content marketing strategy

Keep it simple

Content marketing expert Ann Handley offers a clear path to creating marketing your customers will thank you for

What exactly does it mean to use content to market your organization? According to Ann Handley, chief content officer for the marketing best practices site Marketing-Pros, it’s about making yourself useful to your customers and potential customers. That means giving them information through a variety of channels that serves their needs, not yours. Handley, who co-authored Content Rules: How to Create Killer Blogs, Podcasts, Videos, Ebooks, Webinars (and More) That Engage Customers and Ignite Your Business, spoke recently with CW Senior Editor Jessica Burnette-Lemon.

Ann Handley: “The biggest mistake is making your marketing about you. … Take yourself out of your marketing and put your customer at the heart of it.”
about how content marketing is evolving and where marketers should focus their efforts.

**CW:** How do you define content marketing in the social media age? How has it evolved in the past few years?

**Ann Handley:** Content has always been part of marketing, of course. But advances in technology and the rise of social media bring new and, I think, exciting opportunities for organizations of any size. Increasingly, the social and online interactions we have with one another are leading us to brands. It’s no longer simply brands leading us to their products. So here’s how I define that opportunity: Content marketing means you consistently create and share information that is useful, inspired and honestly empathetic to attract customers to you.

Two critical parts of that definition are “consistently create and share” and “to attract customers to you.” Let’s break that down:

- **“Consistently create”**—means that content isn’t a one-and-done campaign—it’s a commitment. **“Consistently share”** means you can’t sit back and expect Google to do all the work of delivering customers to your door. The opportunity of social media means we can share content and resources and directly engage with the people we are trying to reach.

- **“To attract customers to you”—**the point of content marketing is not to get really good at creating content. It’s to get really good at creating content that drives business.

**CW:** With so many communication channels available, how should marketers focus their content efforts?

**AH:** There are a lot of choices, aren’t there? Research that MarketingProfs conducted in partnership with the Content Marketing Institute found that both business-to-business and business-to-consumer marketers use an average of 12 content marketing tactics—things like videos, blogs, social media platforms, newsletters, mobile content, podcasts, ebooks, white papers, and on and on and on. That’s a lot of choice, and it can feel overwhelming.

Here are two pieces of advice to guide your content marketing efforts:

**First**, define who you are marketing to and where they are. Invest the time and money necessary to identify not just who your customers are, but also how they behave. How do they research purchases? Who influences their buying behavior? (Peers? Review sites? Friends on Facebook?) Having a very clear total picture of the individual or individuals you are trying to reach is called, in marketing terms, developing a buyer persona.

**Then, focus on your hub.** Based on your findings, choose the best channels and platforms on which to communicate with your prospects and customers. Also, weigh your own inclinations: What can you realistically create and share? Are you a writer? Or do you communicate best by simply speaking—which you might capture best on video or in a podcast? Are the execs in your organization perfect fodder for a weekly podcast? (Remember what I said earlier about that consistency thing.)

Pitch your tent in a single content campsite, so to speak, and let that
take a closer look
This presentation from MarketingProfs and the Content Marketing Institute provides a snapshot of the state of content marketing in North America, including information about budgets, benchmarks and tactics.

CW: Which companies do you think are doing the best work in content marketing?

AH: This is a tough question. There are a lot of companies doing it right, but I’ll avoid talking about the ones with huge budgets and global brand recognition, like Red Bull, Nike, Starbucks and Coca-Cola.

At the other end of that scale, I like what my friend Joe Chernov is doing at Kinvey, a Boston-based technology company that aims to make it stupid-easy for developers and enterprises to set up and operate a back-end for their mobile, tablet and web apps in the cloud. Joe creates content that does all of the things I’m talking about: consistently creating inspired content with clear utility and empathy for the needs of the customer—the developer Kinvey wants to reach. His content is brand-agnostic—in other words, it’s clearly produced by Kinvey, but it’s not about the company; it’s about the customer. And it’s driving business. Joe told me recently that at the end of Q4 (the quarter Kinvey began content marketing), only 1.5 percent of new Kinvey accounts first converted on a piece of content. By the end of Q1, that number rose to 20 percent. By the end of Q2 it had more than doubled to over 40 percent. Said another way, more than 40 percent of everyone who opens a Kinvey account first converts on a content offer.

CW: Where do content marketing efforts go wrong?

AH: The biggest mistake is making your marketing about you. This sounds weird, doesn’t it? Shouldn’t your marketing focus on your products and services? Not exactly. Your marketing should focus on what your products and services do for your customers. The former is corporate-centric; the latter is customer-centric. Take yourself out of your marketing and put your customer at the heart of it. In other words, make your customer—not your company—the hero of your story.

CW: What do you see as the next big thing for companies creating content?

AH: I could talk about all the cool content things I’m seeing—the rise of micro-content platforms like Vine and Snapchat and Instagram video, the importance of visual content like Slideshare and Instagram and Pinterest. But honestly, I don’t think companies should prepare for the next big thing. I’m more concerned about helping companies use the tactics and channels we already have really, really well and in fun, inventive, interesting ways. Get your strategy right. Adopt extreme customer empathy. Get inspired. Be useful. And from there, create marketing your customers will thank you for.