How to Drive Your Entire Sales Cycle with

CONTENT MARKETING

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INTRODUCTION:

Developing a Content Strategy
Throughout Funnel Stages

Why a Content Strategy?

Though many marketing teams have bought into the idea of content marketing, many are also dissatisfied with their results. They feel disjointed or unorganized in their methods. Creating a written strategy is integral to your company's success.

One solution to problems with content marketing strategy organization, success measurement, and sales-marketing alignment is to use the marketing funnel and sales funnel to develop a written content marketing strategy and measurement plan. This eBook provides information on how to create a content strategy around these two funnels. This includes what types of content work best for each stage, expert advice on executing, and best-practices for measurement.

Mapping Your Strategy to the Funnel

Any content marketing strategy is hindered if the rest of your marketing team doesn't see its value. But only eight percent of marketers consider themselves "very successful" or "extremely successful" at tracking content marketing ROI, according to the LinkedIn Marketing Technology Community. You can ensure your content marketing is helping your company succeed (and that the rest of your organization agrees) by mapping your content strategy to a content marketing methodology like the marketing and sales funnel.

Using a methodology like a funnel as the foundation for your content strategy can clarify your direction and simplify your team's goals. Other content marketing methodologies include the buyer journey, content marketing framework, and content marketing pyramid.

While there are other common methodologies in the content marketing space, the content marketing funnel is one of the most popular and dovetails nicely with the sales funnel. This guide provides more information on what the content marketing and sales funnels are, how to create content that maps back to its stages, and how to optimize your content for it to help you achieve your goals.

70%

70 percent of marketers lack a consistent or integrated content strategy. *(Altimeter)*

CMOs at the largest technology companies report that building out content marketing as an organizational competency is the **second most important initiative**, only behind measuring ROI. *(IDC)*

What Is the Content Marketing Funnel?

According to Single Grain, the content marketing funnel is a system that takes as many leads as possible through a step-by-step content flow. It then converts them into actual customers who pay for your products or services. The four stages of the content marketing funnel are:

AWARENESS   **EVALUATION**   **PURCHASE**   **DELIGHT**

While most people don't move through these phases in a linear path, having a content marketing funnel model can help your content marketing strategy and clarify your production needs. A content marketing strategy helps answer the following questions:

▶ **What type of content should I create?**
▶ **How do I measure success for this piece of content?**
▶ **Should I repurpose this content?**
▶ **Are their holes in my content strategy?**

This eBook walks you through all stages of the content marketing funnel as well as the sales funnel and teaches you how to map your content to drive traffic, leads, and ultimately—revenue.

PART ONE:

Pre-Sales Content

The first step in developing your content marketing strategy to the sales and marketing funnels is creating a plan for content that your audience will see before they interact with sales. This section will cover these content types and how to develop a succinct creation and measurement plan around them.

Awareness Stage Content

The first stage of the content marketing funnel is awareness. In this phase marketers should aim to attract and educate their audience on the topic related to your product.

Successful awareness stage content accomplishes the following:

- **Generating a high number of shares and views.**
- **Shared and viewed by your target audience.**
- **Causing your target audience to convert.**

Marketing resources across the web suggest awareness stage content is best in the following formats: ads, social media posts, infographics, and videos.

While these content types generally work well at the awareness stage, not all audiences are the same. Look at your metrics to determine content performs the best at this stage. Metrics you can use to determine if your content for the awareness stage is performing are total shares, views, time on page, scroll depth, and bounce rate.

Andy Crestodina of Orbit Media studios explains the importance of creating value at this stage:

> *"The most valuable audience, at least for B2B marketers, is your current prospects. So your most valuable content is something you make specifically for these people and send to them directly."*

Create a piece of content that answers top questions for your current prospects and you'll get value from it even if no one else ever reads it. Plus, you can share it with the next prospect who asks that question.

You may have thought that visual content might be best for this category. Curata CMP analytics told us a slightly different story. Our long-form blog content performed the best for shares, views, and time on page. Strategy for your awareness stage content should include informed decisions on the type of content to create as well as how to distribute and optimize, which new keywords needed targeting, and which posts would benefit from paid promotion.

You can use the following platforms to determine if your content marketing works at the awareness stage:

- **Outbrain**
- **Curata**
- **Scroll Depth**
- **SEMRush**
- **Google Analytics**

Evaluation Stage Content

The evaluation stage is when potential buyers determine the legitimacy of your company, develop trust, and decide if they need your product. Andrew Raso of Online Marketing Gurus describes the evaluation stage as when:

> *"People are doing heavy research on whether or not your product or service is a good fit for them."*

A famous example of evaluation stage content is Nestle's Toll House chocolate chip recipes. Nestle Toll House released recipes to the public, including their own chocolate chips as a primary ingredient. This validated Nestle Toll House as the go-to-source for all things chocolate chip-related, and also pointed consumers to their product.

Determine the success of your evaluation-stage content by answering the following questions:

- ▶ **Are my contacts converting on this content?**
- ▶ **Is this content generating leads?**
- ▶ **Is this content influencing leads?**

Generally, evaluation-stage content includes white papers, case studies, webinars, or blog posts. Curata's content team looks at leads generated and leads influenced to determine which content performs the best.

However, there's a common mistake to be wary of when looking at metrics like these, as Anna Hrach of Convince and Convert explains:

> *"One of the biggest mistakes marketers make when measuring content is automatically assuming that correlation implies causation. We see two trend lines headed in the same direction, so we automatically assume they have a direct relationship. That unfortunately tends to lead to misguided conclusions and forced connections that aren't always there to begin with."*

To learn more about lead generation, Curata tested content type, topic, and distribution method to get a clearer idea of what was working and how to promote our content within this stage.

In addition to content types, your evaluation stage content strategy should include information on lead scoring, nurture email streams, and tying your content to success at this stage.

Other platforms you can use to determine if your content marketing works at the evaluation stage:

- ▶ **Marketo**
- ▶ **Salesforce Pardot**
- ▶ **Act-On**
- ▶ **Bizible**
- ▶ **BrightFunnel**

PART TWO:

Post-Sales Content

The next stage of the content marketing funnel involves convincing your audience that purchasing your product is the smartest step. Post-sales content includes the purchase and delight stages of the content marketing funnel. In a future chapter, we'll break out the purchase stage into more intricate funnel steps used by sales.

Purchase Stage Content

The goal of the purchase stage is to create content that results in closing business.

Questions you should be answering about your content in this stage include:

▶ **Is this content influencing revenue?**

▶ **What sort of pipeline is this content generating?**

▶ **Is this content influencing the pipeline?**

Typically, the best formats for this stage are product reviews, questionnaires, self-assessments, product sheets, and calculators.

At Curata we use our Curata CMP software analytics to determine the efficacy of content at this stage of the content marketing funnel. (Only 30 percent of leading marketers feel they are effective at measuring content marketing's impact on the bottom of the funnel.) We've also taken steps such as building out our G2 Crowd page and updating our product sheets as a result.

An example of popular purchase-stage content is Progressive's side-by-side insurance comparison tool. Users are able to look at quotes and compare Progressive against competitors.

If you're looking to drive results in the purchase stage of the funnel, use these tools:

▶ **Curata CMP**

▶ **Kapost**

▶ **Contently**

▶ **Bizible**
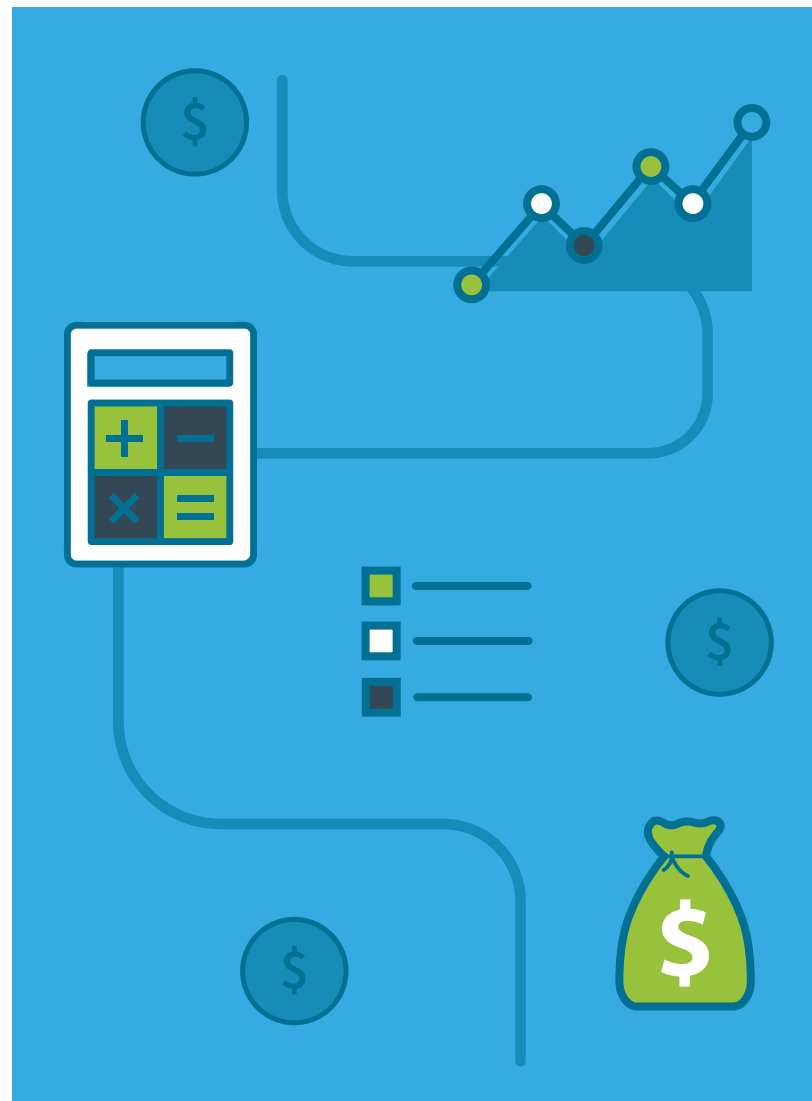
Delight Stage Content

The last, frequently overlooked stage in the content marketing funnel is delight. This is especially important for B2B companies with a subscription-based model. This stage of the funnel has several goals.

Content Marketing Institute founder Joe Pulizzi explains why this stage is important:

> *"Marketers don't realize that the most important part of this process is not the content. The asset we are trying to build is the audience… so everything should revolve around building a loyal audience that will ultimately behave in a way that will help your business."*

We recommend talking to your customer success team to help determine exactly what your KPIs are for this stage of content. Consider goals for your delight stage content such as increased product usage, renewal rates, online interactions, referrals, case studies, and user-generated content.

There are a variety of content types that work well for this stage. These include product guides and educational materials, member-exclusive content, forums and chat rooms, special offers, and giveaways.

The Curata marketing team often partners with our customer success team when creating this type of content and tags it accordingly in Curata CMP. One example of a successful content piece is our CCS use-case guide.

Other examples of content that delights can include anything from a personalized email to offering "priceless surprises" to your customers, like MasterCard did.

Tools to help ensure your content will succeed at the delight stage of the funnel include:

- ▸ **Salesforce**
- ▸ **Curata CMP**

PART THREE:

Sales-Marketing Alignment

Aligning with the sales team and creating content that enables them to do their jobs better will help your company achieve its goals, improve your overall content marketing strategy, and ultimately, help you get that raise you've been wanting.

Many sales teams operate using a funnel similar to the content marketing funnel discussed in previous chapters of this book. The sales funnel exists almost exclusively within the "purchase" stage of the content marketing funnel with a little bit of spill over in either direction. Funnel stages for sales are as follows:

- ▶ **Top of Funnel Sales**
- ▶ **Mid-Funnel**
- ▶ **Bottom of Funnel**
- ▶ **Closing the Deal**

In this chapter, we'll address what these stages are and how you can create content for each of these stages to drive more sales.
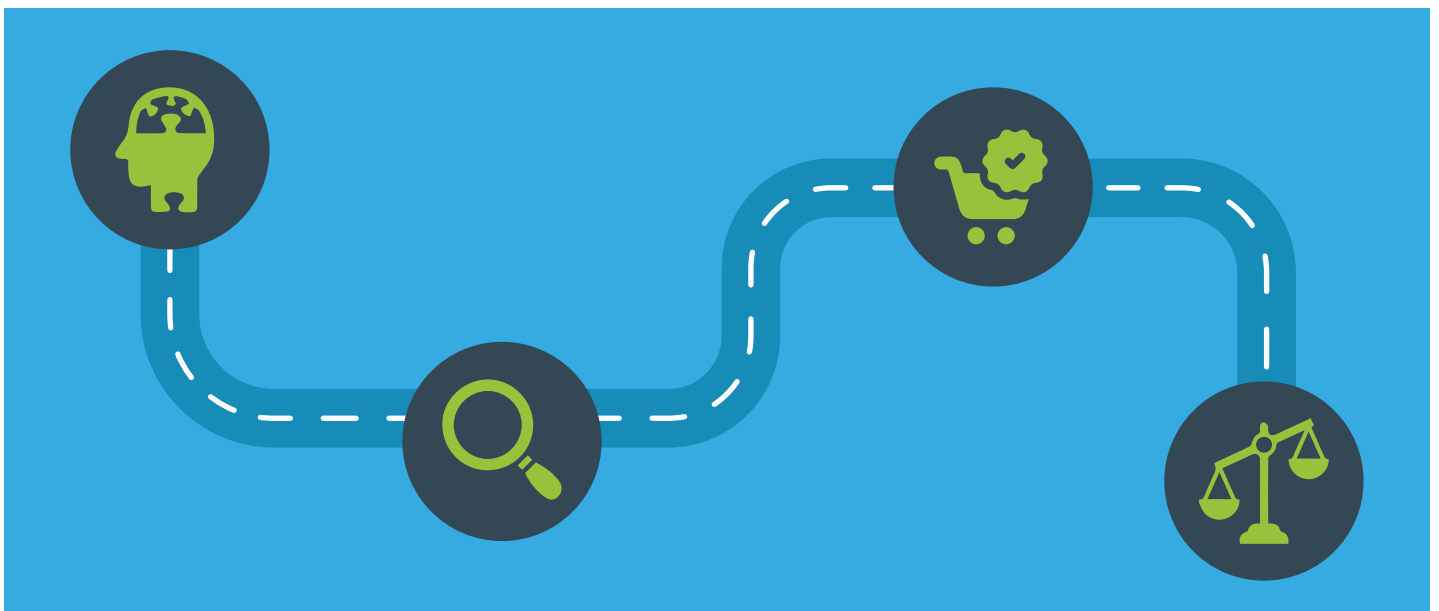
Top of Funnel: Awareness and Interest

According to SpinWeb.com, awareness stage content at the top of the sales funnel is as follows:

> *"This refers to a prospect to whom you haven't spoken, but who becomes aware of the solution you're offering. This person might not be in line with your target customer, but you still might decide they're worth pursuing."*

This stage should be relatively quick and can be completely skipped if your lead qualification process on the marketing side of things is solid. Content that lines up with this stage includes high-level cut sheets and emails for outreach. If the prospect expresses interest, both the sales person and the prospect will agree mutually to move on to the next stage of the buying process: evaluation.

Mid Funnel: Evaluation

According to Ring DNA, the evaluation stage is the stage:

> *"In which prospects or prospect companies examine competitors' solutions as they inch toward a final buying decision."*

Content at this stage includes more detailed product information, demos or pitch decks, case studies, competitor comparisons, and video walk throughs.

Bottom of Funnel: Decision

According to Mailmunch.com, the decision stage is defined as follows:

> *"At this stage, the prospect is making the decision that he wants to take advantage of your solution. He's paying more attention to what you offer, including different packages and options, so he can make the final decision to purchase. This is when sales offers are made by using sales pages, webinars, calls, etc."*

Trials, detailed benefits sheets, customer testimonials and direct-communication reviews from third-party sources are all useful resources for sales professionals trying to close at this stage.

Closing the Deal: Purchase

As with marketing, the last stage is often the most overlooked in regard to supplemental content marketing content. This stage should include a final proposal document and welcome materials.

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PART FOUR:

Tracking and Attribution

Pre-Sales Touch Content

You can measure and attribute pre-sales touch content by using your social channels, CRM, and Google Analytics. Metrics you should consider in regard to your content marketing are as follows:

CONSUMPTION METRICS:

▶ *How many people are consuming your content?*

▶ *Which channels are they using?*

▶ *How frequently and how in-depth is their consumption?*

SHARING METRICS:

▶ *Which of your content pieces are being shared?*

▶ *Who is sharing them?*

▶ *How/where are they sharing?*

▶ *How often are they being shared?*

RETENTION (SUBSCRIPTION) METRICS:

▶ *How effective are you at holding your audience's attention beyond the initial point of contact?*

ENGAGEMENT METRICS:

▶ *How does the intersection of consumption and sharing metrics translate into "engagement?"*

▶ *Does your content inspire users to take some kind of action?*

▶ *What kind of action are they taking?*

▶ *How frequently and consistently are they taking action?*

PRODUCTION METRICS: (To assess team and/or individual performance)

▶ *How is your team performing against editorial calendar deadlines and goals?*

▶ *What time does it take your team to turn a content idea into a published piece of content?*

▶ *How many pieces of content do you regularly publish in a given period of time?*

LEAD METRICS:

▶ *How is content supporting demand generation in terms of lead generation and lead nurturing (middle-of-the-funnel)?*

For a site or blog, the most important consumption metrics are **page views, unique visitors, and average time on page:**

Page view analytics tell you how many and which of your content pages your visitors are consuming.

Unique visitor analytics help you get a sense for the overall size of your audience and how much of your traffic is repeat visitors.

Average time on page analytics give you insight into how people are consuming your content. Are they reading or viewing the content thoroughly or are they quickly skimming?

Each of these statistics is easily available via Google Analytics or a similar web analytics tool.

Because you cannot embed analytics trackers in emails, you cannot get a true measure of content consumption. In lieu of actual consumption data, you can look at **open rates and click-throughs.** Marketing automation platforms such as Eloqua, Marketo, Pardot, Act-On, etc. commonly report both metrics, along with email marketing platforms such as MailChimp, Constant Contact, etc.

Warning! Open rates and click-throughs are only proxies for consumption. They have several limitations:

▶ When a hidden image in an email is loaded, **Open rates** record an open. But many email clients don't load images for spam protection. Open rates are consistently underreported for this reason. They can also make image-heavy emails such as infographics appear to perform better than others. They entice a recipient to load images, even though the content is not necessarily more appealing.

▶ **Click-Through rates** only reflect the number of clicks on an embedded link. This data can help you understand which calls-to-action are most appealing. But many recipients gain value from email content even without clicking links. For example, if your emails include the full text of articles, your click-through rates will underreport consumption as a reader can consume your content without leaving the email.

Post-Sales Touch Content

Though arguably some of the most important metrics for content marketers, they are often overlooked. There's little software available for content marketers to measure these.

### COST METRICS: (To determine return on investment – ROI)

▶ *What are your overall content marketing costs?*

▶ *What are your costs per piece? Per creative resource?*

SALES METRICS:

▶ *How does your content influence bottom-of-the-funnel results?*

▶ *Which ways does your content drive revenue?*

▶ *How does your content fill the pipeline?*

The easiest do-it-yourself means of associating content with revenue is to set up campaign tracking in Salesforce or your Marketing Automation platform. It can be an initially complex process, but it's certainly possible and the insights gained are worth your while.
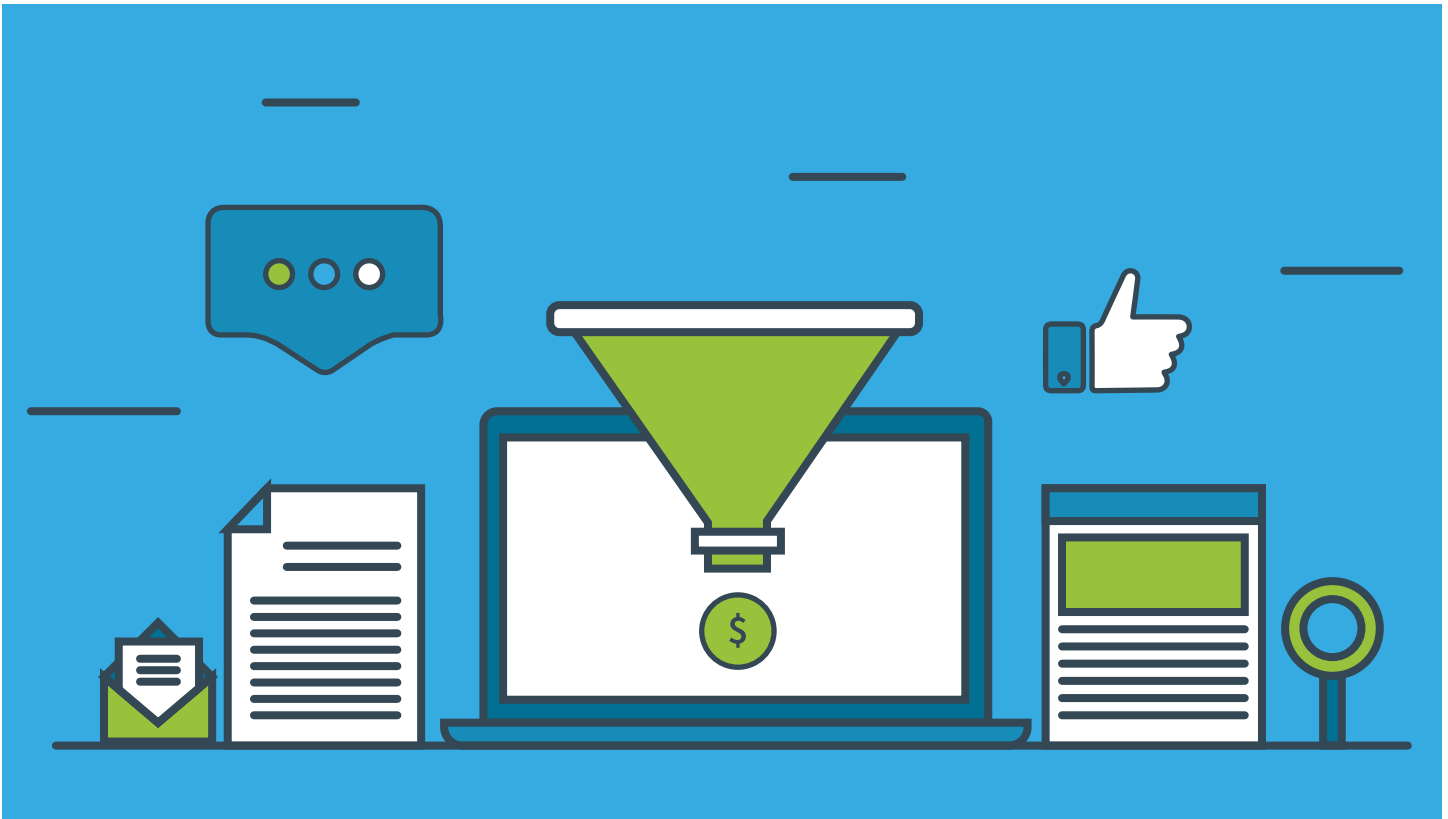
Conclusion

Having a written content marketing strategy and measurement process can be hugely beneficial to your marketing team's results.

One of the best ways to do this while achieving sales-marketing alignment, improving your sales team's time to close, and building your relationship with your customer success team is to build your content strategy around the content marketing funnel and sales funnel.

Heidi Cohen advises not creating content just for the content-marketing funnel. Maximize its usage by making it available at all relevant touch points.

When creating content for the purchase process, think beyond the funnel. To get the maximum value for your content investment, make your content available at every touchpoint where it's relevant. This includes post purchase, something many marketers forget.

Aligning your content strategy and editorial calendar with the content marketing funnel helps ensure your content is used to its maximum potential. You will gain a clearer idea of your strategy, increase your content's efficacy, improve ROI, and align your content with the overall team's marketing strategy.

For more on improving your content marketing strategy, read **Curata's Content Marketing Pyramid eBook**, a framework for developing and executing your content marketing strategy.

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