

Susan Kirtland, Principal

Catalyst Education Partners
sue@catalystedupartners.com
p 602.316.6123

Content Marketing: What It Is and What It Isn't

Definition: Delivering relevant and valuable custom content to activate a desired change in stakeholder thought or behavior.

The content needs to be timely, relevant, memorable, and most importantly, optimized if you're going to see any return on investment for Web Sites, Microsites, Magazines, Newsletters, Videos, Television Spots, Special Events, Facebook Posts, and Blogs.

The driving principle behind strategic content marketing isn't really about marketing at all. It's about producing and distributing information-rich content to your intended audiences to make them better informed about your College and what your College has to offer. Information from the perspective of what they want or need to know, not necessarily what you want to tell them.

Great content marketing presents a unique personality allowing your College to reach prospective and current stakeholders on a more personal level through interaction. Content can offer opinions and advice, but even more important is your willingness to respond to questions and honor requests — which helps people to relate to your content. Content then becomes a two-way conversation, rather than a one-sided advertisement.

Great content marketing attracts prospects and search engines with high-quality, optimized content. Great content draws the attention of prospective stakeholders and wins higher ranking from search engines.

Great content marketing builds loyalty and trust by addressing questions and concerns with useful, lasting information. Content builds an audience and develops loyalty among its followers.

Great content marketing establishes authority through consistent, high-value information — the type that individuals seek over time as a trustworthy source of intelligence on key issues.

The actual content is timely, relevant, memorable, and most importantly, optimized if you're going to see any return on investment. But quantifying a return on investment (ROI) in the new frontier of online marketing can be challenging. There's rarely an immediate 30-day turnaround on investment, which creates confusion and no small amount of anxiety. When content does take hold, however, the benefits can be very fruitful — and measureable.

Before you drill down to measure content marketing ROI, you need to examine and measure the value of your content marketing efforts as a whole. Marketing-related key performance indicators (KPIs) abound, but unless you understand which ones are important to your College, you'll find it nearly impossible to measure success.

Useful content engages readers, and its value goes far beyond the cost of creation and distribution. Yet every College marketer must ultimately speak the language of the administration, so you need to prove value with metrics.

That's where consumption, lead-generation, sharing, and conversion metrics come into play. Determine which of the following is most important to your administration, and start measuring those KPIs within your institution:

Consumption Metrics

Use web analytics to reveal consumption metrics, which show the value of your content efforts. KPI metrics may include total visits, unique visits, downloads, time-on-site, cost-per-visitor, and bounce rate. The key here is to look for measurable data that can help you determine how often content is consumed, as well as the path readers follow to find that content. For example, maybe a visitor came to your site to read a blog post, then followed a link to a program page, then clicked to your about-us page, then filled out a request for more information form.

These metrics are directly tied to the value of your investment. It's likely your other marketing channels are hitting certain baselines, such as cost-per-click or cost-per-action; look for similar ways to attribute content marketing value as you would with paid search or other marketing campaigns. A wide array of website metrics can be used as key performance indicators of content. Ensure your site is set up to measure them, and look at data weekly, monthly, quarterly and yearly for an accurate representation of the return on your investment.

Lead-generation Metrics

One way marketers attribute leads to content is by using lead-capture forms (even restricting a piece of content to those who complete it). The form may ask for name and email address to sign up for a newsletter, or it may request even more information. It's up to you and your recruitment or admissions team to close this lead, but the content itself acts as the carrot.

The second way marketers attribute a lead to content is by tracking the originating source of a lead. A visitor may happen across a great video you developed and fills out a lead form. That content was consumed and helped produce a lead.

Regardless of the method, it's important to set up your site with the correct goals to track and measure leads and attribution. Cookies can also track visitors on your site and indicate which pages they viewed prior to filling out the form — even if they don't do so on their first visit. Ensure your site is set up to track these events and understand the value each lead provides to your company.

Sharing Metrics

Social media metrics are less easily quantified as a dollar value but are still important. Social networks generate traffic for your content assets (and tie in to consumption metrics, among others). But how can you really determine the value of a "like" on Facebook or a "+1" on Google? These social points are certainly important — but in a discussion about content marketing ROI, it's hard to assign a dollar value.

Social profiles provide value for customer relationship management, customer service, and customer engagement, among other purposes. The particular sharing metrics important for the ROI discussion depend on your chosen KPIs. For example, you may focus on referral traffic and conversions on your site, or simply gain an understanding of how consumers share your content, which provides value in other areas. When thinking about the return on your content investment, don't ignore sharing metrics, but take care not to overvalue them either.

Conversion Metrics

The true dollars and cents of content marketing come from conversion metrics. While the rest of the metrics mentioned here are important, conversion metrics are the easiest aspect of the ROI equation to understand. Review close rates. Not conversion rates on your site, but actual conversion-close rates as reported in your CRM system. Conversion rates are an excellent tool for proving content marketing ROI, affirming whether or not your prospects are turning into students. If your CRM system and processes do not currently allow you to track a visitor all the way to enrollment, it's imperative that you figure out how to fix this. Ensure your system can track what path a visitor took to fill out a lead form or application, and transfer that data to your CRM system software. Over time, this should help you to see what type of content consumption is important to that conversion. For example, is it program videos, degree/ certificate mapping, or blog posts by current students or alumni that seem to influence conversion most?

With data in hand, you can attribute value to the content pieces that helped to achieve conversion. You can attribute in part the enrollment of that prospect to the content responsible for bringing the prospect in. Or in the case of institutional advancement, the monetary contribution recently made by a new donor. In many cases, that type of data is hard to track down, so value isn't so easily correlated to a single asset. Don't let these types of loose ends continue to hinder you; start tracking the information, and make informed observations on the ROI of your content marketing.

Quick Tip:

Feeling overwhelmed? Can't measure it all? Then focus on web traffic and leads (requests for more information or applications completed) first. If your content is generating more traffic, leads and inquiries, then all the other metrics are secondary.

Additional Metrics

Consider other cost savings related to content marketing — savings that may not be easy to capture in your KPIs. For example, leads from content (such as a potential student downloading a free guide in exchange for his contact information) are better-qualified conversion leads. Less time is spent actively pursuing the conversion because your prospects sought you (and are further along in the consideration cycle.) Your customer service costs may also come down. Online FAQs or other resource pages can quickly and effectively answer many questions tying up admissions or financial aid staff. Take a hard look at your conversion model and determine how content marketing can make a positive impact on your bottom line, as this can factor in the overall cost effectiveness and success of a content marketing strategy.

Content marketing has proven time and time again to be a valuable asset to any marketing plan, and with proper strategy and implementation, proving the ROI to the administration can be accomplished. It may take some time, but once tracking is set up, you're sure to see your investment pay off.