Content Customization Comes to the Fore

IN THE AGE OF THE EMPOWERED CUSTOMER, OLD MARKETING RULES NO LONGER APPLY

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Customers now have information at their fingertips, and they decide who gets their attention and trust. That means the challenge for marketers has shifted from managing lists and sending messages to attracting customers with interesting, relevant and easily discoverable content. This new discipline is called "content marketing," and PQ Media expects it to be a $300 billion global market by the end of the decade.

B2B MARKETERS HAVE embraced content marketing with fervor, with 88% of North American B2B marketers having already adopted it, according to the Content Marketing Institute and Marketing Profs. In fact, a Spear Marketing Group study last year found that B2B marketers now consider content marketing to be a more important tool than that reliable old standby — email.

But content marketing is a new discipline that requires a combination of editorial, market research and traditional marketing skills. The challenge is to produce useful and compelling content for each stage of the buying process that guides the buyer toward a favorable decision without tipping the scales into becoming a sales pitch.

Marketers are still struggling to master this new form of engagement. The same Content Marketing Institute/Marketing Profs report found that only 30% of marketers believe they're effective at content marketing. A 2015 survey by The CMO Council and Netline discovered that just 15% of senior marketers in North America consider their demand generation strategies to be highly or very effective. And a recent Accenture Interactive report found that only 42% of global marketers consider themselves well-prepared to manage their current volume of digital content, even though nearly all expect the volume to increase over the next two years.

CUTTING THROUGH THE NOISE
ONE DIFFICULTY MARKETERS are encountering is the sheer volume of content they must compete with.

33%
OF TECH MARKETERS HAVE A DOCUMENTED CONTENT MARKETING STRATEGY

25%
OF TECH MARKETERS' TOTAL MARKETING BUDGETS ARE DEVOTED TO CONTENT MARKETING

63%
OF TECH MARKETERS SAY PRODUCING ENGAGING CONTENT IS THEIR GREATEST CONTENT MARKETING CHALLENGE

SOURCE: 2015 B2B TECHNOLOGY TRENDS - NORTH AMERICA: CMI/MARKETINGPROFS

The material they create must not only be useful but also unique, differentiated and shareable. In the early days of content marketing, many marketers sought to generate as much content as possible, but IDG Enterprise's 2016 Customer Engagement Study found evidence that having too much content can actually work against a company by making it difficult for customers to find what they need.

Customers are struggling with the volume issue as well, and content that they deem to be irrelevant or too "salesy" frustrates them. Asked for their opinion of the content vendors provide them, 65% of business decision makers told Forrester that "much of it is useless." Nearly two-thirds of IT decision makers surveyed by Forrester said they routinely scan the information and then throw it in the trash.

To help marketers make more informed decisions about how to reach tech buyers, IDG Enterprise has conducted the Customer Engagement Study of IT decision makers (ITDMs) for the past four years to understand how they find and consume content.
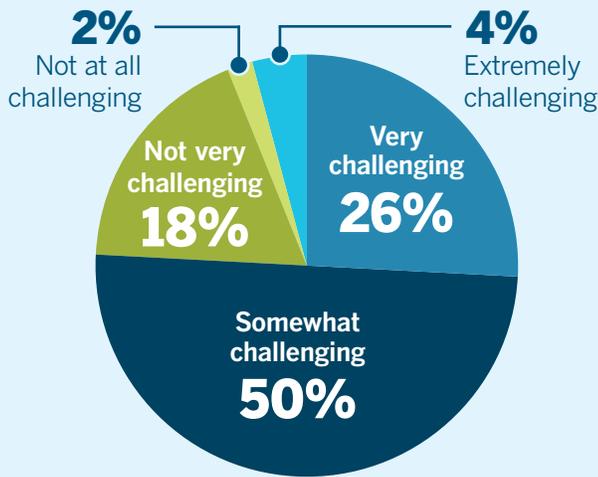
The 2016 survey of 1,000 ITDMs looked at how a wide variety of content types are used throughout the individual stages of the IT purchase process and how that content is consumed, discussed and shared. This year's survey confirmed the supply-and-demand paradox. Despite the ample choice customers now have when researching decisions, 80% of them said it's challenging to find useful information. When asked why, they indicated that marketers often work against their own interests by giving them information that isn't tuned to their needs.

Lack of Credible Information is a Challenge

HOW CHALLENGING IS IT TO LOCATE HIGH QUALITY, TRUSTED INFORMATION?

- **2%** Not at all challenging
- **4%** Extremely challenging
- **Very challenging 26%**
- **Not very challenging 18%**
- **Somewhat challenging 50%**

WHAT MAKES IT CHALLENGING?

Too much marketing hype/empty buzzwords	**51%**
Lack of truly independent, unbiased information	**50%**
Information is too general	**37%**
Hesitant to download for fear of sales follow-up	**36%**
Too time consuming to figure out if source is reliable, trustworthy	**33%**
Incomplete or inconsistent technical info	**31%**
Lack of relevant information	**20%**

EDUCATE, DON'T PITCH

MANY MARKETERS CLEARLY still can't resist the urge to sell, but pitches can backfire. The most often-cited reason buyers said they don't trust marketing content is because of too much "hype/empty buzzwords" and "lack of truly independent, unbiased information."

The research also bore evidence that buyers are wary of trading personal information for content. They overwhelmingly said they don't like sales calls. In fact, the fear of getting unsolicited calls was cited by more than a third (36%) as a reason for not registering for content downloads. The good news is that wariness is down from 48% in 2013.

Attitudes toward follow-up phone calls from sales representatives bordered on hostile, with 55% of ITDMs saying it is never acceptable to follow up a content download or webcast registration by phone and 34% saying phone calls should be no more frequent than monthly. In fact, only 5% said they prefer the phone for sales contact in any context.

But not all the news is bad; 43% said they're comfortable receiving follow-up by email, as long as the frequency isn't oppressive. And they are happy to talk to a knowledgeable salesperson who can answer questions about the content they just accessed.

One trend that has grown over four years of studies is the importance of understanding the buyer journey. ITDMs want content to change and follow them through the decision-making process. They increasingly expect marketers to provide personalized content that matches their interests at any given time. This presents an important differentiation opportunity for marketers. If they can understand buyers' needs at the exact moment of contact they can find a receptive ear.

ENGAGING THE BUYER

CONTENT MARKETING WORKS when done well. It engages prospects directly in the decision cycle, thereby reducing time-to closure. Quality content that helps buyers make more informed decisions also establishes stronger trust between buyer and seller.
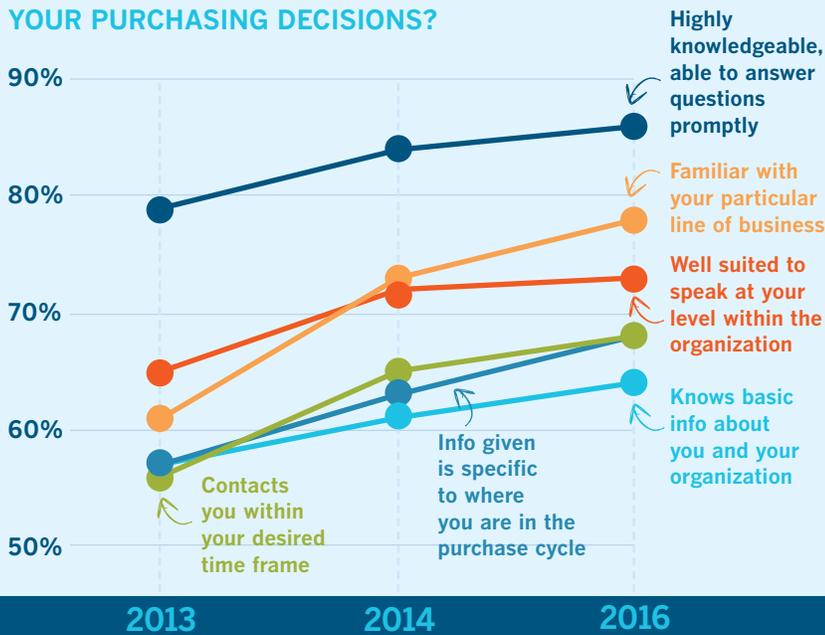
Despite their reservations about quality and follow-up calls, four out of five ITDMs have registered to receive information about products or services within the last six months. An overwhelming 95% told us that if the information has value they are likely to take further action, with 72% conducting further research and 68% visiting a company's website or contacting the vendor for more information.

In the age of social networks, quality content pays additional dividends in the form of peer-to-peer sharing.

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Industry Knowledge is Increasing in Importance

HOW DO ACTIONS BY A VENDOR IMPACT YOUR PURCHASING DECISIONS?

Highly knowledgeable, able to answer questions promptly

Familiar with your particular line of business

Well suited to speak at your level within the organization

Knows basic info about you and your organization

Info given is specific to where you are in the purchase cycle

Contacts you within your desired time frame

2013 **2014** **2016**

WHAT DO BUYERS WANT?

THE ANSWER TO that question, unfortunately, is everything. Although frustrated by the volume of information they receive, buyers also gave us a long list of the types of content they find valuable. Not surprisingly, most of it relates to education.

But the type of educational content ITDMs find useful changes as they move through the buying process. In fact, they download an average of six assets before making a decision. The most-useful content cited by nearly every type of buyer we surveyed was consistent: reviews and independent validation. This implies that research reports by independent analysts, reprints of published reviews and original case studies are important assets to have in your content marketing portfolio.

This is powerful not only because it's free but also because content referred by trusted sources is deemed more credible. The research found that 85% of ITDMs are more likely to consume content their peers share with them.

And people like to share. Nearly half of the buyers we surveyed said they forward useful content to colleagues or ask for a demo. Direct emails are shared most often (82%), followed by white papers (70%), and email newsletters (67%).

Sharing via social channels, although less frequent than email and face-to-face discussion, is growing in popularity, with 26% of ITDMs saying they routinely share content on LinkedIn, 15% on Facebook, and 12% on Twitter.

The lesson for marketers is to make content not only discoverable but easily shareable. Clear headlines, concise and descriptive lead paragraphs and one-click sharing buttons maximize the opportunity to derive value from social shares.

Marketers should also think carefully about the decision to gate information behind registration walls. Although registrations can be valuable for lead generation, they significantly reduce consumption and can hurt search engine results. In contrast, widely-shared content has brand-awareness benefits that may exceed the value of any leads generated.

There was plenty of interest expressed in other types of content, though, with more than two-thirds of respondents saying they find value in:

Product testing/reviews/opinions	**83%**
Product demo/product literature	**83%**
Technology news	**77%**
How-to information	**74%**
Case studies	**74%**
Analyst research	**73%**
Vendor presentations	**73%**
Feature article about technologies	**69%**
Peer presentations	**68%**
Feature articles about trends, strategies and management	**66%**

Timing is everything. Buyers told us that they want to speak to knowledgeable sales and marketing people who can answer their specific questions at each stage of the buying process. Follow-up calls by uninformed sales reps are considered poisonous to the sale. It should be noted that the perceived importance of salesperson knowledge has grown in recent surveys at a faster rate than other factors.

Information Needs Shift During the Purchase Process

1 Determine Business Need	2 Determine Technical Requirements	3 Evaluate Products & Services	4 Recommend & Select Vendors	5 Sell Internally	6 Approve & Authorize Purchase
1 Feature article about trends, strategies, management	1 How-to content/ information	1 Product testing/ reviews/opinions	1 Product demo/ product literature	1 ROI tool, calculator, other assessment tool	1 ROI tool, calculator, other assessment tool
2 Technology news	2 Product testing/ reviews/opinions	2 Product demo/ product literature	2 Product testing/ reviews/opinions	2 Product demo/ product literature	2 Product testing/ reviews/opinions
3 Case studies	3 Product demo/ product literature	3 Vendor presentations	3 Vendor presentations	3 Case studies	3 Product demo/ product literature
4 Feature article about technologies	4 Case studies	4 Analyst research	4 Analyst research	4 Analyst research	4 Vendor presentations
5 Analyst research	5 Technology news	5 How-to content/ information	5 Technology news	5 Product testing/ reviews/opinions	5 Analyst research
		Technology news			
		Peer presentations			

When salespeople do follow up, the topics that interest buyers the most include additional information about the topic of the content they just consumed (62%), information about applications to their business or industry (45%) and general information about the company and its other products (42%).

Although it may seem obvious that sales reps should know what content a prospect has just downloaded, the fact that so many buyers cited it as a problem indicates that this isn't always the case. The ability to get questions answered is crucial at the transition between the research and consideration stages, when buyers are usually considering multiple options. Appearing clueless about the products you sell is the fastest way to lose a customer at this stage. Incidentally, familiarity with the buyer's industry or business was seen as a big plus.

MAPPING THE BUYING CYCLE

ONE OF THE greatest content marketing challenges is to understand the buying cycle and to map content to it on an individualized basis. No two buyers make decisions exactly the same way, and the cycle can vary greatly depending on urgency, number of people involved and the size of the commitment. For the purposes of simplicity, however, the process can be roughly divided into three stages, each with different content needs.

During the needs determination phase, buyers look for high-level information about strategies, management and technologies. Thought leadership content about business value, technology and industry trends is most appropriate at this stage.

As they reach the consideration stage, buyers want more hands-on information about features and functions. Benchmarks, independent research validation, case studies and reprints of evaluations from independent journals are powerful here.

In the final stages of the purchase process, buyers have typically made up their own minds but are still selling the solution internally to gain approval and budget. ROI tools, calculators, total cost of ownership reports and product demos are useful here. Case studies are also helpful in putting skeptics' minds at ease.

It's probably not surprising that 92% of ITDMs said they want tailored content, but customization is expensive. Content angled toward a specific industry was deemed the most useful form of customization, with 56% of buyers seeing value. That was followed by tailoring to a particular platform (48%) and to an individual's responsibilities (42%). This would indicate that case studies and use cases around vertical industries work best.

In this area there was some statistically significant variation by industry: Buyers in the education, financial services and healthcare industries exhibited the greatest need for industry-tailored content, perhaps reflecting

In the early days of YouTube, many companies slapped together quick videos in the office just to have content in their channel, but that won't work anymore. Quality influences perception.

the highly specialized nature of their businesses or the influence of regulations.

And here's some good news: The vast majority of respondents notice whether they have a consistent experience with a technology vendor throughout their various interactions, and the majority (71%) appreciate when a vendor provides a consistent experience/consistent information via a variety of channels.

MARKETING WITH VIDEO

INTEREST IN VIDEO has steadily grown each year we have fielded the Customer Engagement Study, prompting us to devote special attention to this exploding online medium this year.

There are good reasons for marketers to pay attention to video. Ascend2's 2015 Marketing Automation Trends Survey of 300 mostly B2B marketers and salespeople found that video was considered to be twice as effective as blog posts, articles and case studies in engaging customers and prospects.

ITDMs told us they use video most when evaluating products and services, with 84% making video part of the process. In part this is because video is a time-efficient medium for summarizing high-level value as well as providing visual demonstration. Two-thirds of ITDMs have conducted additional research and 56% have contacted a vendor or visited a vendor website as a result of having seen a video.

Video is useful during the earlier phases of the buying stage as well, with 72% of buyers saying they use it when determining business need, 77% when determining technical requirements and 68% when recommending and selecting vendors. Use falls off in the later stages with only 45% of buyers saying they watch videos when preparing to sell a solution internally and 41% when authorizing or approving a purchase.

They don't like just any video, though. Nearly half said video production quality is critical or very impor-

tant. Interestingly, quality was seen as a more important issue by younger respondents. In the early days of YouTube, many companies slapped together quick videos in the office just to have content in their channel, but that won't work anymore. Quality influences perception.

COMPETING FOR TIME

THE AMOUNT OF time buyers will commit to content varies with content type and their stage in the buying cycle. Webcasts get the most attention, with 16.5 minutes deemed to be the optimal length. Interactive video and in-depth product reviews followed in close succession with how-to videos fourth on the list at a still-respectable 12.2 minutes. The least time is spent on introductory information and technology news reports.

Time commitment is not synonymous with value. The marketer's goal should not be to maximize the amount of time a prospective buyer spends with content but to tailor content to the situation. For example, three-minute videos and one-page overviews are perfectly acceptable for buyers in the early research stage. As buyers move deeper into the decision process, they generally have more at stake and are more interested in long-form content, such as webcasts and explanatory videos. As a rule of thumb, the research indicates that briefer content is best at the top of the funnel and longer content more appropriate near the decision stage.

> **FOLLOW-UP CALLS BY UNINFORMED SALES REPS ARE CONSIDERED POISONOUS TO THE SALE.**

THE VALUE OF EVENTS

TRADE SHOWS, SEMINARS and in-person demonstrations continue to offer unique value that online competition has thus far failed to duplicate. This fact came through strongly in the survey results. Despite the cost and time requirements, four out of five of ITDMs said they attend events to learn about new concepts and ideas, and 72% attend to see and try new products.
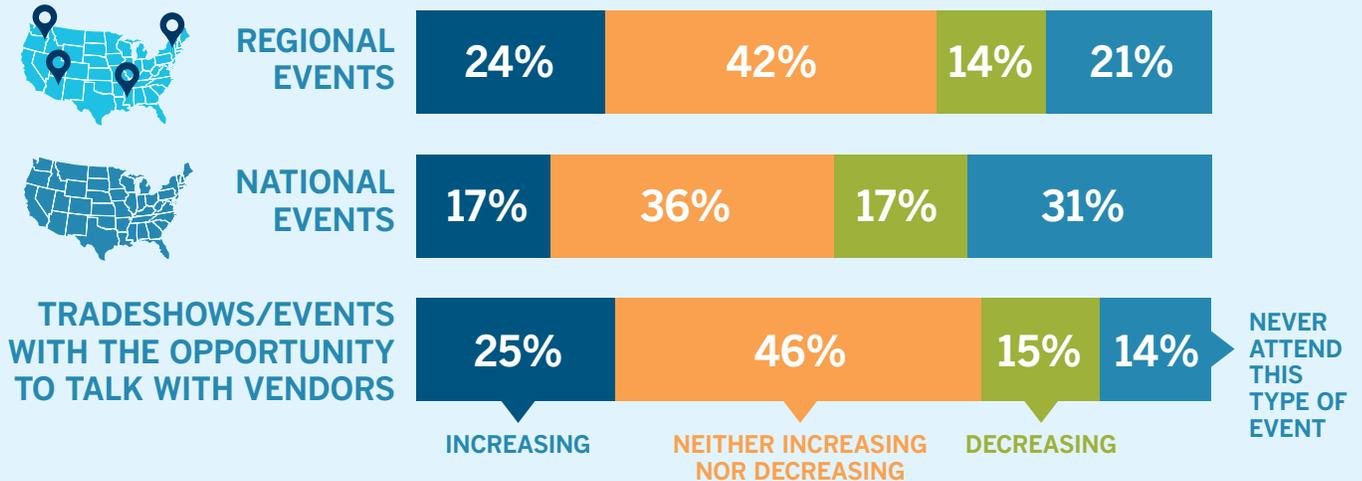
And what they learn there resonates with them: Of the buyers who said they share information via in-person and phone discussions, the most-discussed topics are conference- and event-related, with two-thirds saying they have shared such content. This would indicate that getting on stage at relevant events is still an important way to get new messages across.

Regional events are growing in popularity as a way to realize the value of face-to-face interaction as a lower dollar and time investment. Preference for localized meetings was across the board, with ITDMs at every level preferring them.

Interest in Regional Events is Rising

HOW FREQUENTLY DO YOU ATTEND THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF INDUSTRY OR JOB RELATED EVENTS?

	INCREASING	NEITHER INCREASING NOR DECREASING	DECREASING	NEVER ATTEND THIS TYPE OF EVENT
REGIONAL EVENTS	24%	42%	14%	21%
NATIONAL EVENTS	17%	36%	17%	31%
TRADESHOWS/EVENTS WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO TALK WITH VENDORS	25%	46%	15%	14%

ACTION ITEMS

THERE ARE SEVERAL takeaways from this study that marketers should consider in crafting their content marketing strategies:

Understand target customers and how their journey is unique. Surveys, one-on-one discussions, focus groups and monitoring of social media channels are all effective here.

Create content in the formats they prefer. Customers find different media useful at different stages of the buying cycle. Understanding their journey will help you to target their needs more effectively. Repurposing content such as white papers in alternative formats like serialized blog entries and video interviews is a low-cost way to get more mileage from your investment.

Customize content based primarily on industry and platform. Those are the two customization points that most appealed to buyers.

Put enough content in front of the registration wall to interest and entice buyers. Executive summaries can stimulate interest and deliver the search engine performance you need to get your content noticed. Valuable content such as calculators and e-books are better candidates for putting behind a registration wall.

Be consistent in the experience you create across multiple channels. This includes consistent branding but also a recognizable voice, regular speakers and details such as typography and video backgrounds.

Make content shareable. Choose from the many tools that are available to do this and leverage them across all media. Don't neglect opportunities to embed sharing links in videos and emails.

Nurture customer and employee advocates to encourage sharing. The people who are happiest with your company and products can be your greatest allies in this respect.

Educate your sales team to speak knowledgeably about your products and the problems they solve. Equip them with tools to research the buyers they plan to contact and to understand their likely stage in the buying cycle.

METHODOLOGY

THE 2016 IDG ENTERPRISE CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT STUDY surveyed 1,000 respondents involved in the purchase process for major IT or security products and services with 84% based in the U.S. Respondents work in organizations with an average of 13,094 employees. Just over half of the participants in this survey reported that they are either the top IT leader at their company or business unit/location. Respondents represented a broad range of vertical markets, including high tech (14%), manufacturing (13%), financial services (11%), education (10%), government/non-profit (10%), healthcare (9%), services (8%), and retail/wholesale/distribution (6%).

Strategic Content Solutions
CONTENT CREATION & OPTIMIZATION

IDG Enterprise Strategic Content Services (SCS) is squarely focused on serving the business-to-business technology solution-provider market. SCS is for technology marketers who publish content via their own platforms and channels in an effort to attract educate and engage IT audiences directly.

SCS VALUE FOR YOUR CONTENT MARKETING EFFORTS:

- Expert content development in key market segments from the vantage point of midmarket to enterprise organizations; IT managers to business executives; topics ranging from cloud computing to client virtualization; and across all key vertical industries.
- Content that is optimized for search/SEO, social media/the social Web.
- Content that is shaped based on real-time user demand and need.
- Content mapping that ensures alignment to your objectives and go-to-market initiatives.

SCS SERVICES

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

Provides marketers with expert content that's highly targeted and on-message for whatever requirements/ needs you might have. This allows you to be seen as experts and provide your customers with valuable and actionable content—from thought-leadership pieces to practical tutorial content.

CONTENT SMART

Provides marketers with copy that is written to leverage best practices in search/SEO: meta tagging, headline and sub-headline copy and the content's key word density are optimized to get the best search results/returns. All this is designed to attract and draw audiences in from the broader Web to engage with your published content.

SOCIAL MEDIA OPTIMIZATION

Takes the produced content and optimizes it for use, placement and integration into the social Web. This will establish your company in key topic community conversations and to draw users back into your site.

CONTENT ASSESSMENTS

A successful content plan requires smart mapping of your content needs to go-to-market strategies and objectives. This ensures that the content we produce helps drive the achievement of your objectives.

SCS is uniquely positioned to help you create and optimize content, leveraging the multitude of tools and platforms that enable better content performance on the Web.

For more information, contact your sales executive or IDG Enterprise Strategic Marketing Services at www.idgenterprise.com/engage/marketing-services