

Powering Content

Technology concerns for implementing a winning content marketing strategy

Quantifying the value of content and understanding how to effectively execute a successful content marketing strategy is still a challenge for many marketers. Implementing the right tools to make that happen is crucial.

Often, brands struggle with truly doing content marketing because they have folks creating content that see it purely as a promotional vehicle. "That forces readers to tune out," says Michael Brenner, CEO, Marketing Insider Group and co-author of "The Content Formula."

There are many questions marketers need to ask themselves in relation to the type of technology they need to implement their content marketing strategy, Brenner says. Workflow and scheduling are two key areas to consider—if you're in a smaller organization, email and Google docs may suffice here. But in a larger enterprise, editorial calendaring becomes a bigger issue.



Measurement is a big question in many organizations, many of which have never really documented the reason they're even doing content marketing in the first place. "Identify the business case," he says. "Content marketing doesn't have to be expensive—it all goes back to your objectives. Page views or social

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"IT ALL GOES BACK TO YOUR OBJECTIVE. IDENTIFY YOUR BUSINESS GOALS. CONTENT MARKETING DOESN'T HAVE TO BE EXPENSIVE—PAGE VIEWS OR SOCIAL SHARES MIGHT BE OKAY FOR YOU, OR YOU MIGHT WANT TO GENERATE LEADS."

—MICHAEL BRENNER

CONTENT MEASUREMENT

WHY YOUR GOOGLE ANALYTICS DATA IS PROBABLY WRONG

It's not enough to simply have great content. You have to know how to measure the success of it as well.

Google Analytics is both a friend and a foe to marketers. Some days the site tracking service reassures us that the endless hours we put into SEO strategies is totally paying off. Other days, it makes us reevaluate why we choose to succumb to the search giant's every demand.

Trying to understand how Google categorizes organic search traffic versus direct traffic is difficult at times. Organic traffic is usually a good indication of SEO efforts. It tells you how many visitors are coming to your site through keyword searches. Direct traffic, on the other hand, is typically defined as visitors who land on your site by directly typing in your company's URL. Right? *Maybe.*

The mystery behind direct traffic

Ideally, business owners should be able to analyze the data in their Google Analytics report, discover how much of their site traffic is organic, and use it to establish benchmarks and opportunities for growth. That doesn't seem to be the case anymore.

If you've ever posted a new blog and started getting a lot of direct traffic shortly after publishing, you'll understand that the data can't be entirely accurate. Are your visitors mind readers who are typing in the URL as soon as you publish? Nope. Google is skewing the data.

This irritating reality was proven by Groupon's 2014 experiment in which they temporarily removed themselves from Google's index for six hours. The goal was to see how much it would affect their traffic. What they found was that at the same time their SEO efforts—and consequently organic search traffic—dropped to near zero, direct visits also fell 60%. What this means is that *as much as 60%* of Groupon's direct traffic was actually organic traffic.

Wikipedia noticed something similar. Co-founder Jimmy Wales has recognized a "long-term issue with decreasing traffic from Google." This comes as a surprise, as Wikipedia has always been known to dominate Google's search results. What does all this mean? *At least some web traffic reported by Google as direct is, actually, organic.*

Why is the data inaccurate?

There are many reasons why the data given by Google Analytics' Traffic Sources is misleading.

- Often times it's technical. Different browsers and operating systems (such as older versions of Apple iOS) can potentially block referral information from reaching your company's website. When browsers don't report where they were in the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) referrer header, the traffic is often considered direct.
- Additionally, it can depend on how a user searches – via Google directly, or through a browser's search box.



Groupon discovered that as much as 60% of their direct traffic was actually organic when they temporarily removed themselves from Google's index.

Groupon found that what browser was being used made a significant difference. For example, about 75% of direct traffic from Internet Explorer to long URLs is "actually attributable to Organic search from Google." While "about 10-20% of Firefox, Chrome and Safari desktop traffic reported as Direct is actually Organic."

- Another factor that can affect the count is encryption of search traffic – which Google implemented in 2011 as an effort to "make search more secure." Because of this, business owners and marketers aren't able to get keyword data for searches conducted.
- User privacy settings may also cause distorted data. If a user's first session to your site was sourced as organic, future visits will continue to be sourced as such, even if they've since started accessing your site via a bookmark or directly typing in the URL. As long as they search from the same device and browser, this data will not be altered until they clear their browser history and delete saved cookies, or if they don't access your site again for six months. Then the data is refreshed and all future visits from the bookmark or typing your company URL will be sourced as direct.

Why does accuracy matter?

Search data is significant and frustrating for every business owner because it's an indicator of your SEO and content marketing prowess. When it comes to search marketing, there's no single more important piece of information than knowing where your site's visitors are coming from. If we can't trust our Google Analytics reports, how are we expected to evaluate which content strategies are working and from which SEO efforts we can confidently benefit?

We speak for all of us who use Google Analytics when we say, we are exasperated and demand an explanation. We need to know what percentage of direct traffic is actually organic. If the data error is consistent, we can learn to take the flaw into account and make informed budgeting and strategy decisions in the future. But we need to know. And in a quickly-changing marketplace, *we need to know now.* —Kaysha Kalkofen, co-founder, tSunela

BEFORE YOU BUY...

KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT SEO MARKETERS SHOULD ASK BEFORE THEY INVEST IN A NEW CMS

If you've got fantastic marketing content, you want it to be found. This means marketers must have search engine optimization top of mind when considering a new content management system.

"There's no magic pill for mastering SEO," says Jim McKinley, principal and co-founder of 360Partners. "How can you increase visibility without spending too much? It all goes back to rethinking your whole offering and the whole customer experience on your website."

The marketers that are succeeding at search engine optimization today are focusing less on specific paid tactics and more on the customer experience from an end to end basis, and differentiating what customers are experiencing throughout the sales cycle on their site, he says.

Paid search has become more and more expensive for marketers—leads that cost \$35 three years ago in pay per client now average twice that, McKinley notes. Content can play a huge role in helping marketers have better results in organic search.

"It all goes back to the fact that Google's fundamental goal is to provide the most relevant answer to a searcher's question," he says. "At the end of the day, creating quality content is the way to win."

Incorporating relevant keywords into your content is important, but write to your audience first, he says. "Google spends billion each year on making algorithms better, and they're getting better and better at understanding things like the fact that a copy machine is the same thing as a copier as a Xerox machine."

Content also needs to be digestible by Google—if Google can't understand what your site is about, they're not going to rank it highly. Along those lines, which content management system your site uses doesn't have as significant an impact on rankings as it once did, he notes.

But what *does* make a difference is title tags and meta descriptions. These are the signals that you give to Google to show what your site is about, and what will appear on the search engine results pages. This mistake that marketers make here is that they either don't bother to write them, and let Google do it for them, or they let an IT or website person handle the task. "They could be technically correct but they don't really tap into your true call to action or mission," McKinley says.

What To Ask

S. Colby Phillips, SEO manager, 360Partners, shared some of the most important questions marketers need to ask themselves—and their potential partners and vendors—before they invest in a new CMS.

"The primary considerations are how the CMS treats and allows for the customization of specific elements of the site that impact SEO," Phillips says.



1. Does the CMS allow for a customizable URL structure? Some CMSs automatically generate URLs that are not SEO or user friendly.
2. Does the CMS have a URL structure based on folders rather than parameters? Folders give search engines an indication of how the site is structured, making it easier for them to understand it.
3. Are meta tags customizable?
4. Does the CMS provide the ability to make changes to pages without changing the URL? Some CMSs change the URL when edits are made.
5. Does the CMS use heavy or extraneous code? Code-bloat can slow down the performance of the site.
6. Does the CMS allow for easy 301 redirection? Many CMSs default to 302 redirects which are not good for SEO.
7. Does the CMS allow for adding sub-categories (and sub-sub-categories, etc.) as a way to organize the site?
8. Does the CMS automatically generate XML sitemaps, and can they be modified easily with additional things like language tags?
9. Does the CMS allow for implementing breadcrumbs as an additional method of navigation?
10. Is it easy to integrate social media tags and icons?
11. Does the CMS provide for internal site search functions?
12. Does the CMS allow for adding schema markup tags?
13. Does the CMS provide for responsive design for users on all device-types?
14. Can analytics tracking codes and tags be easily added where you want them in the CMS? Some CMSs have specific places where the analytics code goes, but it is not the optimal place on the page.

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shares might be okay for you, or you might want to generate leads. There can be a lot of noise in the measurement conversation. Know where to invest.”

Many marketers are still using the same content marketing strategies that worked three years ago—and that’s a recipe for diminishing returns, says Mark Schaefer, founder and executive director of Schaefer Marketing Solutions.

“We’re reaching an overwhelming information density,” says Schaefer. “A few years ago, content was a novelty and it was easy to use it to get traction and leads. But now, people are seeing declining success and not understanding why.”

There’s a lot of conversation surrounding best practices for creating and optimizing content, Schaefer notes. “But content has an economic value of zero unless it is seen and shared.”

Content isn’t the finish line—it’s the starting line, he says. “You need to build an audience and know who is sharing, where and why. That is what is creating the economic value.”

A whopping 80% of content on B2B websites never gets seen. Just hitting publish doesn’t mean you have a content marketing strategy, says Schaefer. “You can trick people into clicking on a link, but you can’t trick them into sharing your content. Marketers need to create an emotional connection with their audience in a heroic way that makes them stand out.”

Interactive content is a hot concept right now, notes Arnie Kuenn CEO of Vertical Measures. Anyone who has taken a BuzzFeed quiz to find out the state they should be living in or which Star Wars character is their true soul mate knows the appeal of this kind of material.

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There are a lot of tools available to help marketers to build interactive content, he says. “But, the downside is that data shows that even though this content is engaging, it doesn’t necessarily lead people to the next page on your website. We need to figure out how to harness its power.”

What technology do you need to power your content marketing initiatives? It all depends on your needs, says Kuenn, noting that for many marketers a Wordpress blog could suffice as their CMS. A system for scheduling is also needed—depending on your organization, this could be mapped out in a spreadsheet.

“Size and scope is always an issue,” he notes. “How many writers and content producers do you have? How much content will you be producing? Some systems are licensed on a per seat/user basis.” !



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