



Performance Content:
Turning a Jog into a Marathon One Blog Post at a Time

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What is Performance Content and Why Should You Care?

Why have Babe Ruth, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Wayne Gretzky become so iconic they essentially represent their respective sports while thousands of other professional athletes have done an adequate job for their entire careers and then faded off into oblivion?

All of these sports legends - and many others we could name - came to embody the best their sport had to offer because of their exceptional performance.

It comes down to performance.

But “performance” has two meanings in that context:

- 1. Their statistical prowess compared to their competition.*
- 2. Their level of showmanship (decided by the fans).*

Additionally, truly stellar performance occurs over the long term. While there have been hundreds of athletes who have played a great game or even had a great season, the true superstars have consistently played better than their competition year after year.. and they’ve made it look good too.

Explaining the Sports Metaphor

Of course, this guide isn't about sports. It's about marketing for business success. Specifically, it's about inbound marketing using content.

In our sports analogy, the industry or market your company represents is the "sport," and every company in that industry that's currently creating content for marketing purposes is an "athlete."

Would you like to reach the Tiger Woods or Babe Ruth level of iconic status in your industry?

You can.

What you need is Performance Content.



The Benchwarmers and Second String Players



Every team has players that are never going to do anything really special. They're probably OK, maybe even good at playing the game, but they can't hold a candle to an elite superstar.

They're the benchwarmers and second string players that are still out there hustling every day, but they're just not making much of a difference and they're not getting the attention.

The majority of companies attempting inbound and content marketing today fall into this category.

They know that creating content is necessary if they're going to remain relevant. They know that they need to be active in social media if they want to engage with their audience, and they can probably tell that the old outbound marketing tactics that worked in years past have simply faded in value.

But they're going about it all wrong:

- Inconsistently
- Without a strategy
- With no accountability
- With no goals
- With no way to measure

Sure, they may have created a Facebook page and a Twitter profile, and someone might even fire off a status update now and then.

Maybe they've even set up a blog on their website and last year they uploaded six posts. Technically, they're in the game. But they're certainly not a champion.



What is Performance Content?

Performance Content is a seal of approval created by Sprout Content to signify that the content in question meets the following important criteria:



As you can guess based on that list of criteria, Performance Content isn't thrown together haphazardly, it doesn't cater to high volumes of low quality work, and it's constantly in a state of continual improvement.

Much like those superstar athletes we talked about.

Why Should You Care about Performance Content?

To put it simply, in a world currently drowning in billions of pieces of digital content, if you're not creating something special – something truly at the elite level in your industry – you're wasting your time.



And, unlike professional sports, in the inbound marketing game, if you're not standing out head and shoulders above the rest of the players on the field, you're not getting paid.

It's that important.

How to build a Performance Content System

- Creating Performance Content doesn't occur in a vacuum. It's not the work of one fantastic writer or one knowledgeable subject matter expert.
- Rather, Performance Content requires an established system that emphasizes high quality content created consistently based on a well-planned and measurable strategy.
- So, before we discuss how to create and distribute Performance Content itself, it's important to consider putting that system in place.



Identify your key players

Every successful Performance Content System is going to include people with all of the following skill sets:

- Subject Matter Experts
- Content Strategists
- Content Developers
- Content Distributors
- Content Monitors



It's possible for one person to handle more than one of these roles if the needed volume and complexity of the content is manageable, and often that's how most systems begin. However, more often than not, as the content needs of the organization evolve, the need for additional personnel to fill these roles expands.

Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)

These are the experts in the field your content applies to. Subject matter experts can be specific members of a company's internal team, from the owner or CEO to a staff member with particular expertise or product knowledge. Sometimes businesses work with consultants and advisors who have been brought in because of their knowledge on a particular topic.

They have a deep reservoir of information in their heads and enough experience to have a feel for what the target audience wants and needs to know. The trouble is, it's extremely rare for this individual or group to have both this kind of expertise AND the ability to effectively communicate it in writing (or in any other content medium chosen).



Content Strategists



These folks may or may not have enough in-depth knowledge of the subject matter (at least at the beginning), but what they do know is inbound marketing principles and best practices. They know how to research the behind-the-scenes factors that will determine how the SME's information will best appeal to the target audience and how the audience wants to consume that information.

The strategist dives deep into keyword research, demographics, audience segmentation, personas, and competitive research to develop a 360-degree view of the industry, the company's current position within the industry, and where they want to be. Then, they're able to develop a plan to most effectively get the company from point A to point B.

Content Developers

At the start, these individuals may need to dive in and get to know the industry better through SME interviews and research. But by the time they've created the first few pieces of content, they're well on their way to being experts themselves.

Their main tools are research skills, interviews with the SMEs, and the ability to learn quickly and translate what they learn into powerful pieces of content that are educational, entertaining, and inspiring. And they create these pieces based on the strategic plan set up by the Content Strategists.



Content Distributors



The Distributors (also known as implementers) are responsible for taking the content created by the Developers and getting it out in front of the target audience in the most effective way.

This often involves some basic content marketing tools like blogs, website content, social media activity, email marketing, and more. But the real value in their role comes from their ability to translate the Strategist's concepts into a structured plan that can be mapped to an editorial calendar, and measured thoroughly to determine its efficacy.

Content Analysts

Finally, the Content Monitors are responsible for using various analytical methods to track the content being distributed and determine what is most and least effective for various audience segments. Then, they complete a feedback loop by providing the results of their monitoring to the Content Strategist, so the strategy can be continually improved and the cycle can continue.

While it's possible for all these roles to be effectively filled with in-house talent, most companies do themselves a disservice by trying to shoehorn various existing personnel into these positions. A better option that many have chosen is to bring in an [inbound marketing agency](#) to handle all the content roles and focus their in-house talent on filling out the SME role as thoroughly as possible.

Assuming the agency is experienced and talented, this offers the benefit of plugging into an already established Performance Content System that can hit the ground running with your company's unique needs.

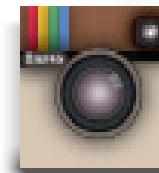


Identify your tools

While the benchwarmers and the second stringers will always gravitate to the same generic handful of inbound marketing tactics (blog, Facebook, Twitter, emails) the elite performers realize that every unique content strategy must include a customized collection of tools and distribution channels tailored to the specific information and audience being connected.

To that end, a Performance Content System will determine through strategic research and monitoring feedback which of the following options are going to most effectively accomplish the company's inbound marketing goals:

- On-site blog
- Off-site blog
- Microsite
- Gated white paper/ebook
- Ungated white paper/ebook
- Online press releases
- Print press releases
- Video marketing
- Podcasting
- Paid search engine marketing
- Facebook/Facebook ads
- Periscope
- Twitter/Twitter ads
- LinkedIn
- LinkedIn Pulse
- LinkedIn Groups
- Google+
- Google+ Communities
- Instagram/Instagram Ads
- Pinterest
- Snapchat
- Vine
- ... and any of a thousand other lesser known options.



If you're not familiar with one or more of these possible tools, an experienced inbound marketing agency likely is. Consider contacting them to ensure you have all the tools you'll need in your toolbox.

Establish your game plan

Even the most talented athletes aren't going to be able to shine on the field without an established game plan. This strategic plan is developed to ensure every member of the team knows what's expected of them, what needs to be accomplished, and how to accomplish it in the most effective way.

Similarly, to succeed, a Performance Content System has to include a structured game plan that puts all the roles and tools into order and interweaves them to maximize the value of each.

If the team is small and the established goals are fairly straightforward, this may be simple, one-page document outlining expectations. However, many Performance Content game plans will need to incorporate a number of different factors and may be quite lengthy.

But the effort expended early in the process to create this game plan will pay off a hundred-fold as the plan is carried out.



Working your Performance Content Game Plan

Once the system is well established, you can concentrate on actually working that plan by creating and distributing quality content on a consistent basis without having to reinvent the wheel with each piece.

Creating Performance Content

Every piece of content the team creates should follow this same general workflow:

- 1. The Content Developer and Content Strategist collaborate on a topic, approach, and goal based on the established game plan and strategy.*
- 2. The Developer interviews an SME (or utilizes previous interviews) to establish the company's take on the subject and the questions that need to be answered.*
- 3. The Developer crafts the content to best cover the topic and accomplish the goal.*
- 4. The content is then passed along for internal and external review as necessary, and then a final version is presented to the Content Distributor.*

While most content pieces begin in written form, it's important to realize that articles and other text-based content pieces are not necessarily the best option for every topic or audience. Video scripts, podcast scripts, infographic flows, and many other formats may be a better choice, and each of these must be written differently.

One of the key differences between Performance Content and the run-of-the-mill content the benchwarmers are constantly putting out there is that a talented Strategist, Developer, and Distributor team is going to be able to determine and execute the very best content format to reach every goal rather than relying on a cookie-cutter template for every inbound marketing program. As noted previously, true Performance Content meets [the following strict criteria](#):

Original: From the strategic plan to finished product, is every piece of content original and custom to your business? Or are there cleverly disguised cookie cutter elements popping up here and there?

Strategic: Is every piece of content based first and foremost on the established content strategy? Or are some of them there just because “we need a presence on...”

Purposeful: Does every piece of content you create have a purpose? Is it mapped to goals, personas, keywords, resources, and a desired outcome?

Helpful: Does your content have intrinsic value to someone in your target audience? If content is not helpful, educational, enticing, memorable or sharable, it’s not doing its job. The goal of your content is to help your customers in some way, and effortlessly take your buyer through your sales funnel with delight.

Planned: No Performance Content appears miraculously. From videos and infographics to ebooks and blog posts, every type of content must be planned as part of your strategic game plan and mapped to goals.

Actionable: Performance Content can't leave your customers or prospects hanging. Instead, it needs to have a clearly defined "next step" in the form of a Call to Action to easily guide them on their journey.

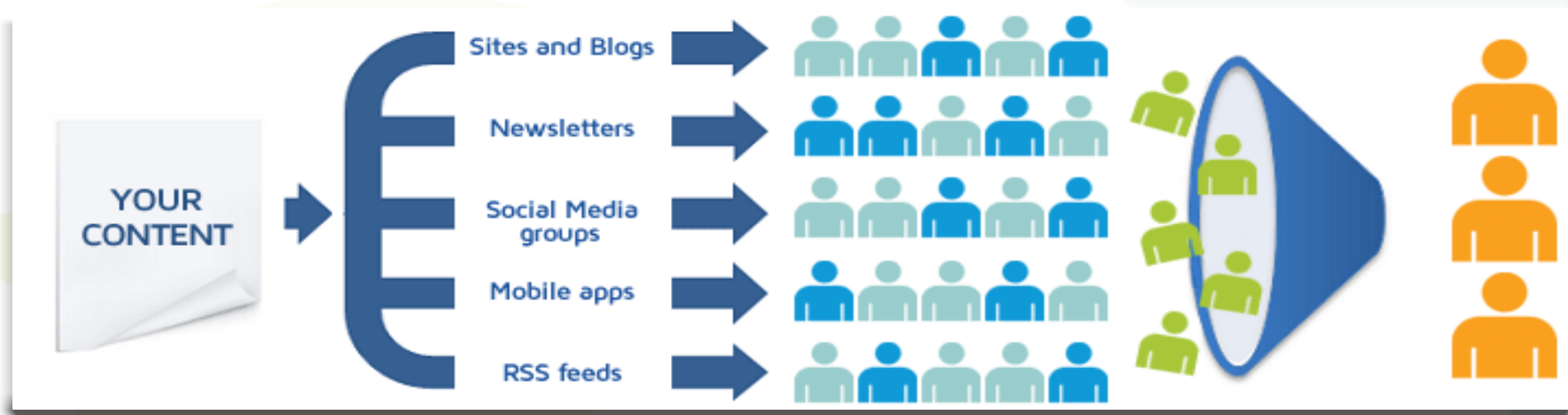
Measureable: No athlete can be considered "the best" if no one measures what they've accomplished. How great is your content if you don't know what it's doing for your business? Performance Content delivers proven results, positive ROI and the high-level content that your fans are looking for.

Content that meets these criteria has the very best chance to accomplish strategic goals for the business and help them stand out as elite in the industry.

Distributing Performance Content

While distribution should be planned out during the initial strategy phase, executing on this part of the Performance Content system requires a thorough understanding of the available channels, what audiences frequent those channels, and how the content can most effectively be distributed using them.

Social media is a huge part of this process these days because it's become the go-to source for content sharing and consumption for many different audiences. But, it's not the only content distribution option available and a talented Content Distributor will always keep their eyes open for channels that could otherwise be overlooked, but which can work perfectly for the unique needs of the company and the content in question.



To determine the best distribution channels, methods, and formats, the entire Performance Content team needs to work together to cover these areas:

- Target persona demographics
- Target persona psychographics
- Where does the target persona spend time online?
- Where do they spend time offline?
- What level of trust do they place in various distribution channels?
- How do they view sponsored content as opposed to organic?
- What content formats are most appealing to them historically?
- What new trends seem to be gaining popularity?
- How do they tend to interact with and engage with content, if at all?
- ... along with many other vital questions.

Based on the answers, they can narrow down the seemingly endless selection process to those distribution channels, methods, and formats that are most likely to achieve the goals laid out in the game plan.

Monitoring Performance Content

While technically the last piece in the Performance Content workflow, in practice monitoring actually serves as the first stage in the ongoing cycle of continual improvement. It's the results of the content that informs the ongoing planning, creation, and distribution of future content.

There are literally hundreds of tools that can be used to monitor content efficacy and optimization. Some are general in their approach and apply to nearly any kind of digital content you could create, while others are much more niche-oriented, specific to a particular channel or format.

Here are some of the most popular and useful monitoring tools Sprout Content has used successfully:

- **HubSpot** – A full-scale content creation, distribution, and optimization platform, [HubSpot](#) includes robust analytics and reporting functionality that makes it simple and intuitive to determine what's working and what's not as your Performance Content game plan evolves.
- **Google Analytics** – While not as easily integrated into the complete content flow as a complete platform like HubSpot, Google Analytics has the advantage of being free and it too offers a powerful analytics package for nearly any form of digital content.

- **Hootsuite** – Specific to social media analytics and scheduling, Hootsuite offers a central dashboard where you can theoretically control all your social distribution and interactions, while monitoring what's working best and what's not. It has some limitations if you're using smaller, niche channels.
- **Channel-specific tools** – Including Facebook Insights, Twitter Analytics, Pinterest Analytics, Iconosquare (Instagram analytics), and many other tools specific to the distribution channel or content type being analyzed.

There are plenty more where these came from. More important than the specific tool(s) used, however, is the fact that ongoing monitoring and feedback must take place to ensure that a content strategy continues to perform at the elite level that's going to accomplish the goals set out for it.

Becoming a Content Marketing All-star

As noted at the beginning, elite athletes aren't just talented. They're not just consistent. They're not just impressive.

They're all of these things and more, and they keep it up over the long term. Similarly, Performance Content – the kind of content that's going to stand out as something special in your industry and garner attention from the people you're most interested in: your customers – requires talent, planning, effort, and creative flair, all utilized consistently and strategically over the long term.

To accomplish this most effectively, we strongly recommend partnering with an [experienced inbound marketing agency](#) who already has a reputation for consistently creating Performance Content. Together, we can make you into the elite, iconic all-star you want to be.

ABOUT

SPROUTCONTENT The Business of Conversation™

Sprout Content is an inbound marketing agency, specializing in Performance Content for “Unglamorous Industries.” With backgrounds in PR, journalism, marketing and copywriting at tech companies, start-ups, global brands and B2B businesses, we’re more than a collection of crafty marketers. Our approach to content marketing is strategic and analytic, creative and collaborative. We develop meaningful connections between businesses and their customers, paired with deep insights that impact your strategy, and deliver the tangible results you’ve been looking for.

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