

# **Content Marketing Strategies for Nonprofits**

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Asher Hayden Sircy

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Advisor: Lancia Affonso

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## **Part I: The Proof and Definition of the Concept**

## **The Problem**

The negative issue that currently affects the marketing industry flows directly out of a positive issue – the invention and promulgation of the internet. A great portion of the world has access to the web, including the vast majority of citizens in the United States. This can be seen as a genuinely positive development, and has led to both the decentralization of knowledge and the accessibility of global communications.

As the use of internet-based digital media has grown over time, the prevalence of online advertising has been a direct corollary. Advertisements flood nearly every page we find ourselves on, pop-up ads tell us to become subscribers, and every entry we search on google leads to multiple ads showing in our results.

This saturation of the digital world is to be expected – online advertising gives businesses various benefits that they may not have enjoyed previously. The ability to drill down to specific target markets and buy specific online real estate in your customer's searches is certainly one of these benefits. Another would be the amount of data provided in online advertising – fruitful analysis of advertising key performance indicators (KPIs) are now available to every business who chooses to promote themselves. No longer do businesses have to guess which '50%' of their marketing budget is resonating and which isn't. Now companies can drill down to the types of ads, copy, graphics, and calls-to-action that lead to the highest performance.

However, the increasing prevalence of digital advertising has led to an increasing noise tolerance among target markets. Because customers are berated with ads every time they check their phone or computer, they aren't very likely to actually pay attention to any of them. Ads simply become part of the online landscape that goes unnoticed by surfers of the web. And not

only are online advertisements largely ignored by consumers, but there's a certain level of animosity/annoyance "at their presence.

The research of Rebecca Lieb in her work *Content – The Atomic Particle of Marketing* sheds light on this very issue. Because of the high prevalence of ad content on every website, she characterizes the modern web surfer as one who is "both banner-blind and blocking ads altogether." She uses recent digital marketing data in order to support this claim, including the fact that the click-through rate for standard banner ads have decreased to 0.12% in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, she gives a data-specific explanation of the affects of ad-blockers – that because of this new feature, 12% of display ads are never seen by humans. This 12% of display ad waste translates to approximately \$18.5 billion. And even outside of ad-blockers, Lieb shows that 60% of consumers suffer from "banner blindness," meaning that they simply don't remember any of the display ads that have appeared during their time online.<sup>2</sup>

So, to briefly summarize, the problem that faces the modern marketer – and especially that of the nonprofit marketer – is the increasingly antiquated nature of traditional advertising techniques to attract online consumers. Because advertising is everywhere, people find these digital and traditional display ads not only to be unconvincing, but ultimately bothersome.

### **The Solution and its Definition**

If the increasing prevalence of online advertising has caused consumers to ignore/block advertising altogether, what should marketers do? Certainly the solution isn't to cease advertising altogether, but the standard approach must be changed. And the way it must be changed is to delay the central call-to-action until *after* the customer is hooked.

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Lieb. *Content – The Atomic Particle of Marketing*. (London: Martin P Hill, 2017), 2

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

While this may seem counterintuitive at first, some light may be shed on the issue by looking at a definition of the concept given by the Content Marketing Institute. They define content marketing as “a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience – and ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.”<sup>3</sup>

This definition contains a good deal of concepts that are important to unpack, so we will go through these individually. Firstly, let’s address the idea of creating and distributing relevant and valuable content. No longer is the main task of the marketer to simply tell consumers about the product currently being sold – the range of content now created by marketers goes far beyond these parameters. And though the content that businesses create may not be product specific, it must still be relevant and valuable – a business wouldn’t procure any more customers if they decided to cover subject matter that was irrelevant to the business.

For a brief example of what is meant by the above phrase, imagine a pool company. This company could invest in paid search advertising, display ads, and even traditional methods such as billboards, sponsorships, etc. But a *content marketing* approach, while not outright excluding these other methods, would place emphasis on creating valuable content for the business. This might be through the creation of a blog written to give consumers relevant knowledge; topics for articles might be “Chlorine or Salt-Water: Which is Better?” or “3 Quick Ways to Lower Your Algae Levels This Week” etc. These articles would provide a service to consumers free of

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<sup>3</sup> Content Marketing Institute. *B2B Content Marketing, 2015 Benchmarks, Budgets and Trends – North America*. (Content Marketing Institute, 2015), 4

charge, and would lead customers to find this pool company to be a trusted source of information – which would lead them to become a customer of the business.

To briefly clarify, the blog described above would certainly not be the only content marketing strategy that the business could use. The main point is that the content is meaningful to the customer, and that it isn't a simple sales pitch for the company's own products.

Let's look at the second important phrase in the Content Marketing Institute's definition, which deals specifically with the attraction and retention of an audience. In order to understand the uniqueness of this idea, the distinction between 'push' and 'pull' marketing strategy must be defined. Push strategies can be defined as what we might call traditional strategies. Billboards, radio ads, and online pop-ups that distract the attention of consumers all fall in this category. Kivi Miller lends a hand in defining push marketing in her book *Content Marketing for Nonprofits*, saying "With old-style interruption marketing, you push out a lot of information, hoping that it reaches the right people. This is also called 'spray and pray.'"<sup>4</sup>

This is to be seen as the direct opposite of modern content marketing, or as we might categorize it, a 'pull' strategy. Instead of pushing one's product on consumers, this approach entails a concerted effort to draw the consumers in before any clear pitch is made. This is where the previously discussed "relevant and valuable content" becomes central, for it's this content that's able to actually accomplish this goal. Miller's elaboration of this strategy is as follows: "you create content that people want, they identify themselves as being interested in your topics, and they actively ask you to communicate with them, because they want more or they are at least

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<sup>4</sup> Kivi Leroux Miller. *Content Marketing for Nonprofits: A Communications Map for Engaging Your Community, Becoming a Favorite Cause, and Raising More Money*. (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 18

open to having those conversations.”<sup>5</sup> By providing consumers with relevant content, they’re able to pull interested consumers into their marketing funnel – securing a much higher percentage of conversions.

Both Lieb and Miller agree that push strategies are a thing of the past. Lieb characterizes this strategy as “the marketing of interruption, of insistence and of distraction.” In her mind, this approach is becoming more obsolete because “the louder the hue and cry, the less effectively it works.” In today’s world of “interactive media” (mainly the world wide web), consumers can “control more of the conversation” and “block out the noise.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Miller boils down the basic pitch of most push – or outbound – strategies to this call-to-action: “Look at me! Help me!”<sup>7</sup> And in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where interruptive marketing techniques have become common place, the modern consumer isn’t likely to oblige.

In short, the Content Marketing Institute’s definition of content marketing shows us two things: first, it calls organizations to prioritize the creation of interesting and valuable content in their marketing plans. Second, it relies on the ability of an organization to attract customers with this interesting content – and to thereby begin a ‘conversation’ with the consumer that ultimately leads to conversions.

While this definition is sufficient to understand some of the key concepts of content marketing, other definitions are needed to give broader understanding. Senior Director of SAP’s Global Marketing team Michael Brenner defined content marketing with this statement:

“Content marketing is about delivering the content your audience is seeking in all the places they

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<sup>5</sup> ibid. 26

<sup>6</sup> Lieb, 1

<sup>7</sup> Miller, 26



are searching for it. It is the effective combination of created, curated and syndicated content.”

Notice that there is one slight difference in his view of content marketing – the idea that content *creation* isn’t necessarily an essential aspect of content marketing strategy. Instead, content can be taken from other sources and “curated” or “syndicated.”<sup>8</sup>

This is a critical concept, especially for businesses and nonprofits that have limited resources and/or employees. If the organization is too small to segment out part of its staff to work primarily on content creation, there are still opportunities to implement content marketing strategies. The idea of curating and repurposing content from other sources (with appropriate recognition and citation of course) is central to the notion that content marketing can be implemented by any organization – large or small. This aspect will be addressed in further detail when discussing principles and methods of content marketing.

Another addition we can make to our initial definition comes from Barry Graubart, and his definition specifically addresses the question of how an organization’s content relates to its actual brand: “Content marketing is an approach by which companies seek to author and/or share contextually relevant content to create or reinforce their brand messaging.”<sup>9</sup> Notice the similarity of terms between Graubart and Miller – both use the term “relevant” as a necessary prescription for content. However, the vagueness of this term might lead some organizations to ask “What are the bounds of relevance? Am I allowed to address things in my industry that the organization itself doesn’t?”

Graubart adds some important insight to the idea of relevant content by elaborating on its

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<sup>8</sup> Loredana Patruitiu Baltes. “Content Marketing – The Fundamental Tool of Digital Marketing,” Transilvania University of Brasov 8, No. 2 (2015): 112

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

purpose – “to create or reinforce their brand messaging.”<sup>10</sup> This idea gives clarity to the bounds of content that organizations can create – it must be specifically related to their goals as a brand, their mission, and the messaging that they create. And this communication isn’t simply propositional – it also takes the form of a narrative. Stephen Denning states this clearly: “Strong brands are based on a *story* that communicates who is the company; authenticity is to communicate what you really are” (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup>

### **A Brief History of Content Marketing**

Although the specific term is quite novel in the history of marketing, the actual concept of content marketing has a great deal of precedent in traditional businesses. For instance, as early as 1891 companies used relevant content in order to differentiate their products. August Oetker included recipes on the back of baking powder packages he sold. Twenty years later, Oetker began publishing a cookbook, and his company’s recipes have continued to resonate with customers for over 100 years.<sup>12</sup>

When Michelin introduced their tires into the French automotive industry at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, content was a key part of their marketing strategy. They created the Michelin Guide, and its initial popularity was actually greater than that of cars. The guide included tips on car maintenance, as well as maps of fuel stations and mechanics in the area. The guide continued to be a success throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, and is currently sold in almost 90 countries across the globe.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* 113

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Michelin Guide History. *Ambrussum, Site Visit, Photos and Information, by Provence Beyond*, [www.beyond.fr/food/michelin-guide-history.html](http://www.beyond.fr/food/michelin-guide-history.html).

Content marketing strategies continued to expand as business progressed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, the toy company Hasbro's television series *GI Joe: An American Hero* was an extensive content marketing strategy in order to sell their action figures. This venture was wildly successful, and proved the validity of this concept in traditional mediums.<sup>14</sup>

Even though each of the above ventures shows the importance of investing in relevant content in order to engage customers and build a marketing funnel, the actual term “content marketing” wasn't used until the 1990s. the term was used during a roundtable at the American Society for Newspaper Editors in 1996, and by the late 1990s businesses like Netscape had positions name “Director of Online and Content Marketing.”<sup>15</sup>

As has been previously noted, the true flourishing of content marketing occurred in congruence with the rise and promulgation of the internet – and specifically the World Wide Web. With users being able to create their own information dashboards and consequently block out all interruptive advertising methods, content marketing has emerged as one of the premier tools used in order to remain competitive in the current economy.

### **Content Marketing – A Niche Strategy?**

Since we are currently setting up the basic parameters of content marketing in a more general sense, we've yet to apply it specifically to nonprofit organizations. Rest assured, this application will come. But before we can arrive at that point, a question must be answered regarding the scope of content marketing's effectiveness. Can we legitimately make the claim

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<sup>14</sup> Emily Bauer. “A Brief History Of Content Marketing (It's Not As New As You Think).” *Content Experience Hub | Uberflip*, 5 Sept. 2018, [www.hub.uberflip.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-content-marketing](http://www.hub.uberflip.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-content-marketing).

<sup>15</sup> Baltes, 114

that content marketing is a useful tool for a wide scope of businesses – not just a privileged few?

In order to address this question, we can divide businesses into two commonly used categories: business to consumers (B2C), and business to business (B2B). B2C companies deal with individual consumers as their primary customers, while B2B businesses have a customer base comprised mainly of businesses.

Now the question can be raised: can content marketing strategies work for both of these types of companies? And the answer seems to be a definitive yes. First, it seems clear that these strategies naturally perform well in a B2C scenario. In fact, by 2013, a study was done showing that “86% of B2C marketers use content marketing, employing 12 individual tactics on average.”<sup>16</sup> These tactics include social media engagement, articles, blogs, e-newsletters, print magazines, etc. And through these tactics, B2C marketers are able to achieve higher brand awareness, website traffic, customer acquisition, and retention.

These strategies don’t merely work in a B2C setting – they are also quite effective in a B2B setting. A study showed that 91% of B2B respondents to the study used content marketing strategies on a regular basis. For these businesses, tactics such as videos, virtual conferences, and mobile content have seen increasing prevalence over recent years. In addition to this, number of businesses who use social media in order to distribute content rose over 10% from 2011 to 2012. The study also shows that nearly one-third of B2B marketing budgets are directed towards content marketing efforts. And not only are these companies continuing to hone their content marketing strategies, but a majority of them plan to expand their content marketing budget in the

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<sup>16</sup> Joe Pulizzi & Ann Hardley. *B2C Content Marketing: 2013 Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends – North America*. (Content Marketing Institute), 3, 4

future.<sup>17</sup>

Now that we've established the validity and effectiveness of content marketing in both B2B and B2C sectors, the question of whether not content marketing is effective in the non-profit sector must be addressed. In order to see the tremendous positive impact that these strategies have on non-profits, we can look at a real-life example. VolunteerMatch is a non-profit organization, and their main product is a database that connects volunteers with nonprofits who need them. In the early 2000's, the company's main way of increasing brand awareness was through public relations tactics.

In the mid 2000's, however, they began to see the opportunity of greater engagement and awareness through content creation. They pinpointed two main audiences for their content – other nonprofits who used their database in order to find volunteers, and corporations who used their database to coordinate volunteer opportunities for their employees. Their approach toward nonprofits was to create a site dedicated to educational webinars on subjects such as “recruitment, screening, orientation, and recognition of volunteers.”<sup>18</sup> They took a slightly different strategy in creating content to target the corporate audience. By using their corporate connections to add special guest speakers to regular conference calls, they were able to turn these regular calls into a source of lead generation.

VolunteerMatch provides us with a specific example of the importance of content creation in the life of a nonprofit organization for brand awareness, customer lead generation, and both customer acquisition and retention. They're a specifically interesting example because

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<sup>17</sup> Joe Pulizzi & Ann Hardley. *B2B Content Marketing: 2013 Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends – North America*. (Content Marketing Institute), 12

<sup>18</sup> Miller, 29

of the fact that they use two different content strategies for two different types of customers. From their experience with pull marketing strategies, we can see that there is a great amount of benefit nonprofit organizations can receive from content marketing.

It must be pointed out that VolunteerMatch's success with content marketing strategies was in a B2B setting, and while they worked with other nonprofits and corporations, they didn't specifically curate content to potential volunteers. However, this doesn't mean that these strategies are of no use for nonprofits whose main emphasis is B2C (which, in this context, is used simply to mean nonprofits who mainly deal with *individuals* instead of conglomerates) relations. In order to connect with the average individual, nonprofits often employ the strategy of sharing a story or narrative that communicates the need for the organization. An example would be the content strategy of Amnesty International, which shows global news updates on issues that are specifically related to their cause. By doing this, Amnesty International is showing that the current state of the world requires their work – and why individuals should support the organization.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this first section was to both define content marketing in the context of the current marketing world and show its validity for all companies – especially nonprofit organizations. The modern world has been completely changed by the internet, and this has greatly increased the amount of advertising consumers are exposed to. And as consumers have been flooded by this new wave of marketing materials, they've become increasingly wary of all online advertising. This wariness often manifests itself as either ad-blocking or "ad-ignoring," both of which speak to the counterproductive nature of these marketing strategies.

In this modern context, content marketing represents a fundamental reconfiguring of the marketing industry. Instead of the traditional method of “pushing” advertising onto consumers and commanding them to buy, these strategies “pull” consumers into the marketing funnel of the company by providing them with content that resonates. This content can be either specifically created by the company or curated from another source.

These strategies work in every business setting, including both B2B and B2C. And, in addition to this, these strategies work in nearly every nonprofit setting (whether B2B or B2C) because of the importance of creating a narrative for these organizations and providing content that increases consumer interest. In short, content marketing is the future of marketing for every type of organization – and its tools are especially useful in the nonprofit setting.

## **Part II: Principles and Methods**



## The Importance of Structure

If an organization decides that content creation should become a valuable part of their marketing plan, they must first pin down an actual strategy of action. This strategy is essential in order for content to truly resonate with a business' base. Rebecca Lieb is again a great source of help on this point, adding that "Content strategy is the foundation, a structure, an analysis of resources and needs, and a system in place to measure results. If you don't have that strategy in place, all you are doing is Facebooking, or blogging, or tweeting with no real purpose or overarching goals."<sup>19</sup>

Just as we dissected Miller's definition of content marketing, it would be appropriate to dissect Lieb's discussion of content strategy. The first important phrase that we can address is the idea of analyzing an organization's resources and needs. This analysis takes different forms for different businesses, depending on organizational features such as size, scope, budget, etc.

For instance, say a small nonprofit with 5 full-time staff members decided to pursue content marketing. They would first have to decide on the source of their content. Do they have any content from previous newsletters, bulletins, and advertising that can be repurposed in order to function as relevant content? They must also ask the question of *who* will be involved in this process. It's a considerable undertaking to develop a fully formed content strategy, and many companies even build extra positions for this specific task. In the context of a small nonprofit where new staff positions might not be as easy to procure, the most optimal solution might be to spread the workload out in an efficient manner. While the Communications Director of the organization might create a schedule of content topics and ideas (this will be addressed later in

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<sup>19</sup> Lieb, 18

greater detail), each staff member might be responsible for only one piece of content a month.

Whether or not this type of strategy is best-suited for a specific organization is entirely up to the judgment and discretion of the organization itself, but the question of resources and needs must be addressed in order to implement a successful strategy.

The second important phrase which Lieb uses pertains to the measuring of results. This is a critical idea, although it is often one of the key structural elements of content creation that is left behind. Put simply, it matters whether or not an organization's content is actually reaching people effectively. To merely create/curate content and publish it is insufficient in and of itself – it must perform well. And in order to judge whether or not it is performing well, there must be goals and benchmarks put in place from the outset. In addition to these benchmarks, there must be an actual method of measurement that is placed on all content publishing.

The ability to measure the performance of content campaigns has become much more accessible in the modern age. Most social media channels, for example, provide comprehensive data on the performance of each post and article for an organization's page. This data can be used to measure performance and determine which forms of content are most valuable to consumers. This data is available for most online publishing services, and should be given emphasis in the determination of which content to use. Simply because content decisions are creative doesn't mean they can't be aided by reliable data-driven decision making processes.

While the above factors of analyzing resources and measuring results are essential in order to give structure to an organization's content strategy, they aren't sufficient. Other questions must be asked and answered in order to have a more robust view of content creation. For instance, using a content outline is an important structural feature that can maintain the

consistency of output. The example below was created by Kristina Halvorson in her book *Content Strategy for the Web*<sup>20</sup>:

<b>Content title:</b>	<i>Use a clear, descriptive title that simply explains what is on this page. The title may be specified in the information architecture (IA) document. Try to be descriptive rather than funny or punny</i>
<b>Template type:</b>	<i>Which type of content page is this? Does it need to fit into a predefined page template? Have you seen the wireframes for this templates?</i>
<b>Business area:</b>	<i>Is this content owned, managed or represented by a specific area of the business?</i>
<b>Stakeholders:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Which people are responsible for approving this content?</i></li> <li>• <i>Which people can sign it off or request amendments?</i></li> <li>• <i>(name names!)</i></li> </ul>
<b>Expiry date:</b>	<i>When will this content expire? How regularly should it be checked for accuracy and relevancy?</i>
<b>Audience:</b>	<i>Who is this content aimed at? What type of people will be reading it?</i>
<b>Objectives:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What is this content designed to achieve?</i></li> </ul>
<b>Key messages:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What brand messages do we need to convey here?</i></li> </ul>
<b>Services and products:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Which services or products is this page selling?</i></li> </ul>
<b>Calls to action:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Where should readers be directed?</i></li> <li>• <i>What is the goal for readers?</i></li> </ul>
<b>Authors:</b>	<i>Who writes and edits the content for this page?</i>
<b>Resources:</b>	<i>Where can writers find the information they need to write this page?</i>

The benefits and clarity that a table like this provides is clear, and within it one can see even more structural elements that organizations can use. For instance, Halvorson incorporates the idea of pre-organized and determined page templates. Tools like this are an important

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<sup>20</sup> Kristina Halvorson. *Content Strategy for the Web* (Berkley: New Riders, ), 22

reminder to an organization that they need not reinvent the wheel. Content marketing has been a staple of countless businesses for a considerable length of time, and there is a wealth of resources that can help one to ensure that their content strategy is sustainable. All of these structural aids are built around lessening any unnecessary workload that creators may feel, enabling them to spend more energy on the creative aspects that can't be so easily pinned down.

### **Who Receives the Message?**

Before we can delve deeper into the discussion of “target audience,” we must first address whether this term is even appropriate in a content marketing setting. Kivi Miller certainly doesn't think so:

*“While the concept of focusing on specific groups of people—via list segmenting, for example—is still very valuable, thinking of this focus as targeting is troublesome because it conjures the image of you blasting your content toward the target, rather than an image of you creating content that naturally attracts specific types of people to you. The term audience presents a similar problem because it implies people sitting passively and quietly while you present to them.”<sup>21</sup>*

Her argument here is fairly nuanced – she's not saying that what most people may *mean* when they say ‘target audience’ is inherently wrong. In fact, segmenting is a necessary feature of determining proper channels and strategy. Rather, her point is that the term ‘target audience’ points to an antiquated method of marketing that is altogether at odds with modern content strategies. The word target doesn't signify proper segmentation as much as it does a type of one-way hurling of content. Harkening back to the previous discussion of ‘push’ vs ‘pull’ strategy,

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<sup>21</sup> Miller, 4

calling a segment a target fits much better with the traditional ‘push’ of interruptive advertising. The same can be said for the word ‘audience’ – the broader point Miller is making is that both these words signify a push strategy, which is fundamentally at odds with content marketing.

Not only is the term ‘target audience’ at odds with content marketing, but it’s also at odds with the online age in general. Advertising is no longer a one-way street, and consumers are constantly given the opportunity to interact and engage with organizations. Businesses cannot simply monologue into the ear of consumers – consumers can now talk back. And this development of digital communication has made the greatly increased the importance of engagement.

Another word that must be rethought – especially in the context of nonprofit organizations – is that of ‘consumer.’ Not only does this word denote a transaction process which might not be present in every nonprofit organization, but it also lacks the precision necessary in order to fully understand the differences between different groups that each play an important role in the lives of nonprofits. Therefore, we should proceed with Miller’s threefold definition of users known as PSIs – which stands for participants, supporters, and influencers.<sup>22</sup>

Participants can be defined as both those who are specifically helped by the organization and those who are actively carrying out the organization’s goals. Supporters are those who volunteer and advocate for the organization without directly helping to implement the organization’s programs. Influencers can be seen as those who don’t have a strict allegiance to the organization, but whose support can be a major determining factor in the present/future engagement of the organization. It must be noted that the distinction between participants and

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<sup>22</sup> Miller, 6

supporters is indeed subtle, and it has a certain amount of fluidity. Certain people might find themselves categorized as supporters early on in their relationship with the organization, only to later be seen as participants.

This three-tier segmentation allows for nonprofit organizations to build several different goals for themselves, most of which are centered around the idea of conversion. In traditional marketing terminology, conversion simply means turning a potential customer into an actual (and therefore for most businesses, a paying) customer. And while a monetary aspect is certainly seen as crucial for most businesses, nonprofit organizations have a greater variety of means for conversion. For instance, a conversion could mean that a person could simply a supporter. Instead of a monetary investment or payment, they could give their time and energy in order to help an organization – and this intangible investment is certainly no less crucial to the growth of an organization.

And yet this isn't the only conversion that an organization must be aiming to see. There must also be a clear strategy to convert supporters into participants by showing them the benefits of becoming actively involved in implementing organizational goals. And this same type of strategy must be in place to first convert influential men and women to become influencers for the organization – and to finally convert influencers into public-minded participants who are willing and able to represent the organization in the social sphere.

### **Understanding PSI Motivations**

Having established the three segments that make up a healthy organization's base, we must now shift our attention to the motivating factors that play a part in the lives of these groups. What causes a person to become involved with a nonprofit? A nonprofit marketing strategy firm

named M+R Strategic Services has found that there are four main reasons:<sup>23</sup>

1. To feel happy
2. To feel important
3. To feel like part of a success story
4. Because everyone's doing it

It's important to notice the most common word among the first three reasons, which is "feel." The subjective experience of the potential supporter/donor is a crucial aspect of their decision to aid an organization, and this experiential aspect plays a larger role than the cognitive aspect of the decision. This is important to keep in mind – the way to procure new PSIs isn't mainly by drowning them in statistics, but by causing them to see the impact that support can have on *them*. Notice that any mention of the actual cause achieved by an organization isn't explicitly mentioned in any of the four reasons, and it's merely implied in the third reason. And yet even in this third reason there's a sense in which the person's personal involvement in the success story is more central than the success story itself.

In short, very few people support nonprofit organizations out of pure self-sacrifice; for the most part, people find the support they give to be subjectively beneficial to themselves. This is a fundamental part of the human psyche, and can't be reworked by any organization's efforts. Instead, what nonprofits must do is find ways to take these four reasons and build them into their own content. For instance, testimonials from PSIs on their experience with the organization can be a way to make an organization look attractive to potential supporters in all four ways stated above – they can see the happiness and importance that involvement brings, see a real-life

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<sup>23</sup> Miller, 76

example of a success story, and see from the engagement of others that they themselves should become involved.

These four fundamental reasons for engagement should be central in the writing of all marketing materials. If there's not a specific call-to-action that draws specifically from at least one of these reasons, then the chance of success is greatly limited. It's also important to remember that it's in no way detrimental to the cause or narrative of an organization to emphasize the subjective benefits of those who choose to get involved. Instead of being a sign of compromise or pandering, knowing how to motivate both potential and active PSIs is the mark of a true content marketer.

### **What is Our Message?**

With our customer-segments in mind, we must now address the question of what is actually communicated to our PSIs. How will we actually go about communicating to our base? The foundational principle which must first be laid is this: all content produced by a nonprofit organization must be PSI-centric.

Although this idea might go without saying, it must be clarified. There is a very common tendency for nonprofits to publish content without truly thinking about their base's reaction. It's still somewhat common practice for these organizations to create newsletters and press releases in order to publish their successes, as well as impressive facts and figures from their recent history (e.g. a scholarship/grant foundation sharing total dollar amounts of awards given in the past year). Now whether or not these traditional channels are actually the most effective way to communicate an organization's value depends entirely on who the PSIs are, and channels selection will be addressed in more detail below. And while the "organizational updates" shared



through these channels might be both true and relevant, this information doesn't qualify as content marketing.

The question must be asked: "Is this content more focused on pleasing *us* or on pleasing our PSIs?". Nonprofit content creators must remember that pleasing the Executive Director isn't their fundamental goal. Now it's clear that an Executive Director can have important and helpful input on content creation, and that for the sake of organizational unity no content should go public without their approval. But there simply must be a central focus on PSIs – without their engagement, even perfect content can fall on deaf ears.

In order to create content that truly resonates with PSIs, an organization first must be able to listen to what they have to say. The main way that an organization can listen to the wants and needs of their base is through data analysis of previous public engagement. If there is a certain type of content that receives more traction than others from PSIs, it's the role of the organization to pinpoint both why the content resonated and how they can leverage PSI interest in future endeavors. For example, if a non-profit centered on conservation received a great amount of response from content centered around the wildlife species that live in certain relevant regions, then this type of content should be expanded upon even further in order to maintain high levels of engagement. The concept of A/B testing becomes crucial during this process. This is the idea that content creators should always be in the process of creating mini-experiments (e.g. publishing time, format, call-to-action, etc.) in their content strategies. Analyzing the differences in campaign performance due to these subtle experiments enables a nonprofit organization to optimize their future performance based on past performance.

## Determining a Content Marketing Mix

Once PSIs are determined and mechanisms are set in place to hear what they have to say, organizations must determine the mix of content that they will use. Generally speaking, there are three categories of content that a nonprofit can choose from: “content that entertains,” “content that informs and/or educates,” and “utility content.”<sup>24</sup>

Entertainment-type content is narrative based, and requires very high levels of investment in order to truly engage. Examples of this from the for-profit sector would be the GI Joe television series, which was created in order to sell toys. Another example which has been remarkably successful is *The Lego Movie*. This last example is unique in that it not only increased sales in Lego toys, but also made almost \$600 million at the box office.<sup>25</sup> This type of entertaining content isn’t limited to television shows or full-length feature films. Chipotle, for example, produced an advertisement named ‘The Scarecrow’ which was intent on raising awareness concerning animal abuse in the food industry. The ad was incredibly well produced, and received an enormous amount of engagement from the public. But Chipotle’s marketing campaign didn’t end there – they created an interactive game on Apple’s App Store. This game allowed players to ‘save’ animals affected by the food industry, lower carbon emissions, and engage in other nature-based challenges based around Chipotles’ core values. This was one of the most innovative marketing campaigns of recent history, and has shown the high returns that this type of content marketing can bring to an organization.

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<sup>24</sup> Lieb, 31-34

<sup>25</sup> Box Office History for Lego Movies.” (The Numbers - Where Data and Movies Meet), [www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Lego#tab=summary](http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Lego#tab=summary)

The next type of content is educational. The key goal of this category is to give both PSIs and the public at large information that directly pertains to the sector of the organization. When content marketing is spoken about writ large, this is the type of content that is being discussed. Under the broad umbrella of educational content is a surprisingly diverse array of content that may be used, and the key determining factor in this regard is based upon what the nonprofit has to offer. A nonprofit who actually sells a product might emphasize information on its use, while a nonprofit homeless shelter might emphasize information on the effects of homelessness in their city. The shape of this informational material is guided by harmonizing the goals of the organization with the sensibilities of its PSIs.

The last type of content is utility-based. This would include mortgage calculators and budgeting apps created by banks, exercise apps created by sporting goods companies, and other related campaigns. There is a common tendency among these utility-based content strategies to create an app in order to house the service in a way that is more friendly to mobile users.

Determining which types of content are best suited for a nonprofit can only be done by analyzing both the nature of the organization and the wants/needs of the PSIs. And it must be said that these three types of content don't signify three separate marketing paths that are never allowed to meet – nor does it mean that an organization can't have a proper amount of all three types. Rather, these three types of content provide the proper framework an organization can use to determine what percentage of each type of content would be most beneficial.

There are yet more distinctions that must be made in order to provide a more useful and practical framework for content. One such distinction was coined by Jason Miller, the global content marketing manager for the Marketing Solutions Group at LinkedIn. He categorizes his

content into two groups: “little rock” and “big rock.”<sup>26</sup> Little rock content can be seen in mediums like online blogs, podcasts, interviews, etc. – containing relatively small amounts of material. There’s relatively little investment needed to create this type of content, which allows for a more sustainable level of output. In contrast to this, there’s what Miller calls “Big Rock” content. This category would encompass longer form content such as a free e-book, short documentary, etc.

In order for a content marketing strategy to function at full capacity, both little rock and big rock content must be included. And nonprofits may even find that these two separate types of content specifically resonate with certain segments of their base. For instance, it may be that big rock content is more suited to the initial conversion of people into supporters, while little rock content resonated far more with those who already share the organization’s vision. This is yet another facet of content marketing that will be contingent on the organization’s analysis of prior performance.

Making proper distinctions between various types of content isn’t merely something that should be done before a campaign is publicized. Rather, continuing to categorize content is an important aspect of a healthy strategy. One premier example of this is Coca Cola’s content marketing strategy. Now it’s clear that Coca Cola isn’t a nonprofit, and many of their marketing techniques wouldn’t translate with any effect into the nonprofit sector. However, in this specific regard their strategy is quite informative. They employ what’s called the 70/20/10 rule – 70% of all content they create is low-risk ideas directly based on what has performed well in the past,

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<sup>26</sup> Pam Didner. *Global Content Marketing*. (New York: McGraw Hil, 2015) 121

20% of their content drills down into the specific aspects of previously successful content and emphasizes certain facets, and 10% of their content is high-risk and is purely experimental.<sup>27</sup>

This three-fold strategy can be a valuable tool for nonprofit organizations in several respects. First, it can be a way of keeping an organization accountable by forcing it to analyze past performance in order to determine what will make up the 70% of low risk content. In addition, it also makes experimentation a constant aspect of the marketing mix. It can become incredibly easy for an organization to slip into complacency, especially when they've been able to pinpoint the types of content that truly resonate with both their PSI and the public at large. However, specifically reserving a space for high risk experimentation can lead to the types of creative thought processes that formulate the most original and engaging content. This isn't to say that every experiment in this last 10% will achieve its goal – the very nature of high risk content is that there's a substantial likelihood of failure. However, this does not negate the fact that this form of experimentation might very well be the catalyst which leads to crucial insights and innovations for the future of the organization.

### **The Importance of Outsourcing**

While the role of content marketing must be carefully thought through by those within an organization, this doesn't mean that collaboration with other content sources or organizations is something to be feared. Rather, the ability to know one's limits in this field and be willing to find content in other places can be a needed boost to the efficiency of the strategy. To designate this choice, I've used the term 'outsourcing' – however, I'm defining this term in a way specifically related to our subject. It doesn't simply mean paying other individuals or companies to create content on your behalf, although this is certainly one form of outsourcing. Instead, I'm using the

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<sup>27</sup> Lieb, 34-35

word do designate any collaboration with other organizations that results in valuable content for the primary organization.

First, we will look at the more informal side of outsourcing. Simple examples of this would include everything from retweeting valuable content from other organizations on social media to actively collaborating with another organization in the creation of joint content (with proper credit given, of course). One important aspect in this regard is the relationships that an organization is able to build in both their local and online communities. For instance, a nonprofit whose mission is to aid the homeless must prioritize its relationships with all organizations in their area who combat poverty, as well as similar national organizations whose online presence may be quite large in scope. Being connected to these groups not only allows an organization to keep in touch with the valuable content that others create, but to see these organizations as an important resource for their own content strategy.

The second type of outsourcing is more formal in nature, and includes the utilization of freelancers in order to create company content. It may be that an organization simply doesn't have the time or expertise to create content themselves. If a company finds themselves in this situation and yet still sees the value of content marketing, hiring outside groups to create content can be a highly beneficial practice. The main factor when hiring others to create content is the directions provided. If an organization gives vague and non-specific instructions to their hired freelancer, there's a high probability that the content created won't be worth the investment. The organization must take it upon themselves to ensure that their content producers aren't simply thrown into the midst of an industry with which they have no familiarity. Laying a solid foundation of the mission and goals of the organization is the first step, which is followed by more practical directions (basic prose, word limits, etc.).

In order to see these principles of outsourcing in action, we can look at a small IT company named Vology. Because of their small budget and limited staff, they've found it imperative to find creative ways of continuing their content marketing campaigns. Because of this, their outsourcing approach has several different facets. First, they leverage free content from their company partners and manufacturers. These connections would be categorized under our first and more informal heading. Second, Vology repurposes content that they themselves have created. This is an important point – that the workload can be significantly decreased simply by changing the format or rewording content that an organization has already created. And lastly, Vology hires freelancers to assist them with specific forms of content like video. These three distinct outsourcing strategies all work in harmony to buttress Vology's marketing campaigns, and build greater engagement among their customers.<sup>28</sup>

### **Conclusion**

While this exposition of effects and strategies of nonprofit content marketing wasn't meant to be comprehensive, it was meant to give a basic understanding of the ideas that are essential to its outworking and performance. As has been stated above, content marketing may look different depending on the organization in question – large nonprofits may be able to allocate large budgets and labor to this area, while smaller companies may require assistance from other companies through repurposed material in order to maintain consistency in their campaigns.

Whatever the individual case may be, the principle of content marketing remains the same – consumers in the digital age need to be 'pulled in' to the world of an organization. While traditional interruptive advertising methods may have worked in the past, they work no longer.

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<sup>28</sup> Didner, 123-125

This is why content marketing strategies are so crucial to organizations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And all of the reasons content marketing is important to *all* organizations are emphasized yet more when applied specifically to nonprofits. These companies rely on narratives, and must have a robust understanding of PSI motivation in order to fully resonate.

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century continues to unfold and technological innovation continues to increase, content marketing's value to consumers will become more and more recognizable. As distractions rise, an organization's ability to cut through the distraction must accordingly rise to the occasion. Therefore, nonprofit organizations will find that only through content marketing can they truly connect with their base – and through their support, make the world a better place.