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TEN FACTS ABOUT CONTENT MARKETING

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Preface

Content marketing is facing what most trendy topics face: it is more publicly discussed than it is truly understood. Thus far content production has relied on case-specific, individual reports, and the final outcomes of content have provided surprises, both positive or negative. In hindsight it is easy to explain content success and failure, but academic studies on the logic of content creation and content life cycle have been missing.

The ambitious goal of this research, Opening the Black Box of Content Marketing, funded by Business Finland, has been to systematically open up the logic of content marketing. In our project, we asked what constitutes content related expectations, how are content experiences formed, and how the content lives in the consumer's environment. In this report, we present ten facts about content marketing answering these questions.

Since the start of this research project in November 2016, we have studied and analysed over a hundred pieces of content marketing – texts, images, videos and audio. We have interviewed over 20 content marketing specialists and gathered survey results from over 2,000 content marketing audience members. All the quotes on the following pages emerged from the interview transcripts and the open-ended questions' answers from the Black Box project's data pool.

With the results, we want to encourage content marketing towards a new, more science-based path. As discussed at the Marketing Week in 2017 and PING Festival 2018 in Helsinki, we explain how audience is taking over the previous "kingdom of content", and the final content experience is formed in collaboration.

Cooperation has been central also for this research project. We want to thank both our Finnish and foreign university partners (researchers at the universities of Jyväskylä, Tampere, and Oklahoma and Macquarie University) and our corporate partners, those eager to develop their content: Alko, A-lehdet, Aamulehti, DNA, Fazer, Nordea, Pirkanmaan Lehtitalo, Vapa Media and PING Helsinki. Warm thanks also to all our interviewees and to those who participated in our surveys. In fact, content marketing follows more the rules of communication than marketing, and content can only be understood through understanding how that collaboration occurs in practice.

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Fact 1: The audience is king

"Content is king." Almost every content marketing professional has heard this saying – and most have used it themselves. In some ways, content *is* king, of course. Content production should always be ambitious and have faith that great content will find its audience.

> *I think content marketing means charming the audience.*

However, we know from experience that content is never produced or evaluated in a vacuum. When we see a message on social media, we always evaluate it in relation to who created the message. Is it someone I know, or is it a stranger? What do I already know about this person? Does this message reflect my previous experience of that person?

The medium used also often provides context for evaluating content: our opinion of the content is influenced by its source. Is it a newspaper or a gossip magazine? Does the content fit my expectations of the medium in question? Our experiences with brands also often affect the perceived usefulness of the content they produce: we don't mind using a cake recipe from a reliable food brand that we know uses a test kitchen.

Even if content is fantastic, it can be hard for an unfamiliar brand to get its message across. Building a relationship and trust with the audience takes a lot of patient work, and it requires a lot more than merely content. If the audience experience good service and promises are kept – or even surpassed – the audience will commit more, which affects how they evaluate content.

> *All marketing should, in a certain way, be service.*

Content marketing has often been described as borrowing conventions from journalism. In addition to the format and narrative techniques, it should also borrow from journalism the idea of serving the public. The core of good content marketing is the audience's expectations and experiences. The *real* king, therefore, is the audience.

Fact 2: The stronger the brand, the less leeway

Consumers have strong beliefs about familiar, established brands. They base their expectations of the topics, style and people that suit the brand on these beliefs, which shapes the way that they experience the content. For example, consumers may see a brand as an expert in some areas. In these expert areas, consumers also trust content from strong brands. A confectionery brand knows the little vices of everyday life, and a drink brand knows how to recommend suitable combinations of drinks and food. There may, however, be a surprisingly small amount of room to manoeuvre, and viewers may begin to wonder why the content has been produced and what it has to do with the brand.

> *If we have to explain why the blogger is involved in the business of this company, then we have probably crossed the line.*

In a brand's own channels in particular, people expect content to stick to themes that they naturally associate with the brand. Of course, there are brands that people expect to supply controversial comments on various issues. With brands like these, the line would actually be crossed if the content was merely everyday tips given in an informative style. The audience generally expects the style of content to reflect the brand image, and they also notice the people featured in content: Who is speaking for the company? Does this particular person fit the brand?

The use of paid media or influencer cooperation, for example, may limit the room to manoeuvre. For example, content that appears in paid media can borrow the style of the medium in question. In one medium, people might be used to longer interviews, whereas in another, people are not bothered if the content resembles an advertisement. The media that surrounds the content provides the lens through which people interpret it. Less well-known brands may be able to buy more credibility in paid media, and a brand that people view as serious may be able to gain some necessary levity and playfulness.

> *I think it widened it [the image]. It showed that this brand is kind of stable and sometimes a bit staid, slow to warm up in temperament maybe. But it also has a funny side: it is good-humoured, and it can laugh at itself.*

The audience's expectations of content do not mean that brands should remain perpetually unchanging. When a brand is stretching its boundaries, though, it is good to prepare for some initial confusion. In the eyes of the audience, a credible change in direction requires action on many fronts, and a single campaign or piece of content seldom successfully achieves such a transformation.

Fact 3: Conflict leads to confusion; confusion leads to flagging interest

When people explore the web, they encounter vast amounts of content in a great many channels. Every content producer is competing for their attention, but it is not worth even starting to compete if all you have are empty promises – you will lose the audience.

To get the audience hooked on content and to retain them, content marketing producers need clarity and predictability in their messages, and in their sites. Confusion was a recurring theme in our research, and it did not always lead to positive insights. If content does not meet people's expectations or a brand's website is poorly organised, it confuses the consumer. This confusion makes consumers lose interest, eventually leading them away from the content. Perhaps clarity and predictability are more sought-after now, following a period that emphasized media coverage, because they help the audience deal with today's deluge of content?

> *It was like jumping straight into the middle without any kind of introduction as to what kind of worlds we were supposed to find ourselves in.*

Many things can confuse the audience: the content may not match people's perceptions of the brand, or the content does not jibe with how people would expect the brand to address consumers. Contradictions can also appear at the content level: between the heading and the picture, or between the hook in social media and the content. For example, if the opening image in a video is unclear or boring, this will not engender positive expectations in the audience. Having too much content can also cause confusion, as it makes finding relevant information difficult. News sites may have an imbalance between the amount of content marketing and the journalistic content.

Audiences require clear lines and continuums, and their expectations must be met. They also want commercial content to be clearly identified, which means separating it from journalistic content. Content producers must also inform consumers about what is new and special about their specific content marketing. If the audience is forced to ask why the content has been produced and how it is linked with the brand, the experience is shattered. The audience has to know who is speaking and why.

> *I started to wonder straight away what on earth does this have to do with the brand.*

Fact 4: The temptation to google is a threat

All content wants to be found on Google, and that is fine. When the consumer has chosen the content from Google's search results, the first challenge has been overcome. The next challenge is to get the consumer to stay with your content without them wanting to return to Google.

> *Now I'm frustrated, and now I'm going straight to Ikea's website, and that is where I go.*

Non-existent, broken or incorrect links are examples of very simple things that drive the audience away from content; it is important to take good care of the basics.

Having a large amount of varied content lets the audience get everything they want in one place, whether that is information or entertainment. For example, if the goal is to get the audience interested in an interior design product, you can offer a lot of relevant information in one place (measurements, colours, prices, etc.), a background story (where the idea for the product came from, what the product represents, etc.), or visual stimuli (images of the product details or of the product in various environments, videos of how to assemble the product, etc.).

How easy – at least for the audience. Content producers should set their sights high and prevent the audience from being tempted to do some more googling. People find it easy to spend time in a rich environment, and they will return to it.

> *… I am using a lot more energy overall. I mean that if I'd been doing this for real, I would probably have stopped. I mean I'd have gone back to Google and searched for something else. If I notice that this just repeats itself, or this site is giving me nothing, then it won't be the site where I do my research.*

Fact 5: A commercial video is a risk for the viewer

The power of video has not gone unnoticed by marketers and the media. Formats from documentaries, reality TV, music videos and talk shows are borrowed for commercial video content, and many recent content marketing success cases utilise video.

People are watching videos more and more, but not every viewer has an easy relationship with commercial videos. You cannot "half-watch" a video, which means that in the mind of the audience, there is always a small risk involved with a commercial video. Some people are more prepared to skip past videos in social media streams.

> *The point has to be made clear right from the start, so that I won't waste another 20 seconds of my life on a pointless video.*

A video should hook you instantly, but it also should make clear to the audience what the video is for and why this particular brand is taking part in that conversation. If audiences are confused, their sensation of risk may grow, which may make them stop watching the video. The old truth about how important the first few seconds of a video are still holds true. And the end of the video had better come good on the promises made at the beginning.

Insecurity among audiences can also be alleviated by likes and shares in their own networks. Making them suitable for sharing and activating enthusiastic content sharers are even more important for videos than for other content. The video thumbnail may also be an influencing factor, as people base decisions about the quality and content of the video on it. A distinctive thumbnail, movement, people, and colour tones all create interest.

> *When I get home from work, I have all kinds of things on my mind... It takes me a while to get focused so I can get into it. So you kind of want to know why you should watch it before you start.*

A video is a risky investment for both the audience and the content marketer. When it succeeds, it thrills, creates powerful emotions and actions, lets you in close, makes you sense gestures and expressions, and saves fleeting moments. The style of a video is expected to be in line with the other content from that brand or medium, and it is especially the people, the music, and the mood in a video that get the audience's attention. But a commercial video has to get over that small hurdle of getting watched. It has to make the viewer sigh with relief and feel that pressing the play button was a good choice.

Fact 6: Usefulness and truthfulness are rewarding

What is good content like? At minimum, it is informative, believable, real, unbiased, interesting, meaningful and entertaining. But it does depend on what the definition is and who is doing the defining. However, it does seem that two characteristics are more important than others: **usefulness** and **truthfulness**. In the statistical review in our study, the other "indicators of good content" were grouped around these two characteristics.

Useful and truthful – those were the things that really made me want it.

The result is surely no surprise to experienced content marketing producers. Other studies have also shown that content is most valued when it is useful to the audience. But what does usefulness consist of? Useful content is not just informative – at its best it is also entertaining. This means that factual content can adopt a playful or relaxed attitude, and a humorous style can sometimes be an effective way of getting a serious message across.

And what is "truthfulness" in this post-truth age? It is important to note that we are talking above all about *perceived* truthfulness. The relevant thing is how truthful the audience *believes* the content is.

The experience of how authentic the content is also plays a part. Content that is judged to be real seems to feed on the perceived truthfulness of the content. For example, if content created as influencer cooperation feels false and artificial, that influencer's opinion also loses credibility.

This is as obvious a commercial as it's possible to have.

Fact 7: It's all about human-to-human

In the 1950s, media researchers began to pay attention to an unusual phenomenon: Viewers started to think of people they saw on the screen as their acquaintances. People would say hello to television hosts, and they felt that the news anchor speaking to the camera was talking directly to them. They started to call this phenomenon, where the audience feels intimacy and interaction with a person they encounter through the medium, *parasocial interaction*.

The web has created more possibilities for parasocial experiences. We may feel close to people we encounter not only on television, but also on social media. A blogger talking about their daily life may seem like a friend, as does someone with a username we regularly engage with on a discussion forum. This experience may also occur with brands' social media representatives, if the style of the updates is personal. An identifiable interface makes the audience feel closer to the person behind the account.

> *… being there, to people as people.*

A parasocial experience is an illusion of a real interaction, but it is still powerful to the person who experiences it. The experience may make the audience member return to the content over and over again, to spend more time with it and even enjoy the content more. These are all very attractive things for marketers.

So, how do you take advantage of the audience's parasocial experiences? You should learn from influencers, especially YouTubers. Many of them are masters at creating personal, interesting and addictive content. By boldly bringing their own everyday life into their content, YouTubers manage to create strong bonds with their audiences and create tight communities around themselves. Parasocial experiences also explain why commercial recommendations from YouTubers are so effective.

> *YouTubers are better role models from the advertisers' perspective than other public figures… YouTubers are not as far removed from normal viewers as normal celebrities would be, and … if a YouTuber recommends a product, then it is definitely going to have more impact on other people's opinions than if the same thing was said by some other public figure.*

Fact 8: Personalized content is a tightrope

There is a seemingly unlimited range of choice on the web, and this can sometimes exceed people's capacity to handle information. Audiences react to the continuously increasing amount of content by being selective about the content and media they frequent. In the content jungle, you can help the audience by targeting and customizing content, as well offering highly personalized, deep-reaching content.

The amount of content in the world exceeds the capacity to absorb it.

Personal experiences can be offered by targeting messages at certain groups. This means moving from "push" messaging aimed at the masses to individual "pull" messaging. This may mean content and marketing related to a person's location, hobbies or interests. Even radio advertising – perhaps the archetype of mass media advertising – will be more targeted in the future, as more people listen to audio content via apps with user IDs.

Targeting can also mean offering specific and very deep-reaching information, which offers businesses new opportunities to highlight their expertise. A small number of consumers want very detailed and deep-reaching content – and are willing to spend a lot of time with that kind of content. Podcasts and vlogs, for example, invite audiences to spend time with content that is just right for them, and people are often ready to follow the producers of such content on a regular basis.

Accurately targeting content and offering personalized content is like walking a tightrope, though. While it is definitely worth targeting content in a way that better serves the audience's needs and expectations, it is vital not to give the audience the impression that they are being "stalked". The audience should not find itself trapped in a recommendation bubble, only coming across content based on their previous behaviour. Recommending content should work in a way that also leads audiences towards content that offers new insights. Targeting must also work in an open and transparent way, so that audiences always know what kind of data is being collected about them, how that data is being handled, who can access it, and how long it is stored for.

In the future, artificial intelligence will also influence the targeting of content. New technology can analyse data and guide content creation significantly more quickly and accurately than humans.

AI and VR technologies will also enable new methods of content marketing, and they will be much more personal to consumers ... Then they will be able to create experiences in the digital world in a totally new way... Content will no longer be one-dimensional.

Fact 9: Content marketing can actually care

Content marketing can care about social discussions, current issues and individuals' problems. Responsibility and social aspects do not mean just factual content about sustainability and the environment; they also mean taking into account consumers' values and the social and personal problems they recognize – and even solving them. People want information they can use and real action from companies.

> *Basically, the best content teaches people and helps them do something,*
> *as opposed to just spreading messages and advertising.*

Brands and companies are increasingly taking part in social discussions. They offer platforms and initiate interaction. These discussions should, however, start with topics that fall within the brand's area of competence. Less well-known brands will find it easier to take risks when initiating discussions. Established brands have limitations to the way they can address the audience: people consider a brand's credibility by comparing the way they start a discussion to the existing brand image. Brands can still participate credibly in volatile social discussions if they are ready to work systematically with the questions and create a recognizable voice for themselves.

Caring also means that companies have to be transparent about their own manufacturing processes, financing and working methods. Consumers do not want to hear vague talk about responsibility; they are interested in the transparent workings of the company, and in making caring visible. Social topics and responsibility content should not involve pointing fingers.

> *Pointing fingers definitely doesn't work – it's more about sharing*
> *information. I am more affected by information, and I will look at it in*
> *relation to my own life and pick out the information I feel is necessary.*

Fact 10: Metrics is a tailored job

In order to effectively produce and develop content marketing, it also needs to be measured.

> *[Measurement] guides how we do our work – as it should do. The results of content marketing can really be measured – and they definitely should be measured.*

In the industry, people often talk about the lack of common and comparable metrics, and about the need for such metrics. Everyday communication would be greatly aided if there were some basic, standardised metrics. However, metrics should always be based on the company's own goals, and the focus of the discussion should move towards customizing the metrics. Making comparisons with other brands is often not worthwhile; it makes more sense to create metrics that serve your own purposes.

The problem with metrics these days is not the amount of data – analytics tools provide plenty of it. Rather, the problem is that not all companies can actually determine what their content marketing targets, derived from the strategic goals, should be. If there are no clear, measurable targets, it is very difficult to establish metrics afterwards in a way that would be useful in serving the development of operations.

> *The current situation in many places is … that they have no strategic metrics, and they just follow "click metrics" because it's easy and because huge amounts of data are available.*

The success of influencer marketing in particular is often monitored with likes, shares and comments. Even though some experts think that these "click metrics" are unnecessary, our research shows that there is a link between audience participation and the influencer's credibility, which in turn helps to make the influencer's recommendations more effective. Audience participation gives an indication of how successful the cooperation has been and, for example, about the attitude towards the brand as seen in a video. If that is the goal of the cooperation, monitoring is worth doing.

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