

Content Is Crap, and Other Rules for Marketers

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Until fairly recently, the options for marketers were relatively limited. Mass media — TV especially — offered the opportunity to reach millions, but only in the form of short ads sandwiched between lots of other stuff. Other tactics, such as trade shows, offered high engagement, but low reach.

Digital technology and **social** media have offered the best of both worlds — the ability to reach, and engage, millions of people. [Nike videos on YouTube](#) routinely attract more than 10 million views. **Coke** has nearly [100 million followers](#) on **Facebook**. **Red Bull** has its [own TV channel](#).

Yet despite these scattered successes, there is mounting evidence that most marketers' content efforts are failing. The Content **Marketing** Institute reports that although the majority of [B2B](#) and [B2C](#) marketers have some kind of content **marketing** program, less than 40% find those efforts effective. Clearly, things need to improve. Here are four places to start, based on the most common mistakes I see **digital** marketers make:

1. Recognize that content is crap.

The idea that content is king, in its current usage, comes from a remarkably prescient [1995 essay by Bill Gates](#) in which he called the internet — still an emerging technology at the time — a marketplace of ideas, experiences, and products. He then proceeded to make failed investments in [Encarta](#), MSN, and [MSNBC](#) (MSNBC became profitable after he divested).

Think about that. **Bill Gates**, a man of extraordinary talent and fortune, who succeeded brilliantly in just about anything he has ever done, saw with remarkable accuracy how the future would play out, put his money behind it, and failed spectacularly.

The problem is that content isn't king. [Content is crap](#).

We never call anything that's good "content." Nobody walks out of a movie they loved and says, "Wow! What great content!" Nobody listens to "content" on their way to work in the morning. Do you think anybody ever called Ernest Hemingway a "content creator"? If they did, I bet he would punch 'em in the nose.

Yet while content — a commodity to be acquired, distributed, and leveraged — remains a fiction in the minds of business planners, **digital** technology has given marketers enormous opportunities to publish and produce. To take advantage of those opportunities, marketers need to [shift their mental models](#) and [think more like publishers](#).

2. Hold attention, don't just grab it.

After decades of creating **advertising**, many marketers have built up strong skill sets in some content-related areas. Most have learned their way around the **design** studio and the video production set. Many have built up web development and user experience capabilities. So creating engaging content doesn't seem like it should be much of a challenge.

The problem is that content is not a long-form version of **advertising**. **Marketing** campaigns are **designed** to “cut through the clutter” and grab attention. A witty gecko lizard with a cockney accent, a talking tiger, or even just a snappy jingle can raise awareness and sell product. But that's no longer enough.

Today, [marketers need to build an ongoing relationship with consumers](#) and that means holding attention, not just grabbing it. To get people to subscribe to a blog, **YouTube** channel, or **social** media feed, you need to offer more than a catchy slogan or a clever stunt. You need to offer [real value, and offer it consistently](#).

To do this, **brands** need to start with a clear mission and think seriously about the experience they want to create. Success will not come from putting a clever spin on facts, but rather by [uncovering powerful stories](#) and telling them well.

3. Don't over-optimize metrics.

Marketers optimize their campaigns for particular metrics, usually some combination of [awareness, sales or advocacy](#). For the most part, this is a reasonably good way to go about things. It directs strategy towards action and instills accountability into the process. Clients and executives, understandably, want to know that they are getting a solid return on their investment.

Yet it's also easy to confuse measurement with meaning.

For instance, a few years ago, over-attention to pageviews drove marketers and publishers alike to use clickbait headlines. The problem, as **BuzzFeed's Ben Smith** [has explained](#), is that publishers who are optimizing for pageviews — which are really just clicks — are betraying the reader's trust. The best headlines, he argues, are ones that offer a promise to readers and then over-deliver.

Marketers have a variety of metrics to evaluate what they publish and produce, including page views, video views, length of viewing, **social** media shares, and on and on. Yet none of that will tell you whether you have communicated a clear promise and are delivering on it. Optimize for mission, not for metrics.

4. Understand that publishing is a product, not a campaign.

Marketers launch campaigns for a variety of reasons, like promoting a new product, driving sales for a promotion, or picking up their [net promoter score](#). These are all valid objectives and traditional campaigns are well suited to achieving them. Yet as I noted above, publishing offers marketers the ability to hold attention, not just grab it.

That's especially important in a **digital** environment because every consumer action related to a campaign can be tracked by competitors, allowing them to [retarget customers](#) who show an intent to purchase. In effect, if you restrict **marketing** activity to promotional campaigns, you will end up providing your rivals with a free lead generation service.

Publishing is different. It's not a promotion; but is more akin to product development. That means clearly defining an editorial mission, identifying benchmarks, and establishing a clear structure.

Unlike a TV campaign or **digital**, where you can expect an immediate benefit that dissipates almost as quickly, **brand** publishing establishes an ongoing, trustful relationship with consumers that lasts beyond the present sales cycle.

Most of all, marketers need to create a compelling experience. Again, that doesn't happen overnight. For marketers to become successful publishers, we need to look beyond this quarter's objectives or the next campaign and treat our editorial mission as seriously as we do that of our **brands**.

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