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Five Habits of Highly Effective Content Marketers

Few would debate that the content-marketing trend is growing; the good news is that recent Aberdeen research unlocks key elements in the formula for success. The study results, *Alchemy of Intent: Content Marketing in the Lead-to-Revenue Cycle*, released in July 2013, explore the content marketing practices of 96 marketing practitioners, representing 81 companies. In short, the study identifies high performing marketing teams; dubbed “Leaders,” (see sidebar for definitions) compares them to their “Followers” counterparts, and delves into the specific practices they employ to deliver better business results. This Analyst Insight will highlight five capabilities (Figure 1) common among high-performing marketing teams and actionable considerations for implementing them.

Figure 1: Technology & Systemization are Central to High Performance



Source: Aberdeen Group, November 2013

Analyst Insight

Aberdeen’s Insights provide the analyst’s perspective as drawn from an aggregated view of research surveys, interviews, and data analysis.

Defining the Leaders in Content Marketing and Management

Aberdeen used four key performance criteria to distinguish the Leaders (top 35% of aggregate performers) from the Followers (bottom 65%). Leaders achieved the following performance metrics:

- ✓ 15.4% year-over-year company revenue growth versus 1.6% for Followers
- ✓ 19.7% year-over-year increase in unique site traffic versus 2.5% increase for Followers
- ✓ 3.7% average website conversion rate versus 2.9% for Followers
- ✓ 10.2% year-over-year growth in marketing’s contribution to revenue compared with 1.6% growth for Followers

Habit #1: Proper Planning



In many respects, companies with effective content marketing practices think like publishers, and put the appropriate processes in place to support content development. In fact, Leaders are 93% more likely than Followers (52% vs. 27%) to align content to a relevant stage in the buyer's decision journey. This plan, which can be interpreted as a documented content map, is used to plan the types of content needed by sales stage, as well as inventory what's available from marketing, and to identify gaps to be filled. For example, you may find after an audit that most of your content fits early into the sales cycle and you lack material to be used in later-stage sales engagement. Further, Leaders are more likely than Followers (38% vs. 20%) to align their content according to buyer persona, which represents a growing trend toward persona-based marketing.

While buyer persona research can be time consuming, marketers using personas know that if you are willing to listen, your buyer will tell you everything you need to know to successfully market and sell to them. Furthermore, the impact of good planning is substantiated; the results of the Aberdeen study indicate that marketers who use personas and map content to the buyer's journey enjoy 73% higher conversions (20% vs. 12%) from response to marketing qualified lead (MQL), versus companies not pursuing this approach.



Planning Tools to Consider:

- ✓ Buyer personas
- ✓ Content map
- ✓ SEO guidelines for content development

Habit #2: Internally-Managed Content



From an organizational perspective, content marketing is a "resident function, with 92% of companies indicating that content development and management is either entirely or mostly managed in-house.

Bringing content in-house isn't the primary factor that establishes a company as high performing, however; it is how they manage it that is critical. Companies that have well-defined content management processes outperform those that don't in several key areas: average website conversion is nearly twice that of other firms (5.9% vs. 3.8%), and average click-through rates are 30% higher than other companies (4.5% vs. 3.4%).

While some companies invest heavily in journalism and creative design resources, others leverage their product marketing, corporate communications, and PR functions for the creation of content. To support internal production, marketing leverages content management systems (CMS) to enable them to post or update content without IT support.

As the need for content grows, and the strategy of companies' content marketing becomes more sophisticated, firms should look to right-size these teams and employ good practices around developing "snackable content" (content that can be easily repurposed, in parts) in order to meet the quantity and quality demands around their content strategy.

Habit #3: Multiple Delivery Channels



In today's content marketing world, where the conversation is often dominated by "inbound marketing," our study found that the most successful companies utilize a blend of tactics, both inbound and outbound, in order to meet their lead generation goals. In fact, our survey respondents report an average of 60% of marketing leads were generated through direct / outbound marketing, compared to 40% through digital / inbound channels.

Our study implies that for most businesses, there is a just-right mix of inbound and outbound tactics and tools representing the sweet spot for success. With 70% of Leaders and 50% of All Others indicating their adoption of content marketing is in support of lead nurturing, this mix of tactics is no surprise.

The ideal marketing mix will vary by company. Marketers will need to find that sweet spot through experimentation, which includes monitoring the conversions of leads from different channels and turning the dial up on the best performing channels, individually, to see if the results scale.

Habit #4: Measurement and Analytics



Our study saw broad adoption of marketing metrics by Leaders, with some specific nuances related to content marketing. The vast majority (79%) of Leaders in our study were able to track how specific content performed, a habit 50% of Followers also adopted. When Leaders do this, however, they implement a level of granularity and sophistication in their marketing metrics that is not as pervasive with Followers. For example, Leaders were more than twice as likely as Followers (39% vs. 18%) to be able to track lead attribution to a specific piece of content.

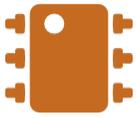
Many marketers use the concept of "lift" as a model for measuring content marketing. In this case, lift looks at the performance of a channel, such as a page or an email, when a particular piece of content is used. This number is compared to the average performance across all uses of that channel to determine the improvement or "lift."

Marketers measuring "lift" should be cognizant that other variables, like list segmentation, timing, data quality, or form length can also affect the performance of a particular channel and, where possible, should look to limit this variability in order to compare "apples to apples."



"64% of Leaders in our study have integrated their marketing automation platform (MAP) with a web content management system (CMS) to support lead scoring."

Habit #5: Technology Integration



The use of content for inbound and outbound marketing has created new use cases and types of marketing technology. Leaders in our study leverage this to their advantage and are smart about integrating technologies. In fact, 64% of Leaders and 45% of Followers in our study have integrated their marketing automation platform (MAP) with a web content management system (CMS) to support lead scoring of customers engaging with content. Further integration of the MAP to sales force automation tools empowers closed-loop reporting that ties marketing activity to revenue.

Marketers should look to adopt technologies that help develop, distribute, measure, and optimize content across multiple customer-facing channels. Driven by the need to scale content to drive marketing results, there is rapid adoption of content marketing tools, with 32% of Leaders and 27% of Followers using a content marketing platform currently, and an additional 28% of firms planning to adopt one in the next 12 months.

Whether it's a CMS, MAP, digital asset management tools, content marketing platform, or SEO tool, marketers should consider how the technology integrates with their technology ecosystem as well as the expected impact on their content marketing results.



“The most successful marketing teams are evolving into operational powerhouses that rely on technology and metrics in order to scale both their quality and quantity of output.”

Key Takeaways



A common thread exists among these five habits of highly effective marketers that implies change and growth for the role of the marketer: the adoption of technology, and data-driven planning and decision-making. The most successful marketing teams are evolving into operational powerhouses

that rely on technology and metrics in order to scale both their quality and quantity of output.

For a company to grow into a modern marketing machine, marketing leaders must build cultures and employ team members with the competencies and value systems to embrace rigorous planning, data-driven decision-making, and the use of technology in new ways. As companies continue to move in this direction, teams that drag their feet on the adoption of these approaches run the risk of losing visibility in the marketplace to competitors who may be mastering these five habits.

The technological evolution of content marketing brings with it considerable benefit for marketers. Not only do these tactics and tools make the marketer's job easier that are under increasing pressure to deliver more content and leads, but these approaches increase the concreteness of marketing's impact, a factor that should make it easier for marketing leaders to foster their relationships with sales and position their budget requests.

For more information on this or other research topics, please visit
www.aberdeen.com

Related Research

[*Content Marketing ROI: Quantifying the Value of the Difference*](#); June 2013
[*Alchemy of Intent: Content Marketing in the Lead-to-Revenue Cycle*](#); July 2013
[*Publish or Perish: Content Marketing is the New PR*](#); March 2013
[*Content Marketing Comes of Age*](#); October 2012

[*Crossing the Chaos: Managing Content Marketing Transformation*](#); October 2013
[*Lights, Camera, Call-to-Action: Trends in Video-based Marketing*](#); September 2012
[*Search Management Drives Higher Conversion, Lower PPC Costs*](#); August 2012
[*Web Experience Management: From Content to Customer*](#); June 2012

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