Good Content

A Genuine **Content Strategy** for the Reluctant Marketer.

by **Stanley Idesis** ▾

"A thoroughly entertaining guide to content marketing" - F. Alexander

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Why Content Marketing

"Content marketing is the only marketing left."

– Seth Godin, Author, Entrepreneur, and TED Speaker

As a former code school educator, I created Android and iOS courses, built mobile applications, mentored students, and got along happily unaware of content marketing. On an odd day in 2015, courses were done, apps written, and students mentored; my teammates and I had a large pile of nothing on our plates. Our leaders aimed our idle hands at growth: *have them answer questions on Quora*, they strongly suggested.

Quora was and is a social media platform that surfaces the best answers to any question one so bravely poses of its users. Chance brought thousands of code school prospects to this platform in search of reviews, opinions, and dirty gossip behind popular code school options. Our higher-ups tasked us to seek out relevant questions and provide thoughtful answers (alongside links to our marketing materials, of course).

As I drafted answers to questions about Java, Android, iOS, and learning, I compared my works-in-progress to responses submitted by our competitors: I spotted a sour trend in their writing. Our competitors used these questions as opportunities to boast and advocate exclusively their services; the stink of self-promotion wafted like noxious gas. Instead of answering the questions to the best of their knowledge, they offered their products as solutions to the questions—they advertised.

As I read these attempts to pass advertising off as content, I became spiritually in-tune with my personal aversion to bull... ahem, *shenanigans*. False answers inspired my distrust and tarnished the reputation of both the brand that produced them and its online representative. If these answers inspired those feelings within me, so would they in Quora's readers. To prevent our brand from suffering the same fate, I vowed to write earnestly and with minimal self-promotion. That vow changed my career.

My answers shot above the egotism and chest-beating with honesty, vulnerability, and an equal assessment of options. I treated our competitors with respect and showed our potential students alternatives that could save them money. I advised students to consider our competitors or worse, teach themselves. Doing so enabled students to skip the code school process entirely; a choice that inevitably led to lost sales.

You may be wondering, *what kind of backwards marketing team would green-light this content?* Not ours. As part of curriculum development, I had full creative control over my writing, and my creativity called for candor. I was certain my brazen honesty would win the company a total of zero prospects, but I was proud to satisfy the marketing team's requests while maintaining integrity as a writer. To the surprise of my team, my manager, and especially myself, Operation Earnest paid off. Big time.

At our team's peak, 1 of every 10 new students found us through Quora. *What?* But the growing number of prospects was only one side-effect of our approach. The conquering of Quora convinced the marketing team that curriculum authors should write blog posts as well;

these posts would speak to similar concerns voiced by Quora users. One blog in particular compared four code schools in Los Angeles, my then-current residence. I was a perfect match for the post and we published my piece unceremoniously.

One month later, a startling email arrived in my company inbox: a praise-filled letter from the competition. The email's author had just enrolled a student at his Los Angeles code school. This student discovered the author's school after reading a blog post, my blog post. The author expressed his gratitude for my even-handed comparison and before signing off, he invited me to a coding meet-up hosted by his company.

Dozens of prospective students attended his meet-up each week and he wanted me to join and promote my organization. He planned not to mock me, humiliate me, or pummel me with tomatoes vaudeville-style. Instead, he wanted to publicize my company (his direct competitor) to the prospective leads he worked tirelessly to attract. That exchange taught me the power of honest, helpful, and respectful content. Good content.

Good content inspires trust in your organization and the consideration of your services by people who respect you before they meet you. And respect is a difficult thing to earn in an online world teeming with false news sources and advertising that poses as truth. And you can learn to create exceptional content that preserves your integrity, generates revenue, and delights your target audience by reading this book.

Do better books on content marketing exist? Yes. Have authors with more clout covered these topics? Of course. But will any be as honest, open, and direct with you as this one? **Hell, no.** Let's cut the *shenanigans* and get to

marketing.[1]

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[1]And if you think most content marketing *is* shenanigans, I want to show you a better way.

Use This Book

Before we get started with the material, I want to help you make full use of this book. The book has three exercises within: skip them. You can do the exercises as they appear of course, but I recommend you complete the book before you attempt them. After reading the material, you will have a better understanding of how the exercises work together to help you achieve your business goals.

I've placed the exercises where they make pedagogical sense (they follow the section that introduces them). But you will gain the most from these drills by performing them one after another in sequence. However, you're an adult and my advice, like all advice, is merely that. Feel free to enjoy the book as you see fit, just as long as you enjoy it.

Definitions

When you come across a link like this one, 42[?], the ? symbol indicates a definition found in the glossary.

Following the link will bring you to its definition. To return to your previous reading location (where the term first appears), follow the link at the bottom of the definition.

Conquer Prerequisites

I love it when 10-pages in, a book directs me to other books; but I know some don't share that unique passion of mine. Thankfully, we can learn a lot from this text without familiarizing ourselves with the recommendations below. However, implementing this book's strategy to its fullest requires each skill (or employing someone who possesses it).

Some believe that the cornerstone of a great content strategy is writing, and to a large degree they are correct. Writing forms the backbone of all content, but without the proper tools to analyze and track the content's performance, this strategy is half-baked. That is why writing finds its place at the top of this list, but equally important skills are hot on its heels.

1. Writing

How often do we consider our own writing? Is it fast and loose? Error-free? Littered with grammatical mischief? Regardless of our writing's condition, it can improve. I was an amateur writer myself until my previous role forced me to focus on pencraft. From sentence structure to word choice, how we write impacts the quality and staying-power of our content. Remember this famous quote?

> *"Like, don't ask your country what it can do for you, man. But think real hard about what you might be able to do for it, you know…?"*
>
> *"…Thanks."*
>
> – John F. Kennedy

I don't remember that either because the 35th president of the United States never uttered that drivel. If JFK eked out that clunky mess of a sentence instead of his eloquent phrasing, history would have crumpled that speech up and tossed it into the cultural scrap heap. Luckily for us, Kennedy had top speech writers.

Suggested Tools
    Grammarly[2]

    Hemingway Editor[3]

Suggested Reading
    On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Non-fiction[4] by William Zinsser

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[2] https://www.grammarly.com/
[3] http://www.hemingwayapp.com/
[4] https://amzn.to/2pVFAw3

The Elements of Style[5] by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White

Bare Minimum

To develop their style and enhance their vocabulary, great writers read the works of great authors. At the least, content marketers should read one piece of classic literature per year.

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[5]https://amzn.to/2H11oO1

2. Spreadsheets

The invention of the spreadsheet revolutionized the finance industry and according to Steve Jobs, spreadsheets, "[were] what propelled the Apple II to the success it achieved." Spreadsheets gave people a reason to buy the world's first computers. 40 years later the spreadsheet remains a central piece in the relationship between man and machine. What I'm trying to say is, if we plan to utilize computers (and this strategy) to its fullest, we must understand spreadsheets.

This strategy uses spreadsheets to track planned content, individual content pieces, their performance, and more. While this information is often stored within the tools we use to gather it (SEMRush, AdWords Keyword Planner, Search Console, others), spreadsheets provide an easy-to-share, no-cost method to access important data without leaving it trapped in a 3rd party database.

Suggested Tools

Google Sheets[6]

Microsoft Excel[7]

OpenOffice Calc[8]

Suggested Free Resources

Sheets — Google Learning Center[9]

Excel Help Center[10]

Suggested Coursework

Master Google Sheets[11]

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[6] https://www.google.com/sheets/about/
[7] https://products.office.com/en-us/excel
[8] https://www.openoffice.org/product/calc.html
[9] https://gsuite.google.com/learning-center/products/sheets/#!/
[10] https://support.office.com/en-us/excel
[11] https://www.udemy.com/google-spreadsheet-tutorial/

Excel Quick Start Tutorial: 36 Minutes to Learn the Basics[12]

Bare Minimum

Learn how a spreadsheet tracks data by row and column. Generally, each row acts as an 'entry' and each column a data point found on that entry. If one can recreate a shopping list in a spreadsheet, they can take full advantage of this text.

As a bonus, one should learn to import a Comma-Separated Values (CSV)? file into a spreadsheet.

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[12]https://www.udemy.com/excel_quickstart/

3. Web Analytics

At the heart of a successful online business beats the drum of analytics. Analytics helps site owners track usage behavior, sales funnels, conversion rates, and more. For content strategies, analytics calculates the success of a strategy or piece of content and whether it contributes to the bottom line. Without an underlying analytics platform, publishing a piece of content is shooting in the dark.

Suggested Tool
> Google Analytics[13]

Suggested Free Resource
> *Analytics Academy*[14]

Suggested Reading
> *Learning Google AdWords and Google Analytics*[15] by Benjamin Mangold
>
> *Google Analytics Breakthrough: From Zero to Business Impact*[16] by Feras Alhlou

Suggested Coursework
> *Google Analytics Training Course for Beginners*[17]

Bare Minimum
> One should learn to create a Google Analytics web property, connect it to their website (possible HTML editing required), create Goals[?], and navigate predefined Reports[?].

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[13] http://analytics.google.com
[14] https://analytics.google.com/analytics/academy/
[15] https://amzn.to/2q6Wt76
[16] https://amzn.to/2Jsbusa
[17] https://www.udemy.com/google-analytics-insights/

4. Webmaster Tools

The world's major search engines, Google and Bing, provide site owners with critical traffic information. Using these tools, we can learn how people find our site, how often they click, where we rank among key search terms, and more. Without this data we struggle to bolster our strengths and minimize our weaknesses. Thankfully, these tools are relatively easy to incorporate and learn.

Required Tools

    Google Search Console[18]

    Bing Webmaster Tools[19]

Suggested Free Resources

    How to use Google and Bing webmaster tools for beginners[20]

    Getting Started Checklist - Bing Webmaster Tools[21]

    Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Starter Guide[22]

Suggested Coursework

    Onsite SEO Using Google Search Console-Webmaster Tools[23]

Bare Minimum

    Readers should claim their website on both tools (DNS editing required) and understand how to gather Page Rank data—discussed later.

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[18] https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/home?hl=en

[19] https://www.bing.com/toolbox/webmaster

[20] https://www.reliablesoft.net/how-to-use-google-and-bing-webmaster-tools-for-beginners/

[21] https://www.bing.com/webmaster/help/getting-started-checklist-66a806de

[22] https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/7451184

[23] https://www.udemy.com/onsite-seo-using-google-search-console-webmaster-tools/

5. Working With Websites

We needn't understand how to setup servers, manage a shopping cart, design a beautiful layout, and code every page by hand—even I wouldn't do all that. But I recommend that we understand how to modify the internal workings of our website. The skills required to do so depend on how our site is built, assuming we already have one.

If we don't have a site, free and affordable Content Management Systems (CMS)? like Squarespace and Word-Press are great places to start.

Suggested Tools

HTML5?

JavaScript?

Squarespace[24]

WordPress[25]

Suggested Free Resources

W3 Schools[26]

Getting Started with Squarespace[27]

Tutorials and Courses for Beginners – Learn Word-Press[28]

Suggested Reading

HTML and CSS: Design and Build Websites[29] by Jon Duckett

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[24] https://www.squarespace.com/

[25] https://wordpress.org/

[26] https://www.w3schools.com/

[27] https://support.squarespace.com/hc/en-us/articles/205809798-Video-Series-Getting-Started-with-Squarespace

[28] https://learn.wordpress.com/

[29] https://amzn.to/2uD89CX

Suggested Coursework

Codecademy[30]

Complete WordPress Training For Beginners[31]

Bare Minimum

Content marketers must have access to edit the navigational elements (top-level) pages of their website both on mobile and desktop. They must also be capable of editing the URLs, titles, descriptions, and contents of all pages. More on those later.

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[30]https://www.codecademy.com/catalog/language/html-css
[31]https://www.udemy.com/complete-wordpress-course-for-beginners/

6. Search Engine Optimization

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a broad topic that incorporates all three subjects that precede it, so we've placed it last. In this book we cover fundamental SEO topics such as keywords, ranking factors, and meta data—the remainder is an overwhelming swamp obsessed with minutiae. SEO professionals see themselves as Gods among men capable of reversing the course of doomed ventures with link building and Black Hat? tactics; as reputable business people, we ignore their duplicitous promises.

Take note, *no single person at Google understands how their search engine works*, so how can anyone else expect to? Understanding a bit past the basics will get us 80% of the way there, and that's more than enough.

Suggested Tools

  SEMRush[32]

  SEOMoz[33]

Suggested Free Resource

  SEO Training Course by Moz[34]

Suggested Reading

  SEO 2018: Learn search engine optimization with smart internet marketing strategies[35] by Adam Clarke

  SEO Fitness Workbook: 2018 Edition: The Seven Steps to Search Engine Optimization Success on Google[36] by Jason McDonald

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[32]https://www.semrush.com/

[33]https://moz.com/

[34]https://www.udemy.com/whiteboard-seo/

[35]https://amzn.to/2GqyrOz

[36]https://amzn.to/2pS2W5K

Bare Minimum

As this book will detail, the content of each web page signals its purpose to search engines. Content marketers must understand that a page's ranking among those with similar purpose is strongly based on the quality of that content, the level to which it satisfies the visitor, the number of trustworthy websites pointing to that page, and the internal structure of the page (often managed by our CMS).

Recap

This book introduces and defines concepts found among these subject matters, but assumes readers can go beyond to learn the skills and apply them in practice.

Without a bare minimum competency in these abilities (or lack thereof among staff), implementing this book's strategy to its utmost is unfortunately impossible.

Define 'Good'

More than any piece of advice found in this book, the suggestion to write *good content* is the toughest to absorb. In the previous sections we encountered a brief introduction to what I perceive as good content, now let me elaborate. I believe that a piece of content falls on a spectrum that begins at *good* and ends at *guile*.

Guile

The skillful use of dishonest means to trick people or make them do what you want.

– Macmillan Dictionary

At the far end we have click-bait headlines and derivative material, plagiarized from a dozen credible sources, so thinly diluted that it borders on meaninglessness. Guile lacks novel ideas, thoughts, and serves the purpose of one: the publisher. Guile is easy to forget, but if retained, leaves a bad impression on the reader. Good content does the opposite.

Good content provides value, delivers on the promise of its headline, and does so by placing the focus on the reader. Whereas guile serves our needs, good content serves the reader's needs, the customer's needs. The majority of content produced by respectable brands falls somewhere in the middle; this happens for two reasons.

First, readers have grown accustomed to click-bait and to see it for what it truly is: valueless drivel. Quality

brands are smart to avoid publishing click-bait garbage—but do they produce *good content?* Brands lean to content that delivers information in a way that reinforces their value proposition but diminishes criticism. This middle-spectrum is what we'll call *safe content*.

Fear motivates brands to write safe content. Imagine our manager tasks us with writing an article about the state of our industry. We begin to research the topic; we study the competition, the up and comers, the trends, and our own company's tactics. Unfortunately, the outlook is bleak.

Industry analysts believe our organization is moving too slowly meanwhile new players gain ground and steal previously-held contracts. As the industry grows, the role of our organization diminishes. In the face of this evidence, what do we write about? If we feel fear, we might write guile.

Fear of appearing weak motivates us to downplay the bad news, spin it as a positive, or exclude it altogether. Fear of bolstering our competition motivates us to ignore their gains. Fear of backlash within our company motivates us to write a 'positive take' that disregards purely negative indicators.

If we give into these fears, we will publish a listless blog post that redacts vital information, assumes our company lacks competition, and continues to pitch our solution with a desperate and heavy hand. The result is a forgettable compilation of words that fails to galvanize interest. It succeeds at one thing: abating our fears.

The content inspired by fear serves the purpose of only one person. After publishing it, the author feels safe, feels she wrote a great piece for her company, feels she

positioned her brand carefully to avoid the invitation of scrutiny. She is the only one left feeling satisfied; satisfied not by what she wrote, *but by what she omitted.*

Okay we get it, let's quit bludgeoning ourselves over the head with the point. But the question remains, *what do we write?* Good content is synonymous with good writing: it entertains and it educates. Good content *also* satisfies an audience of one, but the satisfaction comes from a place of pride, not fear. The author should be proud of what they present, proud to avoid self-embellishment, and proud to provide a value to readers.

This pride does not have to come at the cost of our business goals, it merely treats those goals as secondary. Our primary content goal should be to help the reader— *that's it.* If we communicate something purely helpful, we achieve our goal. Even when we discuss the myriad benefits of our product, approaching the topic from a place of helpfulness is our main priority. Let's look at some examples.

Of the three sets below, which statements represent a helpful, reader-focused approach?

Statement A
　　"We have the best tire selection in town!"
Statement B
　　"If you love options, stop by our showroom—over 80 tire brands on display"

In the first set, it is clear that statement A is a brag, and unless it was produced by the only tire shop in town, it's also subject to debate. Like every Tommy's burger joint that claims to be *The Original Tommy's*, this business uses an unsubstantiated superlative to lure customers.

Statement B makes no such claims and uses a fact to identify with the reader's desire for variety. This second business believes in offering a great selection, and they've communicated that to the customer while maintaining objectivity.

Statement A
> "Fine diners with rich, discerning palates are welcome at Ariana's."

Statement B
> "Ariana's chef graduated at the top of her class from the world's premiere culinary school: L'école Du Chat Fantaisie[37]."

In the second set, statement A takes the perspective of the diner, the diner that cares for a *fancy* experience. After reading the statement, someone may identify themselves with Ariana's values and discover a new favorite restaurant. Statement B achieves a similar goal, but places Ariana's needs before the customer's.

Statement A
> "Have a question, comment, complaint, or something you want to share? Leave us a message anytime at help@ourbusiness.com."

Statement B
> "Customer service is important to us, we do our best to satisfy each and every comment, complaint, and request."

The last set is trickiest; the two statements resemble each other more closely than those of previous sets. But

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[37]Fancy Cat School.

we're getting the hang of this by now, so we've identified statement A as the reader-focused statement. While the goal of statement B is respectable, the customer goes unmentioned. The focus of statement B remains the organization and on how well it responds to customer service rather than the importance of the customer and the service requested.

If we're still a little confused as to what is meant by *good content*, we needn't fret. Throughout the course of this book we will continue to see examples of good content that helps the reader, avoids embellishment, provides value, and as a result, drives continued reader engagement, brand trust, and conversions.

Recap

'Good content' serves the customer. This service is best delivered honest and modest. But if neither of those adjectives are available, we'll settle for entertaining. Under this definition, a curated list of top Parisian museums can be just as helpful to a customer as a silly 3-panel comic about potato spuds. If our content put a smile on an otherwise unhappy face, it served that person.

Even when discussing our products, our services, or the good we do in the world, we do so while focusing on the recipient of our actions rather than ourselves. That's how we build trust, how we earn respect, and how we inspire our customers to reciprocate. That reciprocity leads to sales, repeat business, and a lasting customer relationship.

Understand Our Strategy

Time to drop the philosophizing and get to real work. To grasp what each part of this book will present, we'll first introduce our new content marketing strategy. The strategy is flexible but has a few core tenets that should remain enforced regardless of how we approach content creation. The strategy is called *Good Content*.

Figure 1

The Good Content strategy resembles a customer funnel, but one that never drops leads? (oh what wishful thinking). Our strategy acquires customers by attracting them with content related to our business (business-adjacent) that they find valuable—top-funnel content fills this portion at #1. Top-funnel content directs customers to our middle-funnel content: pieces that directly market our products and services while keeping focus on the customer and their needs (#2).

Middle-funnel content directs to other middle-funnel content and ultimately, conversions. Upon conversion, the strategy places customers into the post-funnel content loop (#3). The pieces in this loop nurture existing customers to keep our brand on their mind, grow their relationship with us, and inspire their repeat business. That is the book's proposed strategy, the Good Content strategy, our strategy.

As we continue, we will find examples that help us generate content ideas at each point of the funnel. On occasion, the strategy seems like an overwhelming amount of work. However, a sole-proprietor can implement everything this strategy requires because it scales organically: fewer resources means fewer pieces of content, and vice-versa. But more content is not always *more* better; it's best to produce the right content, not the right amount.

In Practice

Let's assume we run a local business, a coffee shop for example (I'm a sucker for any place that puts hipsters to work). As the owners of this coffee shop, our goals are to bring customers into the store. If we're located in a major metropolitan area, Chicago for example, we begin by analyzing the search habits of local coffee shop-goers.

We stumble upon a popular search query, *top coffee shops chicago*. Looks promising. We place this Keyword? into our content queue. Soon we publish a piece comparing 5 of the trendiest coffee shops in Chicago. Toward the bottom, we congratulate our competition for making the list and mention how tempted we were to throw our hat in the ring (but we held back, of course).

Searchers looking for top coffee shops, would-be coffee shop goers, and even the competition stumbles across our list. The unbiased and occasionally flattering piece inspires readers to check our shop out, too (they're already on our website after all). The post leads them to a beautiful gallery of interior photographs, a menu of coffee and small-food items, and other middle-funnel content pieces.

Surprised and impressed by our honesty, the reader bookmarks our business and soon ends up at our door. At checkout, our rewards program collects their email and sends them directly to our post-funnel content loop. We take that opportunity to get feedback about our shop, coffee, and other aspects of our business to continue building a relationship with our new customer.

This is one implementation of the Good Content strat-

egy, each business requires a tailored approach. But we can see the skeletal structure of the strategy in play: help potential customers by providing them with a value, inform them of our offering in a helpful and attractive way, then enhance their experience with our brand using post-conversion content. The last element of the strategy requires evaluating content pieces to optimize for performance. We use web analytics and customer feedback tools to determine the value of each effort. Poor performing content demands modification, and sometimes, deletion.

Is This A Lot Of Work?

If we have the capacity to release valuable pieces twice a day and evaluate our entire library's performance on a weekly basis, then more power to us. But the rule of thumb is this, *if we're not a publication, don't act like one.* Blogs, magazines, newspapers, the New York Times, these organizations are publications and with that label comes an expectation of frequency from the consumer.

However, our consumer has no such expectation of us; they expect us to deliver a service or a product, not a periodical. It is this book's opinion that our media presence should not and cannot compete with organizations dedicated to content production—that is an uphill battle easy to lose and impossible to win.

I've bared witness to billion-dollar organizations that attempted to turn their marketing teams into publishing machines. They wanted to print multiple posts a day, big stories each week, video series each month, white papers each quarter, and on until their fingernails bled. Their strategy's core focus was quantity, not quality. They fell into a trap that lures many marketers: the 7+ exposures theory.

The exposure theory purports that a prospect requires a minimum of 7 exposures to the product ('touches') before making a purchase. Frequent touches can contribute to a brand's mindshare, but the right content for the right person should generate a conversion on the first exposure, not the 87th. When we race toward high-frequency publishing goals, we sacrifice quality for quantity and we generate unnecessary and often poor content.

This strategy recommends we narrow our focus and choose our targets wisely. We formulate top-funnel content plans that readers in our target audience will enjoy. We create middle-funnel pieces that fulfill burning questions our leads need answered. And we produce post-funnel content that builds customer relationships, not media conglomerates.

Recap

Our strategy breaks into three parts:

1. Top-Funnel content attracts new customers with helpful and entertaining content related to, but not necessarily about our business. This content directs visitors to the middle of the funnel.
2. Middle-Funnel content educates customers by answering common questions and presenting our business, services, products in a reader-centric way. This content directs users to convert.
3. Post-Funnel content provides personalized help and updates to build the relationship with the customer and lead to repeat business.