

THE CMI CONTENT MARKETING **FRAMEWORK**

7 Building Blocks to Success



Your company is probably already exploring the role that compelling content can play in your own marketing programs—just as many other companies around the world are. You’re experimenting with varying storytelling methods or community-building programs and are working to understand *the precise forms of content that your specific audience wants to connect with.*

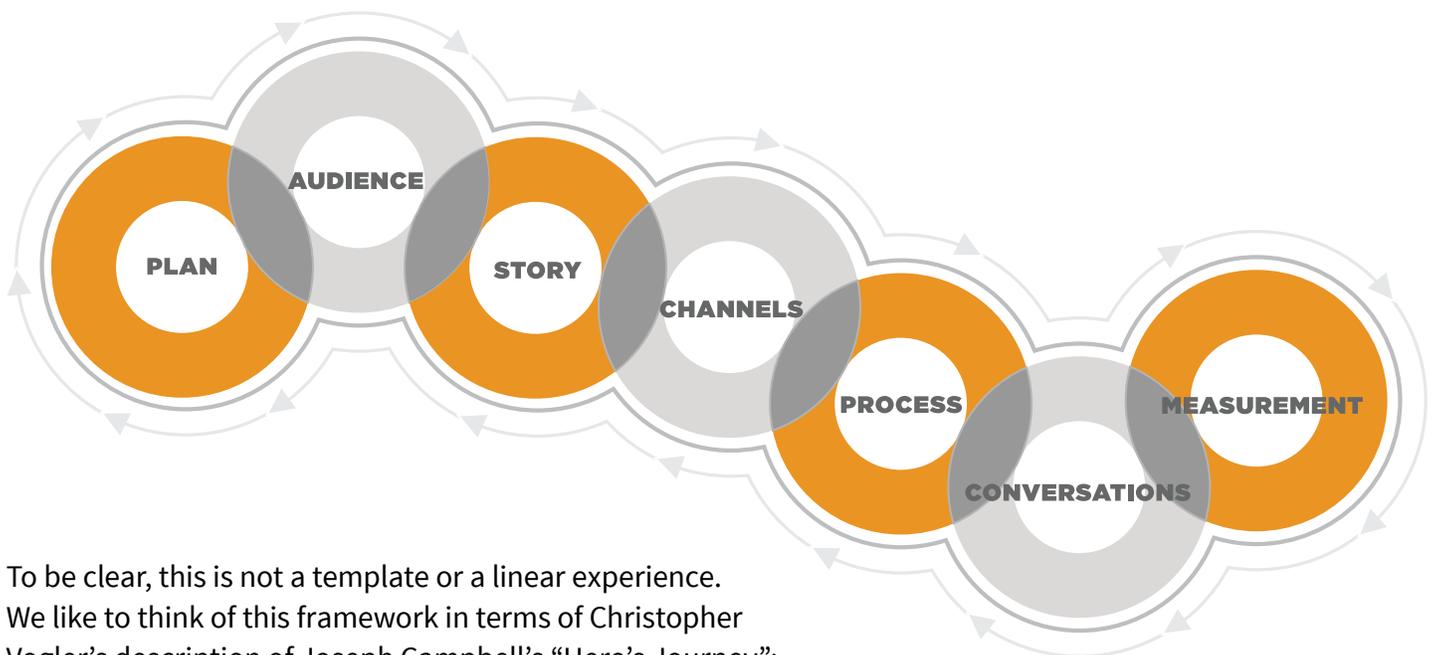


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Since *Managing Content Marketing* was written, we have been blessed to work with some amazing brands to help them operationalize the process of content marketing. We’ve learned a lot, and through our practical experience, we have come to recognize some interesting patterns. These patterns form a chain that increases the likelihood of success. And while the principles we put forth in the book have been put into practice in many ways over the last few years, it wasn’t until now that we really have been able to identify these common elements.



To be clear, this is not a template or a linear experience. We like to think of this framework in terms of Christopher Vogler’s description of Joseph Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey”:

“It is not an invention, but an observation. It is a recognition of a beautiful design, a set of principles that govern the conduct of the world of storytelling the way physics and chemistry govern the physical world.”

It is a form—not a formula. Its purpose is not to provide a linear pathway as much as it is to identify what might be missing or needed in order to increase your chances of content marketing success.

Certainly our customers’ buying journeys rarely travel in one singular, straight direction. Why should our process?

We would rather you view these elements as the building blocks of a broader methodology—a framework marketers can regularly reference as they build their own content marketing programs. These elements can also easily be tailored to meet varying comfort levels, skill sets, or even budgets.

So now, without further ado, we present our framework.

1 PLAN

Whether your company has a marketing army of one or 100, at the core of your continued success will be a thoughtful, strategic plan that ideally aligns with (and strives to help you meet) your broader business goals.

Planning can take a number of forms depending on how far you have progressed in your content marketing journey. If you are just beginning to build your program, planning might take the form of a **business case**, or even a simple **mission statement**. For other organizations that have been building a content marketing program for some time, it may exist as a regular checkpoint to ensure that your programs continue to meet broader (and sometimes changing) business goals. Regardless, the “planning” element of your program should be the first—and strongest—thread that runs throughout your content marketing framework.

**“Plan the work:
Work the plan.”**

Your content marketing plan will aim to answer a few fundamental questions, the first of which is quite simple: Who are YOU?

- ▶ What is your organization poised to accomplish?
- ▶ What are the differentiating factors of your product or service?
- ▶ Who are the unique YOUs that differentiate your business?
- ▶ What is your organization best at providing?

Often, among our day-to-day activities, we overlook this core element of what *should* be driving everything we do. Other questions to consider during your planning conversations include the following:

- ▶ What *needs* do we have as a company, and can we use content marketing to ease any existing pain points, or enhance existing marketing programs (i.e., can your efforts support the broader strategic goals of your organization)?
- ▶ How much of an effort should we be making, and why? (This is why planning can and should occur regularly: As your programs become more advanced, the answers to these questions may change.)
- ▶ What will our program tactically look like (meaning, who will be involved, and what roles with they play)?
- ▶ How will any plans affect existing programs? What key deliverables or milestones will we aim to achieve within a specific time frame?
- ▶ What are the risks, and how will they be mitigated?
- ▶ What specifically are we striving to achieve?

The output of these planning conversations can take a number of forms. For some, the deliverable might be a “business case” document. For others, it might be an annual strategy that gets reviewed, and renewed, every year. Regardless, the fundamental purpose should be to best understand *who you are, where you are, and where you want to be*.

So this is not only where our framework begins, but also where it ends, and begins again: Your content marketing “planning” should be a continual process that drives the ongoing optimization of your marketing programs. And with a firm plan in place and understanding of who YOU are, it’s time to focus externally.

2 AUDIENCE

While a company's content marketing plan is designed to establish, and continually assess and affirm, who YOU are as a company, the "Audience" element of our framework will aim to uncover, and be in tune with, those whom you're trying to reach.

Your audience can be broken out into two equally important spokes: internal stakeholders who need to be involved with your content marketing program, and those whom you are trying to reach externally to help continually grow your business. With both these audiences, consider how their content needs will change over time.

"The only way we can maintain long-term success is to continually engage people."

As with your content marketing plan, the evaluation of your different audiences (both inside and outside of your organization) should occur regularly along your content marketing journey. Why?

- ▶ Who YOU are may be evolving. As you continue to tell more and more engaging stories, you may find that you are better identifying and establishing what your company stands for in ways you hadn't considered before.
- ▶ Your internal stakeholders' needs may change as your content marketing strategy evolves and becomes more accepted (and trusted) internally.
- ▶ New roles may arise internally that need to be informed and engaged in your activities.
- ▶ Your external audience is constantly changing how and where they want to receive content, which you will need to take into consideration, as well.

Some key questions that should be answered during this stage in your content marketing framework are:

- ▶ Who are we talking to?
- ▶ What is each group's (or person's) **persona**? This can get as detailed as you'd like, and should be expanded as new people, or groups, join your audience list.

The next steps should be to consider how your audiences' needs will change as they go through your sales cycle. Regardless of whether your company sells B2B or B2C, you will be looking to engage a wide range of people—from those who know nothing about you to long-time loyalists and everyone in between. Understanding what their different needs are over time will help you start to identify the content they will need to guide them along their buying cycle.

DELIVERABLE TIP:

*A **Content Segmentation Grid** helps you build a high-level view of your different audiences, what content you have that meets their needs, and where your gaps are after your personas have been developed. Use this as a way to understand not only what you've developed so far, but also where you'll need to spend the most time as you begin to put your content marketing plans into action.*

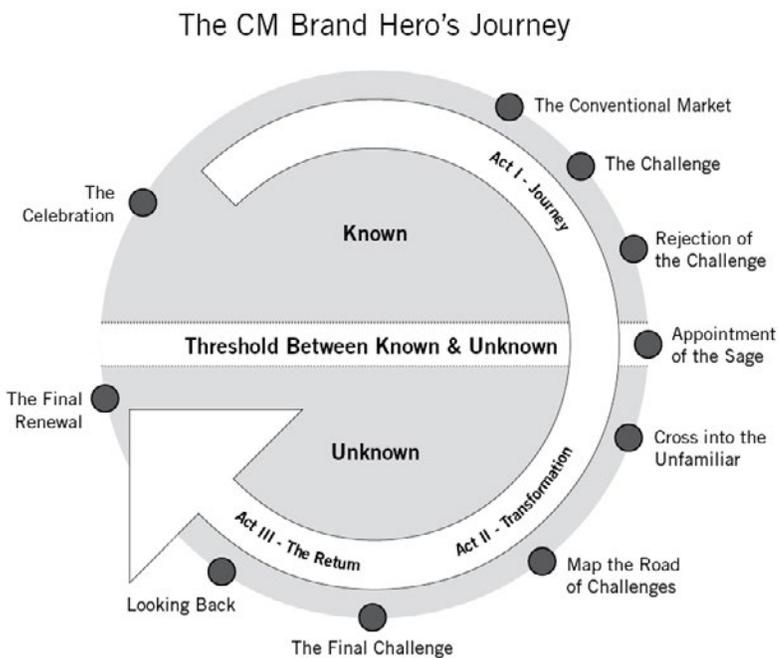
3 STORY

Understanding who you are, and what audiences you're trying to reach, will mean nothing unless you can clearly identify and communicate your story. How did your company begin? What brought you to where you are today, and what's driving you to achieve success in the future?

Storytelling is not intended to be a "selling" tool: it's a method of building strong relationships with your customers and a thriving community of loyalists over time. Your story identifies what your passions are and serves as the foundation for all your future content developments.

One thing to consider is this: The word "story" can sometimes imply there's a clear beginning, middle, and end to what you're creating. This is not the case within your content marketing framework. There are no defined narrative rules you need to follow, nor a strict structure for gathering or identifying the elements of your story. The purpose is simply to help view your content through a storytelling lens, with passion and purpose and—yes—heart. This is the only way to establish a strong emotional bond with your audience over time. And, as time passes and content marketing processes are optimized, so too will your story evolve, making this an essential element in an ever-evolving content marketing framework.

“Developing the content in our content marketing strategy is developing the stories of us. It’s the big ideas that we represent. It’s the differentiated experiences we want to create. It’s what we REALLY do for a living. For better or worse—it’s that simple.”



DELIVERABLE TIP:

One way to uncover your company's "story" is through our **Brand Hero's Journey Chart**. The chart can help you develop a structure that can be used across one small content marketing initiative — or across an entire strategy of content marketing throughout your company.

Once your story is established, you can build your pillars of content, which will help ensure your story echoes through the content you share. (In a practical sense, these pillars of content are used as guides for all future communications.)

4 CHANNELS

Ready to share your stories with the world? You'll want a strategic channel strategy in place before you do so.

Identifying the right channels through which to deliver your messages is key to a successful content marketing program, but it should not happen in isolation. You should consider the CONTEXT in which your audience will view the content, and then use that to alter the content accordingly. “How” and “Where” your audience is consuming your content is just as important as the messaging within.

Here's the time to build a **“Channel Plan.”** While there are a few specific steps you'll want to follow to establish one, here are a few key points to consider:

- ▶ The plan identifies ALL channels (existing and potential future ones) and explores which ones might be most effective (i.e., what should we stop, start, and continue).
- ▶ The plan will also establish certain objectives for each channel, and how they can support one another.
- ▶ This is also a time where editorial planning, and even budgeting should start to occur.

Your channel plan—once established—should not be set in stone, but rather become a continual conversation among your marketing team members throughout your content journey; like many of the elements within this framework, your channels should be reevaluated often to ensure their effectiveness and ability to meet your evolving needs.

Finally, you will want to ensure you've clearly identified what your metrics and processes are around each channel. So, in addition to the different audiences you'd like to reach, you will want to be sure you've clearly established what you'll be measuring in each channel (fan numbers versus traffic numbers versus clicks, etc.) so that you can continually optimize over time.

Remember: *The content strategy defines your channel strategy—not the other way around.* So be sure you have a solid content strategy in place first (yes, even if that means going back to the “Plan”) before you even start thinking about your channel plan.

At this point, we've explored various parts of our content marketing framework that will help you figure out *WHO you want to tell your story to, WHAT story you want to tell, and WHERE you want to tell it.*

And now, with a *Process*, the rubber can really start to meet the road.

“A good content marketing channel plan frees you from the constraints of any one content channel. As your blog efforts wane, or as social mediachannels come and go—or as your success on any one of them ebbs and wanes—you won't be trapped into a singular channel.”

5 PROCESS

Creating a content marketing strategy, audience personas, and channel plan has its own challenges. So, great job! But now what? How do all those plans translate into action? What's your *process*?

Establishing your process will occur in four stages: Create and manage; optimize, aggregate, and curate; converse and listen; and measure and learn. At this time, you will also want to begin to identify who will actually execute your aforementioned plans. This means establishing roles and responsibilities, guidelines, and even a schedule. It's worth your while to set all this up, because your powerful stories deserve well—organized methods to execute them.

“If we haven’t said it enough, we’ll say it one more time: The processes you put in place to manage your content marketing will be unique. Your story is (or should be) unique, and so too will be your method for telling it.”

Think of an output of your work as a “playbook” that contains everything a team member would want when joining your content marketing group. There are countless questions you need to address, such as the following:

- ▶ Who does what?
- ▶ What style and writing guidelines do we have?
- ▶ What *time slots* for posting are most effective for us?
- ▶ How do we converse with our community?
- ▶ Who can we engage to assist us in our efforts (internally and externally)?

Because there are so many questions that should be addressed here, we recommend getting it all organized in a coherent way to achieve the best results. Because, as we mentioned before: *Your content deserves it.*

6 CONVERSATION

While you've likely spent a significant amount of time creating an amazing strategy and process, *"creating quality content by itself is not enough."* In addition to a solid strategy, team, and processes, there's one key element of your framework that needs to be nurtured: a connection to, and conversations with, your consumers.

Creating content has something inherently "one sided" about it; meaning, you know your story and messages, so you're ready to start talking "at" your customers, since you pretty much know what they want to hear anyway.

Right?

Wrong.

The game has changed.

Listening—what a novel concept! Too often, companies overlook this element of their content marketing framework altogether.

The first step is to establish "listening posts" to understand where conversations are happening. Then, be honest: Do you have the bandwidth to respond to all conversations as they occur, in transparent, honest ways? (This includes those happening within your own owned platforms, such as your blog and social media profiles, as well as external channels, such as industry forums or review sites.)

The process of establishing listening posts, not to mention developing a method for responding to conversations, can be extremely overwhelming to many companies, especially with the plethora of conversations happening on the web that are likely not all picked up by Google Alerts. It could eat up your entire day just watching, listening, reacting, and so forth. But the goal should be a more productive, strategic one: Establish which conversations you want to, and can, be involved in. Listen to what people are saying, and determine how you want to respond. (Tip: transparency is always best!)

Your content is now a conversation. It's a story that needs an audience to respond. So, yes, go out and create great content. Be the leader in your industry because you consistently share value. BUT, share it."

7 MEASUREMENT

Measurement comes at the end of this framework, but for many, it's the beginning, middle, and end (and everything in between) of your content marketing process. But, just because you *can* measure just about anything these days, doesn't mean that you should. Metrics can be all-consuming and confusing, so first, determine a few fundamentals on what you really need to know.

“For content marketing, it’s a long season. There are, and should be, many chances to fail—as long as we fail quickly, learn, and adapt to the new surroundings.”

At the core, your measurement activities should strive to answer some pretty basic questions: What's working? What isn't? And what do we need to do to make it work next time? This means you'll want to establish a system for monitoring, and reporting, the results of your activities in a way that makes sense to you and your stakeholders (yes, the people who determine your budgets should definitely see your reports!).

One method we suggest using is the **“analytics pyramid.”** This can help you understand what you should be measuring through an established hierarchy, depending on who you're reporting results to. For example, what does your head of advertising want to see from a brand awareness perspective? What does your head of sales want to see from revenue generation?

When you're reviewing your metrics, always remember the power of your gut. You know your company and its stories better than anyone. You have the best understanding of where you want to be, and what you're practically capable of achieving within certain time frames. So take your time and do it right, with well-established processes for improvement.

And remember, you have time:

This may take some convincing internally, but it's well worth it. Expecting results overnight will ultimately lead to feeling like you're failing. But you're not. You're using those metrics to roll up your sleeves and get ready to recirculate through the different phases of your content marketing framework for bigger and even better results the next time around. And now, let the next phase of planning begin.

ABOUT CONTENT MARKETING INSTITUTE



Our goal at the **Content Marketing Institute** is simple: we want to help you out with the how—to of content marketing. We believe the more you know about content marketing, and how to integrate it into your organization, the better you will market...attracting and retaining more and happier customers.

We teach marketers through educational events like **Content Marketing World** (the largest content marketing event in the world), media properties like **Chief Content Officer** magazine (the leading trade magazine), and strategic consulting and research for some of the best known brands in the world (like AT&T, Allstate, Hitachi, PRNewswire, Petco, PTC, SAS and others).

Learn more about each step in the content marketing framework with CMI's How—to Guides:



Plan



Audience



Story



Channels



Process



Conversation



Measurement