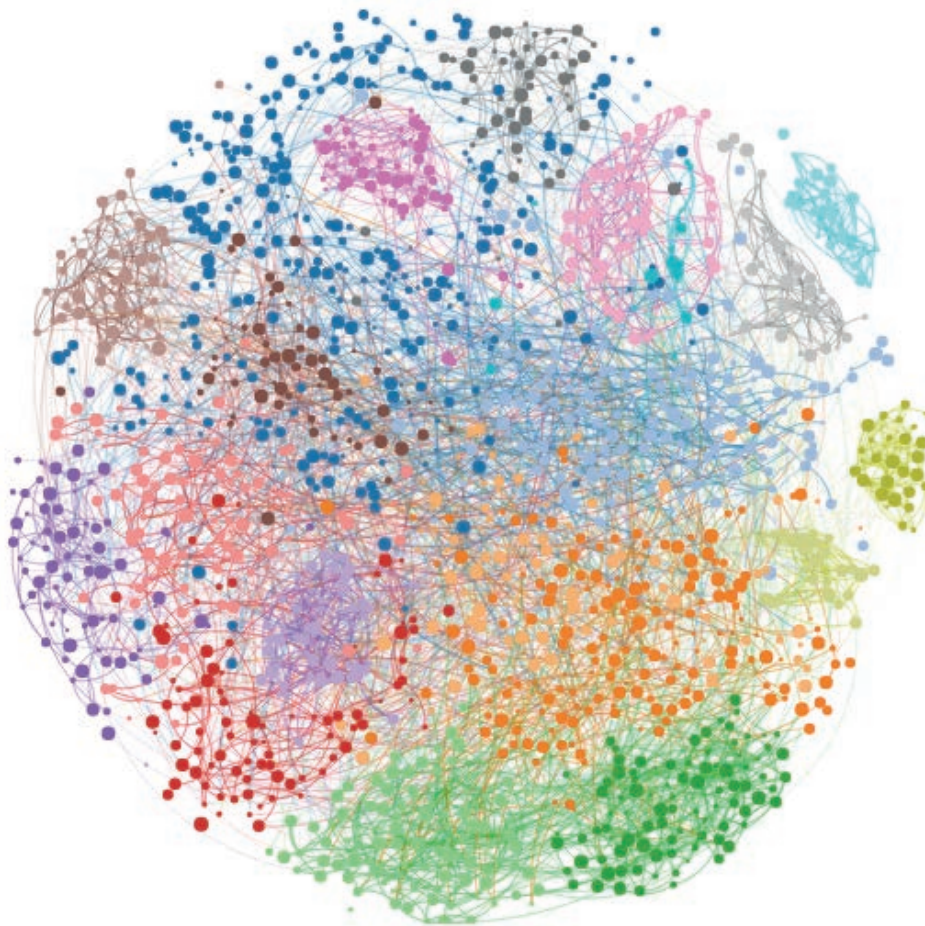

How to Identify, Understand and Grow Your Ideal Content Audience



Observations on the Alpha Audience

Mark Schaefer

Executive Director, Schaefer Marketing Solutions

Tim Burke

Co-Founder and CEO, Affinio

Table of Contents

Foreword.....	3
Emergence of the Alphas.....	5
Understanding Your Alpha Audience.....	6
Identifying and Understanding Alpha Audience.....	7
The Audience of Your Audience	12
How to Grow Your Alpha Audience.....	14
Create Data-Driven Content	14
Strategic Partnerships	14
Paid Amplification.....	14
Pay attention to the small signals	15
Understand Your Competitor’s Audience.....	15
Monitoring Growth.....	16
Activating your Alpha Audience.....	18
Conclusion	21
About the authors.....	22

Foreword

By Mark W. Schaefer, author of *The Content Code*

Several years ago, I began to feel uncomfortable with the digital marketing space. I couldn't put my finger on it but my client work just seemed ... more difficult.

And then I saw data on the exploding amount of content on the web, the ever-rising level of general noise, and the troubling downward trends in engagement, page views, and conversions.

Other research projected even higher levels of noise on the web in the years to come. Clearly the economics of content marketing were changing, and fast. But what do we do about it?

I studied this for more than a year and produced a solution via a book, *The Content Code*. I am very proud of this book and the impact it has had on our industry.

The Content Code spells out the strategy to win on the web in an era of incredible information density. But there was one chapter that seemed to grip people and create the most conversations: "The Alpha Audience."

In this chapter I articulated the economic importance of content sharing on the web. People who share our content are our advocates. They are our most profitable customers and drive more sales through recommendations than any other customer group. They are the heartbeat of our business.

And yet ... do you know who they are? If you're like most businesses, the answer is probably no.

As I go around the world discussing these ideas, this is the question I get most – "Tell us about the Alpha Audience, and what do we do next?"

When I met Tim Burke of Affinio for the first time on a beautiful fall day in New York City, I knew I had met a man who could help me answer that question. Tim is equally obsessed with identifying and caring for our best customers and he was creating some great software to help us do that.

The idea for this eBook was a natural way we could collaborate, and we present to you our ideas on How to Identify, Understand and Grow Your Ideal Content Audience.

Emergence of the Alphas

The evolution of marketing through mass media and the emergence of multi-channel marketing has left consumers in a fog. They see thousands upon thousands of marketing messages everywhere they look, everyday. They have been conditioned to ignore this bombardment, a phenomenon known as the “consumer attention crisis”.

Content marketing was seen as an efficient way to cut through the noise. Brands have become publishers, creating more and more content with the goal of repeatedly reaching their target audience and making meaningful connections.

While this is seen as an efficient channel to reach your audience, it is challenging to repeatedly create content that resonates. Content performance has moved to a dangerous place of clicks, subject lines, and vanity metrics, while steering away from a concentration on creating quality content that your audience wants to read and share.

The real business value of content is the audience that it reaches. In fact, the economic value of content is zero unless it is seen and shared. This suggests that we need to develop an entirely new competency of finding, nurturing, and rewarding these special people.

In this eBook, we will explore how we can begin to do that.

Understanding Your Alpha Audience

For decades, marketers and advertisers broadcasted messages in hopes of connecting with their audience. As consumers became more informed and more choice was introduced, they were empowered to make their own decisions and began to lose trust in what brands were saying.

Today, we rely on marketing strategies that pull people toward our brand. Content marketing is a way to tell your brand story, provide answers to your consumer's questions, and ultimately gain trust that leads to business benefits.

With the fragmentation in channels available to reach consumers and the call for content to engage them, consumers today are overwhelmed by messages. From the time they wake to the time they go to bed, they are being bombarded with brand messaging vying for their attention. The marketing firm Yankelovich estimates a consumer gets hit with at least 5,000 marketing messages each day.

Content marketing – essentially adding to the problem -- may seem like an awkward way of approaching this crisis! Why consider creating more content as an effective way to reach our audience?

Clearly in this era of Content Shock, we need to not only be focused on how we create our content, but also employ strategies to distribute it, promote it, engage influencers, syndicate it, and find other ways to get it to move.

But perhaps the most obvious strategy is right in front of us. How do we find consumers most likely to enjoy and share our content?

Mark Schaefer defines this highly valuable group of individuals as your Alpha Audience. Research shows that these most loyal members of your audience:

- Are more than 250 percent more likely to transmit your content.
- Sell eight times more of your goods through recommendations than they buy themselves
- Are 150% more profitable than other customers.

Cultivating and growing this audience will lead to a reliable content reach and performance. To do this you need to first understand who these highly-valuable, engaged individuals are.

Identifying and Understanding Alpha Audience

Your Alpha Audience is the elite and engaged tribe at the top of the social sharing food chain, the bedrock of your business. Something about your content has kept them coming back for more and drives them to tell their friends about it. These people can be relied upon to share your content consistently. This reach is extremely important to your content success. How do you understand who these people are? What are they interested in? Who are they sharing your content with? How do you cultivate and grow this audience?

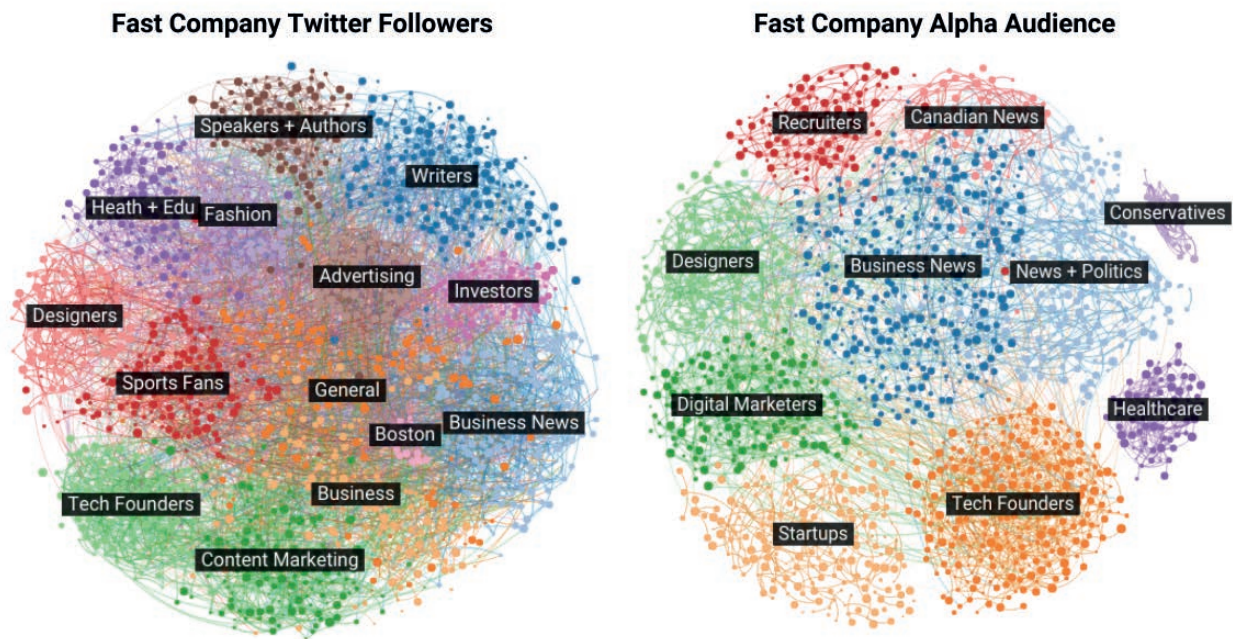
Your whole audience may not socially engage – some of your audience may be connecting offline or in private messages that are hard to track. You likely have an idea of who some of the top individuals are who share your content, because they will engage with you, make comments or ask questions. What about those who read your content, then share it without participating in the conversation? How do we get a deeper understanding of your entire Alpha Audience, even those “in the dark?”

Audiences can no longer be seen as homogenous group defined by demographics. We can no longer define an audience by “Women aged 18-49 located in the United States.” Within a broad demographic category, there are specific interest-based groups that aren’t defined by gender, age, or location. The people most likely to share your content can be better represented by their interests, affinities, and the other content they consume.

“Social graph” data analysis is the most comprehensive way to understand the different interest-based tribes that exist within a huge potential audience. Social graph analysis considers the critical connections that exist within your audience. For example, a “follow” can be seen as a social signal of interest but when we combine that with other big data

we can even find other like-minded people who might be important to you. By analyzing the billions of network connections that exist within your audience, you can for the first time, understand your Alpha Audience.

To demonstrate this, we ran an Affinio analysis on the US-based Twitter followers of Fast Company magazine. Fast Company is a monthly American business magazine that focuses on technology, business, and design. Briefly, Affinio’s algorithm looks at everyone within a defined audience, and then groups people into tribes based on similar interests and affinities. Below, we can see the difference between the Fast Company Twitter audience and their ideal Alpha Audience. While there are a lot of similarities between the two, there are some tribes that emerge and others that drop off.



Let’s dive into a few of the communities within Fast Company’s Alpha Audience to understand them further. Here are snapshots from the ‘Designers’, ‘Digital Marketers’, ‘Tech Founders’, ‘Healthcare,’ and ‘Recruiters’ tribes. The tiles represent the contextually relevant interests to that tribe. On the right, you can see the most popular keywords they use to self-describe and the most-used hashtags within the tribe.

Graphic Designers Tribe



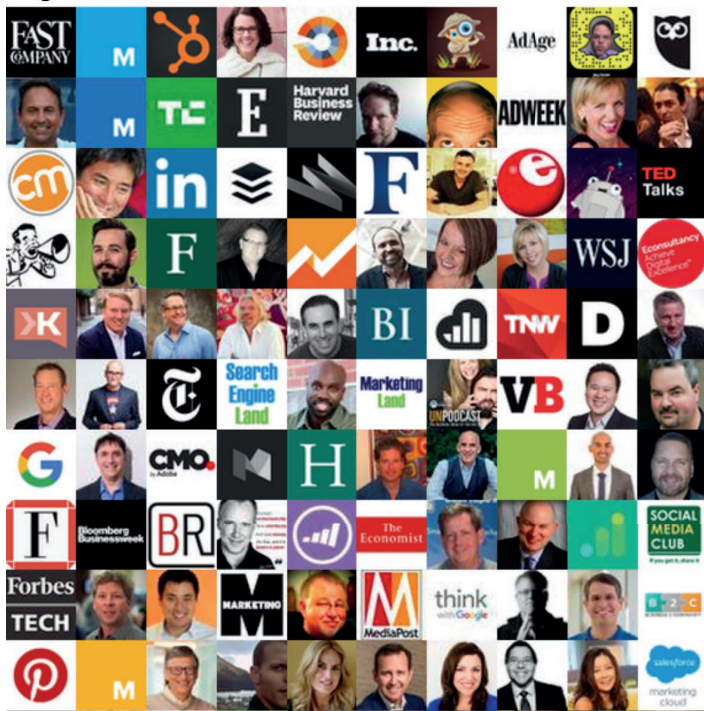
product enthusiast work career consultant strategy tweets innovation brand food business digital music coach creative graphic designer care job life director ux tech agency + hr marketing news people founder technology travel online strategist experience talent service manager writer opinions god content author

mobile designthinking facebook blizzard2016 sotubusiness startups starwars architecture gif branding socialmedia startup iot vr art twitter wefnyc quote tech tbt hr ai apple mlkday ux ces2016 digitalmarketing seo work bigdata innovation food davidbowie creativity flint women content culture

Twitter Bio Keywords

Hashtags Used

Digital Marketers Tribe



sports music women company founder #marketing strategy travel coach fan technology online brand digital manager tech real business design art care writer lover content creative mom life marketer ux work consultant director talent news hr ceo #socialmedia author god twitter #socialmedia editor professional strategist people enthusiast food views passionate career executive helping

digitalmarketing success quote leadership marketing tech seo entrepreneur business digital twitter mobile work content ux facebook design startup bigdata career advertising hiring startups smm 2a mlkday lasvegas vancouver

Twitter Bio Keywords

Hashtags Used

Tech Founders Tribe



Healthcare Tribe



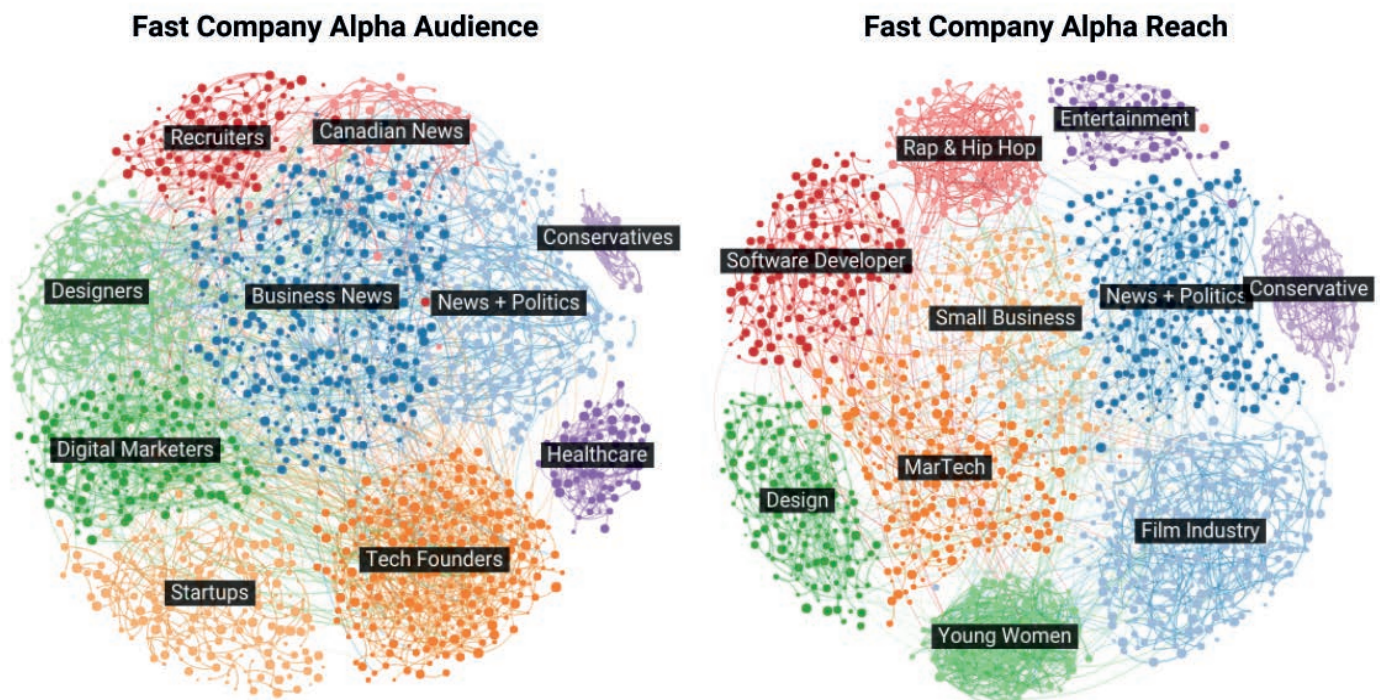
Social graph analysis sheds a light for the first time on this elite group of high-potential content consumers and sharers. The tribes can be seen as the data-driven personas that exist within Fast Company’s Alpha Audience.

From this, we can see that within their Alpha Audience, there is a vast difference in interests and specific individuals in the group. Their content is attracting many different interest-based tribes. However, you can see how each would be interested in Fast Company's content. But what about the Alpha Audience's audience? Who are these people reaching when they share their content?

The Audience of Your Audience

You have this reliable audience that is always sharing your content, but who are they reaching? What is the entire value of your potential content reach?

To get an understanding of the value of Fast Company's Alpha Audience, we analyzed the audience of their audience -- all of the followers of Fast Company's tribes. As you can see below, some significant new tribes appear.



As outlined, many of these secondary tribes also align well with the Fast Company target audience – the content would be relevant to them. New relevant audience groups emerged, such as 'Software Developers', 'MarTech,' and 'Small Business'. Some less relevant tribes appeared as well, such as 'Entertainment', 'Film Industry' and 'Rap & Hip Hop'. This gives us an indication of the value of the Alpha Audience's reach. In this case, Fast Company's content is going beyond its primary audience and is being shared with additional relevant tribes.

This secondary audience illustrates how valuable this group of content sharers are. They not only reliably share your content; they are reaching the right audience beyond your social sphere. This “Alpha Reach” is allowing Fast Company to connect to new and valuable tribes that they wouldn’t be reaching otherwise.

More important, these sharers represent advocacy. When a person shares content, they are “standing up” in a virtual way and saying, “I believe in this. I found it interesting, and I think it will be interesting to you.”

This is a critically important point. Your Alpha Audience is actively and organically growing your business. Research from The New York Times showed that 70 percent of adults say their purchasing decision is affected by content they see shared on the web. It’s no wonder that understanding who is sharing your content is a fundamental element to a digital strategy today.

How to Grow Your Alpha Audience

Now that you have a better idea of who your Alpha Audience is, let's explore the different way to cultivate and grow it.

Create Data-Driven Content

You know that interest-based sub-tribes exist within your Alpha Audience, so now you're able to better tailor your content strategy to align with these individual's interests. You can dive deeper into each tribe to learn more about their culture and what other content resonates with them. By having a deep understanding of the nature of your audience, and their audience, you are now in a better position to create content that is seen and shared.

Strategic Partnerships

Knowing what your ideal audience is interested in allows you to identify data-driven partnerships with audience influencers, brands, and celebrities. Knowing where these audiences intersect and overlap can help you select strategic partnerships that you know are relevant to your community and will resonate with them.

Paid Amplification

While consumers today are bombarded with ads, they don't ignore them all. Relevant and timely ads will still catch their attention. Through social graph analysis, each tribe has an 'interest profile'. Using Affinio's lookalike modeling, you are able to find more people who are similar to your current Alpha Audience. You can then place highly targeted ads with data-driven content and tailored creative that you know will resonate with a particular tribe.

Pay attention to the small signals

There are the small, still voices who are clearly telling us they're there, but we can't necessarily detect their quiet signals and capture the data through conventional dashboards.

Is it possible that you could somehow organize "small signal sleuthing" to discover a whole new category of passionate customers? Consider:

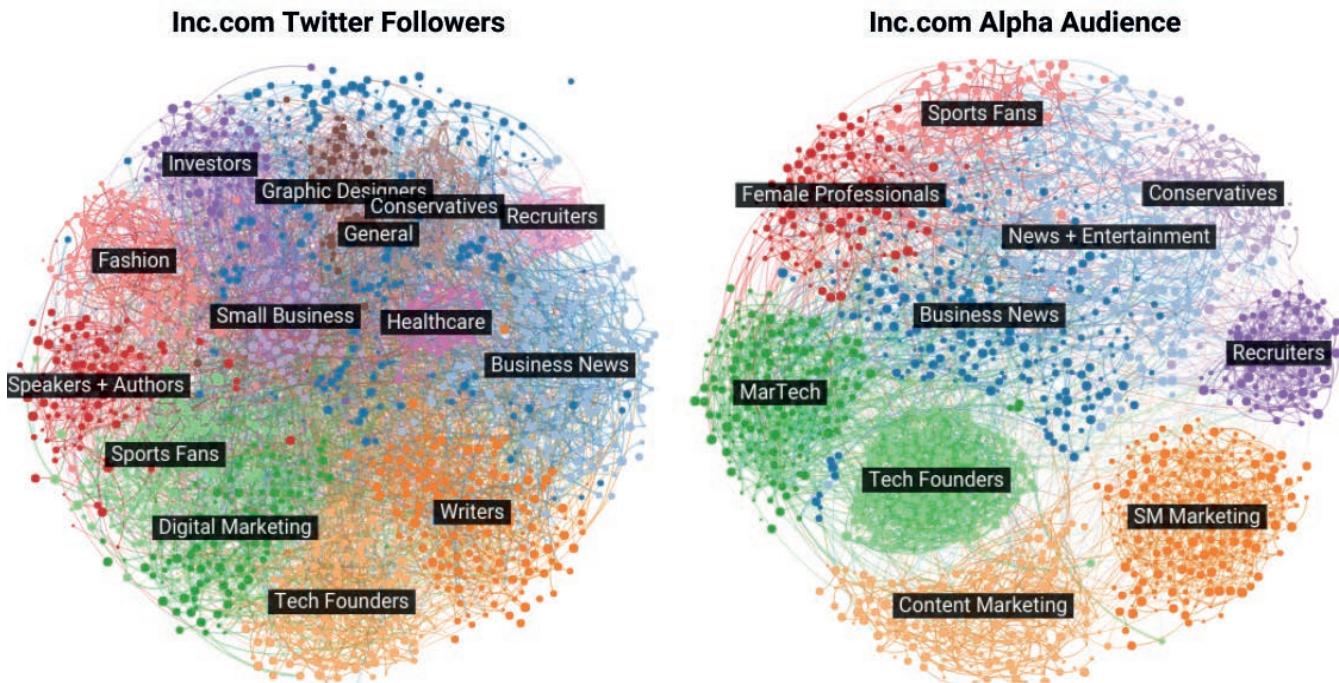
- Somebody leaves you an endorsement for "digital marketing" on LinkedIn. This might be their lone small signal that they're a fan. What if you could determine that in fact this was no idle act — this person only gives out two endorsements per year. Wouldn't that be meaningful to know?
- What if a woman among your followers only tweets a few times a month. Her level of tweeting is so obscure that she is invisible on the social analytics radar. But what if you could determine that 25 percent of her tweets were about your company? Isn't that a "gray signal" that this person cares about your content in an extraordinary way?
- What if you knew that there is a person who ONLY comments on your blog? That means something, even if they only comment twice a year.

Quiet is not irrelevant!

To discover these important signals, it may require digging deeper into traditional analytics.

Understand Your Competitor's Audience

Understanding who is consuming your competitor's content is a great resource for identifying potential areas of growth. As an example, we've analyzed the followers of INC.com and identified their Alpha Audience.



As we can see, a lot of the tribes are very similar to Fast Company’s. However, there are a few that stand out as potential target tribes. The ‘Content Marketing’ and ‘Social Media Marketing’ tribes could be target tribes of interest.

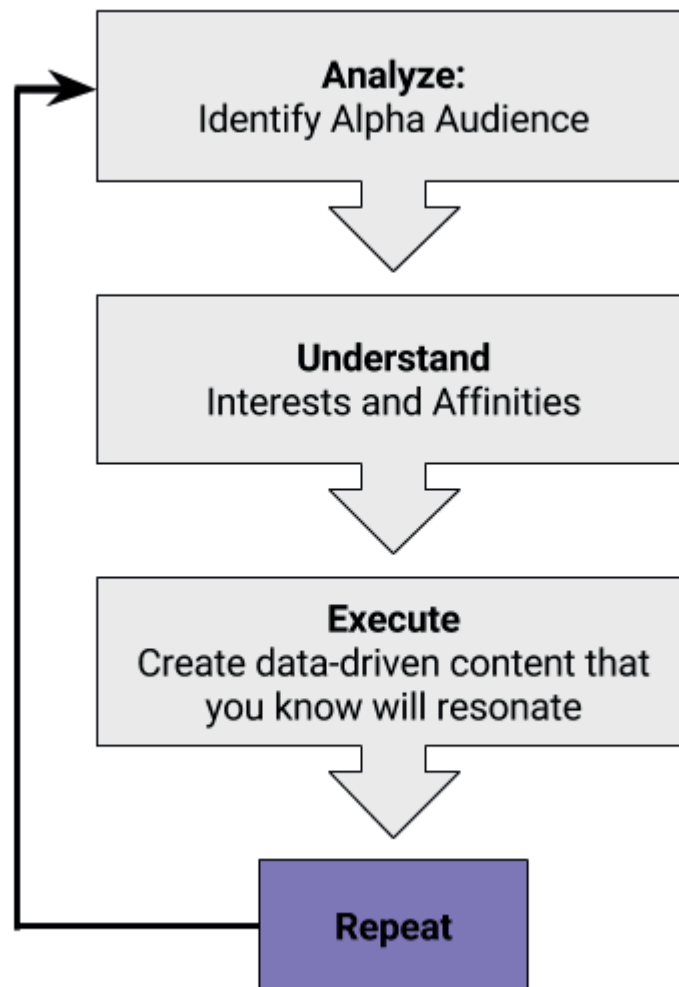
With this analysis, INC would be armed with the information to tailor data-driven content that will resonate with their unique tribes. To engage them, learn more about their interests and the content they consume to begin engaging these competitor Alpha tribes.

Monitoring Growth

Now that you understand who your Alpha Audience is through their interests and the content they consume and you have employed data-driven strategies to increase content performance and reach new Alpha tribes, how do you measure Alpha Audience growth?

By taking a regular snapshot analysis of your alpha audience, you can monitor which tribes are growing, which are shrinking (if any) and what new tribes are appearing. This gives you an indication of success. When you have identified tribes that you would like to grow and have employed strategies to target them, you can see if your target tribes are growing (or appearing) through these Alpha Audience snapshots.

Regular analysis keeps your finger on the buzz of your Alpha Audience. It continues to inform your content strategy, allows for adjustments to understand who exists within your ideal audience, informs what their current interests are and how they change over time. Tailoring your content strategy to these changes allows you to stay relevant.



Activating your Alpha Audience

Melyssa Banda is the Head of Marketing and Communications at WD, a Western Digital Company, and leads global communication strategies across PR, Digital Marketing, Social Media, Brand Development, Consumer Marketing and new innovation initiatives.

She is a marketer on the cutting edge of the Alpha Audience ideals, a professional who is activating her best customers in creative ways to drive measurable economic gains.

We were lucky enough to talk to Melyssa for this eBook and learn more about her unique approach. We loved her stories because they represent the aggressive and customer-centric strategies beyond mere content that we believe will create wins in this era of Content Shock.

Here is our discussion with Melyssa:

Many people don't know where to start with this idea of an "Alpha Audience." How do you find your most active audience?

There are many tools we use, software of course is critical, but also some traditional techniques like personal outreach, surveys, connecting with people in brand forums, blogs, even direct messaging. Like you, we recognize the critical importance of social sharing. That is certainly a key to finding brand advocates.

We monitor our customers wherever we can and when we can't use technology we will pick up the phone and talk to people.

I should note that when we talk about our Alpha Audience, it might not be all good news. We look at the positive advocates of course, but we also connect with our detractors, too. They may have the most passion and insight of all!

The key to product development is finding the pain points. That information may be more likely to come from people who dislike the brand. They're usually more vocal than the brand advocates so that is an important part of our outreach.

How do you understand their needs and the affinities they have with you and your company?

We are constantly reviewing the needs and views of our most active customers through social and community comments. We also have an influencer program called Digerati where we work closely with a team of professionals to understand their workflow and pain points.

In addition, we also have a Reseller Council where we hear directly from our partners. They provide us additional feedback on our product lines, marketing campaigns as well as collaborate on new ideas. We bring them in to onsite and offsite meetings. We see these individuals as an extension of our team and make them part of our development process. We create affinities by working together on new initiatives and products.

Our marketing team connects with people personally and directly. It might be a phone call or a direct message to let them know we care and that we're listening. We have regular surveys and have an amazing 80 percent response rate because they know we are really listening and that we respond. They can see the engagement and commitment. Our team sent out more than 300 personal thank you notes to the people who took our survey, including those who might not be our biggest fans.

That probably surprises a lot of people who you treat your detractors like your best customers.

It does, but I think it impresses them too. It makes an impact. My proudest moments are when we turn detractors into fans simply by connecting with them.

One of the things that impresses us most about WD. You're not just plowing through customer data. You're making human connections. A lot of big companies struggle with the idea of scaling a human connection.

That is a priority for the marketing team and the entire company. We want our executives to see something more from our customers besides a Net Promoter Score. We actively get them in front of customers.

What do you do to nurture these relationships on an ongoing basis?

We give the Digerati early access to our products so they have a hand in the development process in some cases. We also ask many of our end customers how they are using our products or new emerging technologies. They are a tremendous source of our key learning and insight that create future product categories. Some of our biggest product launches came as a direct result of this activity.

We also provide regular updates on our products and processes and we have a regular schedule of personal outreach to these important customers.

For the last few years we have hosted an event at the Consumer Electronics Show for our WD Fans. A few years ago a mommy blogger attending one of these events was talking with one of our executives for 30 minutes before she realized he was the president of the company. Her jaw dropped on the floor!

Our vice presidents will often make personal phone calls to thank people for their business or to respond to the critiques. By giving them direct access, they hear the voice of the end customer and can help me drive the necessary change or investments within the company.

Are you able to connect this intense focus on your top customers to bottom-line results?

Absolutely. This group has been essential to our product development efforts. They are instrumental in helping us identify opportunities for us to fill a void or improve upon. Because they know us and trust us, they are eager to be part of the process and help us solve problems. That makes us a better company.

I can point to \$50 million in incremental revenue we gained through a product launch that emerged from our engagement efforts. That new product has become the category leader in its space.

Conclusion

Content performance doesn't have to hinge on the back of shares, likes, and clicks. Ideal performance metrics should be based on your content's ability to ignite and grow. You can't underestimate the business value of the tribe of content sharers. You are creating content to raise awareness, set yourself apart and build thought leadership. These are the people that will get you there.

By understanding the interests and affinities of your ideal audience, it's easier than you think to cut through the noise and build meaningful connections with your consumers. Having this foundational understanding allows you to be more efficient with your content creation and create reliable content performance.

Building content that consistently resonates with your ideal audience will allow you to grow your audience, build awareness and establish yourself as a trusted thought leader in your field.

About the Authors



Mark W. Schaefer is a globally recognized author, speaker, educator, and business consultant who blogs at {grow} — one of the top five marketing blogs of the world. He teaches graduate marketing classes at Rutgers University and has written five best-selling books including *The Tao of Twitter* (the best-selling book on Twitter in the world) and *The Content Code*, named by INC magazine as one of the Top five marketing books of the year. His clients include Pfizer, Dell, Adidas, and the US Air Force. He has been a keynote speaker at prestigious events all over the world including SXSW, Marketing Summit Tokyo, and the Institute for International and European Affairs. He has appeared as a guest on media channels such as CNN, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times and CBS News.



Tim Burke is Co-Founder and CEO of Affinio. Affinio's marketing intelligence platform is for digital advertisers and marketers who need in-depth audience insights to guide their strategy, planning and buying. Unlike traditional cookie/pixel-based tracking technologies, Affinio's affinity engine analyzes billions of social connections found within audiences with similar interests, behaviors, and networks. This affinity-based approach to audience identification empowers advertisers and marketers to optimize their campaigns and create higher ROI.

Credits: Mark Schaefer photograph by JoPhoto