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# Using storytelling to build sales

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Customers have always been in control of their information sources. Now, however, they have a seemingly infinite number of choices at their fingertips, thanks to a rapidly evolving digital ecosystem that makes it easy to create, store, find and share information on virtually any topic.

This explosion of data sources makes it more challenging for brands to position themselves as a trusted, authoritative information source across all media. In their quest to build credibility and long-term relationships with customers, marketers have embraced content as a key element of customer relationship management (CRM). Companies spent more than \$40 billion on all forms of content marketing in 2010, according to research by ContentWise and the Custom Content Council. In a 2011 survey by Roper Public Affairs and Corporate Communication, 84 per cent of CMOs agreed that custom content represents the future of marketing.

But here's the challenge: now that so many companies are practising some form of content marketing, it's becoming even more difficult to distinguish your brand with compelling content that truly engages customers and prospects – and, most importantly, leads to action.

Over the last few years, content marketing has transformed marketers' ability to attract and generate quality leads. They've mastered the art of using white papers, e-books, webinars and other free-content formats to

inspire enough opt-ins to pack their prospect funnel and keep sales busy for months to come. This is in contrast to a time, not too long ago, when marketers' toughest challenge and primary endeavour was to generate qualified leads. With this new quill in their caps, however, comes a new challenge: lead conversion. Sound like something that the sales department is better suited to handle? Well, that's the million dollar question...

Many are discovering that there is a grey area between lead and sale. The prospect has indicated interest but is not quite ready to commit. They need to be eased in slowly – courted before being proposed to. And while this ultimate proposal still may be the job of the sales team, the courting is – or, at least, should be – the responsibility of marketing. This is where content comes in.

According to research conducted by the Content Marketing Institute and MarketingProfs, the greatest challenge for content marketers is producing the kind of content that actually engages both customers and prospects. That challenge is important because the organizational goals (after brand awareness) are customer acquisition (68 per cent), lead generation (66 per cent) and customer loyalty (61 per cent). All of these worthy goals require content that build trust and get customers to take an action. Additionally, 39 per cent say their goal for content marketing is for lead management/nurture.

It is in the area of lead nurture where content marketing can have powerful impact. This takes place after the prospect has been acquired and is now safely inside your lead management or CRM system. It has been estimated by Forrester and marketing automation firms such as MarketingProfs that it takes five to six high-quality touches to turn a new lead into a customer. If that is the case, then it is critical for marketers to understand how to use authoritative content to move the lead to a loyal customer.

Most brands are good at messaging – but they are not good storytellers. Particularly in B2B markets, content marketing is rooted in traditional lead-generation models, which are based on selling, not nurturing.

The missing link in most content marketing playbooks is good storytelling.

It sounds simplistic, but storytelling is one of the most engaging and immersive ways of delivering content to create an emotional connection with customers and prospects. We've been wired since childhood to understand and assimilate information and complex ideas through the use of stories. Because storytelling is participatory, it enables brands to build a permission relationship with a target audience, across multiple media platforms. This approach helps your customers share your brand and helps them internalize it and fully understand the value proposition.

Marketers must strike a balance between selling and helping to successfully engage with customers and prospects to gain their permission as they progress through the purchase funnel. By helping prospects find the information they need – wherever they are in the purchase cycle – brands will create trust and affinity.

In the business community, narratives such as case studies enable prospects to participate in the story, which makes them more open to internalizing a marketer's messages. Prospects who hear stories place themselves in the process and project the outcome to their situations.

Before they can entertain the notion of becoming good storytellers, marketers first need to rethink how they perceive their customers and prospects. Traditional B2B lead-gen programmes focus on groups segmented by job title, company size or other demographics. Successful storytelling, on the other hand, requires a different type of targeting, with segments based on interests and needs. Instead of thinking about audiences in terms such as B2B and B2C, think about P2P: person-to-person marketing.

Good storytelling can get you in front of hard-to-reach prospects. Copyright Clearance Center (CCC), a global rights broker for the world's most sought after materials, used an innovative video-based storytelling programme to promote its licensing services and special offers to high-level executives who have little time or inclination to open the typical marketing e-mail.

The programme involved an interactive, direct response engagement designed to promote the company's licensing services and special offers. The cornerstone of the programme involved four uniquely crafted, customized video books. The solution was innovative and inspired: a video portfolio wrapped in a custom mailer and co-branded with trusted partners such as the Association of Corporate Counsel, the American Hospital Association and the Motion Picture Licensing Corporation.

The video booklets delivered CCC's case to executives as a compelling package, with the stamp of approval from partners the executives would know and trust. Custom e-mails, landing pages and training for the CCC sales force were put in place to support the unique campaign.

The video book investment, when measured against costly in-person business development calls, was paid back within three months. Sales conversions increased by more than 50 per cent, and the programme generated a forecasted \$1 million in customer lifetime value.

'Cutting through the clutter and getting our services in front of new prospects is always a challenge,' said Miles McNamee, VP, Licensing and

Business Development, Copyright Clearance Centre. ‘The books’ “wow” factor fast-tracked them to the right decision maker.’

Cutting across demographics can expand the market potential and create multiple touch-points, enabling marketers to better target messages amongst customers and prospects. Further segmenting based on where a prospect is in the purchase funnel – awareness, research, consideration, etc – enables more specific storytelling that delivers real value. This is the key to effective lead nurturing, and a step beyond typical lead-gen programmes, which only focus on the wide-open end of the funnel.

Your content plan and schedule must deliver different types of content based on where a prospect or customer is in the sales funnel. Delivering an increasingly deep level of content will enhance your permission relationship with the prospect – the more they ask for your content, the stronger the relationship becomes.

IBM understands this concept. Instead of subjecting IT professionals to an endless stream of stand-alone webinars – a common lead-gen vehicle for B2B media – the technology giant took a different approach with a recent campaign. It launched Eye on IBM, a blog that provides independent news and analysis on topics such as virtualization, social business, mobile and analytics. These topics, of course, are core to IBM’s products and services, but nothing on the site overtly sells IBM. Instead, IBM is subtly building credibility on topics that are critical to its business. This approach help IBM generate new leads and nurture the ones it already has. By giving prospects increasing levels of content IBM is building a relationship of trust and leading them to a sale.

To generate prospects and build awareness, focus on creating content that educates and informs. At this stage, most prospects are researching vendors to learn more about a topic or product category. Best practice white papers and research reports can be effective here.

Once prospects identify themselves as a lead – by registering for a download or attending a virtual or live event – you can bring them into the consideration/short list phase. Here, you will want to provide richer content that takes them to the next level and gives them a deeper understanding of your solution. Case studies, testimonials and demos and will show expertise and build trust in your company.

Zmags, a provider of digital publishing solutions, followed this approach in a multichannel campaign to attract new prospects. The marketing team created a series of stories that brought the digital shopper to life for catalogue sellers and other online retailers. Zmags’ marketing team commissioned original research that resulted in a white paper. The white paper

formed the basis of a webcast, which featured internal and external experts who offered insights on the research and gave the digital shopper a persona that brands could identify with. This is a great example of storytelling. Instead of presenting the research in a dry manner, they crafted a story about the ‘connected buyer’ and brought her to life. It was now relatable to and easier to learn. The programme helped generate leads and nurture prospects for Zmags.

As they get closer to a purchase decision, you can help prospects build a business case. Provide evidence that demonstrates your product as the right choice and mitigate the risk.

Once a prospect becomes a customer the objective now focuses on retention. The content you create and deliver will now focus on building long-term relationships and turning customers into advocates. Here, it’s important to develop content that continues to inspire customers – and convinces them to buy more. Importantly, if you want customers to become advocates, you must design your content to be easily shareable via Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn or other social platforms.

Marketers have become very good at using content to fill their sales funnel with leads. But the majority of leads generated through content marketing are not sales-ready. Just because a prospect has view a piece of your content it does not mean they are ready to buy. Conversions require more touches – supported by good storytelling and original content.

The ability to nurture prospects and customers with highly relevant content builds trust, affinity and loyalty – and drives sales.