VIDEO 1: WHY ARE TOPIC CLUSTERS IMPORTANT?

Hi, I'm Justin with HubSpot Academy. Welcome to the "Creating Topic Clusters and Pillar pages" class.

To start, let's be real for a minute. It takes a lot of effort to create content that gets you found online.

Content marketers are constantly battling for the attention of their audience. But with all the content being published online, search engines like Google are being forced to better organize and showcase the content they think would be helpful to the searcher. This led Google to release a zoo of updates over the years.

The first notable update, which really shook things up, was Google's "Hummingbird" algorithm update in 2013. This update focused on parsing out phrases rather than focusing on specific search queries. Many search engine optimizers and content marketers viewed this as an initial shift from a keyword and topic focus to content creation and website organization.

The next major update happened in 2015 — Google's RankBrain algorithm update. RankBrain is Google's machine-learning artificial intelligence system that interprets people's searches to find pages that might not have the exact words they searched for. Google is able to do this by associating past search history with similar themes and pulling together keywords and phrases to provide a better context-driven search engine results page.

All this change brings opportunity for content marketers to be found and, more importantly, found by their ideal audience. That's a key facet to creating successful content in today's online environment. Most forget it's not just about creating content for the search engine. Search engines aren't the ones filling out the forms on your website. Search engines aren't the ones sharing your content on social media. Search engines aren't your customers; humans are.

If you want to create effective content that converts visitors into leads and eventually customers, you need to create a helpful, positive user experience that solves for both the searcher and the search engine, not just one or the other.

Here's how your content can solve for both: Create targeted clusters of relevant content that each cover a specific core topic in depth. These targeted clusters then need to lead to a centralized hub, known as a content pillar.

What is a content pillar? A content pillar (aka pillar page) is a website page that covers a broad topic in depth and is linked to from a cluster of related content.

In the next video we'll learn how to create an effective topic cluster and pillar page.

VIDEO 2: HOW DO YOU CREATE AN EFFECTIVE TOPIC CLUSTER AND PILLAR PAGE?

Let's review the relationship between a topic cluster and a pillar page.

First, you need a core topic. This should be something broad, usually 2–3 words — something that can be dug into and explained on a deep level.

Sales qualification is a great example of a core topic.

Your core topic will take the shape of your pillar page; your core topic will be what you're trying to rank for on search engines.

Next, identify your topic cluster, which will be made up of several relevant subtopics. A subtopic should be strong enough to stand alone — in the form of a blog post or video — but when combined with other like-themed subtopics, it should be relevant to and support your core topic.

In this case, "What is a qualified prospect?" and "What is BANT?" are examples of strong subtopics that support the core topic of sales qualification.

And what completes this content pillar, which solves for both the searcher and the search engine, is connecting everything through a series of hyperlinks.

By linking all relevant subtopics to the core topic (i.e. pillar page), you're funneling all of your traffic to the main resource hub on this topic.

Let's see this in action.

If you performed a Google search for sales qualification, this is what the first page listing would look like.

At the top, you'll see Google generated a featured snippet, which is the search engine's way of answering your question simply without you having to click through to the page. In this case, Google assumes that if you're looking for information on "sales qualification," then you'll find value in the BANT qualification framework — information that's pulled from a HubSpot resource called "The Ultimate Guide to Sales Qualification."

Below the featured snippet you'll see HubSpot also claims the number one listing for "sales qualification" with the same resource, "The Ultimate Guide to Sales Qualification."

In a world of trying to rank for broad keyword terms, this is what you're striving for: The featured snippet as well as the number one ranking.

Let's say you're interested in learning more about the BANT qualification framework, so you click the link in the search result to learn more. You'd be taken to this page:

After the first few paragraphs, you'll see a table of contents that lets you know you can navigate through the guide by clicking each section. Each section title has an anchor link attached to it, which, when clicked, will take you to the specific section on the page where it explains that topic in depth.

You'll also notice a "Back to top" button. This feature is a must-have for a good user experience on a page of this length, as it allows the reader to jump back to the top after reading a specific section. The last thing you want is your reader having to scroll back up through a long-form content page to get to the top.

Going back to our example, you found yourself on this page because you clicked through to learn more about the BANT qualification framework, which is number four on "The Ultimate Guide to Sales Qualification."

By clicking the anchor link, you're taken to the specific portion on the page that discusses the BANT qualification framework in depth.

And within this section, you'll notice there's a link on "average of 5.4 people to make a buying decision." When clicked, it takes you to another HubSpot

resource titled "Why Custom Positioning Isn't Enough to Close Deals Anymore." This is another relevant subtopic that supports sales qualification.

Not every relevant subtopic you have will be referenced on the pillar page (and that's okay). That's because you may have hundreds, even thousands, of subtopic pages that support your core topic. Instead, you can strategically link to relevant subtopic content throughout your pillar page when it makes sense and when it provides value to the website visitor. Just make sure all important subtopic pages connect to the pillar page, and use your best judgement on what content you include. Remember, keep the user experience and the story you're trying to tell in mind.

So that's how this page solved for the searcher by offering a positive user experience, but how did this page solve for the search engines in terms of traffic and visibility?

This page receives more than 1,500 organic, non-paid visits from search engines per month.

So how do you create a pillar page?

First, let's review the two most widely used pillar page formats.

Let's start with the resource pillar page.

The resource pillar page focuses on internal and external links. The goal of this pillar page is to be a helpful resource in connecting the reader with the most relevant sources on a specific topic (even if it means sending people off your site).

For example, take a look at the pillar page Help Scout, a simple customer service software company, created on "customer acquisition."

This resource pillar page is composed of multiple sections that offer links to internal and external resources.

Generally, you wouldn't want to send people away from your website, but this approach is solving for the visitor, not your business.

The biggest advantage of a pillar page format like this is you have the opportunity to generate inbound links from sources you include on the page.

This page has more than 300 inbound links pointing to it, most of which are sources mentioned on the page.

For this type of page, you'll need to develop an outreach plan to let the sources know the page exists.

Next is the 10x content pillar page.

The goal of this type of pillar page is the same: To provide a comprehensive overview of a specific topic. But the 10x pillar page is generally made up of your owned media. The format of this page is similar to that of an ungated ebook or a guide.

Yes, I said ungated content. Ungating thought leadership content in the awareness stage helps solve for both the search engine and the website visitor, not one or the other. It solves for the search engines because they're able to recognize the clustering of like-themed content on a specific subject, and it solves for the website visitors because it gives them the opportunity to view your content before deciding to commit to downloading it.

The trick is making the 10x content pillar page conversion-focused by packaging the page's content into a downloadable resource.

You may be asking yourself, why the heck would anyone give you their elusive email address if they can view the same content on a website page without providing any identifying information?

Well, HubSpot did a study in March 2017, and we found that 90% of website visitors prefer to read our lengthy content in a PDF as opposed to a website page. But this preference is not limited to HubSpot's content. It's human nature to want to take something with you if you find value in it.

Think of it this way: Let's say you go to a bookstore looking for a new book to read. You'd probably wander up and down the aisles, flipping through pages of various books until you find one that meets your needs. Once you find a book you enjoy, you'll probably go to the checkout counter and buy it to take it with you, as opposed to staying in the bookstore hour after hour and day after day, reading this piece of content.

This is the experience you're trying to replicate, but it can only be done if your content provides value to the reader. We've reached this age where everyone seems to have an ebook or guide, but the quality of that content is a different

story. Sure, you may be getting leads, but what if people don't find value in your content? They most likely won't continue building a relationship with you, so that lead you captured won't be as valuable as you think.

In contrast, the people who can view your content before downloading it and who then choose to fill out your form will be much more qualified because they're willingly giving you their information even though they've already seen what your content has to offer.

For example, take a look at this 10x content pillar page on "email outreach" created by Mailshake, a simple cold email outreach tool.

This 10x content pillar page covers a comprehensive approach to email outreach with sectioned content.

Let's say you wanted to learn more about what an effective outreach email looks like. Click section three at the top of this page, "examples of good (and great) outreach emails and what we can learn from them," and the link will direct you to that specific section on the page to learn more about it.

If you clicked a link in the table of contents at the top, you'd notice Mailshake offers the content as a packaged downloadable resource at the bottom of the page. This way, if the visitor finds value in the content, they can choose to take it with them.

How well is this page performing? Well, in less than a year, this page has been viewed over 43,000 times, shared on social media 398 times, attracted 372 inbound links, acquired 5,321 email opt-ins, and acquired 402 customers.

Whew. Now those are some serious results for a piece of content that's less than one year old.

Now that we know the types of pillar pages that exist, let's review how a company called Etuma created their business' first ungated 10x content pillar page. Etuma is a company that helps transform unstructured text data into decision-making information for a business.

While there's more than one way to create a pillar page, here's a seven-step process that Etuma followed to create an initial 10x content pillar page and topic cluster for their business.

Let's review each step in-depth.

First, Etuma identified a core topic for their 10x content pillar page.

Etuma performed research on keywords their primary buyer persona, Customer Experience Manager Maggie, might use when looking for information online. They identified the broad term "text analysis" and decided on it as the core topic because it's an awareness-stage subject that Maggie would search for and it's connected to a product or service they offer.

If you're going to take the time to create content that educates your audience, make sure it connects to, and supports, at least one of your products or services. If it doesn't, ask why you're creating it in the first place.

Second, Etuma identified their topic cluster.

You may already have content created in support of your core topic. Instead of re-inventing the wheel, identify current owned media that's relevant to your core topic.

In this case, Etuma already had four pages of text analysis-themed blog content and a series of YouTube videos.

And while it may be great that you have subtopic content already created, don't sell your business short. Brainstorm a list of as many subtopics as possible that bring value to your core topic that have yet to be published.

Once you make a comprehensive list of subtopics, narrow it down to six of the strongest subtopics that support your core topic and its pillar page. Remember, you can continue growing your pillar page, so having a list of subtopics already identified will help make that process easier. That comprehensive list you made is the content gift that keeps on giving.

Third, Etuma created blog posts for their subtopic content.

If you're like Etuma and you choose at least one subtopic that needs content created, you're going to need a way to bring it to life. Create a blog post first because there are various opportunities for repurposing it in the future.

Etuma needed content for their subtopic "categorization systems," so they created a blog post titled "How to Create a Customer Feedback Taxonomy."

Once Etuma created this blog post, they had a blog for each one of their subtopics they identified.

Fourth, Etuma repurposed their subtopic content into a downloadable offer.

Once you have all the content you need to create your pillar page, repurpose the subtopic content into a downloadable offer. Remember, the goal here is to use the content you have to put together a helpful story for the reader, which explains the core topic in-depth.

Create the content offer before the pillar page. This way, you'll be able to prepare a highly relevant conversion action (downloading the content offer) to have on the pillar page so your business can start generating leads as soon as the page is published.

Fifth, Etuma deconstructed their downloadable offer into a 10x content pillar page.

Etuma took the same content offered in their guide and formatted it to fit on a website page.

We all know "content is king." Matt Cutts, formerly with Google, coined this phrase many years ago, but design is sometimes forgotten, and it's just as important, if not more important, than the content on the page. You want people to have a positive experience when they're reading your content.

Think about the last bad experience you had at a restaurant you visited. Did you go back?

To make sure your 10x content pillar page provides a positive experience, check out these 13 layout tips outlined on Etuma's example.

Let's review each layout tip in more detail.

Starting at the top-left of the example, with tips one, two, and three, apply consistent on-page SEO best practices, referencing the core topic in your page title, URL, and H1 tag.

Moving down to tip four, include conversion-focused landing page elements. Really, this is what a landing page should look like: text to the left with bullet

points to describe the offer's value, an image of the offer's cover in the middle, and a form to fill out and access the offer to the right.

Insert the form directly on the 10x content pillar page. Doing so reduces the amount of conversion actions a reader needs to take to download the resource. That being said, if you're more comfortable with a dedicated landing page with a form to access the offer, insert a CTA on the pillar page to send readers there.

Moving down to tip five, add an anchor-linked table of contents below the conversion point with the line "click the link to go directly to a specific section." This lets the visitor know they can view the content first before deciding to take it with them.

Moving up to the top-right of the example and layout tip six, you'll notice there's website navigation. The goal of this page is to create a positive experience for the visitor, not force them to convert as a landing page would.

Moving down to tip seven, there's a definition of the core topic. The core topic is defined at the top of the page, which helps optimize the page to be chosen as a featured snippet for that topic. A featured snippet is Google's way of trying to answer your search query simply without you having to click through to a page. It's the first thing people see before the search result listings.

Moving down to tip eight, use relevant images throughout the page, with the core topic referenced in the alt text. This helps optimize the images used on the page for image search results.

Moving down to tip nine, use H2 tags for section headers — don't even think about just increasing the text size and bolding it. Let's keep it simple, consistent, and neat. Using proper html structure helps provide a clean user experience and makes it simpler to update the page.

Moving down to tips 10 and 11, use relevant internal and external links to dig deeper into resources. Yes, I said external as well. It helps to use external links to validate your claims. Just use them strategically, like to support a claim or data point you need to reinforce.

Moving down to tip 12, reference your core topic throughout the page. But don't just repeat the exact phrase — search engines are smart enough to understand synonyms of your core topic phrase.

And lastly, tip 13, have a back-to-top button. This way, when people click a section they want to learn more about, they can easily jump back to the top. People probably won't read your entire page, but they may find one section interesting enough and want to download it and take it with them. You want to make this process as easy as possible for the visitor. Forgetting this step would require the reader to scroll endlessly, or it might feel like it, which could lead to frustration, which could lead to them leaving your page and going elsewhere.

Sixth, Etuma linked their relevant owned media content to their 10x content pillar page.

Once you complete your 10x pillar page, you're going to need to hyperlink your subtopic content to it, creating your topic cluster.

The goal here is to connect all owned media that's relevant to the core topic to the pillar page using a hyperlink. The more content associated with your topic cluster and pillar page, the better.

And don't just add any old link text. Take the time to update the anchor text to something descriptive that supports the core topic.

Etuma linked more than 20 relevant pieces of content to their 10x content pillar page. And you'll notice they took the time to create descriptive anchor text to let the searcher and search engine know where they're going.

Seventh, Etuma created a conversion path for people to access their 10x content pillar page.

The goal here is to let people know this content is available, because if you don't, you run the risk of a large portion of your website visitors never finding it. Forgetting this step would be similar to building a new addition on your house without a door. No matter how great that room is, no one would be able to get in, so what's the point?

One placement to consider is to call out your pillar page in the top navigation on your home page through a one- or two-click process: one click if you offer it directly in the dropdown menu, two clicks if you have a resources page with multiple assets to organize and call out.

Etuma calls out their 10x content pillar page as a one-click option in their Resources tab.

Another placement to consider is a dedicated section with a CTA near the top of the home page, with an image and descriptive supplemental text.

This doesn't mean it always needs to stay here on this page. You can promote the pillar page for a limited time, possibly for two weeks or a month, to support its publishing launch.

And there you have it: Seven steps to creating an effective 10x content pillar page for your business.

Etuma has been creating content consistently for years, but this seven-step process helped them make more sense of how to create, grow, and connect effective content.

But how well is it performing?

After two months, their VP of Marketing and Sales said, "We're receiving about four times the leads (if you measure by quality) compared to before the text analysis content pillar."

And why do you think Etuma's quality of leads went up? Because their content provides so much value that interested visitors are willing to give up their information to take a packaged download with them.

If you're looking for a place to start with creating topic clusters and pillar pages, consider deconstructing your existing awareness- or consideration-stage offers into 10x content pillar pages. I reverse engineered a DIY truck camper guide through a series of blog posts for my website wildwewander.com. And in an effort to solve for the best experience for website visitors and search engine web crawlers, I deconstructed that guide's content into a conversion-focused pillar page.

The result? In four months, our non-paid, organic traffic coming from search engines increased 329%.

Remember, if you have something valuable to say to your audience and the world, don't keep it locked up behind a form. Get it out there for all to see. Just make sure to package it in a way that makes it easy for people to take with them and enjoy elsewhere.

VIDEO 3: WHAT'S AN EXAMPLE OF A SUCCESSFUL PILLAR PAGE?

Your pillar page should always be under construction. You might need to make updates to keep it relevant or add new, fresh content to keep it performing at a high level. You need to maintain it. Otherwise, you're leaving yourself vulnerable for someone else to come in and outperform you — it happens all the time.

Let's check out a company that's taken the time to grow their topic clusters and pillar pages into the backbone of their content strategy. That company is Townsend Security. They're a full-service data security provider.

Townsend started 2016 with a positive lift in organic, non-paid visits coming from search engines due to their content efforts. They worked hard in 2015 with regular blogging, webinars, podcasts, white papers, and ebooks. The result: Their traffic held steady in 2015, and in the first quarter of 2016, they had a 27% rise in organic search visitors.

But all that changed in the second quarter of 2016. Competition for their narrow band of keywords increased as new competitors entered the marketplace, and their larger rivals outspent them on online marketing. After a record high March and April, they saw a 38% slippage in organic search visitors during the next three months (with a 28% slippage in one month alone). Their hard work from the previous year evaporated. While they fought back and did recoup some of that traffic, they still struggled to regain their high ground in organic searches.

In late September of 2016, Townsend's HubSpot Premier Inbound Consultant, Erin Sliney, introduced them to the concept of creating a pillar page and topic cluster. So they created a comprehensive 10x content pillar page around a broad topic. The goal was to become the thought leader on "encryption key management." And that's exactly what they did.

During the editing process, Townsend wrote 20 social media updates and scheduled them to be published to their Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn accounts once the pillar page went live. They mixed their publishing dates with their regularly scheduled updates during the following eight weeks. Coupled with an email campaign promoting the pillar page to their active lead

community, they were able to get the word out to those already familiar with them.

To reach the wider community who might not yet know them, they inserted links to the pillar page by thoughtfully answering questions on Quora, adding insights to other blog posts through blog commenting, and contributing thought leadership through guest posts published on other websites

And lastly, since Townsend had been blogging on encryption key management for years, it was easy to identify a topic cluster through a few dozen subtopic blog posts that were contextually similar. They could place internal links with descriptive anchor text on these posts pointing back to the pillar page. The links enhanced the reader's experience, since they were providing additional, relevant content for them to binge (as well as being a clear signal for search engines to understand what the pillar page was all about).

This is how Townsend created and promoted their initial 10x content pillar page, but how did they continue growing it to become the authoritative source on encryption key management?

Townsend improved the on-page experience in four ways.

To start, Townsend created graphics and optimized them for Google search results. To take it a step further, Townsend turned the images into interactive infographics with pop-up text using HTML5, which search engines can also read.

Next, Townsend repurposed various data points into infographic-like images.

And lastly, Townsend repurposed content on the page into a video, providing a quick overview of encryption key management. The video led to a 20% increase in average time on page.

Second, Townsend sprinkled in relevant content offers that would help their buyer personas continue educating themselves through the buyer's journey.

Townsend offered additional content offers throughout the page based on relevancy, like an ebook and a whitepaper.

This is an effective way to help your visitors continue progressing through the buyer's journey — showing them what other content you have to offer when it makes sense.

We live in an age where people binge content. Platforms like Netflix promote this by releasing full seasons of a show at once, turning people into content-crazed couch potatoes. People want content now, and as much of it as they can consume until they're ready to make a decision, whatever that may be. The best thing you can do is find a way to keep people coming back to your content and continue to either educate or entertain them (or both). If you don't, someone else will.

Three months after publishing their 10x content pillar page and continually promoting it, Townsend had some interesting results:

- Organic, non-paid traffic went up 17% from January to February of 2017.
- Organic, non-paid traffic went up another 32% from February to March of 2017.
- From all of their marketing efforts combined, including social, PPC, and guest posting, March 2017 saw a record amount of total visitors to their website.
- And 63% of people who visited the encryption key management pillar page decided to download it and take it with them.

What about visibility on search engines? In August 2017, Townsend's 10x content pillar page claimed the number one position on Google for "encryption key management." It also shared the featured snippet with Wikipedia.

Third, Townsend inserted a heatmap on their pillar page to understand performance and optimization next steps.

Townsend's pillar page offers a lot of valuable content with multiple conversion actions. And because they want to ensure their visitors are receiving the best content experience possible, they used a heatmap to see the engagement patterns on the page using Hotjar.

Hotjar is a new and easy way to truly understand your web and mobile site visitors' on-page experience.

For example, after placing a Hotjar heatmap on their pillar page, Townsend learned that people who visit the page are more interested in learning about what encryption key management is before downloading the content in a packaged download. Here's a screenshot of Townsend's heatmap at the top of their pillar page. Notice how all the engagement is happening around the CTA.

But once visitors start clicking around to learn more about encryption key management, they're more interested and willing to give their information in exchange for a packaged download of the content. Interestingly enough, the CTA for the guide that's three-quarters of the way down the page led to the most conversions.

This information helped Townsend understand which sections people found the most value in that lead to conversions. It also showed them that people prefer to peruse through the content before giving up their email address to download it and take it with them — another effective data point to support Townsend's choice to ungate their content and offer it as a packaged download.

And fourth, Townsend created another 10x content pillar page and connected it to the encryption key management pillar page through a hyperlink.
Results like this sparked a lot of interest at Townsend. They adopted the inbound methodology of marketing years ago, because it aligned with their heartbeat of being mentors, educators, and coaches first, and businesspeople second. Creating content through topic clusters, they feel, is a natural extension of that sentiment.

News traveled up to the CEO, who was so delighted by their results that he decided to create Townsend's next pillar page, "SQL server encryption."

Something important to note is that "SQL server encryption" is a subtopic of "encryption key management." You heard that right, a subtopic that evolved into its own 10x content pillar page. That's the first step toward building a web of content and really going that extra mile to create a binge-worthy, positive user experience that solves for both the search engine and website visitors.
What I love most about this example is how content creation has always been a major facet of Townsend's marketing plan. That being said, the immense success Townsend received with topic clusters and pillar pages led to content marketing becoming a business-wide initiative that everyone rallied around.
If your goal is to create content that attracts, converts, closes, and delights your ideal customers, then you need the commitment, excitement, and dedication of your entire company to make it happen.