box UK

Eight New Opportunities for The Content Age

Providing you with:

- ✔ New ideas for engaging with your users
- ✔ Examples of real-life business benefits
- ✔ Technical implementation advice

Introduction

90% of all the data in the world has been produced in the past two years, and 2.5 quintillion (that's 2,500,000,000,000,000,000) bytes of data are currently generated each day (source: IBM). With the 571 websites, 216,000 Instagram photos, 204,000,000 emails and more that are being created every minute continuing to add to this vast number (source: Domo), it's clearer than ever that we're living in a 'content age'.

What is content?

Content is everywhere - from social posts, videos, print magazines, mobile apps and podcasts to product descriptions, pricing information and company credentials. We're presented with hundreds, if not thousands of messages every day, and it's estimated that the average American consumes 15.5 hours of content a day (source: Institute for Communication Technology Management); more time than we spend sleeping (around 8 hours on average), and over three times the amount of time we spend eating (2.55 hours on average each day according to the USDA).

It's no surprise then that businesses are looking at ways to leverage growing content consumption through disciplines such as content marketing. Research from the Content Marketing Institute found that 94% of marketers in the UK have already adopted content marketing, with 64% planning to increase their spend in this area over the coming year.

How is the way we are consuming content changing?

No matter what sector or industry, B2B or B2C, the way that audiences are consuming content is evolving. The shift to online channels as the primary medium for consumption has been taking place for many years (research from Google shows that 90% of content consumption is now screen-based), but businesses are also now facing the challenges raised by multiple device usage. It's now estimated that there will be 1.75 billion smartphone owners within a year with penetration expected to reach half the worldwide population by 2017 (source: eMarketer), and research firm Enders Analysis has reported that in the US mobile apps have recently overtaken PC internet usage for the first time.

It's not just smartphones that are affecting seismic change though. The range and variety of **connected devices** is expanding at a rapid pace to include everything from laptop and desktop computers to TVs, phones and e-readers, with the concept of the Internet of Things extending this group even further to encompass intelligent car dashboards, internet-enabled fridges and much more.

> **Connected devices: devices that have built-in connections to the internet and use those connections to offer content, information or experiences to users"**
> **Mashable**

The way users interact with these devices is often dependent on browsing context and the activity taking place; for example, PC use is often centred on finding information while smartphones and tablets are more frequently used for communication and entertainment. Increased connectivity has also led to a growth in the number of people accessing multiple forms of content simultaneously, and we currently use an average of three different screen combinations every day (source: Sophos).

A large proportion of this multi-screening involves accessing opinion and news via social channels; another major factor affecting the way we consume content. These platforms enable users to curate the content they are most interested in and receive information only from selected sources, increasing the power and prominence of peer validation. According to research firm Forrester, nearly a third of online consumers would trust the opinions given on forums or blogs over traditional branded advertisements and marketing collateral.
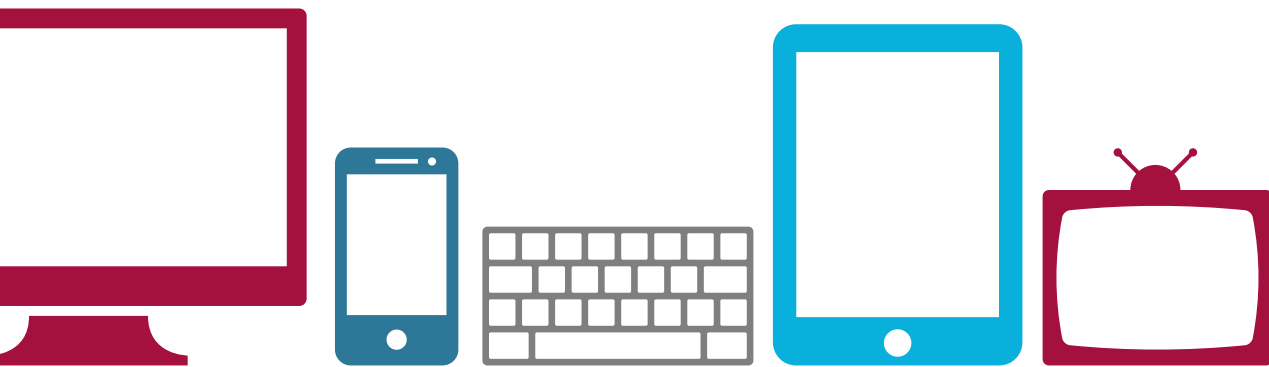
The impact for businesses

What does all of this mean? Essentially, that it is increasingly difficult to get your message heard. With more distractions attention spans are becoming shorter and audiences are increasingly relying on alternative sources of information as opposed to the official channels. While this may seem to threaten more traditional ways of communicating with prospects and customers, it does however present a wealth of opportunity for innovation. In this report we identify eight ways in which you can leverage new trends and technologies to take advantage of changing consumption habits and better connect with your audience in this ever-changing environment.

Personalisation

The shift in power when it comes to consuming content has led users to expect highly tailored experiences from whatever sources they interact with, and it's clear that if organisations want to continue to grab attention in the face of extreme competition they're going to have to identify and react to the preferences, behaviours and needs of their audience. Applying personalisation techniques is an effective way to achieve this, freeing marketers from having to optimise a single website based on the needs of a wide and diverse group of users and instead allowing them to focus on crafting distinct experiences tweaked for specific personas and contexts.

The majority of organisations have recognised the power of personalisation, and a 2014 Econsultancy survey revealed that marketers place it top of their list of priorities for the coming year. With technology in this area becoming increasingly sophisticated it's certain to be a long-term trend, and is expected to remain one of the top three most exciting marketing opportunities for the next five years according to the same survey. While beaten to the top spot by customer experience and multi-channel campaign management, it's clear that these disciplines are all interconnected, as two-thirds of organisations cite improved business performance and customer experience as the main drivers behind personalising the website experience.

However, although the benefits of personalisation are virtually universally recognised (94% of organisations agree that it is critical to current and future success), it's not being embraced so readily in practice, and less than half of companies are currently working on personalising their website experience. This is driven not just by a lack of appropriate technology, time and budget but by insufficient understanding, with 72% of marketers stating that they don't know how to approach the subject.

For organisations that do embark on a personalisation strategy, many begin working with explicit preferences; information provided by the user such as that captured through online forms, subscriptions and dedicated login areas. This form of personalisation can be particularly useful for membership organisations, where delivering added value has become vital as social channels threaten to replace the traditional subscription model. Content can be tailored according to the interests of a particular user and the experience adapted as they progress through membership levels (for example, from student to graduate), creating long-term connections that deliver lasting value.

Beyond the details that come directly from users though, there is a wealth of additional information to be found in analytics that can be used to personalise the experience. Device type is one of the most obvious (and necessary) pieces of information to pay attention to, and it's critical in ensuring that your content is tailored to provide maximum accessibility for your user's particular screen size, resolution, browser and operating system. Knowing what device is being used can also help you deliver the right information based on likely motivations, contexts and constraints, especially when combined with another important piece of contextual information: location.

Multi-national organisations have long leveraged location data to manage specific cultural, legal and economic requirements and reach out to geographically-disparate audiences, but as individuals are now often on the move while interacting with their devices the potential of location-specific experiences is being realised by a wider range of organisations. The leisure and retail sectors in particular have started to drive sales using geographic data, targeting users with discounts and offers via their smartphone when they approach one of their physical stores. As real-time technologies gain momentum this ability to tailor content according to highly specific contextual circumstances will only continue to increase, and we're already seeing organisations use data such as time of day, local events and, in the case of fashion retailer

La Redoute, current weather conditions to inform the content they display.

La Redoute's 'Le Billboard Météo'

To complement explicit and implicit information that helps create an immediate connection with visitors to your site, building a detailed picture of specific users through analysis of past interactions helps organisations further increase relevance by tailoring information on a highly individual basis. Amazon is one of the most notable leaders in this field, generating cross-selling and up-selling opportunities by suggesting additional products based on previous purchase and browsing history, as well as a 'customers also bought' feature that taps into common psychological trends such as social proof and peer validation. Along with additional data such as tasks completed, goals achieved, and information from social networks and other touchpoints, behavioural patterns can also be used to score a user against specific profiles and serve the most relevant content for their particular requirements.

Additionally, alongside providing insight into who a user is, profile information can also help inform where they are in the purchase cycle, enabling organisations to deliver personalised messages that significantly speed up the conversion journey and revive any leads that may have dropped out. This personalisation can begin from the moment a user lands on your site with dedicated landing

pages for different channels and even particular ads and social updates, and continue through to following up with emails and sales calls; carrying the conversation across multiple channels to reach a user with the information they need when and where they need it for sustained interest and engagement. Automating these activities to trigger when certain actions are taken by the user can further streamline the process, enabling you to conduct one-to-one conversations while managing a greater volume of leads at every stage of the pipeline.

Takeaways

- Encourage user action by applying explicit, implicit and contextual personalisation across all touchpoints including

- Make sure your personalisation strategy is aligned with the demographics and behaviours of your audience by conducting thorough research at the outset

- Safeguard the relevance and impact of your communications by maintaining an accurate and up-to-date store of user dataSuccess stories

Technical perspective

- It's been found that data and organisational silos are among the biggest challenges to executing a successful personalisation strategy, but there are many Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems available that connect information from disparate channels in a way that can be easily understood and acted upon. By integrating these solutions with your online content and campaign management tools you can apply automatic personalisation rules for a wide range of attributes including traffic source, location, device, whether the visitor is new or returning, how they've

interacted with your brand in the past, and which persona they best match; helping you build a picture of an individual user over time that enables and needs for increasingly accurate communications and greater return visits, conversions and sales.

2 Video integration

As high-speed internet connections and web-enabled devices become more accessible (fuelled in part by government initiatives such as broadband.gov and BDUK), the audience for rich media content is growing. In particular, video consumption is becoming increasingly popular. Domo estimates that 72 hours of video is uploaded to YouTube every minute, and comScore found that 186.1 million Americans viewed at least one video online during April 2014.

In some cases, this consumption may even be replacing traditional TV viewing and online users globally are now turning to their in-home computers as often as their television sets to consume video content (Nielsen). Mobile video consumption is also on the rise, now accounting for 22% of overall digital video consumption (source: Digiday).

Commercially, videos are especially useful in helping e-commerce businesses demonstrate their products, particularly in the fashion sector where seeing how an item looks in a real-world situation can reassure a customer and encourage them to purchase; something that's been employed successfully by a number of large retailers including ASOS, Zappos and Ice (the latter of whom saw a 400% increase in conversion rates when videos were included on product pages).

Integrating video content can have a marked effect on conversions ›

In a similar way, when focused on delivering valuable information and advice rather than driving a sale, video content can effectively demonstrate capability and knowledge around a specific subject, improving brand awareness while also helping customers solve common problems and driving down support costs.

Don't forget too that video can be highly viral; shared on Facebook 12 times more than textual content, blog posts with videos have also been found to attract 3 times more inbound links (research by M Booth, Simply Measured and SEOmoz). Successful video campaigns can even completely rejuvenate a company's image, as demonstrated by Old Spice who saw sales double after posting "Old Spice Guy" YouTube responses to requests submitted by their social media followers.

Takeaways

- Engage and excite prospects by using video to support other forms of content

- Minimise support costs by finding out what information your users require and delivering it via video – product demos, "how to" answers and complex instructions are all ideal

- Safeguard Increase the effectiveness of mobile channels by better engaging shoppers browsing via these devices with video optimised for popular delivery platforms

Technical perspective

- Adding video content to your website is perhaps the most obvious example of a 'solved problem' in development and organisations are unlikely to ever need to engineer a solution to acquiring, transcoding, hosting and serving large video files when some excellent services already exist to do just that. Some of these services, such as BrightCove, Vimeo and YouTube, also provide another channel through which your content can be consumed; others will help monetise your content with advertisements or by wrapping it inside a paywall.

3 Social channel integration

With over 270,000 tweets sent every minute (source: Domo) and Facebook's user base shooting past the 1bn milestone, social media is big business. For many, these and other social networks are an integral means of communicating, interacting and consuming online; the average user spends over 700 minutes per month on Facebook (source: Blog Herald), and social media overall is now the most popular online activity for American internet users, beating even email to the top spot (source: Business Insider). Social channels are therefore a great place to generate discussion and conversation around your content, aiding lead generation and other critical conversions, with automation solutions available to streamline the process of publishing content to social platforms and support the execution of longer-term nurturing campaigns.

Recommendations from other consumers, however, carry far greater meaning and authority than traditional brand messaging and McKinsey has shown that, as the consumer decision journey evolves, consumer-driven touchpoints (word of mouth, reviews etc.) become much more powerful than those that are company-driven. Sharing tools, online review functionality and integrated social channels can all help leverage the power of brand advocates to increase reach, awareness and sentiment, while forums can be used to connect customers and prospects to provide social proof.

Just as praise on social channels can aid a company's reputation however, so negative sentiment can seriously harm it. Recent research from the Sprout Social Index indicated continuing growth in customer support requests through these channels, with a 48% increase in messages

requiring a response and a 100% increase in inbound messages. Many companies are taking note of this, giving their customer service teams a social presence to help resolve any issues quickly and efficiently. Organisations ranging from Dell and Microsoft through to Nike and Whole Foods use Twitter to provide customers with fast access to advice and guidance, and social teams such as those run by O2, Waterstones and Oreo humanise the company, turning negative and potentially harmful experiences into positive ones through rapid response and the use of humour.

Taking this one step further, social signals can be integrated into existing CRM strategies to help attract new business. With 70% of customer service complaints made on Twitter ignored (source: evolve24), monitoring negative sentiment around competitors or requests for help and support can help reveal opportunities for engagement with potential prospects.

Finally, as social technologies become more sophisticated, the opportunity for businesses to join up their digital channels increases. Social sign-on (SSO) solutions allow users to sign up to websites using an existing social profile, and it's been reported that over 80% of U.S social network users prefer to connect with brands through these channels (source: Gigya). Providing capabilities such as these does not only improve the user experience, helping to increase conversions, but also enhances more traditional forms of content (such as blog posts and press articles) with social conversations and statistics.

Takeaways

- Increase the depth and breadth of your reach by using social channels to provide users with access to a greater range and variety of departments

- Improve user satisfaction by integrating social activity with your other digital channels to provide a consistently positive experience of your brand

Technical perspective

- Integrating with existing social channels can deliver major benefits. You can defer authentication to an existing service for example, thus abstracting your solution from potential security vulnerabilities and providing users with the ease of one-click access and a lack of additional passwords to remember and manage. This authentication can be used for commenting or personalisation, performing activities such as posting on a user's behalf (with their permission of course), or encouraging users to share your content around their social network with a simple click. All the major social networks have well-documented and robust APIs for seamless integration with your project, and many libraries exist to further accelerate development.

Bespoke social networks

Reaching out to existing and potential customers through established social media platforms is a cost-effective way to communicate with a wide user base, but the power of social connections can be leveraged still further through the implementation of a bespoke network or forum that provides you with greater visibility of conversations and increased access to user data, while also enabling tighter control of discussions around your brand.

A dedicated user area is a natural extension of existing online services and functionality such as specialist forums, contests and polls, resource repositories and online networking events can reinforce a sense of community and encourage sign-ups. This is particularly relevant for membership organisations but is by no means limited to this sector. ASOS for example has created a community through their online Marketplace which brings together independent retailers and online shoppers and is supported with blog content, supplier photography and more.

For B2C organisations, a custom social network increases engagement with the brand, as well as providing a valuable new revenue stream. This approach works especially well when users may not be being served by existing social networks, as seen in the success of Disney's "Club Penguin". A social network aimed at children, Club Penguin offers access to lessons and games for a small monthly subscription fee, with additional revenue coming from merchandising deals. It also provides a direct line through which to deliver branded messaging to a huge audience; the network has over 200 million user accounts and its newsletter has a larger readership than that of the New York Times.

200 Million

Custom social networks also foster a sense of community and increase brand loyalty for businesses not using subscriptions to generate profit. Take tool retailers Kreg for example – they created an online community to connect users of their products across the world, attracted 35,000 members and generated a mass of content demonstrating the capabilities of Kreg tools, as well as providing information that reduces demands on their traditional customer service channels.

Sites such as American Express' Open Forum are proof too that successful online communities can be built without requiring interactive networking capabilities, instead leveraging a wealth of original content (created by both in-house writers and publishing partners) to provide information that is of value to their target audience while reinforcing the skills and expertise of the brand. Through its forum American Express has reinforced its reputation as a publisher as well as a service provider, with many organisations following suit and incorporating high-quality content into dedicated online resources in order to succeed against a mass of competition by establishing authority and thought leadership.

Takeaways

- Encourage customer loyalty within niche sectors and highly targeted audiences with a bespoke social network that provides personalised, relevant information as well as access to subject experts

- Deliver business efficiencies and drive down costs by equipping members with self-management tools for a connected and sustainable community

- Boost return visits and encourage users to stay on your site for longer by supporting your network with high quality, original and up-to-date content

Technical perspective

- Moving away from existing social networks, it can be highly desirable to have a community that is completely aligned with your brand. Although establishing, maintaining and growing this kind of community requires an investment of time and effort, tools such as SocialEngine can help with delivering niche content and providing access to subject experts. It's important to note that scaling social networks is a very complex task and, if not managed correctly, can be a painful experience (seen in the experiences of both Facebook and Twitter). Make sure to plan carefully and be realistic about the demand and ambition of your network, as this will have huge implications for which tools and libraries can be used to accelerate development.

5

Second screen experiences

Multi-tasking and simultaneous usage of devices is now commonplace, with TV consumption one of the areas most affected. A recent AdReaction survey revealed that a third of daily screen time is spent using more than one screen, and 84% of people also report to have accessed content via the TV and their smartphone or tablet at the same time (source: Nielsen).

> ## Simultaneous usage: using more than one device at the same time for either a related or an unrelated activity
>
> **Google**

The reasons for this vary and while 22% of simultaneous usage is 'stacking', or using multiple devices for different activities (source: Millward Brown), searching out facts and opinion about television content plays a significant role in simultaneous consumption, with 41% of tablet owners and 29% of smartphone owners reporting to do so while watching TV. This trend of using a second screen to enhance their existing media experience offers numerous opportunities for relevant businesses to increase engagement with their audiences; 'second screen' apps such as Zeebox, IntoNow and Dish are responses to this, offering instant access to a wealth of programme information through a single application. These apps also provide visitors with a direct line to social conversations, opinion from across the web, and interactive features such as polls and quizzes that enhance the viewing experience.

Second screen apps can be used to enhance viewing experiences, connecting users online ›

zeebox
The best thing to happen to TV since TV

INTO_NOW

dish

Some media publishers have gone even further, creating dedicated second-screen experiences that complement their main television content. Red Bull for example, famous for their innovative marketing campaigns, created an augmented-reality app for viewers of the "Supernatural" snowboarding competition that allowed viewers to access exclusive first-person perspective content, resulting in 130% video viewership (meaning many users accessed more than one of their online videos).

Also prominent in the second screen market are game shows, with programmes such as The Million Pound Drop, Only Connect and Red or Black offering the option for viewers to play along in real-time. Not only does this help increase awareness, engagement and conversation around a show, but at a time when PVRs (Personal Video Recorders, such as Sky+ and YouView) and catch-up services are driving viewers away from watching live broadcasts these games provide a reason to tune in to the full programme as it's being shown, helping revive the reach and revenue of advertising.

For companies not directly involved in the media there are still ways that second screens can be used to drive results. 41% of smartphone and tablet owners have been directly encouraged to browse for products online after seeing them in a programme or advert and nearly a third have made a purchase afterward (data from eDigital Research and IMRG), presenting great opportunities for organisations to invest in dedicated micro sites, optimised for mobile devices, that complement more traditional forms of advertising and take advantage of spur of the moment purchases and other spontaneous activity.

Takeaways

- Retain traffic, loyalty and awareness by linking up your brand's experience across channels

- Increase engagement and get people talking about your brand across a range of platforms with digital products and services that complement and extend traditional media
- Create a sense of excitement around your offering by using new techniques and technologies in your app development programme for greater ease-of-use, interactivity and immersion

Technical perspective

- Second screen experiences fall into two main camps. Tools facilitating active-passive relationships (such as TV remotes) provide controls and additional information, but truly active-active experiences add a level of interaction previously unseen in media consumption. Video gaming is leading the way with this technology, from the Wii-U GamePad's usage of maps to advanced racing simulators that use tablets as telemetry control. Improvements in home networks and the proliferation of smartphone and tablet devices further enable developers to create synchronised experiences from pushing content and links to additional devices to immersive experiences dependent on the manipulation of multiple input streams, and the success of these brands currently taking advantage of second screens will ultimately shape how quickly and to what level we integrate them with other media.

6 Multi-channel experiences

Along with the growing trend for simultaneous usage users are also increasingly moving between devices to accomplish a single goal. Known as sequential screening, Mobi has found that 90% of users employ multiple screens in this fashion, and the prevalence of this behaviour makes it not just an interesting consideration for businesses, but a vital means of driving conversions.

> ❝ **Sequential screening: moving from one device to another at different times to accomplish a task"**
> **Google**

Sequential screening is particularly relevant to those in the retail sector, where seamlessly guiding customers through the purchase process regardless of the number or variety of devices being used is of paramount importance. Ensuring simple, high-impact design and clear, easily accessible information means that visitors are quickly led to the content they want, while streamlined payment processes or "one-click" systems remove barriers to purchase.

These considerations have already been recognised by the 75% of top UK retailers that have optimised their websites for mobile (source: Skava), though of course launching a site is by no means the end of the story. Continuous improvement, facilitated by data analytics and A/B or multivariate testing, is essential to maintain relevance and respond to changing user needs and expectations.

Outside of retail, it's worth noting that 65% of sequential journeys searching for information begin via a smartphone. The integral nature of mobile technologies to conversion journeys has been felt all the way up to the C-Suite, with 94% of CMOs across all industries reporting to IBM that they plan to invest significantly in this area over the next three to five years; most likely driven by a

growth in mobile audience, the evolution of mobile technologies and increasingly sophisticated mobile solutions such as responsive, adaptive and liquid frameworks that detect the device being used and tailor the content, design and layout accordingly.

However, it cannot be assumed that users will take a linear path through the conversion journey and as such strategies need to allow the user to move seamlessly back and forth across distinct platforms. Personalised accounts enable activity to be saved between sessions, and wireless connections allow the automatic sync and update of progress between devices (seen, for example, in Amazon's Kindle e-readers and smartphone applications).

Wireless technology can also be used to connect on and offline activity. John Lewis for example has introduced customer wi-fi into their stores to encourage price comparisons and enable shoppers to access the retailer's mobile site, helping generate triple-digit growth of traffic and revenue from mobile and tablet devices while also increasing dwell time in the store's catering facilities. Further technological advances, such as Near Field Communication (NFC) and iBeacons, where users can receive download data remotely from offline sources, also support the joining up of disparate marketing channels, providing improved conversion tracking capabilities and supporting enhanced personalisation of content.

With so many ways to connect with users, the issue of unification has become integral to a successful multi-channel marketing strategy. Perceptions of digital marketing (and the notion of "digital" in general) have started to shift, and Forrester suggests that marketing budgets should now be organised around consumer segments, with businesses moving away from an approach that sees each channel as a defined and siloed entity and instead more accurately reflecting how the customer experiences the brand in reality.

Takeaways

- Reach a larger and more engaged audience by enabling users to undertake tasks where and when they want to, using their preferred devices

- Delight users and increase conversions by delivering an exceptional user experience across all devices

- Unify marketing activity with a flexible strategy that enables your organisation to take advantage of the latest technologies and trends

Technical perspective

- Time is running out for single-channel experiences and the numbers make a highly compelling case for businesses to acknowledge and support the increasing variety of methods their customers are using to interact with them. Removing barriers between different devices is the first and best way of helping an audience with diverse habits to fully engage and a single, shared sign-on incorporating wish lists, carts and history will allow a user to flit easily between smartphone and desktop. Combining the portability of smartphones and their in-built cameras and barcode scanners with the large real estate of tablet and desktop machines also means that a synchronised cross-device shopping experience can be created using simple messaging technology.

Monetised content

An enduring debate surrounding digital content, particularly within the publishing sector, has been that of whether it can be monetised successfully. Audiences have become used to a vast amount of free news, literature, video and music online; however, there are signs that public attitudes are changing. Research from Reuters found that more and more people are signing up for digital news subscriptions over one-off payments, and paid content revenue from the US is currently reported to be over $7.5bn (source: Statista). For businesses looking to capitalise on this growing market, there are many approaches that offer competitive advantage as well as financial gain.

£7.5 Billion

One of the best known and most popular monetisation models is the paywall; functionality that requires payment from users before content can be displayed. While initial reaction to this model was largely pessimistic, results have exceeded the expectations of many. For example, 60% of the Financial Times' subscribers now pay for the newspaper's digital version (source: Business Week), and it's estimated that soon over 40% of US dailies will have a paywall in place (source: Newsonomics). For these and many other media producers, a paywall not only provides a new, measurable revenue stream, but also results in a more engaged, motivated and loyal audience.

> **Both the New York Times and Financial Times are proving successful in monetising online content**

The New York Times

FINANCIAL TIMES

However, just as the growth of content marketing is forcing businesses to invest in quality, the success of paid content is reliant on its ability to deliver value. Many leading research bodies such as Forrester, McKinsey and

Gartner charge a fee to download their reports while others request payment in the form of information (requesting email or other contact details before releasing access). As the amount of content online consumers are exposed to becomes increasingly overwhelming, charging for well-researched and insightful long-form content benefits both the business (through revenue or lead generation) and the audience (through driving up the quality of content available as companies strive to stay ahead of the competition).

The concept of value must extend beyond the information being communicated though, to include an exceptional user experience that matches the seamless and intuitive nature of offline consumption and integrates functionality that enhances immersion and interaction. Titles such as Elle are leading the way in this area, supporting the high-quality imagery and articles of their print editions with video and interactive features only available to subscribers. The growth of tablet sales, predicted by Gartner to soon reach over 320 million worldwide, offers a valuable sector to target in this regard; tablet users are, for example, around twice as likely to pay for online news as the general population (source: Pew Research Institute).

As user behaviour and technology continues to evolve, many companies have started to experiment with alternatives to the paywall approach to find other sustainable and future-proofed solutions. For example, offering content or services for free but reserving certain features solely for paid subscriptions (known as the freemium model) is something that's been adopted by music streaming service Spotify who offer paid users an ad-free service for a monthly subscription, with around 10 million users (a quarter of their total user base) paying for content. The New York Times too supports their paywall with free content, allowing users to read 10 articles a month before prompting them to subscribe.

The freemium model has also been embraced by many businesses providing online SaaS tools, who have split their offering into several packages to enable users to

subscribe to a basic option for free. By providing a taster of key features and functionality and demonstrating the value of their service, they can increase conversion rates and encourage valuable word-of-mouth recommendations. Business management tools such as HootSuite, SurveyMonkey and KISSInsights, for example, all offer free versions of their software, with the paid packages providing access to unlimited users, usage, accounts or similar.

Others have gone further again in search of new revenue streams. The band Radiohead responded to increasing music piracy by releasing their 2007 album "In Rainbows" online using an honesty box system where users were able to pay what they wanted to access the content. While the success of the project has been questioned (the average price per download was estimated at $2.26), the album generated more digital income than all previous Radiohead albums put together, showing the potential value in exploring new models, especially in sectors where digital advances have traditionally been seen as a threat.

Takeaways

- Generate new sources of revenue by targeting valuable audiences, such as the tablet market, with paid content and applications

- Maximise uptake for your particular industry and audience by exploring alternatives to traditional subscriptions

- Increase sign-ups and retain readers by ensuring all paid content is of the highest quality

Technical perspective

- Monetising your content means creating some form of barrier between your visitors and your site or application and instantly adds complexity by requiring the management of user accounts, payment mechanisms, subscription handling, notifications, security and a host of other attributes.

- You can mitigate some of this by migrating your content to an established e-commerce or subscription platform, however bolting on these tools is not an insignificant task itself, particularly if the content is of great value to your business. Moving premium content to a different service, such as video hosted on Cleeng, can be a non-disruptive first step to discovering whether your market will bear the switch to paid content.

New use cases

The marketing mix has been in a state of flux for many years, fuelled in large part by an evolving buying journey that has seen users become less likely to respond to traditional marketing messages. The rise of new technologies is, however, providing businesses with new opportunities to connect with users by offering up useful information and services in original and interesting ways that encourage active, rather than passive, consumption. McKinsey advocates investment in these "consumer-driven marketing vehicles" that enable people to easily learn about your product and interact with your brand, and 37% of North America-based B2C marketers consider branded content tools to be an effective form of marketing (Content Marketing Institute).

Leveraging these branded tools for business benefit can be done in a variety of ways, depending on the audience being targeted and the ultimate goal of the campaign. Games, for example, drive engagement and reinforce brand identity, well demonstrated by Coca Cola's "Crabs and Penguins".

Coca Cola's Crabs and Penguins is just one example of how gamification can reinforce brand identity ›

©2012 The Coca-Cola Company

"Coke makes moments of happiness, and this game is just a virtual version of that", says Head of Content, Stafford Green, but with the game achieving over 250,000 downloads within weeks of its launch, there has also clearly been a real impact on public consciousness of the brand.

For more considered purchases and particularly the B2B sector, informational tools can also be effective. Take for example budget or finance calculators that offer the ability to connect with users before they have decided upon a specific product or service. By providing users with information that is relevant to their needs, and minimising sales messaging, businesses can establish themselves as a subject authority and ensure they are at the front of their prospects' minds when they do start considering a purchase.

Branded content tools also offer an ideal opportunity to take advantage of innovative new technology and create buzz around campaigns, generating lots of social shares and positioning brands as industry leaders. IKEA's use of augmented reality to complement their print catalogues (visualising furniture in 3D through smartphones) is just one great example, alongside campaigns such as British Airways' "Olympics – Home Advantage" which incorporate video and personalisation for deeper engagement. Coca Cola, too, has been a leading force in this area; for example utilising the motion-detection capability of mobile phones alongside QR codes, SMS activation and social media in their "My Beatmaker" app to allow users to create and share their own beats.

Takeaways

- Encourage active consumption of your content through branded apps that target your users' desire for related information and services

- Establish yourself as a subject authority in the minds of your consumers by ensuring that your application serves their needs and demands but does not explicitly sell

- Enhance the user experience by integrating advanced features and functionality that increase engagement, satisfaction and usability

Technical perspective

- The future of content shouldn't be dictated by the future of software, but there may be clues in the direction of its development that expose opportunities for the astute. An entrepreneurial boom enabled by cloud services (which remove barriers to scaling from the outset) is to be expected and means that a mass global audience is no longer something to fear but to embrace. It is those who take advantage of changes to the technological landscape that will ultimately have the greatest success.

Conclusion

While the importance of content has been recognised for decades, the growing volume of information available, increasingly fragmented consumption habits and ever more complex and sophisticated aggregation tools have made it essential to ensuring success in today's online landscape.

This white paper has looked at some of the ways in which organisations can leverage new trends and technologies to improve their connection with audiences, but the scope for innovation and differentiation is virtually limitless, with powerful new tools coming to market every day.

It's detailed research and requirements gathering therefore that is key to understanding audience needs and business objectives and matching these to the opportunities available. Armed with this information at the start of your project you're in a powerful position to be able to define a digital strategy that ensures every aspect of content creation, implementation and delivery is correctly aligned for long-term, measurable results.

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