

The Art of B2B Creative

Trends in crafting B2B content that connects with your target audience

Sure, everyone is concerned with the bottom line and a better ROI. But if you want winning B2B marketing creative, you need to be selfless.

The biggest mistake many marketers make is positioning their creative around their need to sell, instead of the needs and wants of their customers, says Brian Maschler, chief creative officer, Bulldog Solutions. "You need to know what your customers are dealing with."

"Clients struggle with the need to talk about what they do, rather than how they can service customers' needs," agrees Mary Oliveri, senior vice president, exec creative director, CBD Market-

ing. "Sure, your features may be fantastic. But what does your target audience need to hear so they know you care about them?"

"Things can't be creative just for the sake of being creative," notes Paula Balzer, CEO, TBA Global. "We're not doing art here. B2B creative needs to drive action."

Many B2B marketers treat all of their creative the same through the entire process—and that isn't a sound practice, says Cyndi Greenglass, senior VP, strategic solutions, Diamond Marketing Solutions.



"A lot of folks are using some sort of marketing automation to help engagement through the funnel and these systems allow us to set up trigger communications that are effective based on the actions taken by our audience," she says. But most systems work off templates, for consistency sake. So, you set a

series of wireframes and simply vary the content within the template based on the type of communication."

This creates a vanilla approach to all communications that can lose your audience and seem flat. Instead of just considering what the dynamic content is going to be, consider how the dynamic content is going to look as you

move through the communication journey, she suggests.

"It's just like dating. In the beginning of a relationship, you like to keep it fresh and interesting, then over time you end up doing the same thing over and over again," she says. "And maybe the relationship stalls. You run out of things to talk about. You need to keep it fresh and interesting."

For example, when you are capturing information in a form for future qualification, your format and message is pretty simple—get what you need,

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give them what they requested and move on. “You don’t want anything too fancy to get in the way of the response. But later on, when you are looking for engagement, or sharing, or other types of content interaction, consider how to make that message look more appealing,” Greenglass says. “The same boring form capture template may discourage them from engaging with you further.”

Boring is always a danger in B2B marketing. After all, in B2B, a lot of things just aren’t inherently fun, so offering up a little sugar with the medicine can be challenging, says Maschler. Using humor depends on your niche, he says. If you’re in healthcare, where someone’s life may be on the line, it likely isn’t the time for jokes. But if you’re marketing something like technology, there’s room for laughter.

Humor can be scary but it’s good to be different, says Olivieri. “We encourage clients to be disruptive—it feels human to make people smile.”

Of course, some people take themselves very seriously, so using comedy might not feel comfortable to them. Finding a nuanced way that works humor naturally into a campaign can make it work, she says.

Firestone Building Products wanted to find a way to show that their organization can be a good partner to architects and contractors, among other target audiences. CBD created a campaign illustrat-

ing the brand’s capabilities, with one word exchanges between building professionals and Firestone reps such as “Whoa.” “Exactly.”

“It had a little bit of humor but wasn’t over the top,” says Olivieri.

B2B marketers should remember that your brand voice should be consistent, no matter what the channel. “I see a lot of marketers approaching content as one off efforts—but one good idea for a piece of content isn’t a campaign,” says Maschler. “You need to think more holistically.”

Short and sweet is more the trend today, but it’s about more than just short or long copy, he continues. “It’s about customer benefits and showing why the customer should care [about what you have to say], rather than patting yourself on the back.”

“The types of long narratives that used to be popular just don’t work today,” says Balzer. “People now have attention spans that demand easily digestible sound bites.” —*Beth Negus Viveiros, managing editor, Chief Marketer*



A CREATIVE PLAN THE ELEMENTS YOU NEED TO CREATE B2B CONTENT WITH A MEASURABLE ROI

Are you creating more marketing content than ever before? You’re not alone: According to the Content Marketing Institute and MarketingProfs’ annual Content Marketing Benchmarks Report, 78% of the most effective B2B marketers are crafting more content than they did just one year ago. But less than half have a documented content marketing strategy.

To succeed, your content strategy should be grounded in an effort to create a personalized experience for each customer that demonstrates measurable business value. Here are three elements to keep in mind:

1. **Alignment:** Keep content customer-centric.

Content is vital to supporting meaningful engagements across all channels. Smart content supports the needs, challenges, and triumphs of your current and prospective customers. Before you map out a content creation initiative, assemble a core strategy around value-based themes for your audience. It’s important to examine your existing content and ask: “Are you talking about your products or is your content focused on the enablement and success of your customers?” Go for the latter! Your customers should always be the centerpieces of your content ideas.

2. **Planning & Strategy:** Don’t forget the basics.

A carefully planned strategy helps keep your con-

tent in check, so teams can maximize asset value and audiences can see the benefit of interacting with your content. Whether you’re starting from scratch or are knee deep in planning, here are four basic questions to keep in mind when developing content:

- How is this relevant to my audience?
- Does this enable my customer’s success?
- What are our success metrics?
- How do I maximize my daily efforts?

3. **Measurement:** Assess your marketing effectiveness.

In the era of big data, marketers need to be more strategic with the information they collect and access. But it’s overwhelming to get your arms around the treasure trove of data, especially when it comes to content marketing.

Marketers can best measure content marketing effectiveness through a centralized view of the following aspects:

- All your content (including topics, format, keywords and status)
- The volume of content you’ve created
- Your content productivity
- Content distribution channels
- Promotion status and activities
- Content timelines/calendars

Assessing this type of information about your content marketing allows you to configure strategies to better execute on your understanding of content status, gaps, and measurement. —*Andrea Ward, vice president of marketing, Oracle Marketing Cloud*

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

B2B CONTENT NEEDS TO OFFER VALUE TO THE CUSTOMER—NOT TO THE MARKETER

Content marketing is as popular as it is misunderstood. According to a recent survey, 86% of B2B marketers use content marketing, but a little more than half admitted their organizations had an unclear definition of what it meant to have a successful content marketing program.

To truly succeed, content has to have value—not to the marketer but to the person consuming the content. It starts with the right mindset. If your team thinks content marketing is about sales, the content won't connect with the audience. In fact, your audience will run from that content because it'll look like what it is—sales material.

One way to get your team to adopt a selfless mindset is to ask them to brainstorm some of the challenges they see their customers facing. What are some things your customers don't understand? Not questions about your product, questions about their industry. The more you talk about those questions and challenges, the more you'll hone in on an educational need. Once you're thinking about gaps in your audience's knowledge, you'll begin to see how you can address those challenges with relevant content.

HOW DOES THIS CONTENT HELP?

Content marketing comes in many mediums and forms, but the fundamental question you must ask for every piece of content you publish is, "How does it help?"

Accordingly, the very best content marketing programs are heavy with how-to guides, tip sheets, checklists, and blueprints. Naturally, the content varies across industries, but the common denominator is that whatever you produce must help your audience address a real business problem.

GO THE EXTRA MILE WITH ASSETS

Helping your audience understand and address a real problem is critical, but if you want to go the extra mile, one of the best ways you can distinguish yourself is to provide your audience with some free tools. But what kind of tools can you offer?

Companies that sell marketing technology, for example, go the extra mile by offering their audiences access to free libraries of stock photos. The reason

behind that offer is simple: all marketers need stock photos, but wrangling them is costly and annoying. In other industries, it might make sense to provide the audience with templates for producing commonly used documents, or access to online calculators that help someone in that field perform a specialized task.



BUILD A LIBRARY OF HELP

A content library can't be completed overnight. In fact, if you're doing content marketing right, your job is never really done. That's actually a good thing, because it reminds us that the goal of content marketing is to make your brand a trusted resource in your space. That shouldn't happen fast, nor is it something you set and forget.

As you grow from a few good pieces of content into a full-blown library, it's important to think about organization. Ask yourself what themes and categories you see emerging. As your library grows, those answers will help your audience find the right information, but they'll also help you stay on brand while identifying new areas of opportunity.

EXPAND REACH THROUGH CONVERSATION

Whether it's on LinkedIn, Twitter, or Facebook, people in your industry are talking. One of the best ways to amplify and tailor your content marketing is to engage those audiences in conversation. Listen in on the conversations to look for content marketing topics. Better yet, ask your audience what they want to know. If your content marketing comes straight from a poll or FAQ, you are absolutely providing value.

CURATE AND COMMENT ON WHAT'S NEW

Regardless of the industry, news moves faster every day. While keeping up with industry news can be daunting for your audience, it's an opportunity for a content marketer. Try curating relevant news through a company Twitter account. For larger stories, offer a deep-dive analysis on LinkedIn.

BROUGHT TO YOU WITHOUT SELF-PROMO

At this point, you're probably wondering: Okay, but where does my brand come into the picture? After all, you've given a lot of value to your audience, but how do you get value back in return?

The answer is that you take credit for your work. You tell your audience who gave them value, but that's all you do. If your content truly has value for your audience, the thought leadership will pay for itself. —Todd Ebert, CMO, MultiView

B2B? BRAVE? NOT SO MUCH

WHY MORE RISKS NEED TO BE TAKEN IN B2B CREATIVE

Let's be honest: The speed of change in B2B marketing isn't exactly fast.

Yes, CRM and automation are being embraced on a much wider scale. But being brave creatively seems one step too far for many brands and agencies.

Everyone talks about "business to business" becoming "person to person" because professionals are living, breathing human beings. But we're not practicing what we preach.

When you look at B2B marketing both online and offline, creativity isn't exactly thriving. Yes, the work is often effective, and budgets and deadlines are tight. But only rarely do B2B campaigns win creative awards. What is the problem? Is anyone really driving for a creative change?

IS IT THE AGENCIES?

Do agencies have the creative firepower? Have we given up? Are we unable to persuade our clients to be brave? Is there a *need* to be brave? Perhaps it has become too easy for B2B agencies to roll over and do as they are told. Ultimately it is our responsibility to push ourselves and our clients to be brave. There's a knack to getting clients to understand and buy more creative work, but it isn't easy.

You need a client with a challenge, maybe one that is up against it and being forced to make a big shift, a make or break moment for their brand. You also need a client that is hungry and has a desire to make a difference. A great client relationship is crucial, so the whole experience feels like a big team push. You want great work? Then you need to put

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the time and effort in.

WHAT ABOUT THE CLIENTS?

Being brave often means doing something different. Different is scary and dangerous. If it works, the client look great. But if it goes wrong, they could lose their job. So, does the upside outweigh the nega-

tives? Often not. We are a society that likes comfort and repetition and we love to follow rather than lead. It isn't in our DNA to be

different or brave and if you add in multiple stakeholders, all needing to have a say, then it becomes almost impossible to get everyone in agreement to do something different. For global brands it appears the focus is looking and sounding the same wherever you are in the world. But does that really work? Or is the safer option also the easier option?

SO HOW AND WHY SHOULD WE BE BRAVE?

As with anything there are degrees. Agencies need to make clients feel comfortable. I've had campaigns bomb in testing and the client has been even more behind it because of that. At the other end of the spectrum I've seen campaigns pulled because of a tiny detail mentioned in testing. Testing can work for and against you, but if you have a client that isn't convinced, what do you have to lose?

In this day and age, we can use real-time testing on live campaigns to help us out. We can instantly tweak the messaging, change the imagery, or adjust a call to action or offer. We don't have to run a campaign as it is for 12 months and keep our fingers crossed. We can also pick our battles when it comes to bravery. Most campaigns these days have multiple parts: video, digital, search, advertising, etc. so why not choose one of those areas to be a little more daring, rather than just wallpapering the campaign across everything.

Every brave campaign we have ever run—however big or small the element of braveness—has worked. Each campaign got the agency more excited and eager to push harder and pull out all the stops to make it happen. They were noticed by our target audience and remembered, hence the results are better. They made our clients look and feel good, and on top of that, they became the campaigns that our client's colleagues talk about in the corridors.

In a world where many brands, look, sound, and act the same, creativity is the biggest weapon to stand out, get noticed and seriously shift your brand in the right direction. Embrace creativity and be brave.—Darren Bolton, executive creative director, OgilvyOne Business



POWERED BY DATA

3 TIPS FOR USING DATA TO IMPROVE YOUR BRAND'S CONTENT AND CREATIVE

1. Understand what resonates with customers.

By knowing what makes existing customers happy and coming back, you can hone in on those aspects of your brand and in turn use them to target new customers.

These kinds of insights can be gathered from a variety of touchpoints. Demographics and buying behavior used to be understood by trial-and-error strategies based on limited data and no small amount of conjecture. But the puzzle becomes easier to solve with analytical processes that connect the dots more precisely between products and the people who buy them.

When it comes to direct customer feedback—*as opposed to what's implied by what actually leads to a purchase*—surveys are one place to start, especially if you can handle unstructured feedback. Analytics around website visitors and content can help too. Social listening tools are another good place to see what customers think about your brand, while keeping a close eye on what content is the most popular on your website can be useful as well.

More than anything, though, it's important to not look at any of these metrics in isolation, but to bring them all together to in one place for a full picture of what parts of your brand are already excelling. Gartner noted just how important integration is in a Magic Quadrant report on digital marketing analytics, saying: "Marketers must be able to analyze data that sits on different systems and in different locations in a wide range of forms and formats, including structured and unstructured datasets."

2. Map the entire customer lifecycle.

Many customers may be drawn to your brand for one thing, but end up staying for something quite different. For this very reason, it's important to map the full customer lifecycle across channels, purchases and time. This will help your marketing department know not just what's catching customers' eyes and where, but what's turning them into repeat customers. You'll also get a sense of how customer journeys



change over time, how to better react to those evolving needs, and so on.

Such responsiveness, personalization and seamlessness across channels are surefire ways to keep customers smiling and loyal. But how exactly do you make such understanding and personalization a core part of your marketing department? One key, as Gartner notes, is exploration, and visual analytics can help. Being able to explore patterns in a variety of data sources and then blending

them together, even based on time periods, can help clue you into key customer lifecycle patterns.

3. Correlate your brand with the bottom line.

Folks who work in marketing are naturally the ones that inherently understand the importance of branding. Those in other departments might write off details big and small that can have a huge impact on customer perception and retention.

This is where data comes in. It will help you prove branding's importance at the micro and macro levels, and thus provide the "why" to teams across the company. Combining and analyzing a variety of data will let you actually correlate brand awareness and engagement with the bottom line, which is huge for communicating initiatives internally. For example, what are the data trends in your customer support department? Your website stats? Your marketing campaign data? How do those sources and others tell the story of how your brand is reflected in revenue?

This kind of inquiry can lead to a snowball effect; as more decision-makers in the company can quantify and see the value of a strong brand, they will also be more willing to continue investing in marketing, leading even more customer understanding, fine-tuning, brand loyalty and a strong bottom line. —*Elissa Fink, CMO, Tableau Software* !



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