



BRANDS IN GLASS HOUSES

HOW TO EMBRACE TRANSPARENCY
AND GROW YOUR BUSINESS
THROUGH CONTENT MARKETING

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Foreword

If you don't mind, I want to talk about "reality" for a minute.

Four years ago, the reality for me was simple. Due to the stock market and housing crash, my swimming pool company was going to go out of business. Sixteen employees and their families would be out of work. I was going to lose my home. And never had stress been so great in my life.

It was during that moment of truth that I discovered what today we so often refer to as "content marketing."

But for me, back then, I didn't call it "content marketing." Simply put, the writing was on the wall. The way consumers were shopping had changed. The digital age had mixed with the information age, all leading to a new way of doing things, and my "reality" was that we could either change or become just another failed business in a long line of sinking ships.

So that's what we did. We accepted reality. **We changed.**

On the surface, there was nothing amazing about what we did. We simply altered our philosophy about the way we communicated online. Our motto was simple:

They Ask, We Answer.

In other words, if anyone had ever asked us a question over the years about swimming pools, we were going to answer it on our website. Good, bad, or ugly — it didn't make a difference. Transparency would be the name of the game. Honesty would be the guiding light. The brand was now in a glass house, for all the world to see, and boy did the results astound.

To make a long story short, over time, search engines and consumers alike fell in love with our website — and this meant way more traffic, leads, and sales. We became the ultimate voice of trust within the fiberglass pool industry, and in a period where swimming pool companies have gone out of business left and right, we've managed to survive, thrive, and find financial peace.

I tell you this story in the hopes that, unlike River Pools, you won't have to be going over a financial cliff in order to see the writing on the wall and embrace reality as we know it in the digital age.

We can all see what's happening. It's obvious. And we also know how *we* like to be treated when we visit a website and “interact” with a brand.

That said, to achieve your own River Pools story and become a brand in a glass house, you're going to need a blueprint — which is exactly why this book excites me so very much. When the folks at SPROUT Content asked me to write the foreword for this work, I'll be honest — I was worried it would be just another book filled with theoretical jargon that would leave readers scratching their heads and wondering how to truly get started with a successful content marketing campaign.

I'm happy to say I was dead wrong.

Somehow, in just over 100 pages, the authors have managed to not only paint a vision of effective content marketing through transparency, but they've also loaded the work with multiple real-life examples that are absolutely relatable to any business — big or small, B2B, or B2C.

I sincerely believe that if you embrace the teachings herein, and then follow the plan that has been so neatly outlined, your business will change forever.

Yes, it will be difficult.

Yes, you will experience unique challenges.

But yes, it can be done.

So do it. Become a brand in a glass house and be the best teacher in the world at what you do. Become the voice of your industry. Become the ultimate source for useful information.

By doing so, you'll engender the trust of anyone who sets a digital foot on your website, and the results that follow will likely amaze you — just as they amaze me every single day as I contemplate the magical choice I made to embrace transparency and content marketing four years ago.

Marcus Sheridan
President, The Sales Lion
Co-Founder, River Pools and Spas

Introduction

*“In a time of universal deceit,
telling the truth is a revolutionary act.”*

— George Orwell

As a culture, we are fed up with the inauthentic. There are whistle blowers in the financial world and banks are crumbling from dishonesty. Author James Frey was crucified by the media and on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* for exaggerating tales in his best-selling memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*. Journalists such as Jayson Blair and Stephen Glass have fallen from grace after it was proven they had plagiarized or fictionalized facts, quotes, sources, and data. Grassroots organizations like the Environmental Working Group are fighting hyperbole on product labels and demanding change in chemical ingredient regulations.

People want to work with real people. We want to know the people who are mowing our lawns, growing our food, doing our taxes, and offering us insurance. We want honest, easy-to-find information and we reward those businesses that offer it by giving them our purchases, referrals, and loyalty.

Why were we inspired to write this book?

There is a shift underway of being honest and true to who you are. Being real and authentic is even a dominant storyline in mainstream prime-time television. Shows such as *Modern Family*, *Parenthood*, and *The New Normal* fill our living rooms with stories about same-sex parents, surrogacy, sperm donation, stay-at-home dads, teen pregnancy, blended families, adoption, and mental illness. All of these shows depict normal as being the opposite of the status quo, giving people permission to not be afraid to be who they are and live a more authentic life. The idea of hiding who you really are and conforming to an expected standard is not an option anymore. The same is true in business.

Deceit and dishonesty have caused a backlash, a revolution if you will, by people demanding the truth, not only from their neighbors and government officials, but also by the companies with whom they choose to spend their hard-earned money. Consumers don't want to hear generic business speak on websites, cold canned responses to emails or customer inquiries, false exaggerated claims for products, or that your company is "the best," "high quality," or "delivers the greatest results."

"You must be candid and honest with today's discerning and skeptical customers," says our friend Ed Hind, lead principal of Healthy Living Marketing. "You are likely talking to a highly educated audience that tends to be more social and traveled, and has high expectations for transparency. And really, why would you want to be anything other than transparent and candid? It's so much simpler when you can call a spade a spade."

Access to information is growing at an exponential rate and consumers are just beginning to realize the power they have. Businesses are facing a choice: either fight this need for transparency or embrace it.

For years, companies have used advertising to cover up their behavior as people have watched and believed ads. "Fifty years ago, that's where people got their information and their content," says Jeff Rosenblum, founding partner of Questus. "Consumers have taken the power into their own hands. They know if companies are ethical and whether products are good or bad. Consumers have the power. It's a massive paradigm shift."

Oddly, inauthenticity still filters into the marketing and advertising world by agencies and corporate brands alike. Companies make false claims and often intentionally try to misrepresent themselves to look bigger or more experienced than they are. They say they have dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of employees — when really they might have a database of freelancers. Organizations tout a "combined 60 years of experience" of their core team — and showcase logos and names of companies they've worked for in the past — rather than present content that represents who their company really is.



Old school “traditional” marketers still keep everything top secret. They fear that sharing expertise, product development, thought leadership, and insider information will empower customers and their competition — which is exactly what marketers should strive to achieve. If someone doesn’t connect with your brand on an emotional level, they won’t buy from you, talk about you, share their experience with you, or listen to what you have to say. Companies need to accept the reality that customers are leading the course of brands and the best way to connect is to keep it real.

It has never been more important for companies to step up to the plate, and really rethink their entire marketing approach and how they communicate with the world. Companies are created and run by people who have ideas and a purpose. It’s time to share that passion and start conducting business person-to-person.

Brands must open the curtains and lift the veil of “secrecy” to give the world a real bird’s-eye view into what makes their companies tick. Even big companies such as McDonald’s and General Electric are leaving the B.S. out of business and keeping it real and crystal clear, revealing everything from company financials to failures and how-to successes.

Many brands are setting great examples of how to show your human side through content marketing, social media, and proactive storytelling. They’re creating fun, memorable, engaging content that reveals who they are at the core and establishes their credibility with consumers. Content published in blogs, social media, newsletters, e-books, videos, and more provides a window into a company, giving people a glimpse into what the company is about, from “meeting” the people who work there, to learning how products are made and where they come from.

We are here to share these stories with you and show you how being candid and honest about who you are, while sometimes scary, is the only way to do business today.