

CREATING A CONTENT MARKETING STRATEGY:

6 Best Practices That Work



The always-on web has created thousands of opportunities for marketers, but perhaps the most valuable is the chance to connect directly with your target market and define the conversations around what that market is all about. What problems do people in that market have? How do they solve them? How do solutions like yours make that easier? By creating content that helps them answer those questions and achieve those goals, you constantly move your audience closer to becoming your customers.

That's the core role of content marketing, regardless of whether the content is a white paper aimed at qualified leads or an infographic designed to teach unknown prospects the basics of your industry. By proving your company has the expertise and understanding to help your target audience achieve its goals, you simultaneously generate demand and help your sales team win the battle for new business.

But a content marketing strategy doesn't create itself. In fact, recent research by the Content Marketing Institute shows that, while most marketers are using content marketing, few believe they're using it well.

A successful content marketing strategy is the result of a clear intention, careful planning, and focused execution. As Carmen Hill, Director of Marketing at Connective DX, puts it, "Whether it's a targeted campaign or a comprehensive program, you need to plant a strong foundation of content that attracts prospects at every stage of the buyer's journey, seeding awareness and nurturing ongoing interest."

Which begs the question: How do you get started?

These **six best practices** can help you develop and deploy effective strategies for content marketing across all channels and buying cycles, and this eBook will show you how.

Content Marketing Strategy Best Practices:

1. Get Stakeholder Support
2. Understand Your Audience
3. Identify the Right Content Formula
4. Create an Editorial Calendar
5. Get Maximum Mileage Out of Your Content
6. Develop a Process for Measuring and Reporting

The State of Content Marketing



Source: "B2B Content Marketing: 2015 Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends — North America," by The Content Marketing Institute.

1. Get Stakeholder Support

Content marketing is not a short-term affair or a one-person operation; it's a long-term commitment that requires ongoing collaboration and engagement to succeed. This means you'll most likely need to sell the idea to the executive team and to the subject matter experts in your company who can help create great content.

According to Ardath Albee of Marketing Interactions, "You need executive backing to fund and source a content strategy. You also need the support to ensure there is enough commitment to see a content marketing strategy through."

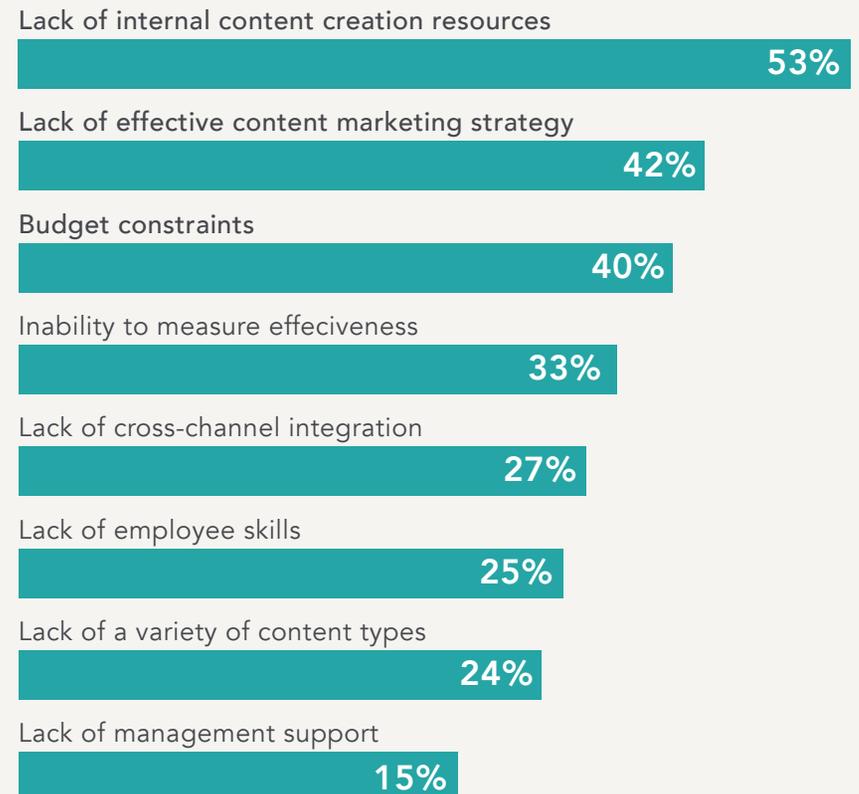
Research by Ascend2 backs that up. In the chart, you can see that lack of resources (No. 1) and budget limits (No. 3) are some of the top challenges content marketers encounter. It's no coincidence that on the chart between those challenges is "Lack of effective content marketing strategy" (No. 2).

While specific "Lack of management support" may only appear to be an issue to 15 percent of respondents, getting executive buy-in is essential to solving most of the problems on that list.

One effective technique for getting internal buy-in begins with not talking about content marketing at all (at least not initially). Instead, focus on your stakeholders' goals and pain points, even their bonus systems – those areas that affect their own success. Then introduce content marketing as a valuable way for them to get better results.

Challenges to Achieving Content Marketing Success According to Marketing Professionals Worldwide, March 2015

% of respondents



Source: Ascend2, "Content Marketing Trends Survey Summary Report," March 12, 2015

1. Get Stakeholder Support (continued)

A Plan to Get Executive Buy-in

In the book “Managing Content Marketing,” Robert Rose recommends making the case for content marketing with a business plan, just like you would for any other aspect of the business. Try to answer:

1. What is the business need?
2. How important is that need?
3. Describe the business model. How will the company execute it?
4. What is your unique selling proposition? What will differentiate the content you create and ensure it succeeds?
5. What are the obstacles that could cause you to fail, and how will you overcome them?

Bonus: In a related blog post, Robert Rose’s co-author, Joe Pulizzi, offered two tricks to win support in case the business plan fails:

1. **Test It:** A pilot program with limited goals and scope can prove the business case for content marketing
2. **Fear:** Show how your competitors are using content marketing and compare their results to yours. How do they rank on your search keywords? How are their social media audiences growing compared to yours? What is the opportunity cost there?

2. Understand Your Audience

Content marketing isn't about selling. It's about educating, entertaining, or otherwise delighting your readers in order to earn their trust over time. To be successful, you need to understand who is in that audience – and what they want and need from you – in order to gauge how much viable content you already have, and what content you'll need to create.

There are two key activities here, both of which require stakeholder commitment and participation:

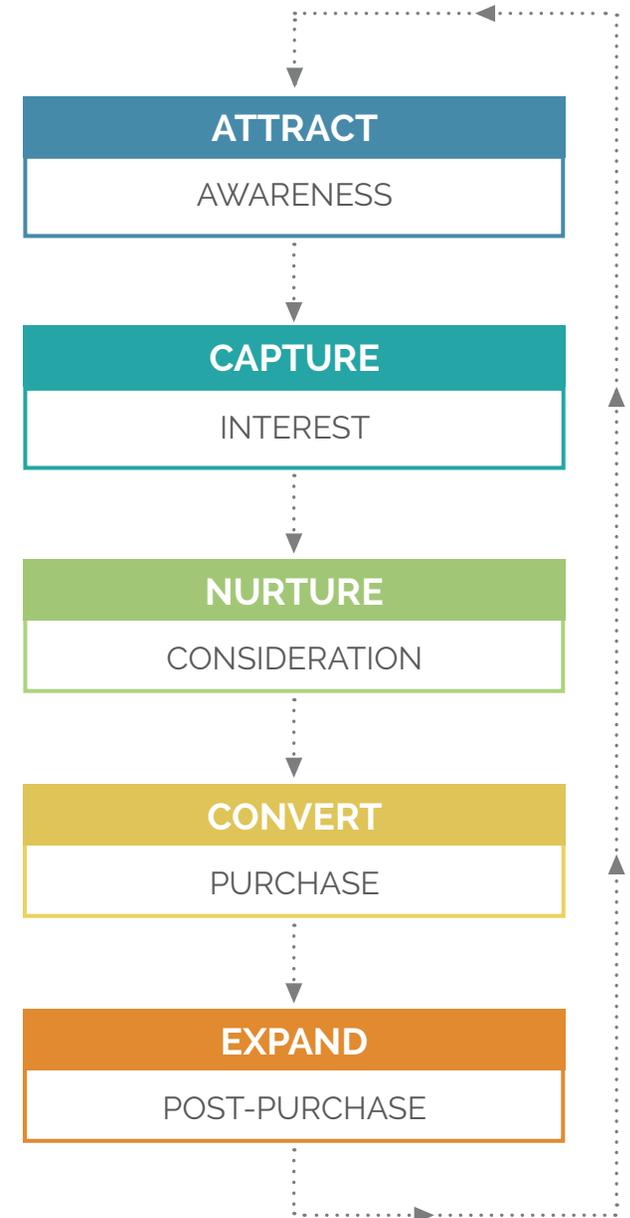
Develop Customer Personas

This is an effective way to uncover who your target customers are, which helps identify what topics your content should be covering. Start by asking yourself and your sales stakeholders these questions:

- a. Who are our ideal prospects and customers?
- b. How do they go about making a buying decision?
- c. What are their questions? Pain points? Objections?
- d. What gaps in information are they lacking that your content can fill?

Map Your Content to the Customer's Journey

Mapping content to the customer's journey is the second key to a successful content marketing strategy. By understanding which types of content are most useful to your audience at the appropriate stages in their journey, you not only make the best use of existing content, you also discover gaps that need to be filled. Don't forget the post-purchase phase of the journey, because this is the stage that increases lifetime value and delivers the greater part of your overall ROI.



2. Understand Your Audience (continued)

Typical steps to mapping the customer journey include:

- a. Who are our ideal prospects and customers?
- b. What kind of content do they want before they even think about a purchase? What content can you offer to help them?
- c. How do they go about making a buying decision?
- d. During consideration, what are their questions? Pain points? Objections?
- e. What gaps in information are they lacking that your content can fill?
- f. After purchase, what kind of content will help make the customer experience great?
- g. When and how can your content begin to stimulate a return to the consideration phase for repurchase?

Master Customer Personas

Learn how to create customer personas in just 15 minutes with this [workbook](#).

3. Identify the Right Content Formula

Content marketing is about providing value to your current and future customers. It should help them solve issues, spark new ideas, or learn something that's important to them. To do this, your content needs to do different things at the different stages of the customer journey.

ATTRACT



Content should be provocative and irresistible. If you have an easy-to-explain “secret sauce” that will help your audience succeed, this is the time to impress them with it. Talk about the things everyone in your target audience wants to talk about, especially the basic truths and problems that led you to create your products or services the way you did.

Try to disseminate those ideas across the media and websites that are relevant to your target market (appropriate social media, guest posts on industry blogs, etc.).

Goal: To generate interest in your company and establish it as a thought leader that should be considered first when they start thinking about a purchase.

CAPTURE



Broaden the conversation with more in-depth content. Start gently introducing the differentiators that make your products and services better for people considering the issues you're discussing.

This is a good time to start using gated content, such as white papers and webinars, to capture contact information and bring interested audience members into your prospect file.

Goal: To stimulate purchase consideration and position your company as the provider they'll want to work with.

3. Identify the Right Content Formula (continued)

NURTURE



Provide content to facilitate conversations among influencers, stakeholders, and decision-makers, giving them the confidence to take the next step. If your content doesn't deliver at this stage in the customer journey, your content marketing strategy will fail (or at the very least, under-achieve its goal).

This is a good spot for more sales-focused content: Industry reports benchmarking your offerings against competitors, customer testimonials, counterpoints to common objections, etc.

Goal: To win the sale – subtly. Your content should never feel dishonest, or come off like a stealth sales pitch. Continue to educate and help your audience solve the kinds of issues that make your offering the ideal purchase.

CONVERT



Provide content that will make it easier for your customers to have a great customer experience. Are there tips that will help them get the most out of the product? Are there easily resolved complaints you can get ahead of with a few key tips?

Goal: To win the next sale by delivering a great customer experience.

EXPAND



There are two roles of post-purchase content: First, you need to keep customers interested in what you have to say so you can market to them again in the future. Second, eventually it will be time for them to consider the next purchase, and you want to spark that consideration before your competitors do – this is the part where, for example, Apple starts leaking images of its next iPhone.

Goal: To start the next customer journey on a path that will lead back to your company.

3. Identify the Right Content Formula (continued)

These three steps will help you uncover the optimal content formula:

- 1. Create content your customers want.** Many organizations make the mistake of investing heavily in pushing marketing messages that are important to the company, rather than providing information that's important to the customer. When planning content, always take a customer-centric approach to best ensure you create something of value for your readers.
- 2. Develop an array of content to deploy across multiple channels and devices.** Take the time to understand which channels and formats your customers prefer: articles, infographics, blogs, social media sites, webinars, videos.
- 3. Don't just create content, talk about it.** There's enormous value in not only creating original content, but in discussing "best-of" content from across the web. By engaging in a virtual discussion with content from other thought leaders, you demonstrate independence and credibility, which can increase customer affinity and loyalty.

Taking a Customer-Centric Approach

To identify the depth and breadth of content that will resonate with your audience segments, it's essential to focus on what they want. Which means you have to do some research to find out what's already out there ... and what's missing. **Here are some key elements to get you started:**

- **Study your website analytics.** Uncover clues about your prospects' needs and interests by looking at keyword performance, internal search data, user behavior and bounce rates.
- **Investigate the social web.** See what's being discussed on blogs, LinkedIn groups and other places your target market is consuming content. Watch what's working for your competitors.
- **Get your hands on industry research.** Relevant research results can provide insights into your industry, as well as your competitors.
- **Survey your customers.** Ask your current customers specific questions about what they're interested in when evaluating whatever it is that you sell, what features are important, what their favorite websites are, what information piques their interest or breaks the deal.
- **Talk to your CSRs.** Customer service representatives spend all day hearing about the difficulties your customers are having, and they can be a great source of inspiration for the topics customers want and need you to cover.

4. Create an Editorial Calendar

One of the biggest challenges to content marketing success is perpetuating the program. The chart on Page 2 about challenges to content marketing success includes several challenges that are not related to budgets or resources: lack of employee skills, lack of variety of content types, and lack of cross-channel integration. An editorial calendar is the first step toward solving those challenges.

Every good content marketing program begins with a carefully planned, proactive editorial calendar. It's the execution plan for integrating content into a cohesive story that you want your audience to see. You won't follow it verbatim, but if it exists upfront you'll be far more consistent and successful at publishing the content you need to publish and generating the results you want.

Your editorial calendar should:



- Enumerate your customer-centric themes, aligning content with appropriate buying cycle phases and audience personas
- Provide a tentative outline of when different pieces of content will publish, on what platform, and via which syndication and social channels
- Clearly articulate cadence; that is, the date each piece of content will be developed and distributed. Publishing your content in a consistent, timely fashion is critical

Additionally, because social media and content go hand-in-hand, be sure to map social campaigns to your editorial calendar. Work with your social team during the calendaring process to align the respective publishing schedules and help drive traffic to your website.

4. Create an Editorial Calendar (continued)

Develop Customer Personas

One of the most common challenges to executing a content marketing program is developing the content. After all, it's not your company's main line of business, and one person blogging does not a content strategy make. Effective content marketing strategies leverage multiple sources to create content in different voices, formats, and at different levels of expertise. The unique voices and expertise inside your company are essential to making your content stand out.

Here are four tips for generating that content:

1

Identify your star contributors

Every company has employees who have something to say about your business and will relish a platform for it. These are the people who'll find the time to create great content and make their deadlines with reasonable oversight. Empower them with regular blogs, videos or other creative outlets.

2

Help your reclusive geniuses

Some companies, especially in the technology space, have fantastic minds behind the scenes who could be great sources of material, but who may not have the skills/time/desire to turn that into content. Help bridge the gap to bring their genius to your audience. Instead of asking them to write a blog post, offer to do an interview and write it for them. Or hire a freelance writer to interview the team and turn it into several pieces of content.

3

Leverage customer service

Again, CSRs have extensive experience communicating with your customers. Generate content based on how they handle their issues. For example, you can turn service call scripts into DIY content for the purchase and post-purchase phases.

4

Give customers a voice

You may have customers who find creative ways to use your products, or know how to make the most of them. Give customers a chance to write or record that information to be shared as content. User-generated content is some of the most trusted content on the Web, so don't overlook this powerful resource.

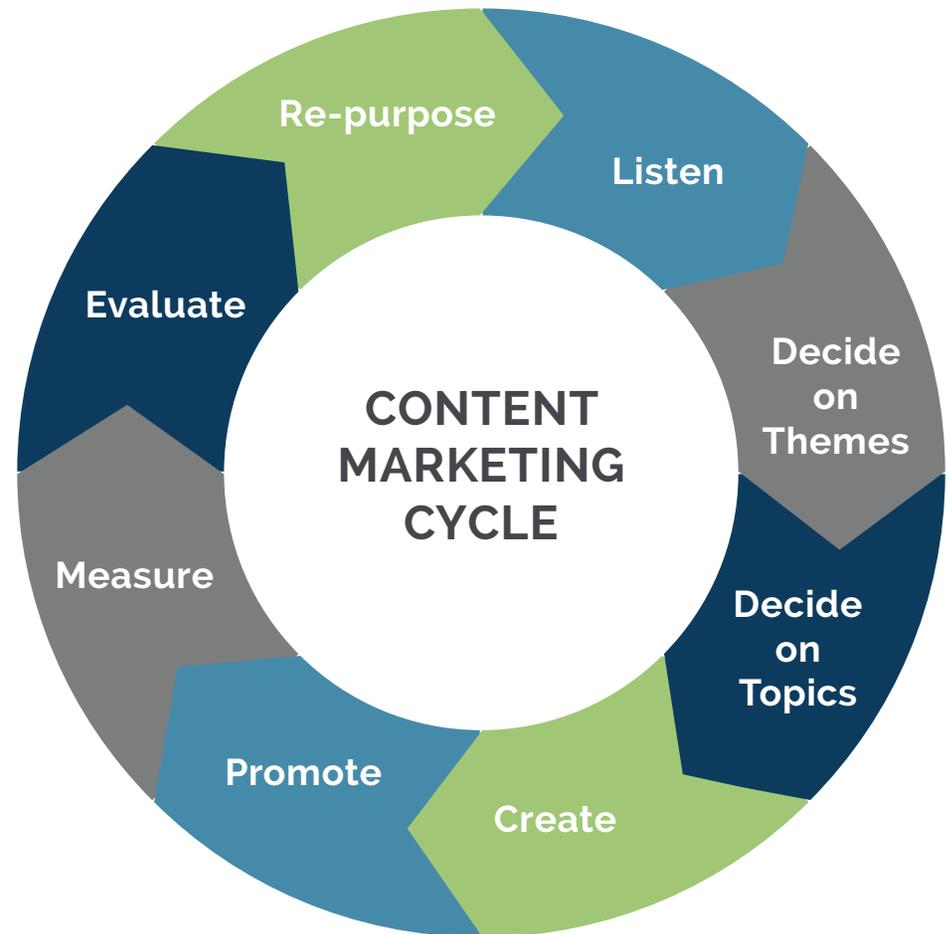
5. Get Maximum Mileage Out of Your Content

Generating the volume of material necessary to fuel an end-to-end content strategy is an ongoing challenge for even the most prolific marketers. One of the keys is to find ways to re-use content, so that each unique piece of source material you create leads to many pieces of content for your target audience.

One repurposing tactic is to follow the “Rule of 5” – where one piece of content is used in five distinct ways. Although five may not always be the optimal number, the goal is to extend the life of your content by using it in multiple ways, offering it in multiple formats, and distributing it everywhere.

Begin by thinking about how to break up long content into smaller pieces and different formats. For example, after putting time and energy into a fantastic webinar, you can turn that source material into many additional pieces of content, such as:

- Convert it into a video and publish it on YouTube
- Post the presentation deck on SlideShare
- Create an infographic from the best slides in the slide deck
- Make a PDF of the transcribed audio track available
- Break the transcript into a short series of blog posts
- Create a Q&A from the session



5. Get Maximum Mileage Out of Your Content (continued)

Do you have a robust white paper?

- Extract two main ideas and create short articles
- Take two more ideas and create blog posts
- Promote all of them through social media
- Link them to each other, inviting readers to go on an information journey with your brand
- Use the articles in lead nurturing campaigns

Maximize the visibility of your content and brand by including social and sharing links in your various content pieces – papers, web pages, emails, blogs, etc. – whenever and wherever appropriate. And don't forget about search engine optimization. Use keywords and metadata in the right way to make your content findable by the people for whom you've created it.

By planning your content for scalability, you'll reduce resource overhead while increasing visibility and providing value to your audience.

How to Make Any Content SEO-Friendly

For more on optimizing your content to be found by Google and the other search engines, [download](#) Act-On's three-step guide for writers and content marketers.



6. Develop a Process for Measuring and Reporting

In many organizations, decreasing costs and increasing profit margins are as important as increasing sales and revenue. According to Heinz Marketing's Matt Heinz, "An effective content marketing program can do both. Make sure you point that out and measure it over time."

Measuring content marketing requires different tactics at different stages in the funnel.

Non-Conversion Content

During the early and late stages of the customer journey, content isn't driving conversions so much as it's maintaining audience engagement. Measuring content marketing at this stage relies on softer metrics, such as page views and site visits.

To track engagement from website to newsletter to social media networks and external partner sites requires cookies or other tracking tools.

Marketing automation systems make this a lot easier by allowing you to identify people who are engaging with your content across those channels. Applying a lead scoring system to these interactions will allow you to both track the effectiveness of your content marketing and discern when individual prospects are ready to receive the next level of your content.

Conversion Content

Deeper into the funnel, content can be easier to measure because you are able to capture information as it is downloaded or otherwise accessed – i.e. conversions. This makes it easier to follow the relationship through your prospect database and see what content is most effective.

You can measure the success of this content in terms of generating leads and how those leads contribute to sales and revenue. Again, a marketing automation system can make this evaluation much easier.



6. Develop a Process for Measuring and Reporting

(continued)

Make It Part of Your Marketing Metrics

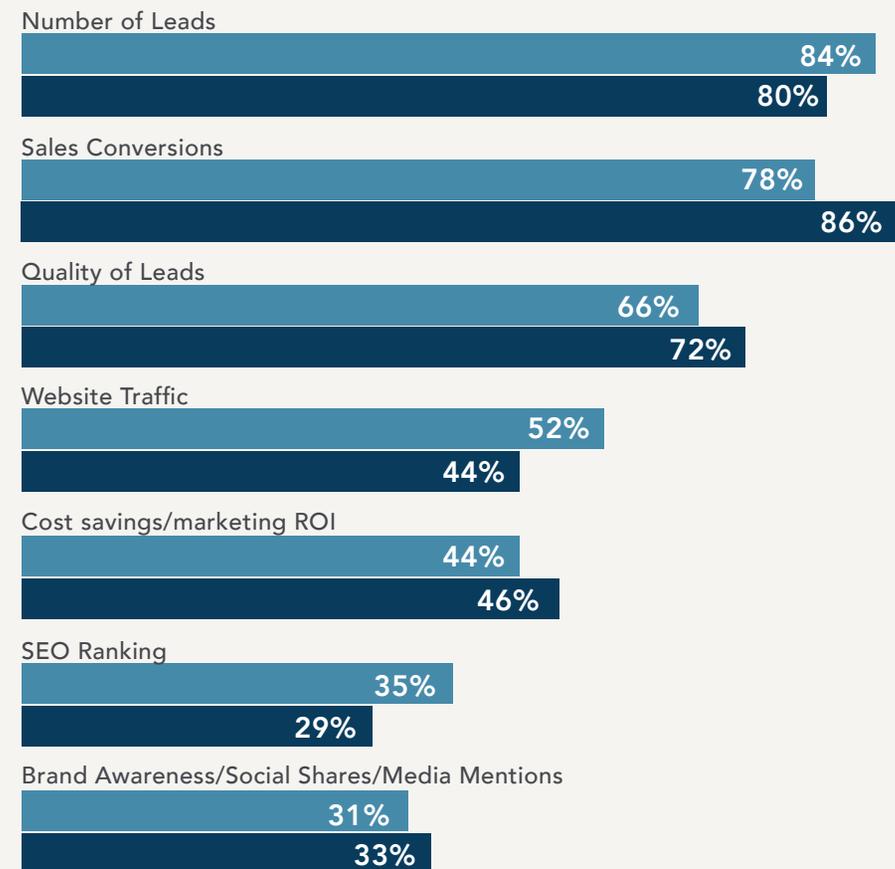
All of this reporting should integrate into your wider marketing metrics so there is transparency in the role and effectiveness of your content marketing. It's much easier to continue to justify content investment when you can tie it directly to revenue, and can show in a business plan what the ROI will be.

Set standards with your sales team. Agree on lead qualification criteria, and decide when and how leads who aren't qualified will be nurtured until they are ready for a sales conversation. Define how content interaction plays a part in that nurturing, and set goals for the performance of your content. This will enable you to meet your goals with sales, and for sales to meet its goals for revenue.

Content Marketing Performance Metrics Used by B2B Marketing Professionals Worldwide, 2014 & 2015

% of respondents

■ 2014 ■ 2015



Source: "Content Marketing Performance Metrics Used by B2B Marketing Professionals Worldwide, 2014 & 2015," by eMarketer

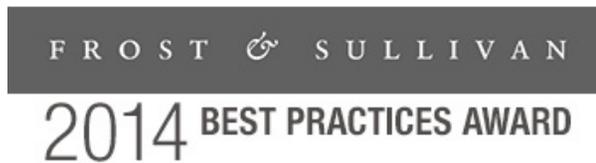


Conclusion: Driving Results

Good content marketing establishes long-term, trusted relationships with current and future customers by regularly delivering high-quality, relevant, and valuable information. In addition, it can bolster your SEO and brand positioning. By leveraging these best practices, you can create an effective content marketing strategy or fine-tune the one you already have in place. **The company that does this best will break through the noise and drive real results.**



Acclaim for Act-On



About Act-On Software

Act-On Software is a marketing automation company delivering innovation that empowers marketers to do the best work of their careers. Act-On is the only integrated workspace to address the needs of the customer experience, from brand awareness and demand generation, to retention and loyalty. With Act-On, marketers can drive better business outcomes and see higher customer lifetime value. The Act-On platform provides marketers with power they can actually use, without the need for a dedicated IT resource.

Connect with us to learn more