes

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About DCG

Digital Clarity Group

Digital Clarity Group is a research-based advisory firm focused on the content, technologies, and practices that drive world-class customer experience. Global organizations depend on our insight, reports, and consulting services to help them turn digital disruption into digital advantage. As analysts, we cover the customer experience management (CEM) footprint – those organizational capabilities and competencies that impact the experience delivered to customers and prospects. In our view, the CEM footprint overlays content management, marketing automation, e-commerce, social media management, collaboration, customer relationship management, localization, and search. As consultants, we believe that education and advice leading to successful CEM is only possible by actively engaging with all participants in the CEM solutions ecosystem. In keeping with this philosophy, we work with enterprise adopters of CEM solutions, technology vendors that develop and market CEM systems and tools, and service providers who implement solutions, including systems integrators and digital agencies. For more information about DCG, visit www.digitalclaritygroup.com or email info@digitalclaritygroup.com.

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