Developing a Content Strategy

A PR PLACE GUIDE

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About this guide

In this guide, we explain what a content strategy is, and why it's an important part of producing effective content. This guide is designed to help you evaluate where your organisation is now, where it wants to be, and which content will help it get there. At the end, we include a brief outline of how to put a content strategy into action – we plan to cover the topic comprehensively in our next guide Content marketing – a guide to executing content strategy.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS CONTENT STRATEGY?

Organisations have always had the ability to communicate. However, the web – and the growth of social media – have changed the way in which they do so. Customers now expect to find brands on the social channels and digital devices they use. Here, there's a demand for 'content': written, photographic or video material that's platform appropriate. Videos for YouTube, for example, or short text updates for Twitter. And while it's fairly easy to produce or curate content on any channel you like, doing so without a plan will usually lead to disappointing results.

Enter content strategy. Put simply, content strategy is a plan for the content an organisation will publish or distribute. A good content strategy defines goals for the content, and the metrics by which they'll be tracked. It defines the target audience, where to find it, and how best to engage its members with the brand and its proposition.
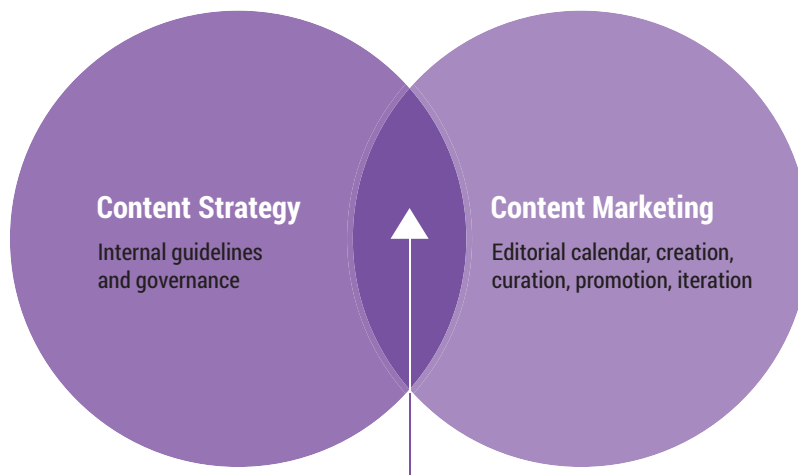
Why do you need a content strategy?

Content strategy is critical to the success of your content activities. Producing quality content is resource intensive and can be expensive. The content strategy helps ensure that communications are focused and effective. Written with an awareness of search engine optimisation (SEO) and other digital marketing techniques, the content strategy helps you leverage content to attract and engage people with the brand and ensure a return on your investment in content activity.

Creating and implementing a content strategy will help you create content that will engage your audience. This is particularly important when applied to content marketing, the discipline of applying a content strategy to help achieve your marketing objectives.

Content strategy vs. content marketing

It's important to stress that content strategy and content marketing refer to two interdependent, but separate disciplines. While content strategy is building a plan for the how and why of the content you'll produce, content marketing will be one of the major tactics you use to implement your strategy. In other words, content strategy is figuring out what you want your content to achieve, and content marketing is the expression of this in your marketing and communications.

Content Strategy
Internal guidelines and governance

Content Marketing
Editorial calendar, creation, curation, promotion, iteration

Content Marketing Strategy (overlap area):

Vision, goals, audience research, voice and style, ideation, external governance

Figure 1 What is the difference between content strategy and content marketing, Moz

https://moz.com/beginners-guide-to-content-marketing/content-strategy

In content marketing, a larger, engaged audience translates into more web traffic, more interest, and a greater number of leads. In research by content marketing platform Semrush, 83% of respondents measured the success of their content campaigns by improvements in organic (i.e. not paid) search traffic. Two thirds (66%) measured lead generation, and more than half (53%) looked for a higher conversion rate.[1]

Content marketing can be particularly effective in generating awareness, and sustaining and informing consideration as individuals travel down the marketing funnel. In the Semrush study[2], 69% of respondents were focusing their content marketing on the top of the funnel, with 43% targeting, or also targeting the middle.
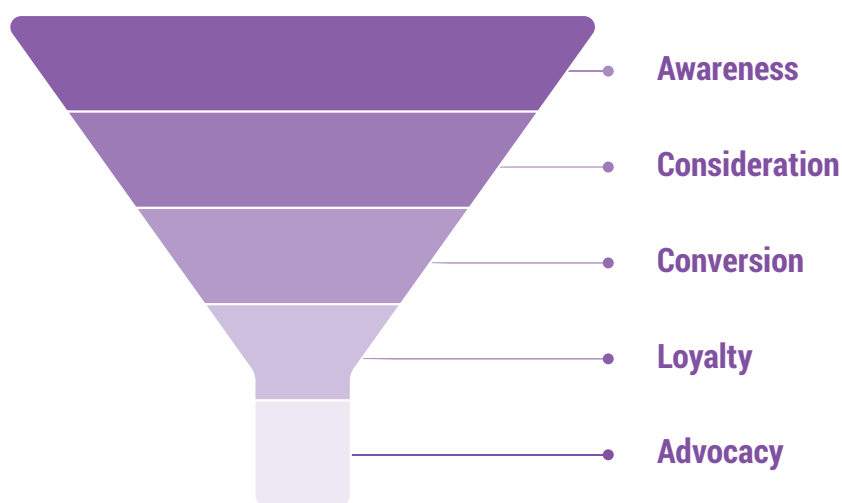

Awareness

Consideration

Conversion

Loyalty

Advocacy

Figure 2 The marketing funnel showing buyer decision stages.

Defining a content strategy is essential to content marketing success. It's perhaps surprising, then, that according to research by the Content Marketing Institute (CMI), only 43% of business-to-business (B2B) marketers[3] and 42% of business-to-customer (B2C) marketers[4] have a documented content strategy.

How, then, do you create and document the best strategy for your business?

DEFINING THE FUTURE

Where are you going?

A content strategy is about the future – what you want to achieve, and how you'll use content to do it – so the starting point in any strategy is to look at where you want to be. Begin with your medium-term organisational goals, covering perhaps the next four or five years. Your content strategy is a plan to help you achieve these goals through content, so let them provide the focus and reason for everything you'll do.

From the start, include internal stakeholders in the process. Talking to any marketing, comms, product and creative resources in your organisation will help you understand where you need to be and how to get there. It will also highlight any current problems you'll need to overcome on the way.

Who is your audience?

With the organisational vision in mind, it's important to research and define your target audience. Profile potential and existing customers to identify the demographics of the people you want to engage with. How old are they? What's their gender? Where do they live, and which sites and apps do they use on the web?

Talk to existing customers to discover more about what drives them, what they need, and how they usually find their information and resources. What are the obstacles they face when trying to find or access content, either from you, or more generally on the web?

Use your understanding of the audience to develop personas, or refine any existing ones. Personas help segment your target audience and keep your messaging focused. At their best, each is a sketch of a distinct segment of your target market.

The best personas skip the fluff, such as how many kids or dogs customers have. They do include a job role, the platforms on which the persona consumes content, and some details about how they fit into the buying process – are they a decision maker, or do they influence the decision makers? Personas are an opportunity to list common use cases, pain points and 'choice factors' for your industry – you can target these with your content.

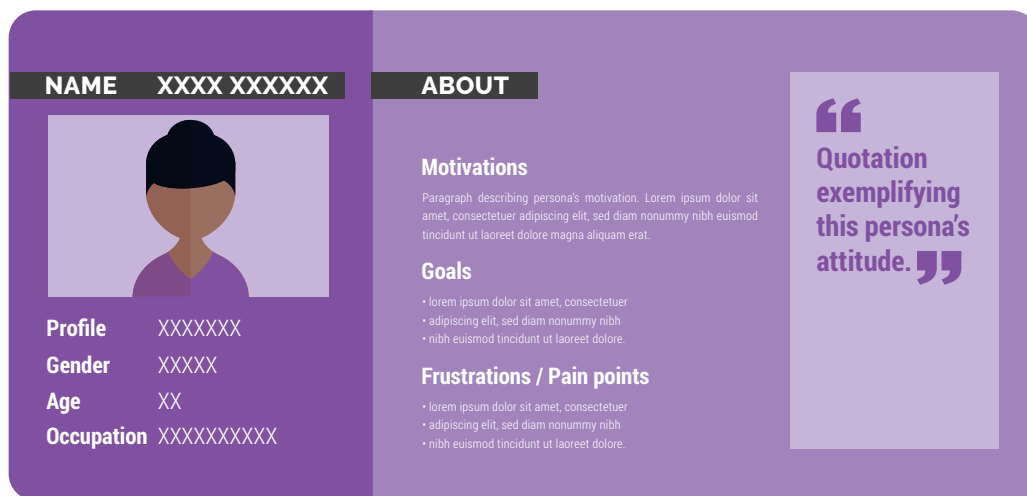| NAME	XXXX XXXXXX	ABOUT	
		Motivations	

Figure 3 An example persona template

What do you offer?

With an understanding of your audience, you can identify how you fit in. Evaluate what you offer against the pain points you've identified, and use this to define the problems you solve. If you offer contract-free broadband in an industry dominated by 18-month lock-ins, that's a key message for your content.

You can strengthen your messaging by identifying why you're the best, or at least a leader. Perhaps you're the cheapest, or you can point to high customer-satisfaction or review scores. Maybe you have industry-leading customer retention. Perhaps you're simply unique – your content strategy should reflect this.

Consider also the type of content you can offer. Does your expertise lend itself to explainer videos, for example? Have you got exciting products to demonstrate, or thought-leaders eager to post monthly blog posts?

What's your brand story?

Storytelling is one of the most effective approaches to content marketing, and the brand history, ideals or ethos are often a rich source. If you don't already have a brand story, look at what you offer and what existing customers think of you, and begin to build a narrative. This might tell the story of your founders, and why they chose to start the business.

'In the beginning I looked around and could not find quite the car I dreamed of. So I decided to build it myself.'

Ferdinand Porsche[5]

Alternatively, it might be a brand personality or attitude, or an issue with which the brand is strongly associated. These might evolve with the brand, but they should always be sincere and demonstrable.

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'Anything that's fake; consumers can smell it in three seconds. Everything has to be authentic. People have to feel it. It has to be real.'

Wyclef Jean[6]
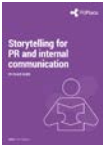
For more on storytelling see our **PR Place Guide to Storytelling**

Examine the customer journey

When planning the content you need, it's useful to know where it comes on the journey your customers take with the organisation. That means understanding which content attracts people and raises awareness, and which content types and formats help move people further down the funnel toward a purchase – hopefully arriving at delight or advocacy. It's important to refer to your research to understand customers' behaviour and their information needs at each stage of their journey.

See, Think, Do, Care

When defining your audience and considering its needs, it can be helpful to apply the 'See, Think, Do, Care' framework proposed by Avinash Kaushik[7]. Here, Kaushik suggests that during the consideration stage, audiences can be segmented into those who use products or services like yours (see), those who are thinking they need to buy such a service (think), and those who need to do so right now (do).

Ask what content will appeal to people, solve their problems or overcome any hesitation at each stage. Don't overlook your current customers – the 'care' segment. Create content to delight them, and encourage their engagement.
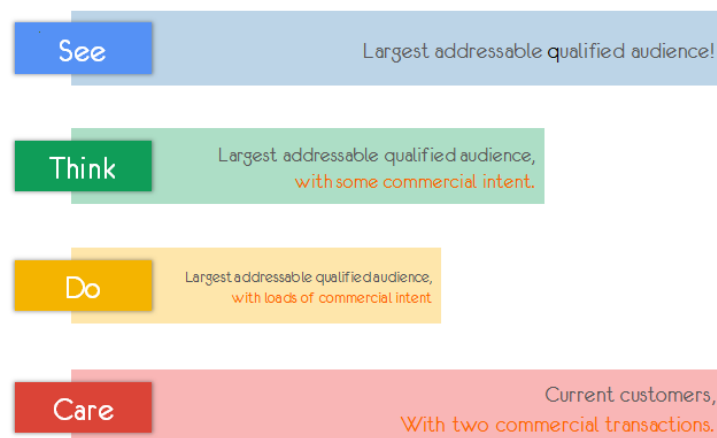

Figure 4 The See Think Do Care model by Avinash Kaushik

https://www.kaushik.net/avinash/see-think-do-care-win-content-marketing-measurement/

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CASE STUDY – PR ACADEMY

When rebuilding our website in 2019 we used the See Think Do Care model to map out the needs of our audience at each stage of the buying cycle. We analysed all our existing web content against these needs. We identified that there was a lack of information to help people make their final choice in whether to study for a professional qualification. So, we created a **'How it Works'** section on our website. We're now able to use this content in our email marketing to help people who are interested in studying for a professional qualification with us.

WWW

WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

By now, you should have a clear picture of why you're producing content, who it's for, and what you're hoping it will achieve. Now It's time to cast a critical eye over what you already have.

The content audit

Auditing your existing content is a crucial part of building any new content strategy – and a guide in itself! Your existing content – and how well it has performed – is your best source of information about what works with your current audience. It's also a big resource of material that you could update, repackage or resurface, helping you get greater value from the investments you've already made.

Content audits usually focus on the material on your own website, including all your web pages. Blog and news posts can date quickly, however, and auditing is time-consuming, so it's best to only include those from the most recent 2-3 years. It's a good idea to find and include all high-performing posts – those which are widely viewed or shared, or which rank well in search.

How to do a content audit

You can find templates and tools to help you with the content audit process. For example, Hubspot offers a free, SEO-focused audit kit[8], while SEMrush has a (paid) content audit tool[9]. Whether you're using a kit, or starting from scratch, your output should be a spreadsheet of content URLs, titles and details, to which you can easily add further columns and information.

It's important to categorise content by type, such as 'landing page', or 'blog post', and include top-level details such as a word count, and whether there are images or video. Evaluate where each piece of content sits in the marketing funnel – note whether it raises awareness, or might encourage consideration or conversion.

Ideally, you should record key SEO factors such as whether the page or post has a meta description. It can be helpful to install an SEO plugin such as Yoast (if you are using WordPress), and include its SEO and readability ratings, too. Gather data on post and page performance, and add it to your spreadsheet. Add in pageview metrics from your CMS or Google Analytics, and include the content's social performance – for example the total number of shares or positive sentiments (likes, loves etc.) on Facebook.

While content audits don't typically include social network content itself, if possible you should conduct mini audits on your social channels. Evaluate the types of posts you create, and where they fall in the marketing funnel. Include metrics on reach, shares, positive engagements and so on.

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What's working?

Analysing the audit data will help you understand your strongest content, ideas and formats. Filter the data to look for patterns in your best and worst performing posts – do they share a common length or structure? Do they all contain video? Are they all on the same topic, or by the same author?

Don't just consider pageviews as the measure of success. Look for content with a low bounce rate, or a long dwell time, and compare it to weaker examples to see why it was 'stickier'. If you have previously defined content goals or objectives, perform a gap analysis to establish the areas where you're falling short.

Jargon buster

- **Bounce rate** – the proportion of visitors to a site who leave the site after viewing only one page
- **Dwell time –** the time visitors spend on a page

With analysis, you should be able to identify the content that most appeals to your audience. You're likely to also find underperforming content that could be adapted for greater success. Look, too, at the content you've produced for different parts of the funnel – is any stage underrepresented, or served by particularly weak content?

What's needed?

Creating the most effective content means understanding what your target audience wants or needs. From an SEO perspective, it means knowing what they search for, and making sure you're delivering good quality content that targets their search terms and satisfies their interests.

Your business, and your earlier research, should help you understand your audience's interests. SEO keyword research will help you understand what they're searching for. Multiple free tools are available to discover and compare search volumes for related terms. Google's Keyword Planner[10] is an obvious, free example, while Google Trends[11] provides insight on keyword performance over time.
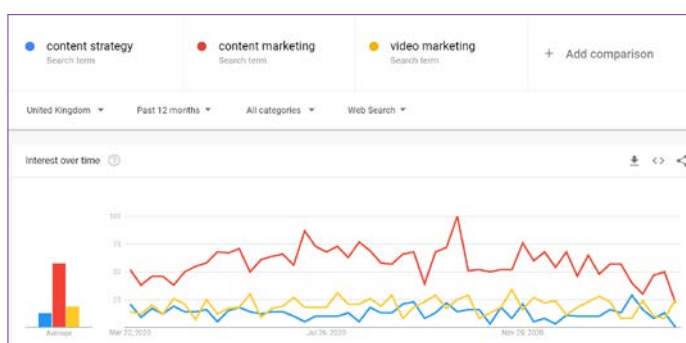
See our **Guide to Digital PR** for more on advice SEO.

Figure 5 Google Trends data for the keywords 'content strategy', 'content marketing' and 'video marketing' over the past 12 months.

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What's the competition?

For most organisations, there's already a competitor out there creating better content. It's important to find successful examples in your sector, and take time to analyse what they're doing right and where you might be able to compete.

Evaluate the topics successful competitors cover, and how they're covering them. For example, perhaps they produce explainer videos, or have an industry podcast. Try to identify not just what you like, but the elements that make content successful.

It's equally important to understand what's missing, and research whether there's a market for it. For example, if you're a mortgage provider and nobody's produced a jargon buster, check whether anyone is searching for it.

What resources do we have?

By this point you should have a clear picture of where you stand, where you're falling short, and your opportunities to create success with content. It's time to filter this against the resources you have available. It may be that you have a content team, or that you've previously produced ad-hoc content, leaning on whoever was available to help. During your research, you may also have identified weaknesses in your content management system (CMS), or other key tools or processes.

You'll need dedicated resources to put your content strategy into action. This usually means having at least one person for whom content planning and marketing is a core job responsibility. You should also consider:

- **Expertise** – you've industry expertise and opinions, but do you have the writing/photography/video talent?

- **Equipment –** do you have the video, audio or photographic equipment you need? Do you have a quiet, clean environment in which to shoot or record?

- **Software** – do you need a new CMS? Do you need help migrating from the old one? What about audio and video production tools?

- **Do you have the budget?** Be realistic about what you can afford. You could demonstrate potential return on investment with a limited trial of your strategy.

Content production needn't be done entirely in house. Content Marketing Institute (CMI) research found that half (49%) of B2C marketers outsource at least one content marketing activity[12].

Setting goals

With an understanding of your current content, where it falls short, and which resources you have, you can set goals for your content strategy. These should be measurable and realistic – you won't rank on the first page of Google for 'book flights' based on content alone. Set a reasonable number of achievable goals and specify a timeframe. Examples might be:

- Create and publish explainer videos for the company's products within six months

- Write and publish blog posts addressing key pain points within three months

- Reduce bounce rate and increase dwell time for selected content, within three months.

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CONTENT IDEATION

While the content audit is typically hard and methodical work, it provides the insight you need to begin the fun part: coming up with content ideas. While you'll no doubt have many good ones yourself, it's important to involve others as soon as possible.

Gather your content team and any engaged stakeholders into brainstorming groups no bigger than six people. Give each a short outline of your audience, and the content areas you hope to address, and encourage them to come up with as many creative ideas as possible. Brainstorming will deliver a wealth of strong ideas – and some terrible ones. It's important to capture everything – video the sessions, photograph any sketches, and note down every idea.

It's also important to think laterally, particularly if you're looking for a new approach in a saturated niche. If you're a micro-brewer, for example, could you demonstrate the quality of your product by highlighting your suppliers' expertise? You might video or photograph their work, and include insights into the history of their craft alongside your own. If you can't innovate with your subject, perhaps you can with your treatment of it.

Review your existing content. Are there good pages or posts that didn't break through? Could you improve or update them, or reformat them – for example by breaking up a long brand history into multiple chapters? Could you amplify evergreen content by updating it and re-sharing?

Content ideas and the buying cycle

Once you've created and captured content ideas, it's useful to sort them. This might mean creating a new spreadsheet, listing ideas against their format (video, blog etc), and other factors such as whether they're new content or rewrites, and the channel(s) where you'll publish them.

In each case, consider content ideas against where they fall in the buying cycle. Generally speaking you'll raise awareness through content that ranks highly in search or paid ads. Brilliantly shareable content – funny, original or very high quality – could also be remarkably effective, but only if you have the right idea and can do it justice.

Content can be particularly effective during the consideration phase or, to return to the See, Think, Care, Do model, the 'think' group. This audience usually has a huge appetite for content that explains your products and services, or your brand history or ethos. They may be reassured by stories that highlight ethical practices, product quality or staff expertise. Explainers, day-in-the-life videos or 'supplier focus' articles may all help deepen your audience's engagement. If all your content is 'awareness' content, you'll struggle to get a return on investment from your content activity.

You can support people to convert by creating content that offers reassurance, or answers key questions, such as 'do you offer free returns?' or 'can I cancel at any time?'. Don't overlook seasonal or event-based ideas, for example to announce or support sales activities around Black Friday or Christmas.

Finally, consider your advocates, or the customers who 'care'. Here, the goal is to sustain interest and engagement using 'deeper dives', teasers, or early access to new products. People in this group are likely to see and share content that reaffirms their faith in your brand. If somebody is riding one of your bikes around the world, this group will love the story, and play a key role in helping spread it.

MEASUREMENT, GOVERNANCE AND WORKFLOW

Content production is a creative process, but it works most efficiently when there are clear rules, workflows and hierarchies. Defining these is a key step in putting any content plan into action, and for this reason they may often form part of the content strategy.
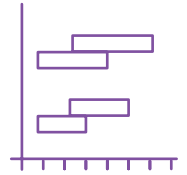
Brand guidelines

The most powerful and valuable brands rely on careful control of messaging content and tone throughout the organisation. This is especially important in content creation, where a mis-step can erode fundamental brand values such as trustworthiness or quality. Ensure all content creators have the correct logos, straplines and pre-defined copy blocks for your brand. If you have a brand book, the content team needs it for reference.

It's especially important to define your brand tone of voice, which usually reflects a balance between the audience you want to address, and the attitude you want to convey. Whether you're a start-up with attitude, or an established brand with a reputation for no-nonsense reliability, the brand tone needs to appeal to the right market, and reinforce your identity.

Written content must follow a consistent style: British English spellings, for example. Where there are multiple writers and creators it's especially important to formalise this with an in-house style guide. Your style guides could include a short note on the target audience, a description and examples of the brand tone, and a limited number of fundamental rules on style.

Get in the workflow

Efficient content production relies on clearly defined workflows, in which work is created, iterated, polished and approved. All content needs to be edited or reviewed by someone with the appropriate experience, who needs to check it against the brand guidelines and the brief.

This can be achieved in many ways. In a small team it might mean two experienced writers, checking each other's work. In larger teams there may be a hierarchical flow of content from writers up to editors and managers. It's important to keep technical and legal requirements in mind: workflows need to support supplementary jobs such as sourcing and licensing images or gaining compliance approval.

Tools for the job

The content strategy should consider the software needs of content production and publishing. These include your own CMS, but potentially also tools to simplify the upload, publishing or tracking of social content. Office software and any asset management systems need to support iterative processes where content may undergo multiple revisions. Ideally that means features like version management, change tracking and in-line commenting.

Managing content production across multiple team members, freelancers and channels can become challenging, so teams need support with production or project tracking tools. For example, some editorial teams use the Trello list-making app to manage content through key steps, such as ideation, briefing, creation, editing, approval and publishing. At PR Academy we use Airtable for our content calendar and task tracking. It is an essential tool for keeping our content activity on track and managing our remote team.
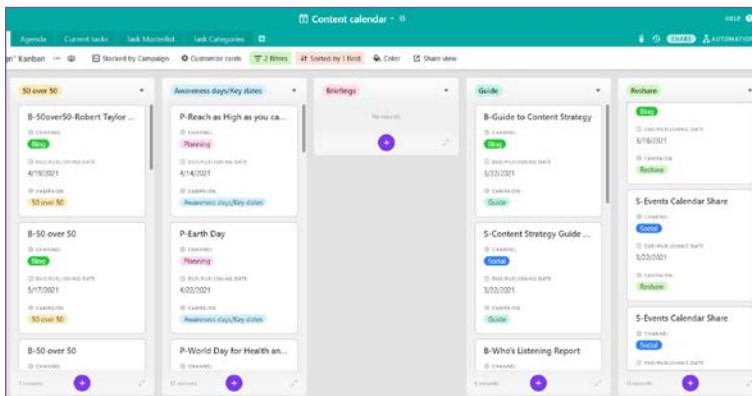
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Figure 6 PR Academy **Airtable** content calendar example – Kanban view. Airtable allows you to view your content data in various formats – calendar, 'kanban' view, task view etc.

While brainstorming sessions have always been important to content creation, the post-Covid world demands tools to support collaborative working between colleagues who can't meet in person. Online workspaces such as Microsoft Teams, and video calling apps such as Zoom, can be an invaluable way to support flexible working patterns or bring freelancers up to speed.

Measurement

Finally, you'll need to define how you'll analyse the success of your content, and how you'll measure it. Return to the goals you've set out, and work out which metrics will tell you how well you're achieving them.

The options are likely to break down into traffic metrics, such as page visits, dwell times and bounce rates. They might include measurements of how highly people regard your content, such as the number of comments or inbound links it attracts. According to the Content Marketing Institute (CMI) research[13], 87% of B2C marketers use web traffic metrics to measure content performance.

It's important to also consider social metrics. These are how you'll understand the success of a stand-alone social post – such as a photo on Instagram. They'll also help you gauge the appetite for shared web content, such as a tweet teasing a new product page.

Less common metrics include cost to convert, or cost per lead (40% of B2C marketers, according to the CMI), or media coverage (33%).

How do you measure communication effectiveness? See it simplified and explained in our PR Place guide[14]: Guide to PR and Communication Measurement

CONTENT MARKETING – MAKING STRATEGY HAPPEN

As we explained in the introduction, content strategy is the art of understanding and planning the content you'll publish. Translating this into practical success comes through the discipline of content marketing – which will be covered in a future guide.

Continued…

Putting a content strategy into practice means ensuring that you have the resources and processes in place to deliver on your plan. You'll need to draw up an editorial calendar, setting out when you'll tackle each of your content ideas. Creating a calendar helps ensure that you're creating a steady output of fresh content across all of your channels. It helps you manage resources, plan seasonal or time-sensitive content, and make sure you don't overlook scheduled updates or instalments.

Ideally, the content calendar should contain a detailed content plan for at least one month ahead, with an outline plan for perhaps the following three months. Sketch in important dates such as company anniversaries, and remember to add ideas for follow-up posts – such as a 'one year on' look back at a major product launch. Remember also to include some capacity for reactive or spontaneous posts – you never know when you'll want to react to news, or when inspiration will strike.

USEFUL FURTHER READING

Several other PR Place guides can help with planning, executing and measuring your content strategy:

- **Guide to PR and Communication Measurement**[15]

- **Guide to Developing and Writing a Communication Strategy**[16]

- **Storytelling for PR and Internal Communication**[17]

- **Guide to Digital PR**

The Content Marketing Institute produces yearly research reports on the state of content marketing, and how it's being applied. There are separate editions covering content marketing to businesses[18], and consumer-focused content marketing[19].

You'll also find an extremely comprehensive guide to content strategy and marketing in Moz's Beginners' guide to content marketing[20].

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Focus Mode is a boutique marketing consultancy helping ethical, purpose-driven businesses create sustainable digital marketing campaigns that generate revenue on autopilot.

ABOUT PR PLACE

PR Place is PR Academy's online community and resource hub. It is where public relations and communication practice meets scholarship, where insight is derived from evidence, and where questions of career development and professionalism are explored. It is a resource to help practitioners become more effective and assist with the completion of professional and academic assignments.

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Endnotes

1. "What are the key metrics you use to measure your content success?" https://www.semrush.com/blog/content-marketing-statistics/
2. "What funnel stages have you created the most content for in 2020?" https://www.semrush.com/blog/content-marketing-statistics/
3. https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/b2b-2021-research-final.pdf
4. https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/b2c-research-report-2021.pdf
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