The state of DIGITAL MEDIA

CONTENTS

EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US BENEFITS FROM A WORLD OF BETTER DIGITAL CONTENT.

When the online content you deliver to your audiences is engaging, high-quality, professionally written and edited, and targeted specifically to your exact audiences, your efforts will be more successful — and that means better online experiences for publishers and readers, too.

Driven by survey responses from more than 140 online publication editors and an analysis of more than 4 million pieces of digital content, this whitepaper is designed to present the state of digital media and equip brands, content creators, marketers, and publishers with the data they need to make more strategic decisions about content and drive real results for their businesses.
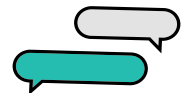
KEY FINDINGS

Editors want to continue to publish content from guest contributors.

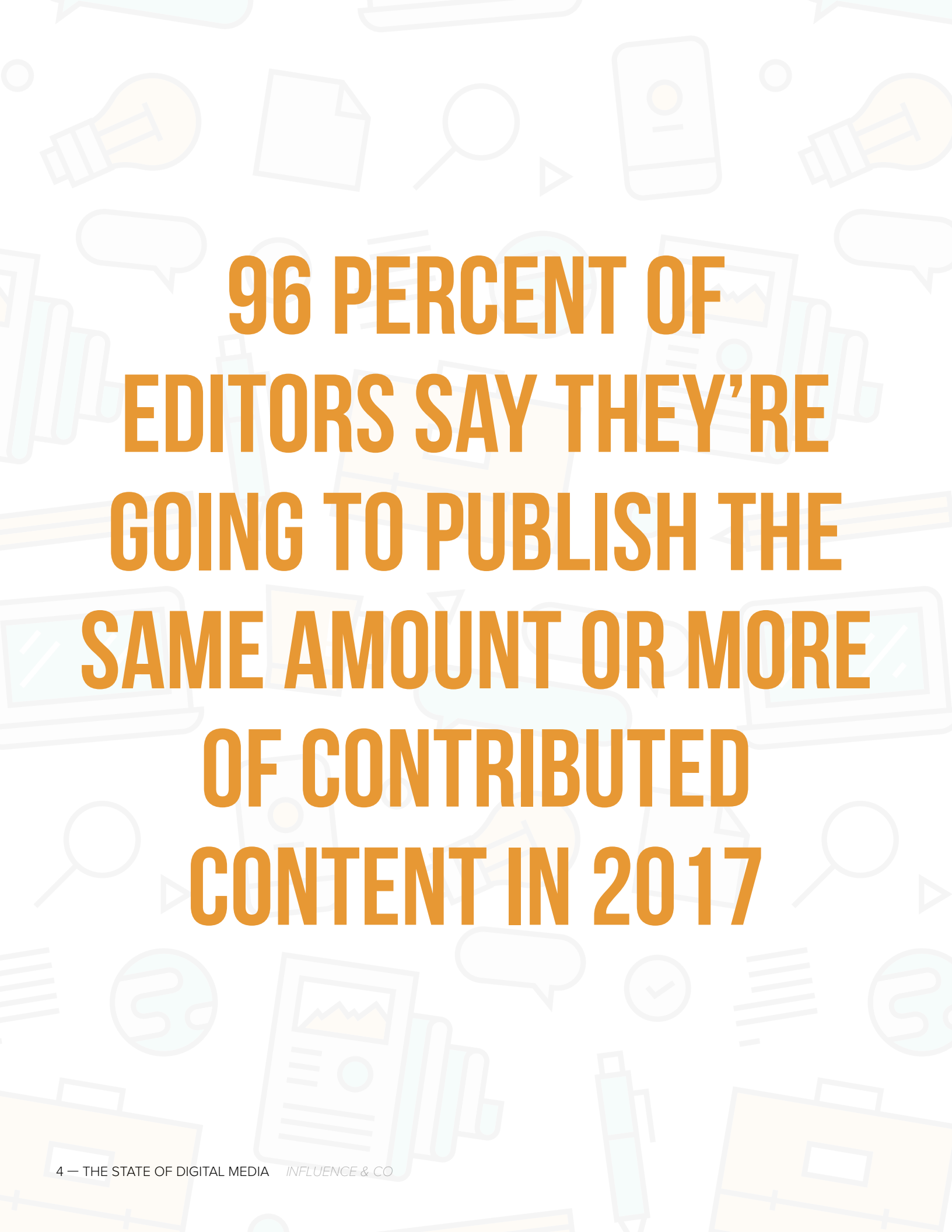In order to increase your chances of acceptance, avoid content that is promotional.

There is a correlation between content length and engagement.

There is a science behind crafting a headline that is sharable.

About Influence & Co.

Influence & Co. is a tech-enabled content marketing agency that specializes in creating engaging content that fuels companies' content marketing efforts and positions their key employees as influencers in their industries. With our custom content marketing software and more than 1,200 editor relationships with online publications across various industries, we focus on creating and distributing engaging content, coming from our clients, that reaches their target audiences online and accomplishes their business goals.

96 PERCENT OF EDITORS SAY THEY'RE GOING TO PUBLISH THE SAME AMOUNT OR MORE OF CONTRIBUTED CONTENT IN 2017

PART ONE:
EDITOR SURVEY

If you're looking to get your brand and your content in front of a targeted audience of engaged readers, you've probably considered adding contributed content to your strategy. Now, contributed content is pretty self-explanatory; it's content that you contribute. But don't confuse the simplicity of its definition with the work it takes to achieve.

> Contributed content positions you, the thought leader, as an expert by placing your unique ideas in publications that validate your work and help you reach your audience. Often called "guest posting," this practice involves creating a piece of content for a targeted publication and submitting it to that publication editor. It's a mutually beneficial exchange that gives editors new content to share with readers and contributors the chance to reach new audiences.

EXTERNAL PUBLICATIONS ARE A NATURAL PLACE TO REACH YOUR AUDIENCE AND ENGAGE THEM WITH CONTENT

When it's properly integrated into your strategy, contributed content can drive qualified traffic to your site and boost your content marketing efforts. Still, landing a byline in the right publication takes more than writing up a standard article and shopping it around to whichever editor accepts your work.

You need to know which publications your audience is reading, what kinds of content editors love, and how to craft engaging, compelling articles that meet editorial guidelines. To help, we surveyed publication editors from a variety of industries. Here's what they told us.

Ninety-six percent of editors say they're going to publish the same amount or more of contributed content in 2017.

> **Of all editors surveyed, only 4 percent say they are planning not to increase or maintain the amount of guest posts they accept this year; 61 percent are sure they're going to increase published contributions; and 35 are going to maintain amount they're currently publishing.**

This is a huge opportunity for brands and industry experts to get directly in front of their audiences and position themselves as thought leaders and trusted resources, build influence, and generate measurable returns from their content efforts — if they know how to craft and contribute content that editors love.

WHY EDITORS PUBLISH CONTRIBUTED CONTENT (AND THE CONTENT TYPES THEY'RE LOOKING FOR)

The overwhelming reason editors accept and publish contributed content is to share new insights with their readers. In fact, 85 percent of editors say it's their top goal of publishing contributed content on their sites.

Typically, contributed content refers to written content. It's common to see thought leaders and industry experts contribute written articles about their experiences in their spaces, trends they're seeing and preparing for, and commentary and recommendations on tactics and practices. But that's not necessarily all editors are willing to accept.

In addition to standard articles, editors publish:

Contributed interviews	infographics	Video
57%	48%	45%

THE NO. 1 REASON EDITORS REJECT CONTENT AND OTHER COMMON PROBLEMS WITH CONTRIBUTED CONTENT

Not all content will work for every outlet, and if yours doesn't fit the specific guidelines of the publication you're targeting, you can bet it won't be accepted.

Sixty-two percent *of editors say the main reason they reject content is because it doesn't fit their guidelines.*

So that begs the question: What does it mean when content isn't a fit? What are some of the most common problems with contributed content?

71 percent say content isn't professionally written or edited

71 percent say content is too promotional

63 percent of editors say the most common problem with content is that contributions aren't a fit for their readership

59 percent say that content offers insights that are unoriginal or not unique

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE 'TOO PROMOTIONAL'

Addressing the problem of poorly written and edited content is as easy as working with a professional, hiring an outside content marketing agency, or taking advantage of any number of tools to help you clean up your content.

But what does "too promotional" really mean? And why is it a problem?

Promotion is hard to clearly define for all cases across the board. It's often something you know when you see it, but coming to a definition that's applicable to all your content? That's usually another story.

So how can you identify and avoid promotion in your content? We asked some editors to weigh in.

What elements are too promotional?

79 percent: Forced mentions of your company, products, or clients within an article

44 percent: Including a link to your company's homepage

41 percent: Writing about your industry as a vendor

24 percent: Including links to educational content you wrote for your site or blog

For a lot of brands, this definition and these too-promotional elements might sound like a death blow to your contributed content efforts.

If one of the main points of content marketing is to ultimately drive your audience to profitable action with your brand, why pass up the opportunity to be promotional in your content?

Because overly promotional contributed content won't get you anywhere.

The result of starting your written content with a sales pitch can be truly detrimental to your business. By being salesy in your writing, you could end up in a downward spiral that includes:

- *Losing most of your readers at the top of your content funnel. Your audience isn't ready to buy when engaging with your first piece of content, so they get turned off and leave.*

- *Not being able to publish anywhere but your own blog because publishers aren't interested in your infomercial cloaked as a guest post.*

- *Sabotaging the success of your content marketing efforts as a whole.*

WHAT SUCCESSFUL CONTRIBUTED CONTENT LOOKS LIKE

The kind of contributed content that editors love to publish shares three key qualities:

It's non-promotional. Fight the urge to weave multiple mentions of your brand into your content. Readers find it spammy, and editors won't accept it.

It's professionally written and edited. Not only is your content clean and free of mistakes, it's also a good fit for the readers of that publication, and it meets editorial guidelines.

It offers original insights and outside data. The content you contribute should be full of stories, examples, and unique insights that come directly from you, as well as the research, to back up your claims. That's what readers will find valuable — and what editors are more eager to accept.

HOW EDITORS
EXAMINE SUCCESS

When asked what analytics editors look at to determine the success of a contributed article, editors rallied around two key metrics:

66 percent say social shares

62 percent say page views

(Others: time on site, 39 percent; comments, 28 percent)

Shares and views may be how editors measure success, but not all shares and views are created equal. Less than 1 in 4 editors are comfortable with contributors paying to drive traffic to their contributed content.

A WORD ABOUT PAID AMPLIFICATION

While more than 50 percent of editors don't have an opinion on the practice, 23 percent are opposed to it. Those editors against the idea of paying to drive traffic to a published article say it feels unethical, provides unreliable analytics, feels too promotional, and makes it difficult to measure the success of that contributor's article against other contributors' content.

As technology and data analysis becomes more advanced, you can look forward to more publication editors using in-depth metrics to measure success and embrace paid distribution tactics to achieve results. For now, we've found that it works to put a little spend behind an article that's organically doing well to give it — and your brand, your content, and the publication you contributed to — a bit of a boost.

PART TWO:
PROPRIETARY DATA

Regardless of how groundbreaking your content is or how many editors publish your work, contributed content alone usually isn't enough to accomplish a full range of business goals. A solid content strategy that drives real results includes a variety of content that's amplified in numerous ways.

That's why we opened up our analysis to include more than 4 million pieces of content published between Oct. 28, 2015 and Dec. 31, 2016 and uncovered some of the best practices you can use to maximize the effectiveness of your content and your strategy.

LET'S START AT THE TOP (LITERALLY)

The importance of headlines truly can't be overstated. Not only is it the first thing about your content that a reader sees, it's also the largest and boldest part. The headline grabs your audience's attention, and the quality of your content (and their interest in it) keeps that attention.

That's a lot of pressure, but it's not impossible to nail a good headline. Research shows that some of the best have these four major things in common:

- On average, headlines of content with more social shares use between eight and 11 words.
- The headline is long enough to tee up your content but short enough for readers to easily digest.
- They directly address the target reader's problem.
- They're clear, compelling, and concise.

In this post on our blog, one of our final editors — who not only polishes content, but who also weighs in on the headline, format, and structure of pieces when necessary — offers this advice to craft the perfect headline:

- Be specific.
- Quantify what's quantifiable.
- Make it personal.
- Create immediacy.
- Pinpoint the newsworthy.
- Tempt readers with curiosity.

WHEN CONTENT IS PUBLISHED COMPARED TO WHEN CONTENT IS MOST ENGAGED

Plenty of factors affect when content is published, just as many factors (if not more) affect when, why, and how consumers engage with it. Still, having an idea of when most content is published and when audiences engage with it can help you optimize your efforts and connect with your readers.

Based on our analysis, the majority of content is published during the week with a spike on Tuesday that increases into Wednesday and dips slightly into Thursday before settling.

Content engagement (including shares, comments, likes, and reactions) is a little more evenly spread out between weekdays and weekends.

Published (all time)

Engaged (all time, average)
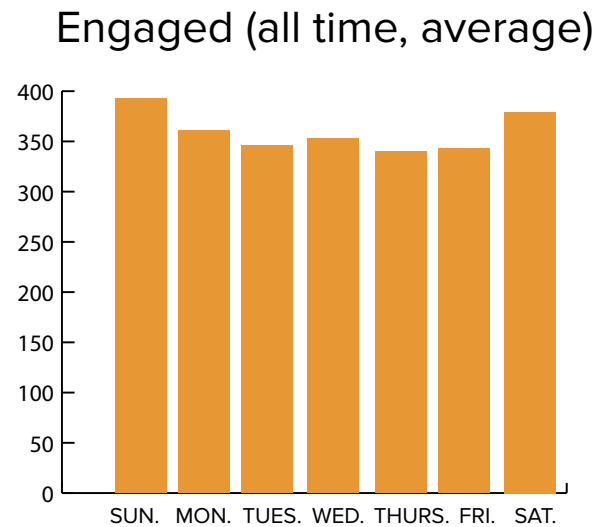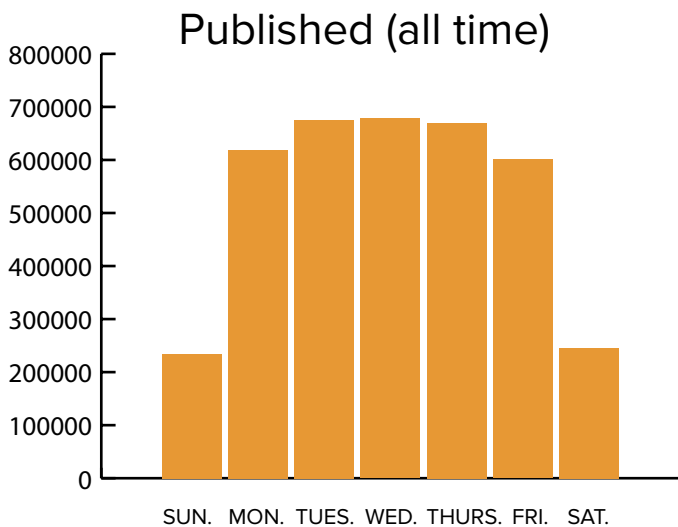
COMPARING CONTENT PUBLICATION TO AVERAGE ENGAGEMENT HIGHLIGHTS SOME OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONTENT CREATORS

While most content is published during the weekdays, audience engagement is relatively steady throughout the week. This data suggests that publishing content on Saturday or Sunday could help contributors capitalize on low publishing numbers and high engagement rates. And although Mondays see higher publishing rates than Fridays or weekends, it's still low compared to Tuesday through Thursday, and engagement remains steady.

Much like content creators might optimize their work for search terms and keywords with high volume and low competition, content marketers might consider publishing content under the same idea. Now, if you're working with a publication editor to contribute guest content, you're effectively trading your publishing control for access to new audiences and the opportunity to share your insights. But if you do have control over publishing days, aiming for days with low publication rates and steady or high engagement rates could work in your favor.

PLATFORM POPULARITY

The days of publishing the same content with the same update
across all your channels and calling it "distribution" are over.
Whether that practice ever truly worked, its days are long gone.
Marketers today know that every platform is different,
and content on each one must be tailored to that channel
and the audience that makes it unique.

After analyzing millions of pieces of published content on four major platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Google+), we found the following to be the most popular for sharing and engaging with content:

Top platforms for content with more than 1,000 shares

1. Facebook, which includes each reaction, plus comments and shares (AVG: 4,226.29)

2. LinkedIn (AVG: 269.24)

3. Twitter (AVG: 196.98)

4. Google+ (AVG: 16.57)

Facebook remains a powerful social network for sharing and engaging with content of all types. This could be because it offers users several ways to enage by liking, sharing, and commenting. Worth noting, however, is the continued rise of LinkedIn — and its popularity over Twitter.
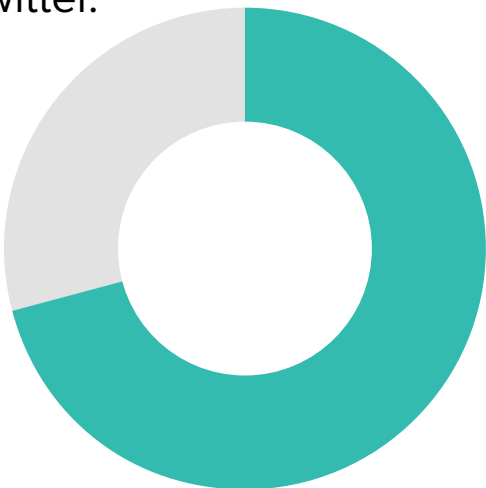
In fact, 71 percent of B2B marketers report that LinkedIn is critical to their content marketing success, coming in behind email and ahead of other platforms like Twitter.

Source:
[Content Marketing Institute, "B2B Content Marketing 2017 Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends — North America"]

As brands and individual content contributors assess their social distribution practices, remembering the big three — Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter — will be valuable.

Of course, each platform is different and requires content to be customized to fit seamlessly with the wants and needs of those platform users.

If you've repurposed your written content into a branded video slideshow, Facebook might be your best platform to share it on — especially considering the increase of video content on Facebook. [Mediakix Team, "The Facebook Video Statistics Everyone Needs to Know," http://mediakix.com/2016/08/facebook-video-statistics-everyone-needs-know/#gs.Xsbx2jU (August 26, 2016)]

If your content is more newsworthy, consider using Twitter. Nearly 90 percent of Twitter users say they use the platform to get their news, and if yours is news-related, you might have a better shot at engagement on the platform. [Christina Newberry, "A Long List of Twitter Statistics All Social Media Marketers Should Know," https://blog.hootsuite.com/twitter-statistics/ (December 5, 2016)]

Tailoring your social content to the habits of users engaged on each platform will help you leverage these popular platforms most effectively.

THE GREAT
WORD COUNT DEBATE

Depending on what information you're trying to convey, which publications you're targeting, and who your readers are, the length of your content will vary. Still, it's worth noting the trends in content length and word count of popular content. Let's break it down.

- **The average word count** of all analyzed content sits between 565 and 570

- **Content with 1,000** shares or more has an average word count of 590 to 790 words.

- **Content on publications** with 1 million or more monthly visits has an average word count of 480 to 695 words.

What could this mean?

Based on what we know of the attributes of the best headlines, readers are more into content that doesn't take them too long to consume but still explains concisely how or why to do something. These word-count averages speak to the value audiences place on their time and on brands' abilities to be concise yet compelling.

But beyond that is where things get a little trickier.

When we compare content that's highly engaged to content published on publications with a million or more monthly visitors, we see a difference in average word count. Content with more shares tends to be longer than content published in outlets with more than a million monthly visitors. Why?

No one enjoys content that's ridiculously long simply for the sake of being long. When we see average word counts in the ballpark of 600 to 800, it reaffirms the belief that most content consumers engage with is the kind that's long enough to get the point across without droning on too long. It also suggests that when content is in-depth, informative, and compelling, readers may be more likely to share it with their networks than if that same content was too long or too brief to cover the right bases.

The average length of content published in major outlets with more than a million monthly visitors is even shorter. This might suggest that the deeper you want to get on a topic (and the more expertise you want to share with your desired audience), the better luck you may have targeting a smaller, more niche publication. Not only might your chances of acceptance increase, but your chances of engagement increase, too.

METHODOLOGY

This report was compiled based on survey results from 146 online publication editors at the standard 95 percent confidence level with a 7.6 percent margin of error, along with proprietary data from Influence & Co.'s content marketing software, ICo Core, and an analysis of nearly 4 million pieces of published content.

As with any survey, this data is not absolute. Please remember that these insights are based on self-reported responses from publication editors, including some with whom Influence & Co. works and others with whom we do not currently have relationships. These results do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the publishing industry as a whole.

ABOUT US

Influence & Co. is a tech-enabled content marketing agency that specializes in creating engaging content that fuels companies' content marketing efforts and positions their key employees as influencers in their industries.

With our custom content marketing software, ICo Core, and more than 1,200 editor relationships with online publications across various industries, we focus on creating and distributing engaging content, coming from our clients, that reaches their target audiences online and accomplishes their business goals.

If you'd like to learn more about our custom content marketing software or our relationships with more than 1,200 publication editors in industries ranging from technology and finance to marketing, entrepreneurship, and general business, contact us.