01

Why use brand journalism as part of your content marketing mix?

The lens through which we view our B2B communications and marketing materials is becoming increasingly blurred. Not only have the last few years witnessed an explosion in the sheer number of channels that didn't exist before, but the amount and complexity of information that these channels contain is reaching almost unfathomable levels.

It's staggering to think that today an extra *2.5 quintillion* bytes of data will be created, and will continue to be created, each and every day. To put this into some sort of perspective, 90 per cent of the data that's ever been created in the history of mankind was created in the last two years.

Unsurprisingly, this explosion of channels means brands – whether they occupy the B2B or B2C space – have an increasingly hard task when it comes to reaching customers and audiences. With the number of stakeholders multiplying and the touchpoints with which they connect also proliferating, buying cycles have become much more complicated. It's no longer enough for brands to start engaging their target audience at the top of the traditional sales journey. What they need now is some sort of 'brand warm-up'. B2B brands must find a way to build a presence before the buyer even reaches the top of the sales funnel. As content marketing expert Robert Rose puts it: 'The remit of marketing these days is to have a very large part of the top of funnel experience/pre-customer phase.'[1]

What does this really mean? What's often forgotten is that selling a product is actually a human-to-human experience; it's about telling stories that resonate about your brand in a broader sense, or which align your brand with a particular way of thinking. It's about creating stories that support marketing efforts even *before* potential buyers start on the journey to purchase. If created well, and in a way that occupies the various networks your audiences engage with, these *journalistic* stories can deliver solid reputational impact.

Making your brand a contender

In other words, success in our multi-channel world is about establishing your brand as a 'contender' – one that consumers will consider, at the point they (or an influencer of a buyer) decide they have a need. Brands must establish themselves in a more considered and strategic way, using editorial content, in the places and spaces audiences are inhabiting – even before they exhibit a product or service need.

Volume of information

Grabbing the attention of any customer, whether B2B or B2C, is growing more challenging every day.

In recent years there has been an almost exponential rise in the number of news and information outlets delivering articles, blogs, so-called news and other forms of content in all its guises. Some of this content originates from traditional or recognized news sources, but a rising proportion is from personal bloggers and other unknown publishers.

But the quality of much of this output is questionable. Eighty per cent of blog writers do all their writing themselves without any outsourcing for fact checking (according to data from SEO Tribunal[2]). It's well reported that many posts are ill thought out, only loosely researched and often not substantiated, and yet they appear in many people's social feeds and inboxes. Add to this the content that is simply duplicated across outlets, cut and pasted and shared, and it's not difficult to see that there is a wave of mediocre information swamping all of us.

But as well as an ever-growing total volume of information, it is the sheer quantity of outlets and voices competing for our attention that is also reaching staggering proportions.

As the internet has democratized audience reach, there has been massive growth in niche news outlets and sites delivering the 'long tail' of views and positioning – often representing the less mainstream and more minority thinking. Some see this as a welcome sign of diversification. But not only do some argue this is a breeding ground for 'fake news', other media commentators are worried about the impact these new sources of information – more often than not from social media sites – are having. Many audiences are now abandoning traditional and trusted news outlets for those that are more often than not echo chambers for their beliefs.

If this wasn't challenging enough, not all content we see (primarily in our social feeds) is even written, generated or shared by humans. Some is being generated in troll farms[3] creating, distributing and sharing content aimed at manipulating political thinking, or under-mining fact-based insight in healthcare, or the economy.

The impact of all this cannot be underestimated. We live in a time where some people are veering towards content or phony stories that support their beliefs, while others are being turned off by traditional media. All-told, trust and credibility of news sources has never been so highly questioned. As the Pew Research Centre recently found, the growth in content has been such that only around one in five Americans said they trusted what was shared to them by news organ-izations, family or friends. Social media was trusted by even fewer. Only 4 per cent of web-using adults said they trusted what they saw and read, no matter who shared it. Audiences are now ever more aware that the information that is delivered to them is biased – almost three-quarters of those surveyed agreed with this.[4]

Legislation limiting marketing

As well as the marketing profession's own efforts to stop people being deluged by too many untargeted messages, governments are also legis-lating to stop the rising wave of spam and unwanted push engagement.

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) rules have applied in the European Union since May 2018, and they limit the way companies can use, share and store data about individuals. Personal data can't be used without the consent of the person concerned, and it can't be forwarded to others or re-used in any way.

While it's challenging to find data on the true impact of GDPR on email marketing and telemarketing, Facebook reported that a temporary fall in user registrations, and a decline in ad revenue in early 2018, was linked to the legislation. Why? More and more consumers now value the importance of privacy. Research has found that almost 70 per cent of US adults aren't comfortable with companies sharing and selling their data and online activity – and more than half of these report taking specific action to limit data collection when they're using apps and websites. Many will even stop using the company altogether if need be.[5]

Against this background, it's perhaps unsurprising that research group Forrester noted that the number of Fortune 100 firms explaining their commitment to consumers' privacy as part of their corporate social responsibility grew from 21 in 2017 to 28 a year later.[6] With the number of GDPR-prompted complaints growing, it's no wonder countries outside Europe – including California, Brazil, Japan and India – are also debating introducing similar regulation.[7]

Buyers doing their own research

In the recent past there were only a limited number of ways vendors could engage with buyers, and much of this engagement was one to one, or face to face. There was also only a limited extent to which buyers could gather information to inform their buying decision. Today, however, B2B buying decisions are characterized and influenced by a variety of factors – and a lot of these take place before customers even contact a company to find out about a product. The decision about whether to engage with a brand and purchase its products might start and finish completely at the online research stage – research shows that almost half of all B2B buyers will touch

or engage with three to five pieces of content before they contact a sales person.[8]

In fact, the business consumer is now so digitally sophisticated, that according to Lori Wizdo at Forrester Research:[9]

- more than two-thirds (68 per cent) of B2B buyers say they prefer to research on their own, and online;
- sixty-two per cent of B2B buyers say they now develop their selection criteria or finalize a vendor shortlist based solely on digital content;
- some 60 per cent of B2B buyers prefer not to contact a sales rep as the primary source of information.

The message here couldn't be clearer: brands that don't have the right type of digital content – that is content which is engaging and appealing to decision makers – have lost their sale before it's even begun.

A crisis of trust

B2B brands that have managed to 'cut through the noise', get their audience's attention and get themselves noticed still don't have an easy ride of it. As I have already indicated, trust is the last big dominant issue. Build trust, and relationships are forged and fostered. As we know, though, audiences don't appreciate push messages; they want to feel an affinity with the brands that they are dealing with.

Accenture puts it neatly in one of its recent research reports:

> The heightened transparency inherent in our digital world means trust is a highly flammable, ever-present concern… companies need to very intentionally create a culture of building, maintaining and preserving trust, and bake it into their DNA, strategy and day-to-day operations.[10]

Trust is important because it impacts your buyers, your investors, your partners and your employees. It's not only important to reinforce and measure, but also to communicate to your stakeholders and audiences. Failure of trust is more pervasive in young people in

Western societies, according to research by Deloitte.[11] In fact, optimism is at an all-time low amongst young people. Overall, millennials are less trusting across the board – whether it's of religious leaders, politicians or the mainstream media. Millennials and Gen Zs are more likely to patronize and support companies who share their own values.

The good news is that emerging research indicates buyers are more ready to accept that vendor content is trustworthy.[12] Better vendor trust is creating what Forrester's Laura Ramos calls a 'B2B content arms race', with B2B firms 'trying to achieve competitive advantage by producing any possible content that any possible buyer could possibly need at any possible time.'[13]

However, before looking at this in more detail, it's worth examining just how trust levels currently differ across channels.

Challenges to mainstream media

Trust in traditional media, and all media generally, has declined, but there is a growing 'trust gap' between broadcast and new media. According to the YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project, Britons in 2019 are the least trusting of social media, out of people in 23 nations including France, Germany and the United States.[14] It found just 12 per cent trusted information from social media, while 83 per cent had little or no trust in platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Just two sources of information were trusted by a majority of Britons: national TV news channels (61 per cent) and local news organizations (54 per cent).

While traditional news brands (NBC, ABC, the BBC), have seen the new kids on the block (BuzzFeed, NowThis and the like) telling stories that capture young people's attention in much more engaging ways, there's still confusion between what is fake and what isn't. This hasn't been helped by the failure of social media platforms themselves – which have been widely condemned for helping to propagate much of the fake news.

The corrosive influence of fake news is such that Edelman's Trust Barometer 2019 found that while there has been a rise in people

consuming news, more than 70 per cent worry about fake news or false information being 'used as a weapon'.[15] The net result is that audiences – being fed a diet of trash from all sides and from all channels – often struggle to discern fact from fiction.

Advertising concerns

In parallel with confusion about what parts of the news we should believe in, is the very real concern that exists about the integrity of the advertising industry as a whole. Even though trust in advertising has been falling for the last few decades, more recently trust has been melting at an accelerating pace, with consumer 'belief' in the sector now at a record low (of 25 per cent). It is, so research says, due to the huge volume of ads, their repetition, their obtrusiveness and irrelevance.[16]

As Lord Puttnam, one of the greats of the UK media industry, recently put it:

> Every one of us has a colossal job on our hands in the process
> of recreating trust – not in the system, which in many ways has
> only discredited itself, but in some kind of a system which we feel
> comfortable to gather around and support. Building trust is a human
> activity, and is very unlikely to be achieved solely through the use of
> analytics and algorithms. Simply looked at from the fairly narrow
> perspective of advertising – our role is all about building 'trust' – trust
> in brands, trust in our message, trust in each other.[17]

Society wants new spokespeople.

It's not just the media and the advertising industries that are struggling to maintain trust in the eyes of outsiders and of audiences. Perhaps top of the list in many Western countries is the demise in respect for politicians. Democratic governments around the world are now mistrusted more than ever before, by as much as 80 per cent in some countries, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer. Whether it's from the handling of Brexit in the UK, to the rise of

conflict and confrontation politics in the United States, or the emergence of populist groups such as yellow vests (*les gilets jaunes*) in France, there's been a shift in deference that has seen politicians lose much of the respect they had in the post-war era.

The opportunity: finding and articulating your brand purpose

With threat arguably comes opportunity. The trust vacuum left by media, advertising, politicians, and by falling respect for the broader establishment opens up opportunities for senior business leaders and thinkers to demonstrate their credentials through sensible, considered thought leadership.

Organizations have earned their right to step into that space, to talk about the areas that they know and understand. They can do this safe in the knowledge audiences can filter and curate their own narratives – which (in an ideal world) are taken from a range of sources rather than an echo chamber of their own making.

In our interview, Founder and Chief Strategy Officer of The Content Advisory, Robert Rose, described the importance of earning not only our audience's attention but also its trust.

Attention is not hard to get. You can get attention. You can buy attention. But that attention is fleeting. It's easy to grab somebody's attention for 10 seconds. All you have to do is be controversial or pay for it, and you can get something in front of someone to get their attention. But it's holding that attention that's the hard part; it's holding it for any length of time and deepening the trust so that they want to do things that favour you. That is the difficult part.

That's where the power of content marketing truly comes in, by delivering value before you've even asked for anything, in other words, before you've asked for their name, or their registration, or their email address, or any kind of transaction. You're treating them as if they were a customer already. You're treating them as if they were a valuable relationship to you by delivering value without them even asking for it. And that, to me, makes all the other elements of trust easier.

Your brand conversations should reflect:

- **Honesty** – ensure any stories you develop on behalf of your company exhibit honesty and clarity on the thoughts, views and opinions of the organization.
- **Connection** – build case studies and human examples from within your organization to develop empathy and build relationships.
- **Value** – offer insight that taps into the needs of the customer.
- **Reliability** – don't start the conversation unless you can maintain it.

The power of thoughtfully told stories

It's not just employers and audiences who believe in the power of thought leadership. Employees also believe more than ever that their organization should take the lead on change in the broader environment and the world around them. According to Edelman's Trust Barometer, in 2019 more than 70 per cent felt that a company ought to act in a way that enables it to both increase profits and improve economic and social conditions in the markets in which it operates.[18]

So, what better to way demonstrate you are doing than through your own thoughtfully told stories? Telling your audience what you believe in (and why) should today be considered a vital part of your brand-building strategy. As David Roman explains below, flogging products no longer works. Today there's an expectation brands will share the same beliefs as their consumers – and this is equally relevant in B2B. With data showing that more than half of consumers will boycott brands that don't share their beliefs, there's no reason why this shouldn't be true of the B2B space too.[19] It's B2B brands especially that have seen the customer journey evolve and become more complex with a proliferation of touchpoints, platforms and even the number of people involved in a sale/purchase.

Lenovo takes the brand beyond tech innovation

'Now we have become a $50 billion company, Lenovo has to be tighter in terms of what we stand for and what we represent', said David Roman, senior VP and CMO of Lenovo, recently interviewed in the *Drum*. 'When you look at people buying technology today, especially millennials, they expect to have a relationship with the brand. They expect to know about the company. They want the company to share their values. There's a broader set of things than just the technology itself, especially now as we move into cloud-based solutions. There's an expectation of trust and how the company is going to maintain privacy and security.'[20]

The complex path to a sale

It was in 1898 that travelling salesman Saint Elmo Louis first coined his famous 'journey to sale' concept – neatly summarized by his AIDA acronym (Awareness, Interest, Desire and Action).

To this day, the basic premise behind what creates sales largely remains unchanged. It could also be argued the sales funnel he first described differs little – it simply has more outlets, touchpoints and platforms through which customers can be engaged. As marketing commentator, professor and strategist Mark Ritson writes:

> The sales funnel precedes the invention of television, direct mail, telemarketing, cinema ads, the internet and smartphones. Each and every one of these technologies has changed the tactical options available to marketers, but the essential challenge of marketing strategy and the enduring value of a properly derived sales funnel remain undimmed.[21]

The rise of digital communications means there are even more touchpoints along the customer journey, and each of those might be delivered on a different platform. According to McKinsey, 'the average B2B customer now uses six different channels over the course of their decision-making journey'.[22] The new challenge is complexity of engagement. And it's this complexity of engagement at different

stages of the buyer journey that sits against the backdrop of increased complexity of communication and a growing mistrust in our traditional media, advertising and marketing. As marketing guru Seth Godin writes:

> … the newly empowered consumer has discovered that what looks like clutter to the marketer feels like choice. They've come to realize that there are an infinite number of choices, an endless parade of alternatives. For the marketer, it's like trying to sell sand in a desert.[23]

Without a profile or some sort of digital relationship, organizations wanting to be included in the procurement process can lose a sale before any formal Request for Proposal (RFP) process has even been started. As a McKinsey & Co report concluded, when getting attention becomes harder, it's all the more important to build brand awareness and engagement:

> Faced with a plethora of choices and communications, consumers tend to fall back on the limited set of brands that have made it through the wilderness of messages. Brand awareness matters: brands in the initial consideration set can be up to three times more likely to be purchased eventually than brands that aren't in it.[24]

Key to success is to 'interrupt' the decision-making process with your brand message in as appealing a way as possible. If you can push through the noise – be clever with your messaging, not just shout the loudest – there is scope for brands to use storytelling and brand journalism to gain awareness and start the journey to a trust position. Marketing expert and author Michael Brenner explains in an interview for this book that the issue is not that audiences don't want content, it's that they are not served the content that they need:

> Research shows that buyers are actually quite open and are looking for more content from brands that is educational. I don't think audiences are completely jaded. They are, increasingly, open to brands providing expert-level thought leadership or brand journalism (whatever your preferred term) – they are just disappointed at how few brands are providing it.

The issue is that the natural instinct of the business is to promote itself – this is true in marketing, with the C-suite, and it's certainly true for sales teams. Everybody thinks that their job is to talk about how great their products are and how great the company is. In plain terms, it's the desire to promote that gets in the way.

Finding ways to connect

If storytelling and brand journalism is the answer, the challenge for companies using it is how to connect with their audiences in this fragmented environment. How do organizations cut through with their messaging and engage audiences? How can connections with B2B buyers be made within an ever more complex, emotional and extending sales journey?

Adrian Monck is Managing Director at the World Economic Forum. Interviewed about the Forum's approach to publishing, he explained his belief that an organization could drive its own coverage by disintermediating traditional media:

We took as our starting point the idea that an organization could use stories to tell the world more about its own mission and its own passion and its own concerns, and then bring that same storytelling approach to people in its organization and in its stakeholder group. The people you engage with, the people you work with, all of those are your audiences as well as the world at large, and telling stories is the most powerful way we know to touch people.

How do you bring that approach to your own organization or your own business with authenticity and integrity? In my case, the path went from being a professor and thinking about journalism, to realizing that organizations could also embrace some of the values of journalism and be part of the future of what journalism is becoming.

One of the most important things for any organization, any journalism organization, is having those values – editorial integrity and telling stories respectfully. To do that you have to recognize your organization's

boundaries, in terms of its ability to speak to issues, and you have to make sure that within those boundaries it can communicate with integrity and with authenticity.
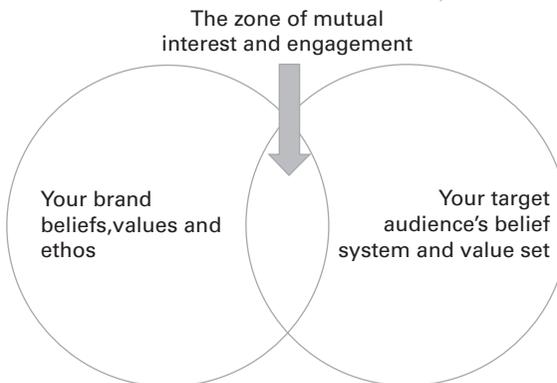
The rise of brand purpose

Brands are increasingly expected to stand up for what they believe, and tell stories that align to those beliefs, to demonstrate their brand purpose more pervasively than ever before.

Bill Theofilou, a senior managing director in Accenture Strategy, puts it this way: 'A brand must solve a problem or meet a need. How well it does that, and how well it creates loyalty, affinity and connections with its customers determines the winners from the losers.'[25]

Accenture's own research refers to the 'rise of the purpose-led brand' – stating that its survey of more than 2,000 US consumers found that more than 60 per cent want companies to take a stand on broadly relevant issues such as transparency, fair employment and sustainability. They want to do business with companies that broadly align with their own values.

FIGURE 1.1   Finding the content sweet spot

The zone of mutual
interest and engagement

Your brand
beliefs, values and
ethos

Your target
audience's belief
system and value set

Finding 'your' purpose

According to research commissioned by Waggoner Edstrom and Quartz, the need for businesses to have true and authentic purpose is now 'table stakes' and there is an 'inextricable link between social issues and business strategy'. It adds: 'Companies can no longer operate in a vacuum. As 84 per cent of our respondents say, customers will demand greater transparency and assurance that the brands they support have a positive impact on society.[26]

You don't need to go far to find those that are really embracing this. Multinational consumer goods company Unilever has shaped its brand in recent years with purpose at the heart of its offer. The company has even created a website and mission to support others to do the same thing, called Selling with Purpose.[27]

But this isn't the full extent to which communicating purpose now goes. Brands and business are now expected to have strong views (and associated action) on social issues such as the environment, equality and politics. Satya Nadella (CEO, Microsoft), Marc Benioff (CEO, Salesforce), and Anne Boden (CEO, Starling Bank, behind its #makemoneyequal campaign), are some of the leading exponents of this.

The new challenge for companies might be ascertaining just how comfortable they are straying into potentially tricky, but also potentially beneficial areas. However, in his annual Letter to Investors entitled *Purpose and Profit*,[28] Larry Fink, chairman and CEO of BlackRock, was unambiguous:

> Unnerved by fundamental economic changes and the failure of government to provide lasting solutions, society is increasingly looking to companies, both public and private, to address pressing social and economic issues. These issues range from protecting the environment to retirement to gender and racial inequality, among others. Purpose is not a mere tagline or marketing campaign; it is a company's fundamental reason for being – what it does every day to create value for its stakeholders. Purpose is not the sole pursuit of profits but the animating force for achieving them.

Brand purpose driving value

At a time where trust in news brands is reduced, what Fink *et al* are saying is beautifully simple. Why not turn to corporates and established specialist brands for information and insight?
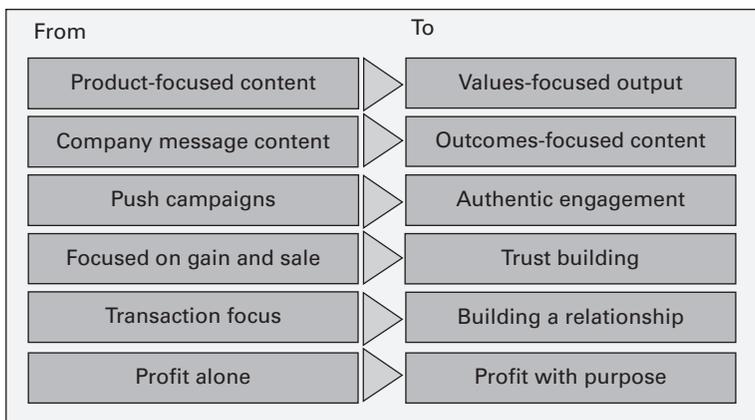
Often procurement teams will want to understand commitment to targets around equality, gender balance, access, supply chain viability and commercial approach, whilst governments are legislating changes and approaches to how businesses work. Increasingly there is a focus on sustainable and ethical procurement and standards. Integrating these narratives into your public-facing assets – website, blog site, social media channels – is just one key part of building reputation and trust online and offline.

Remember... it's emotional

B2B brands aren't just expected to demonstrate purpose, they're also expected to dig even deeper into their touchy-feely sides. IBM, in an overview of general marketing trends, referred to this move as the shift from the *attention economy* to the *emotion economy*.

This needn't be the big leap it appears to be. Emotion, at some level, has always sat at the heart of great marketing and advertising. Perhaps what IBM is talking about is making this much more explicit,

FIGURE 1.2   Shifting the focus of content

From	To
Product-focused content	Values-focused output
Company message content	Outcomes-focused content
Push campaigns	Authentic engagement
Focused on gain and sale	Trust building
Transaction focus	Building a relationship
Profit alone	Profit with purpose

as articulated emotion rather than a 'sense' or a 'feeling' of what a brand believes in or represents. As data from Google's own marketing team reveals, on average, B2B customers are significantly more emotionally connected to their vendors and service providers than consumers.[29] Of the hundreds of B2C brands studied, most had emotional connections with between 1 and 40 per cent of consumers. Meanwhile, of the nine B2B brands studied, seven surpassed the 50 per cent mark.

Heidi Taylor, in her book *B2B Marketing Strategy*, discusses the changing shape of customer engagement:

> I now look at the customer buying journey in B2B as an engagement continuum, where there are multiple potential touchpoints for both traditional and new marketing activity. Because if our customers no longer want to be sold to, we have to completely change our perspective and think not only about where along the buying journey we need to have a presence, but how we can engage with our customers before their buying journey even begins.[30]

Cross-team collaboration

If it's not already abundantly clear, the need for great brand storytelling has never been more important. The context of our storytelling is a world where we, and our potential clients and customers, are deluged with information and messaging.

Success will henceforth be all about understanding the techniques that can be leveraged to get true attention and build meaningful relationships based on a shared vision and purpose.

Success will also be about greater cross-functional collaboration. If nothing else, effective brand storytelling and brand journalism is a collaborative effort, especially now sales engagement is no longer a linear process. Because buyers will often move from digital content back to sales teams before moving closer to purchase, it's important the various teams involved recognize their own responsibilities and the way they need to collaborate with other teams:

Marketing: the marketing team guide and support commissioners and editors to create content that will align with current campaigns and business/product priorities, ensuring activity is laddering up to key marketing goals.

Communications: communications teams articulate brand messaging and re-work that into engaging messages that will appeal to target audiences and personas; the communications team will also develop tone-of-voice guidance that will underpin how stories are created and what stories you choose to tell as a brand.

Sales: communication with sales teams enables content marketers to understand the concerns customers – what do they need to know and understand, or what are their pain points? Ideally sales would be a close partner of any editorial team developing brand journalism. Brand stories can be used as door openers and relationship starters for the sales teams themselves, as well as the basis of future collateral or lead generation collateral.

As audiences and buyers wrestle with the complex nature of our communications and marketing environment there has never been a better time to cut through with your own stories. Not only that, we are now enabled with a full range of tools to give us the ability to scope, deliver and measure every aspect of the brand stories we create and delivery. Next is to understand the facets of the newsroom you can appropriate and learn from to build a successful brand journalism strategy and production operation.

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