THE GREAT CONTENT QUESTION

WHEN TO BUILD AND WHEN TO BUY

You can't take two steps in the world of marketing these days without hearing everyone's favorite word – content – being tossed around.

There's a reason for that; good content fosters trust, conveys thought leadership, generates leads and closes deals. Blog posts, videos, white papers, newsletters and social media material can all serve as the catalyst that sparks a sale. It's a sign of the times that today's marketer has also become a publisher.

While being vital for a respected and appealing digital brand presence, content also plays a dual role in both entertaining and educating the audience while guiding them through the sales funnel. For that reason, many businesses are eager to build a sizeable content library. Yet not all of them know how to produce the rich content pipeline required to keep audiences engaged and participation high. So far most businesses have adopted the prevailing philosophy, if you build it, they will come. But because they often lack the internal resources to build the content they need, many are asking another question: what if they buy their content? Will the leads and customers still appear?

This is a real dilemma for businesses struggling to keep up with an ever-multiplying number of platforms and channels that demand original content. Producing a consistent flow of fresh and engaging material is simply beyond their capabilities; often their staff is overloaded, they lack the expertise to develop informative content in-house, or they don't have the resources to create and distribute the material at a rapid pace. As a result, many choose to leverage outside expertise or products to fill the content gap.
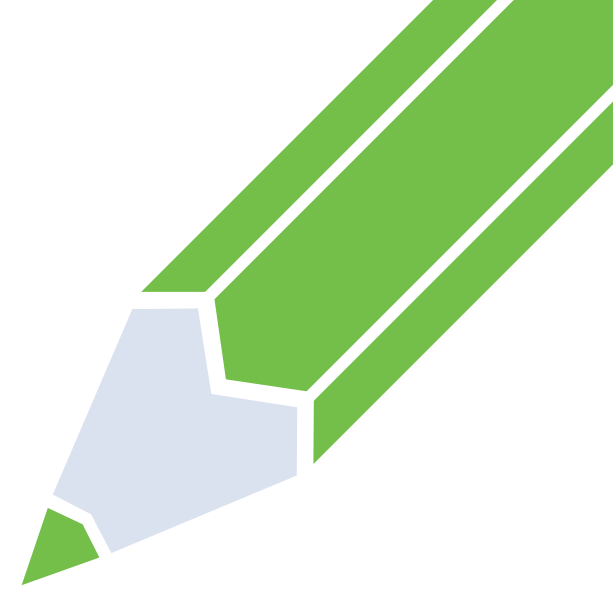
Because all content is an investment, it's important to understand the factors that determine whether it's better to create custom content in-house or seek third-party assistance. Below are several guideposts to knowing when it's best to buy content, and when it's better to build it internally.

Crafting Your Content Strategy

The foundation of all good content marketing, of course, is creating an intelligent strategy. Your team will need to outline goals and workflow processes regarding content creation, delivery and measurement. Also important: deciding in advance the kind of content you don't want to produce. If you can identify the types of content that are likely to be ignored by your target market, you can save yourself considerable wasted time and budget.

After outlining the types of content your company plans to generate, create a realistic calendar to ensure pieces are published in a well-managed schedule. While frequency is important, consistency is even more critical. Sporadic bursts of intense publishing followed by silent dry spells will look unprofessional. One blog post a week is preferable to three posts one week and none the next.

Because content marketing is such a popular space right now, there is an abundance of self-styled marketing experts who promote specific content strategies as a guaranteed path to boosting a company's image and sales. Yet in the end, there is no single approach that consistently works across the board. The only real commonality in content strategy is understanding what your customers want. The actual parameters of your system will have to adapt to your specific business needs.

As your marketing metrics tell you which material is working and which isn't, your strategy will change over time. Crafting an effective content roadmap isn't a one-time project but rather an organic and evolving model. Ultimately your products and services, your target markets, and the unique flavor of your brand will shape a distinctive and nuanced content strategy that is best for you.
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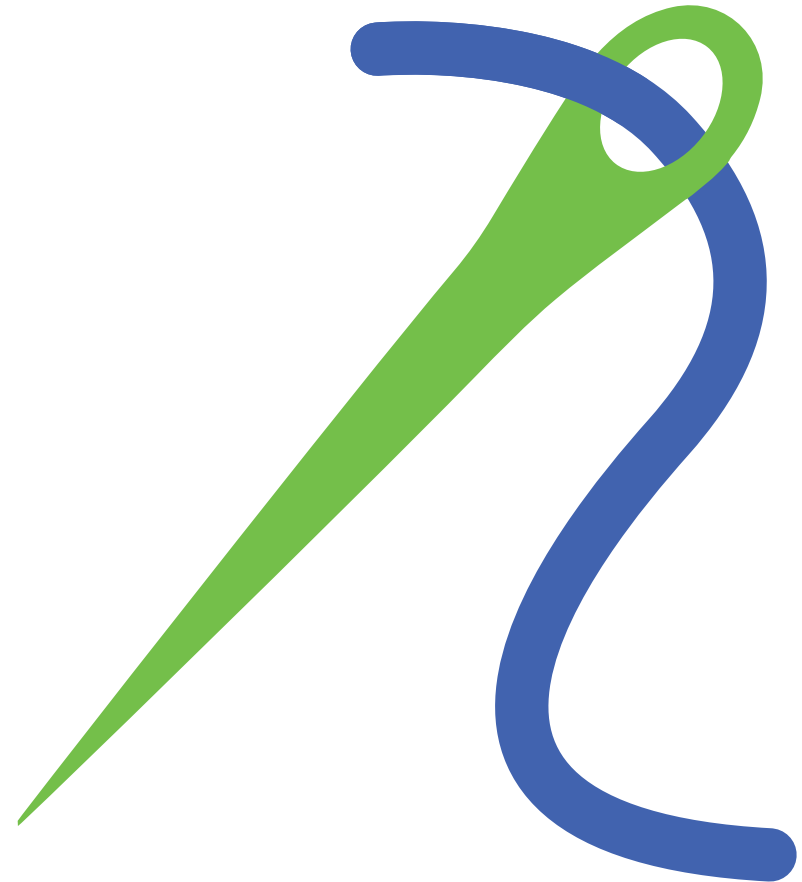
Know Your Content Threshold

After mapping out a comprehensive strategy on the types of content you need, your next step is calculating the amount of content required. A word of warning here; it's at this intersection where a battle between quantity and quality can come into play, as some marketers tend to become overly fixated on chasing quantity. The rule of thumb here is that original and relevant content will always drive higher returns than a larger amount of bland content. Twelve thoughtful and insightful articles on your site will draw more engagement and lead generation than thirty low-quality articles.

Another factor to remember is that just as excellent content conveys an impression of expertise and achievement, bad content suggests incompetence and a second-rate business model. Search engines are sophisticated enough to detect generic, spam-ridden content as well, making it a detriment for anyone's site. The smarter strategy is to develop useful and meaningful content that speaks directly to buyers' needs and challenges.

The final factor to consider in terms of quantity is management. While some marketers think that owning a massive library of videos, blogs, webinars, newsletters and white papers will drive thought leadership and an impressive SEO-keyed digital presence, the less glamorous reality is that all of that content will need to be managed. Publishing the content, measuring its performance and modifying it in response to those metrics all demand a considerable amount of time and resources. A failure to manage it professionally can result in broken links, off-kilter messaging and disjointed materials that ultimately detract from your brand image.

The key to growing a distinctive and well-managed content library is starting small. Strategic and thoughtful growth over time, with a focus on high-value quality, will ultimately build a library that makes a deeper and more lasting impact. You'll also have more time to measure the success of your efforts as you go, which can help guide your future marketing investments. Sometimes the content you expect to go viral will fall flat, while other material on other channels will pay unexpected dividends. Slow growth will stop you from developing a large number of pieces that don't deliver positive results.

At this point, you can make the decision on which content can be created in-house and which will need to be outsourced. Put together a list of the kinds of content you need and pick the top three – for instance, a blog, emails, and webinars. Identify the team members who will be pitching in to create it and map each type of content to those internal resources. Whatever is left over is the content that needs to be outsourced.

Keeping Outsourced Content On Brand

While it's not something most companies openly discuss, many of them have a good deal of their marketing content developed by outside agencies. As more marketing channels have risen and more content has been required to fill them, this practice has only intensified.

In addition to relieving over-burdened staff, outside talent can bring many benefits to the table. Often they have expertise in a specific area and can bring a professional sophistication to content; outsourcing projects can also sidestep office politics, as it can be easier to give honest feedback to an outsider. Agencies can also turn a project around more quickly than would happen in-house in many cases.

This might sound like heresy if you're determined to produce authentic content, custom-built to align with your brand voice and business objectives. Rest assured, experienced content developers know how to incorporate your brand messaging and buyer personas to create a piece that looks and feels like it came right from your marketing director's office. You'll get a successful creative asset that sells your message without pulling team members off their other initiatives to get the content finished.

That said, it's best to consider some of the possible pitfalls. Outsourcing content creation to an agency means adding an additional team to the project, which can add more layers of development, refinement, and editorial approval. This can sometimes extend the timeline, rather than shorten it, particularly if the agency fails to match your messaging and brand tone. You'll also need to assign a point person or two within your business to work with the agency, which will consume additional hours away from their core responsibilities. These factors won't necessarily delay campaigns to an egregious extent, but they can sometimes throw a wrench in productivity.

Bring in the Experts
Non-customizable Bulk Content

Obviously custom, organic content offers the benefits of building an authentic rapport with leads and customers. Yet third-party content has its place as well in the marketing universe, namely because it offers a certain level of industry prestige. Buying research-based content assembled by a reputable research firm or third party expert can add a professional gravitas to your content mix and elevate your brand profile. The idea is to publish credible, industry-leading thought pieces that add a new and deeper dimension to your current library and establish you as a thought leader in your field.

The first step toward implementing third-party content is identifying the leading thinkers in your field. Just as with outsourcing projects to agencies, this will require assigning an in-house point person to manage it properly. That's on top of the actual content price. In the end, you're not paying for content as much as you're paying for credibility and research in your area of expertise.

Bear in mind that this strategy is not appropriate for the early stages of a content pipeline. It does however work well for a business that's already sustained a publication groove and wants to take their output strategy to the next level. Usually this stage occurs when a brand has achieved a certain amount of visibility and the core messaging is successfully resonating with the target markets. Leveraging third-party expertise at this point can amplify the existing brand awareness and establish you in a higher echelon of thought leaders.

Make no mistake, organic content produced by your own team is an effective way to engage leads and customers. But third-party content does something different. It penetrates the cynicism of skeptical buyer personas and dissolves their internal barriers. While you already know how to market to your existing foundation of loyal followers, reaching trust-based buyers requires a different set of tools. Third-party expert content achieves that goal. The validation from outside sources and respected leaders can lift an entirely new category of prospects over their internal roadblocks and convince them to join your buyer base.
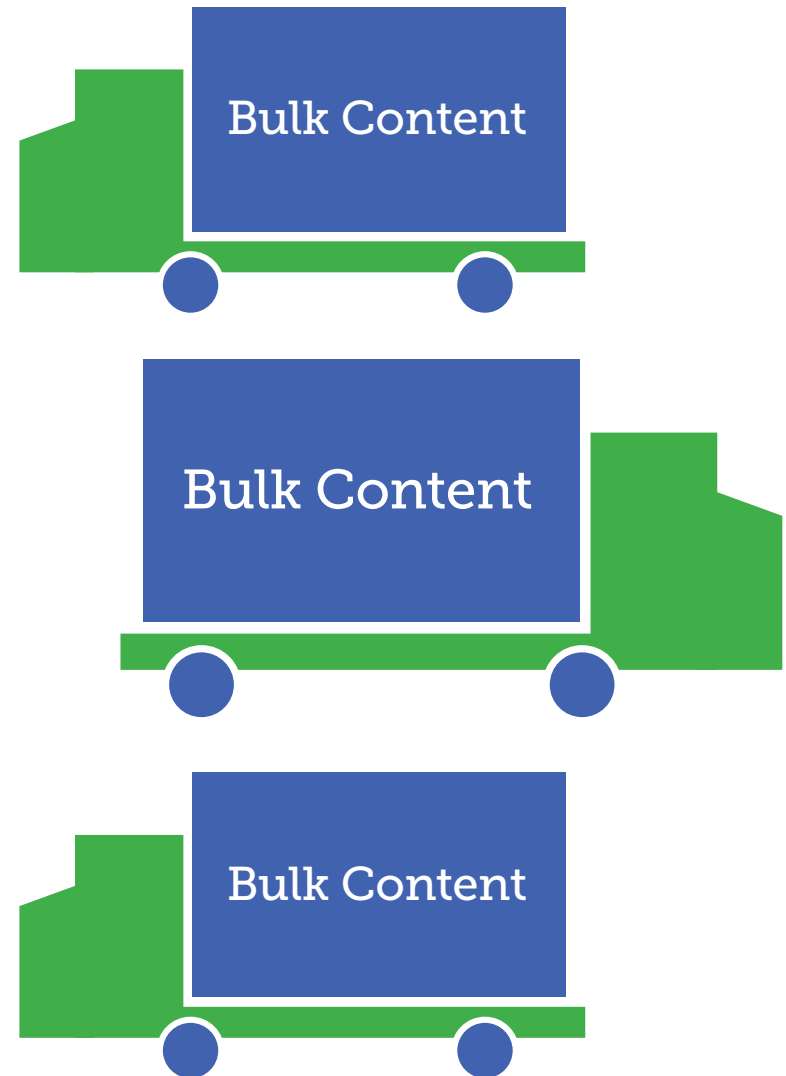
Making the Decision

When all is said and done, the common denominator at the heart of all successful content creation is relevance. With a deep understanding of your buyers, you'll know how to architect content that strikes a chord with your target markets. Whether you choose to build or choose to buy, your primary consideration should be aligning the content with your customers' interests. Usually this means it's best to retain as much genuine content generation as you can comfortably handle, and bring in outside expertise after hitting a certain visibility threshold.

Ultimately the build or buy decision hinges on several criteria. If your custom content needs are relatively small, such as one or two new pieces per week, and you can afford to put some of your team on the project, handling it internally is probably the right place to start. If you're already working with an outside agency on other objectives, they may be able to accommodate your new requests without much additional expense or fuss.

Eventually, the time will be right for third-party validation to expand your content repertoire. Retain your authenticity throughout and you'll find that if you build it – and buy some of it – the customers will come.

1.877.77.LEADMD
9383 E. Bahia Drive, Suite 225
Scottsdale, Arizona 85260
Fax: 888.294.9854
info@leadmd.com

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