HOW TO CREATE A GREAT ECOMMERCE CONTENT STRATEGY

A publication of

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October 2011 edition

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HOW TO CREATE A GREAT ECOMMERCE CONTENT STRATEGY ••

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THE VALUE OF A CONTENT STRATEGY

Most of what people know about your ecommerce business is what they read, view or hear about you online — on your website, on other sites in your industry, in search engine results, and on social networking sites. Most of that content you control directly in the text, photos, videos, and audio you publish yourself. Much of the rest you control indirectly — by influencing what others say in response to what you do publish.

The fact that you have so much control over a factor that largely determines your success means you'd better know how to control it. You'd better know content strategy.

The sites consumers *visit* most and stay on longest are ones consumers find most enjoyable and valuable. The sites where consumers *buy* the most are those with new content that predisposes them to buy and keeps them coming back until they are ready to buy. These sites understand key principles of content strategy. For example, they get it that product value is not always self-evident and that web visitors want useful information, not just a sales pitch. They understand that some shoppers shop because they like shopping, not just buying, *if* they find a shopping environment that engages them. These sites also know how to create and leverage a unique brand personality with content that differentiates and excites.

These sites are marketing; they're not just selling.

> *Content is the universal elixir for attracting attention, developing leads and converting leads into customers. But like any tool, it only works if you know how to use it effectively*

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Just because someone visits a site doesn't mean they're ready to buy — but they are more likely to buy *at some point* than is someone who never visits the site. What marketing does is bring more of those "warm" prospects to the site and builds relationships with them. Marketing does this with content designed to attract both people and search engines, to differentiate, to be liked, to be shared with friends and colleagues and to convert prospects to leads to buyers.

How this happens largely depends on their context, such as where they sit in the marketing funnel. Are they TOF (top-of-funnel = new prospect), MOF (middle-of-funnel = sales lead being nurtured toward a purchase), or BOF (bottom-of-funnel = ready to buy)? The higher in the sales funnel, generally the more educational and less "pitchy" content should be — in terms of both information and calls to action (i.e., offers you're asking the visitor to accept as a result of having read your content). Other "context drivers" are: average customer spend, product complexity, length of sales cycle, and number of purchase influencers — all factors, by the way, that tend to be higher for B2B.

Engaging content also shares some key attributes across contexts. For example, it is relevant, keyword rich, consistent both in voice and publishing schedule and abundant. It is not overly promotional nor does it copy other people's content. It's fresh, valuable and authentic. And it reflects a clear and informed strategy for reaching ecommerce success.

1 GREAT CONTENT MATTERS

IF THEY DON'T BUY YOUR CONTENT, THEY WON'T BUY YOUR PRODUCT

Websites are a lot like movies, books, TV shows and other forms of media. They don't succeed if they don't hold people's attention. So one comment you'll often hear from a movie or book critic is one you might also hear from a web reviewer — "this website has a lot of content" or "that website doesn't have a lot of content." What are they talking about? First, what content consists of and what it is are two different things. Content consists of text, images, audio, and graphics — basically whatever forms of expression people use to communicate ideas. But as you know from personal experience sitting through a bad movie — you can have a lot of words (or "action") and still not have much content. Content is both the *ideas* and the *experience* of reading, watching or hearing how those ideas are presented. If content were just some ideas stung together, then people would read plot summaries rather than go see actual movies. That's not what they do, of course, because that would be boring. But movies that are all about presentation — e.g., big special effects with no plot — also get boring pretty fast.

People "get" great content — they get value from the ideas presented and they get value from how the ideas are presented. It's not great content, however, if someone has to explain why people *should* get it. They just get it, automatically. The ideas are inherently interesting, insightful, intriguing, helpful, enabling, informative or of value in some other way. And the presentation is technically proficient — the author knows how to tell a good story, write a good article, produce a good piece of video or execute whatever particular form of content the content happens to be.

Ecommerce websites are not movies but the same principles apply. People won't buy your product if they don't buy your content first. That's not fair, of course. Like most ecommerce sites, you are probably in the product (or service) business, not the content business. It's the product, not your content, that people are paying for. And

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it's the product, not your content, that people will be using long after they leave your website. It's also your product, not your content, that people will complain about if something goes wrong later. In fact, the better your content, the more your content skills will probably be ignored. On the other hand, the better your content, the more your product will shine.

So you want a lot of great content — in both senses, a lot of really valuable ideas conveyed with great presentation skills. Your content is everything on your website that consumers know and experience about your product before it actually comes off your site and into their hands. Your website content is also something you control virtually 100%. You get to decide what words, images, audio clips, etc. go up on your site and where. You control the layout, the descriptions, the links to other sites, the offers, the calls to actions — in short, the entire experience. It's all content! That is an amazing opportunity because it means you have almost 100% control over how people will respond to you, at least initially.

You do have other opportunities to influence, of course, as people try out or buy your product and word spreads — so, yes, actual performance counts for a lot, as does what other influential people in your industry say about you (including competitors). But even here your website content has a major impact. For one thing, your website is your first impression on the market, and first impressions are strongest. For another, a lot of third-party commentary is a response to what you say first — which means you get to help set the ground rules by which your product is judged. (At least you should help set the ground rules if you're doing content right.)

2

**FOUR
CONTENT
PRINCIPLES**

MAKING CONTENT ATTRACT, HOLD, AND MOVE CONSUMERS TO BUY

Just as ecommerce websites are not movies, they are also different from other kinds of marketing websites, although they share important traits with those as well. Content can't just be engaging, and it can't just promote products. It's got to :

1) Attract and hold the consumer's interest

2) Move the consumer from "yes, I'm interested" to "yes, I want to buy,"

3) Make the actual sale.

That's a heavy load. The good news is there are some known ecommerce principles that control how much success you have on all three fronts. Here are four of those principles:

1. CONSUMERS WANT TO BE EDUCATED

Product value is usually not self-evident, especially in a B2B, or business-to-business, context. So the first step in almost any product purchase is usually research. Even if they expect to ultimately buy in a store, consumers usually head to the web first for product information before walking out the door. (Ideally, of course, they'll also shop online once they visit your website.) The web lets them conduct their product research from the comfort of their own home or office. They can cover a lot more

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sources in a lot less time. They can often get information that's more difficult to get offline — information from articles, white papers, reviews and so forth. And, finally, they know that online they won't be dealing with pushy salespeople.

The fact that people come to your site in search of content is a huge advantage. It's not like you have to sell them on the idea of looking for product content in the first place. Of course, we all know if the website fails to take advantage of this opportunity — visitors quickly go elsewhere. But if you do meet that need, not only can you keep visitors on your site during their first visit, you can keep them coming back for more education until they are ready to buy. The way you keep them staying longer and coming back is by continuing to feed their need for content.

Content consumers typically want includes information about:

- Price

- What value they get by paying a higher price

- What they lose or risks they take by buying at a lower price

- What features are more or less important and why (including those they might not have previously considered)

- What other consumers and professional reviewers are saying

- How to use the product (perhaps in applications they might not have previously considered)

- Issues surrounding the product, such as environmental impact or fair trade

- How the product does what it does (especially important for B2B, where technical specialists are heavily involved in the purchase decision)

2. CONSUMERS WANT A SHOPPING EXPERIENCE, NOT JUST A PRODUCT

Content not only feeds people's informational need for data, it also feeds their emotional need to shop. As discussed later, research shows that women in particular — but many men as well — like the experience of browsing, comparing prices, fantasizing about what owning a particular item might be like, talking with other customers, talking with vendors and doing all the other activities that fall under the heading of shopping. Giving people more, and more varied, content is how you replicate that physical in-store experience in an online virtual environment.

3. YOU MUST STAND OUT

The bad news is that the web has made it very easy for competitors to speak to your target customer. The good news is that many of these websites look the same. Content is therefore key for creating a specific brand personality — for being known for selling into a particular market niche and in a particular self-identifying manner that people remember. This is important for attracting both people and search engines. If your content is brief, generic and uninformative, why should anyone "hang around"? If, on the other hand, the site becomes known as an authority; if the content is presented in a unique and memorable way, then more customers will come and rate your website higher. And so will search engines. If your site's content is similar to that on most other sites in your market, why should search engines rank it any higher? If, however, the content is different, that difference (if positive) will register and you'll rank higher in search results.

4. SEO IS CONTENT BASED

To rank higher, your content can't just be different. It must present more keywords that better support your particular brand and market niche. That is how you become a bigger SEO (search engine optimization) target. Not only must the content be more

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finely tuned on both an informational and presentation level, there must simply be more of it. That starts with knowing which keywords (the top 10 or so) you want each page of your website to rank highly on. That usually means striking a balance between keywords that are highly popular in your industry (but not necessarily differentiating) and keywords that are more specific to your niche (but less popular). More popular keywords will attract more searches in general, while more differentiating keywords will do a better job of pulling visitors looking for your specific kind of offering.

These four principles are the "what" of ecommerce content. But the "how to" also matters. Just providing lots of keyword-rich product information in a style that attracts attention is not enough. Engagement for the sake of engagement doesn't sell. Any good book does that. And even though any good ecommerce website performs a public service by educating buyers, ultimately that is not its objective either. How do you go from publishing an engaging, information-rich site, to one that actually sells product?

3

HOW
CONTENT
SELLS

# 5 ATTRIBUTES THAT DIFFERENTIATE MARKETING CONTENT

Selling is more than just marketing, of course. But *selling* is also more than just selling. If all your content does is pitch features and benefits and tries to close sales, then the only customers you'll likely sell to are those who are: 1) already knowledgeable about the category, 2) ready to buy, and 3) already on your site.

This is obviously a relatively small group. Of course, this is also a very important group, and one you definitely want to sell to at every opportunity. If someone is ready to buy, you don't send them an offer for a webinar instead. You make the "buy" button easy to see, the purchase instructions easy to follow, and the steps to purchase as few as possible.

As for the vast majority of potential customers — they're just like customers in a store. They may not be ready to buy at that very instant, but the reason they are in the store (or on your site) in the first place is because they are potentially interested in buying. Most likely they are open to the possibility. Notice, for example, the different impact blog content

DECIDE ON A PRODUCT/SERVICE	21%
REFINE CHOICES	19%
GET SUPPORT/ANSWERS	19%
DISCOVER PRODUCTS/SERVICES	17%
ASSURE	14%
INSPIRE A PURCHASE	13%
EXECUTE A PURCHASE	7%

"BLOG ARTICLES PLAY A ROLE IN THIS ASPECT OF THE PURCHASE PROCESS."

Figure 1: An October 2008 Jupiter Research study shows the extent to which blog content influences the buying decision in each phase of the purchase process.

has in the different phases of the purchase decision (Figure 1), even though a relative small percentage of that impact occurs at the final purchase itself. If you only give consumers a non-stop stream of sales pitches and nothing more, you will probably turn them off. They want to know more, and they want you (or one of your competitors) to engage them. In other words, you have to *market* to them — and that's what most of your content is about: getting these virtual tire-kickers to the point of purchase.

Five attributes that differentiate marketing content, therefore, are:
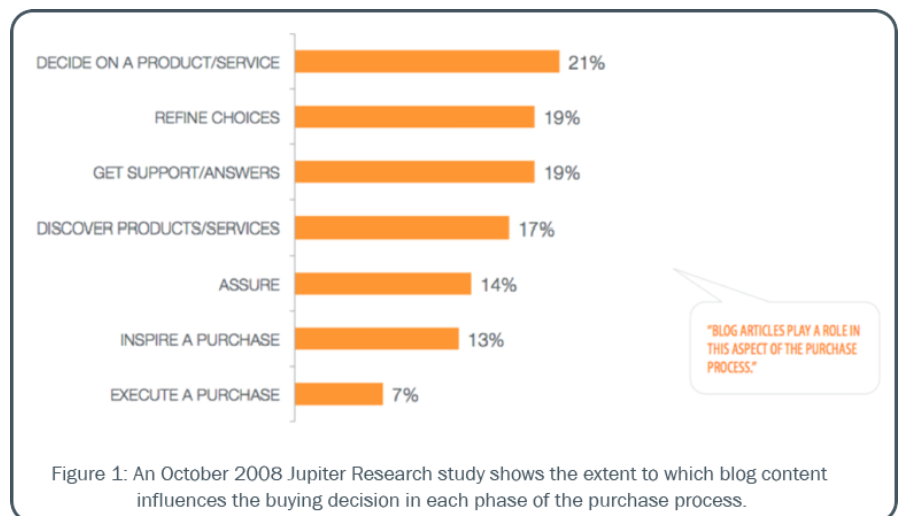
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1. IT DIFFERENTIATES

One way to make your product stand out is by making you stand out. In terms of presentation content, write in your own voice; don't try to copy someone else's style (or let a ghostwriter substitute his or her voice for yours). Write from your own experience with your own insights.

A great example of a differentiating voice is the couponing site, groupon.com, which uses comedy writers to pen the various deals, such as a $20 coupon worth a $40 meal at a local restaurant. As critics at the *New York Times*, have noted, the humor is an effective device for setting the site apart in what is increasingly a crowded market of me-too groupon imitators.

People tend to be attracted to other people, and not so much to objects, which means coming across like a human being makes you more relatable. In terms of informational content, present, or better yet, demonstrate what makes your product different, through videos or customer testimonials. Chances are that you got into your current business because you genuinely felt that you have something to contribute that no one else does — innovative technology, a better business model, a unique blend of services — whatever. Start there.

2. IT IS SHARED

Marketing content should be "sharable" — i.e., it is content people will *want* to share and is in a form that is *easy* to share — videos, blogs and how-to articles, for example. Videos attract search engines; they are easy for people to embed inside their own websites or blogs; and they are easy to link to. They can also be more visually interesting than just text — which makes people want to include them in their sites. Blogs are another good example of highly sharable content since they invite comments and are often linked to by other bloggers who wish to join in the conversation. The key here is to blog on subjects other people want to talk about — like themselves (rather than you) or controversial issues. How-to topics, whether in blogs or your main site, are also highly sharable since people use them as a resource. How-to content works best, again, when it focuses on the problem getting solved rather than on you or your product.

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One reason you want to share more with customers is that you want customers to feel comfortable returning the favor — sharing more with you — especially when it comes to information that will help you market to them in the future. That's information like their email address, product likes and dislikes, and demographic information (age, occupation, and so on).

3. IT IS LIKED

Being controversial and being liked may seem at cross-purposes. On the other hand, no one really likes and, worst, rarely *trusts* someone who agrees with everyone else and never expresses an individual opinion. Having an opinion means you're a player in your industry and someone to respect. Again, as a start for writing content, go back to what got you into your business. Bring that passion into your content. Speak to other people's needs, annoyances, and aspirations. Show that you have something real to contribute that will improve their lives. People will like you for it.

4. IT BUILDS RELATIONSHIPS

The first three marketing content "how-tos" just listed — differentiating, sharing, and being liked — all contribute to the fourth, which is to build relationships. Relationships have qualities that one-off transactions don't — qualities that keep customers coming back and spending more with less prompting. Relationships are sustainable over time. They encourage information sharing. They foster loyalty. And they reduce marketing and transaction costs. But, again, consumers have relationships with people and businesses, not with products. So even if consumers can't know you personally — your content has to have a personality (probably yours) and it has to speak *to* people rather than simply *about* them. Use words like "you" when speaking about a customer's need, rather than "they." Instead of using business cases to make a point, write success stories featuring heroes with whom your customers will identify. Stories have a setup, a conflict and a resolution — not

simply a "situation" and "results." Failure and success have real-life consequences — talk about them. The more empathy your content shows, the more connections you make between you and your audience, and the stronger the relationships.

5. IT PREDISPOSES TO BUY

Give the consumer reasons to *act*, rather than just consume content they passively enjoy, find valuable and can relate to. That requires calls to action — offers for more content (if they're not yet ready to buy) and offers to buy (if they are ready). Always giving consumers the "buy option" on each web page means you don't have to read their minds to know when they will likely be ready to buy. And always putting an option for more content (e.g., a white paper, webinar, etc.) prods them out of their passive state so that taking *some* action doesn't seem like a foreign concept. People who are already interacting with you when they're not buying have less of a mental barrier to cross when they do buy.

Calls to action are constructed differently than other kinds of content. They are what your high school English teacher would call imperatives, with words like "buy now," and "click here to download." They include rewards for taking *immediate* action, like the product's benefits, solutions to problems, technical knowledge, a discount, free add-ons (like a service contract) and so on. These rewards come in various "packages" — such as a white paper, webinar, free trial, and of course the actual product you ultimately are looking to sell — each of which calls for a different level of customer commitment.

When and *where* you employ a specific call to action is also important. And so is knowing when to apply the other techniques and principles just discussed. The when and where part of content strategy is called your *context*.

4

WRITE GREAT CONTENT

HOW TO WRITE ENGAGING CONTENT

Just like some authors always seem to write best sellers, some writing techniques always seem to produce more engaging marketing content almost regardless of what product or audience is being sold. Here are a few of those techniques:

MIX IT UP

As this HubSpot [blog article](#) on blog writing suggests, most readers don't like a steady diet of the same thing all the time — and not just for blogs. Mixing it up means giving readers both shorter and longer pieces of content, case studies as well as tutorials, sales pitches as well as articles designed to educate, humor as well as formal presentations, and so on.

BE CONSISTENT

You can be mix it up and still maintain a consistent voice and brand personality. In fact, you must if you want a brand people will remember and remember as being different from your competitors. That includes being consistent in your blogging schedule so people know when to expect your content, and look for it.

MAKE IT TOPICAL

Write what people in your industry care about *now*. Make yourself look relevant by referencing current trends and issues. If people are already interested in these topics, they will probably be interested in you if you have something relevant to say.

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BE PROLIFIC

One of the most effective content strategies is also the simplest — publish a lot of content. The more content you have — and the more information (and keyword) rich content you have — the greater the opportunity for both people and search engines to spend time on your site.

WRITE TO A PERSONA

Create in your mind (and on-screen) a profile of your target customer — shopper, buyer, business purchaser, consumer, etc. — and serve the content needs of that profile for both presentation style and information. What are they comfortable with? What do they need to know? Are they more "how-to" oriented, more "how's-it-work" oriented or more "what's the ROI?" oriented? Balance your content accordingly.

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5

CONTEXT DRIVES CONTENT

THE 3 BIGGEST CONTEXT VARIABLES

If content drives customer and search engine behavior, it is context that drives content. Context is all the variables that impact your choice of content at any given moment. Three of the biggest context variables are:

- Whether your business is B2B or B2C (business to consumer)

- Where your customer sits in the sales funnel

- Whether your customer is more of a shopper or buyer

1. B2B OR B2C?

Content targeted at business buyers is typically "richer" than content for consumers — meaning that there is more information on each web page and there are usually more web pages, blog articles, white papers, recorded webinars, and so on. There is simply more to say that is relevant to the buying decision. Business products and services often are more technical and have to be integrated with the existing products and processes of the buyer's business. That's not to say that all consumer markets don't require more content — vehicles being a good example of one that does. And, as mentioned earlier, content is an effective way to create differentiation, which is often harder to demonstrate in a consumer category. Even so, consumers typically have less of an appetite for the in-depth technical content that business buyers often seek and which B2B sites can leverage for sustaining ongoing involvement with the customer.

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B2B sites need that longer customer involvement, due to another B2B/B2C difference, which is that B2B products and services typically have a longer sales cycle. That's partly due to the complexity of the product and the complexity of integrating it into the business. And it's due to its higher cost compared to most consumer products. But it's also because of another difference between B2B and B2C markets, which is that multiple levels in the organization from different departments (e.g., IT and manufacturing) must approve the purchase. So not only do you need more content going into more depth over a longer time period, you also need to speak different vernaculars — IT speak, attorney speak, production speak and so on. That's difficult to do in any single content piece, such as a web page, white paper or video, and may require what might be considered multiple "channels," each with its own set of tailored audience-specific content items.

2. SALES FUNNEL POSITION

The journey from browser to buyer is often described as a sales cycle or sales funnel. The funnel metaphor is more apt because the number of top-of-funnel (TOF) browsers on your site is almost always less than middle-of-funnel (MOF) active leads and is much less than bottom-of-funnel (BOF) buyers. Each of the three positions — TOF, MOF and BOF — also requires different kind of content to move that customer further down the funnel. BOF content is obviously more about features and benefits with strong buy calls to action. Rewards — e.g., a 30-day free trial — can also be bigger

Figure 2: Where someone sits in the sales funnel helps determine the kind of content required to move them further down the funnel (and toward a sale).

because the customer has shown sustained interest and the investment risk is lower. TOF content would be much more educational. Calls to action would be more content oriented — e.g., "download our free white paper" — since both the need for education is greater and the risk of them just walking away is higher. "MOF" funnel sales leads

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must be nurtured. These folks have demonstrated interest, probably by accepting (e.g., "converting on") previous low-risk educational content offers. Nurturing content is content that is: 1) consistent; and 2) addresses specific questions and concerns — perhaps in response to shared information or behavior tracking (such as web pages visited). E-newsletters are great nurturing tools if they offer timely relevant content on a consistent on-going schedule.

3. SHOPPERS OR BUYERS?

As discussed earlier, some people like to shop as much for recreation as for acquiring a product or service, while others see shopping more as a means to an end. Research shows that women *tend* to fall more in the first category (but not always) and men in the second (but, again, not always). "Shopper" content indulges people's need to browse, learn and interact (such as with forums, blogs and Tweets). "Buyer" content uses calls to action and places these calls where they are easy to find.

Then there are sites, like car sites, that draw both shoppers and buyers. The key here is to indulge those who like to shop with lots of content and

What *Not* To Do

As with any strategy, when it comes to content, formulating strategy often requires understanding what *not* to do as much as learning what you should do — for example:

Don't borrow other people's content. This especially applies to product descriptions where the temptation is to simply copy and paste descriptions from suppliers' sites. Borrowed text adds nothing to your SEO ranking and makes you look "me-to" in the eyes of consumers.

Don't talk to (or about) your competitors. This applies to marketing content in general, not just web marketing or ecommerce. Talking about your customers raises their profile and can make you look defensive (i.e., follower) rather than a leader. You should be setting the tone and the defining the field on which competitors play. You also don't want to give your competitors SEO credit by referencing (or linking to!) their sites.

Don't be too promotional. Content that's all about "me" and "how great I am" tends to turn people off. Stick to talking about why certain techniques or innovations work better than others. People expect you to list features and benefits — i.e., reasons to buy — on a site whose purpose they know is to sell them something. But cast those features and benefits more as value to the customer than as evidence of how amazing you are.

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interactivity while also offering an efficient purchasing process for those looking to buy, such as by not forcing them to read a lot of content if they want to move right to purchasing.

A simple example is an online catalog consisting of multiple pages; each populated with rows of displayed items consumers can click on to buy or find out more information. Each cell in the table could contain an item's image, some brief text, and two links, one to more info and the other to buy. This structure satisfies both the consumer who wants more content and the one who is ready to purchase. It also allows you to put more products on a page or, alternatively, have extra space for additional content like customer quotes, special promotions and so on.

Another example is a resources page, where you list titles and short descriptions of white papers, customer testimonials and other educational materials. Again, rather than cram a lot of complete works on this page, just list short titles and short summaries with links to complete articles. That way the content is there for visitors who wish to "drill down" but not in the way of those just looking for an overview. As with B2B content, the ideal is to mix your shopper/buyer content to achieve the right balance for a particular user type, or for multiple user types at once.

In addition to top-level context drivers, such as the three just discussed, there are also lower-level drivers that attach to them, such as those previously mentioned for B2B like greater product complexity, higher customer spend, and a longer sales cycle. Any of these may also apply to a particular B2C context or some other context.
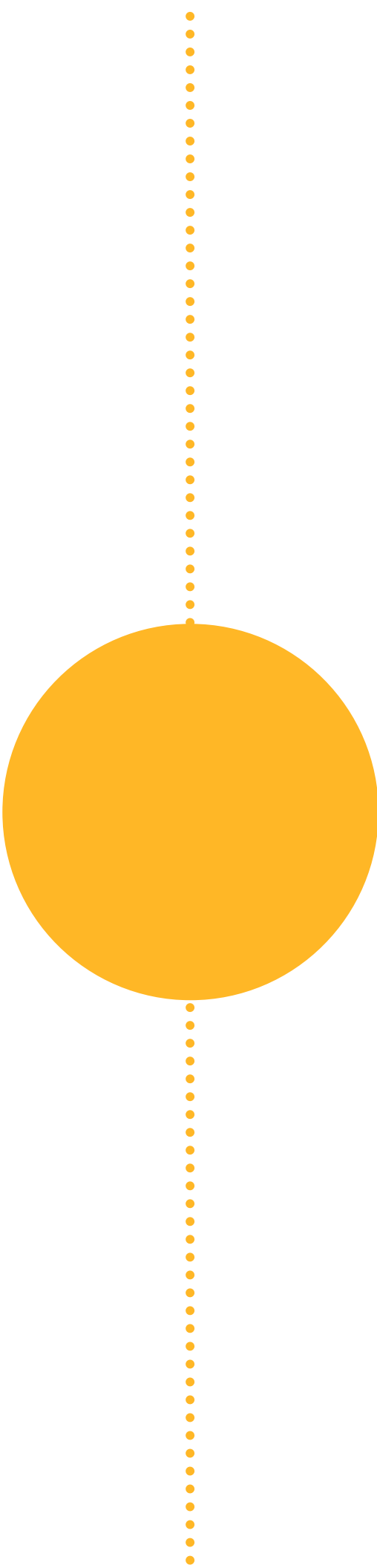
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FINAL WORD ON CONTENT FOR ECOMMERCE

Naming a particular context or technique, however, is not what makes your content strategic. There are many more situations that impact strategy — and specific ways to handle them — than can be covered in just a few pages. What these principles, how to's and contexts illustrate, however, is a framework for building a content strategy and why having a content strategy matters. Different people respond differently to different content, and it's important to know why. Because when you do,

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