

THE PROBLEM WITH CONTENT

There's a problem with content that's been right under our noses for years.

(Nobody's sure what it is.)



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It's 2017, and content marketing is entrenched. Even the most resistant companies have invested in it, Google algorithms reward it, and we're reasonably confident that our audiences want it.

But do we really know what we're doing?

Consider, for example, that most of us tend to define content marketing in terms of itself – which is weird and not very helpful, if you think about it.

“Content marketing is ... offering targeted content...”

The phrasing differs between definitions, but the structure typically doesn't. Even the Content Marketing Institute, effectively the Merriam-Webster of the industry, puts it this way:

“Content marketing is the marketing and business process for creating and distributing relevant and valuable content...”

It's striking that, in our years of navel-gazing about the practice, we haven't bothered to break down its parts more carefully. What counts as content, really? What doesn't? Why does it matter? Are we really saying anything with our current definitions?

Above all: How can we understand the nature of content – the type of thing that it is – in a way that improves our work?

WHAT'S AHEAD

In the pages that follow, we're going to define content and provide applicable lessons that will help you reach your audiences better. This isn't just a semantics exercise: It's a new way to understand one of the most important tools we use every day – and ensure that our investments in it will bear fruit.

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Logo

search



navigation

news



sale



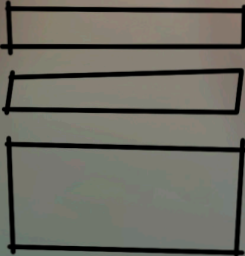
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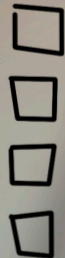
links



contact form



submit



social network links

contact



What we mean when we talk about content

What is content, really? Let's play with some definitions.

Maybe content is useful written or visual information. Maybe it's information that's transferable and can drive decision-making. Verbiage or imagery that educates? These definitions rise to the top on the Internet right now – they're how we currently understand what we're producing.

But notice that they tend to focus on the *verb* of content – the action it creates. Content *helps*. Content *drives*. Content *educates*.

That's handy, but that doesn't really get us any closer to the *noun* of content – what type of thing it is.

It's the difference between calling an airplane “something that flies” and “a vehicle with wings and a tail.” The first definition gets you somewhere conceptually, but you still don't know anything about how it works. If you want to build an airplane, you don't bolt together an outcome. You assemble a wing and stick it to a fuselage.

Similarly, we want to know what we're constructing when we make content. Only then can we really understand where those outcomes come from – and how to create better ones.

WHATEVER IT IS, CONTENT ISN'T GOING AWAY.

42%

of content marketers say their business has recently had organization/structural changes that embrace content marketing¹ In terms of institutional priority and infrastructure, content marketing is here to stay.

¹Content Marketing Institute, 2017 Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends—North America

A (possibly) surprising definition

CONTENT IS ARGUMENT.

Think about it: In marketing, we don't publish anything with the goal of keeping people where they are. That's silly. We publish to move them somewhere – to convince them of something, motivate them to act, or reframe how they understand an issue. This movement can happen obviously or subtly, consciously or unconsciously, but it's always happening. No matter the message or medium:

Your blog topics and messages demonstrate that you know what's going on in the industry, or that you have something useful to say.

Your thought leadership isn't education for education's sake; it's arguing for your intellectual seriousness and worthiness as a company.

Your website and landing page designs assert that you are either contemporary and fluid, or (unfortunately common) that you are stuck in an old paradigm.

Your tweets make explicit and implicit statements about your relevance, your connectedness, and even your humanness as a company.

Your infographic, if it's decent, reframes a narrative argument about the topic – suggesting, for example, that certain statistics should compel us to action.

Even sterile news content contends that you're abreast of what's going on in the industry and that you can be trusted to convey it (we publish news to be seen publishing news well).

...and so on endlessly.

For you nerds, this is all rhetoric theory (we're not really creating anything new here). Rhetoric is the art of creating desirable effects through communication choices – so essentially, we can all add “rhetorician” to our LinkedIn profiles if our jobs involve content marketing. Just make sure to spell it right.

BUT WILL IT FLY?

Let's return to the airplane metaphor. If your content marketing presence consists of many arguments connected to each other, like landing gear, cockpits, and stabilizers, then that gives you a pretty good way to picture the process that leads to outcomes. As a symbiotic structure of claims and assertions, your content marketing creates those desirable verbs: convincing, educating, empowering, etc. And just like you improve flight characteristics by designing better wings, you can also improve your content marketing by designing better arguments.

The takeaway?

Thinking of various content pieces as arguments doesn't just give us a nice, tidy definition – it gives us a way to track our progress and improve our results.



Applying the definition to your work

Acknowledging that everything you churn out will have some kind of argumentative impact – whether it's gentle or blatant, desirable or undesirable – enables you to anticipate your content's effectiveness, or lack thereof.

You can test yourself each time you're about to click "publish:" Am I putting a positive argument out there, or one that will be interpreted as shallow, ineffective, or needless?

IMPACT	EXAMPLE CONTENT	POSITIVE ARGUMENTS	NEGATIVE ARGUMENTS
Subtle	Blog	Our blog is clear and professional; we probably are as well.	Our blog is hurried and unoriginal, so we might be, too.
	Email campaign	Our email campaigns are well thought-out, just like our products.	Our disorderliness should raise suspicions about our products.
Direct	White paper	We understand the looming impact of the Internet of Things, as shown by this research.	Our research is shoddy and our interpretations are stretched to fit our marketing plan. Be wary.
	Tradeshow booth	We dominated that tradeshow – so we're a force to be reckoned with in our industry.	When our booth didn't have any of the answers you needed, we proved our ignorance.

No marketing content is argument-neutral. Whatever we create, in whatever medium, makes a claim about us. Sometimes that claim is intentional and to our advantage; sometimes it's unintentional and damaging. And sometimes one piece of content can contain multiple, even divergent, claims.

*NO MARKETING CONTENT
IS ARGUMENT-NEUTRAL.*



The message and the medium: two content species

Frolic around the marketing world for a while and you'll encounter content in roughly two forms, one of which people routinely ignore:

A) Message: brand messaging, news, education, data. This is what most people think of as content, but that's a limited view.

B) Medium (the ignored one): an email or white paper template, an infographic design, a blog theme, etc. A "container," as Gianluca Fiorelli, international strategic SEO consultant, puts it.

Important: Both of these are content because both, whether we like it or not, make arguments.

For example, a well-designed email newsletter template can send a message about whoever produced it, regardless of the verbiage and imagery it contains. Likewise, a poor design can nullify great words.

TIME WON'T LET ME.

Available time – not budget or lack of investment – is the top barrier to success in content marketing. Eighty-nine percent of B2B companies have embraced content marketing,² so mere participation is no longer a victory. You have to do it better than the others.

So if you need to have a hard conversation with your boss about what it means to be productive – shoveling loads of crap onto the Internet to meet a quota versus taking the time to create something distinctive – now's the time to advocate for time itself.

²Content Marketing Institute, 2017 Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends—North America

The three new rules of content

Here's something to tack on your wall. We know you like that sort of thing.

Three rules:

- + **The holistic rule:** Develop content by choosing media that amplify the messages. What characteristics of each medium lend it to certain types of content? For example, a magazine or other print piece is great for evocative photography (because photos come to life on paper – ask a designer) but awful for news (because it'll be outdated by the time anyone reads it).
- + **The audience-wins rule:** Choose your media and content balance based on your audience behavior, not what is easiest for you to churn out, or what is familiar, or what is more agreeable to your leadership. If your audience doesn't care about Facebook, stop prioritizing it. If your audience still reads industry magazines, publish there without feeling bashful.
- + **The less-is-more rule:** Publish less content, and make it better. Judicious good content nudges people in positive directions. Copious lackluster content only draws attention to your inadequacy. Remember that you can distribute one piece or a portion of great content in multiple places – blog, social, a variety of pubs, website – repeatedly.

*A little taste of great content
feels like a gift to your audience.
Loads of lackluster content
make them run away.*

FUNNEL OF LOVE

You can also think of arguments in terms of the funnel stages they should occupy. What kinds of arguments do you want to make when you're capturing awareness? Affirming retention?

Here's a start. You can fill in the rest for your own vertical or context.

Awareness	We exist! And we're worth the time because we have something compelling to offer.
Consideration	We have something unique to say about your problem. We can help you understand it – and solve it – in ways others can't.
Adoption	We're a safe bet. Safer, in fact, than the other guys.
Retention	You've made a good choice. You should keep making this choice and evolve with us.

Likewise, certain “containers” are best suited to one funnel stage or another. Short, quick-hitting formats (blogs, infographics, etc.) are good for early in the funnel because they inform without demanding much attention; longer, in-depth white papers and case studies are good for later stages because they provide the meat that people want when it's time to commit.





THE TAKEAWAYS

So what does this leave us with (other than a hankering for watching airplane assembly on YouTube)?

- + By thinking of content marketing as an interconnected series of arguments, you're establishing a practical, baseline definition for your work.
- + By being more thoughtful about this than everyone else, you're introducing real rhetoric theory in a space usually filled with empty, jargonny gestures.
- + By remembering that your content makes positive and negative statements on your behalf – whether you're thinking about it or not – you can be more aware of the impressions you're leaving and take steps to get rid of what's holding you back (like that conspicuously outdated newsletter template – it speaks volumes, trust us).
- + By observing the three new rules of content, you can turn your arguments into audience-slaying assets, not empty “productivity” meant to please your boss.

Case in point: Starbucks Upstanders campaign

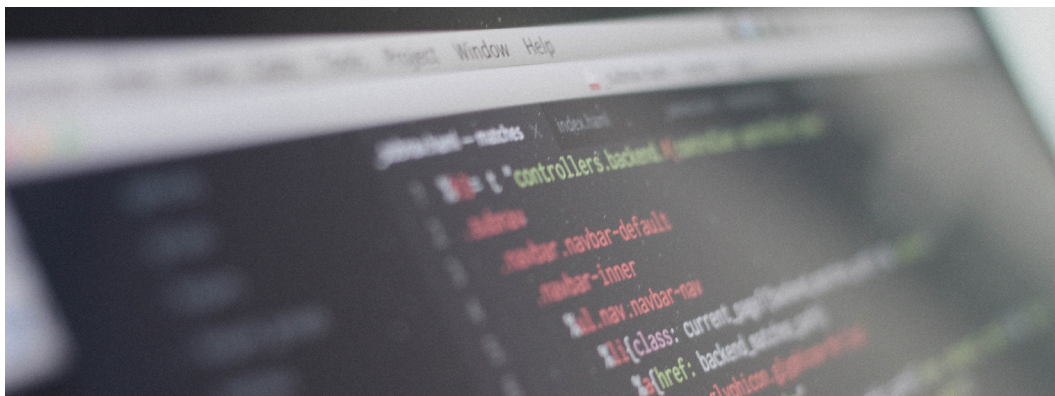
You've probably heard, or heard about, Upstanders. It might have made you weep openly on your commute. There's no shame in that.

If not, here's what you need to know:

- + The campaign is about highlighting good people doing good things – in all walks of life. Soldiers, educators, and various do-gooders who make us proud to be a country of thinkers, dreamers, and believers.
- + It is written and produced by Howard Schultz, Starbucks chairman and CEO. Rajiv Chandrasekaran, a former senior editor at *The Washington Post*, is executive producer.
- + The content itself has nothing to do with Starbucks. The brand appears nowhere.
- + The content nevertheless makes Starbucks look awesome.

Here at Burns Marketing, we sometimes call this “attributed prestige” – the practice of earning kudos indirectly, without asking for them. The fact that Starbucks is bankrolling Upstanders is the only brand argument they're making directly, but it's impactful. In writers' parlance, they're showing, not telling – which is usually the best policy anyway.

So here's a thought for the future: Your content doesn't actually have to be about you. Sometimes you should get yourself the hell out of your content to get recognized for it.



Happy creating.

Burns Marketing can help you create content that wins.

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