

THE 2017
CONTENT MARKETING
FRAMEWORK
5 BUILDING BLOCKS FOR PROFITABLE, SCALABLE OPERATIONS



CONTENT
MARKETING
INSTITUTE™

THE 2017 CONTENT MARKETING FRAMEWORK

In 2013, Content Marketing Institute released its first **Content Marketing Framework**. At the time, its purpose was to serve as a high-level view of the principles that govern the world of brand storytelling.

Since then, CMI has worked with more than 100 brands, helping them put these core principles into practice. These partnerships have taught us a lot about which parts of the framework worked, which didn't, and where we still needed to provide greater clarity and transparency.

To reflect the insights we gained – as well as the many shifts that have occurred across the entire digital ecosystem – we've streamlined our original discussion, and have added a distinct new process model to each node.

What follows is our redesigned Content Marketing Framework. Think of it as a syllabus of sorts, covering the five core elements necessary for running successful, scalable content marketing operations within an organization:

- ▶ **Purpose and Goals:** Why you are creating content, and what value it will provide
- ▶ **Audience:** Who you are creating content for, and how they will benefit
- ▶ **Story:** What specific, unique, and valuable ideas you will build your content assets around
- ▶ **Process:** How you will structure and manage your operations in order to activate your plans
- ▶ **Measurement:** How you will gauge performance and continually optimize your efforts

Taken as one cohesive unit, this framework unifies the methodology we teach at CMI University. It is our hope that each of the five nodes will serve as a trigger point that helps you understand how to grow stronger, more agile, and more innovative in your approach to creating content that builds value for your customers, as well as for your business.

Robert Rose

Chief Strategy Adviser



PURPOSE: THE VALUE PROPOSITION OF THE CONTENT PRODUCT

Whether your company has a marketing army of one or 100, you need to align on a shared **purpose** if you want to be successful.

Content marketing, done well, differs from many marketing activities because it doesn't operate as a campaign. Instead, it coalesces around big ideas that deliver value to people – many of which can and will exist for long periods, take multiple forms, and gradually increase in value over time. And as all ideas take time to develop and bear fruit, each content marketing initiative you embark upon should be designed to operate on an ongoing basis, rather than having a set expiration date.

Because of this, content marketing is more like developing a product than running a campaign: You build an idea into something concrete that will exist as an extension of your brand. So, while it's true that content marketers create assets that can be applied to specific, campaign-like goals (e.g., generating sales leads or increasing up-selling opportunities), if you treat content marketing as just another means to produce direct-marketing collateral, you'll miss out on its tremendous potential to drive multiple lines of value for your business – all at the same time.

PURPOSE: BUILD INVESTMENT AROUND YOUR AUDIENCE, NOT YOUR ASSETS

Setting your business up for content marketing success typically requires you to have a clear view of the business goals you are looking to reach and a “map” of all the strategic and tactical steps you will have to take to get there. But long-term value derived from content will be in the creation of an engaged audience, not a collection of discrete content assets. And audiences will aggregate based on the continued and consistent value they receive from you. So you should think of the value you want your content to bring to those who consume it. In other words, what distinct and compelling ideas do you have for content that your target audience can relate to, learn from, and appreciate you for – ones they won't find anywhere else?

From a brand perspective, the primary question you should look to answer is:

“How can we create business value from the creation of an engaged audience?”

What ideas will create value to an audience, and thus enable our initiatives to provide multiple lines of value to our business over time?

Remember: Your response doesn't need to be complete and concrete right from the start. The important thing is that you take the time to think critically about the qualities you value as a brand, how you can reflect those favorable characteristics in the content you create, and how doing so will benefit your target audience.

Ultimately, your answers should lead you to discover a unique brand story (more on this later), which will inform all the decisions you make as you execute on your program.

With your most critical question answered, you will have all the information necessary to create your [content marketing mission](#): a purpose-driven statement that sets the tone for your first (or many) content marketing initiatives and defines your expected outcomes.

Specifically, your content marketing mission should answer four fundamental questions:

- ▶ What are your business goals (i.e., the results you expect to achieve through content marketing)?
- ▶ To whom can you deliver value in order to satisfy these goals (i.e., the audience you will target)?
- ▶ What is the valuable content experience (independent of the products/services you offer) you will deliver at the particular stage of your customer's journey?
- ▶ How is your voice/value unique (i.e., what is your "[content tilt](#)," aka the unique content experience that only you can provide)?

GOALS: TURNING MISSION-CRITICAL IDEALS INTO TANGIBLE RESULTS

Once you have your content marketing mission in hand, it will be much easier to make important strategic and executional decisions throughout the life span of your program – such as which goals to set and prioritize; what tactics, channels, and techniques to use in pursuit of those goals; and how to translate content performance into real business value.

Content marketing typically helps you achieve three types of goals. While each offers different benefits, they are not mutually exclusive – in other words, you can pursue more than one type of goal simultaneously through your content initiatives.

All three of the following types of goals have a common foundation: the behaviors of subscribed audiences that differentiate them from others who might consume your content:

- ▶ **Campaign goals:** Sales-related goals are increased or accelerated by the content you create. Content can make these goals easier to achieve because prospects who subscribe to your credible, informative content often turn into leads more readily, purchase more, or go through your sales funnel more quickly.
- ▶ **Cost-savings goals:** Your content enables you to deliver better performance from your other business activities. For example, the rich data collected from your subscribers can help you understand which prospects are more likely to become sales-qualified leads, keeping your sales team from wasting their resources on pursuing the wrong targets. Or, you can utilize data from subscribed audiences to more accurately and efficiently target paid advertising campaigns.
- ▶ **Business-growth goals:** Content can drive overall business growth, such as creating new revenue streams or opening up new product lines. For example, consider how companies like HubSpot or Salesforce have monetized their event-related content by offering paid sponsorship opportunities.

Keep in mind: When it comes to using content to achieve multiple marketing goals, you will want to focus on monetizing the audiences and behaviors that your content efforts collectively drive – not the individual assets themselves.

For example, consider the typical corporate blog. The articles themselves contribute little value to the company that creates them. But when someone takes action as a result of reading those blog posts – such as subscribing to receive ongoing communication, starting a conversation by commenting on a post, or visiting additional pages on your site to get more information, etc. – your blog has enabled a value exchange that brings you closer to your goals.

Your content marketing mission should be focused on a unique core idea that unifies all the specific goals to which your content marketing program will contribute.

By this point, you should already have started to recognize that “goals” is not only where your content marketing program begins, but also the point at which it should end – and then begin anew: Content marketing should always be centered on goals; but just as your business priorities might shift over time, so should your content goals continually evolve so your program can stay as relevant, optimized, and impactful as possible.

With a clear understanding of who you are as a business, a view of how you will express your core values through the content you create, and an understanding of what you seek to accomplish, you can then start to focus on those who will consume that content.



AUDIENCE: DELIVERING THE PROMISE OF VALUE TO THOSE WHOM YOU WANT TO TAKE ACTION

At the core of every successful content marketing strategy is content that provides multiple lines of value to a **subscribed audience**.

The concept of a “subscribed audience” is a critical distinction that is unique to content marketing, compared to other marketing disciplines. Content assets alone have no inherent value – their worth lies in how successful they are at compelling an audience to actually DO something.

Driving your audience to take a desired action is how content marketing, as an approach, becomes measurable; thus, “subscribers” should be considered the basic unit of currency when it comes to deriving value from your content marketing program.

A subscriber is created when a person willingly provides their personal data in exchange for the promise of valuable content in the future. So, placing a registration form in front of an asset isn’t what creates that subscriber – it’s simply the mechanism that helps you identify when such an exchange has taken place.

Now, to be clear, we are not saying that you must capture email addresses in order to have a successful content marketing program. Just as there are layers of “brand awareness” and other “high-funnel” goals in marketing, so too can “subscribe” be defined in a few different ways, depending on the nature of the information being exchanged and how the resulting data will be measured and used by your business.

For our purposes, you can look at it in terms of the three levels of a subscriber framework (moving from the top to the bottom of the funnel):

- ▶ An **ENGAGE subscription** might simply be measured by looking at the number of people reached with content, the number of people who are returning to your digital content, the number of RSS feed subscribers, or simply the number of pieces of content that have been consumed. Think of Adobe and its [CMO.com](#) platform here. It reaches 330,000 marketers every month and looks at content consumption (and the data it provides) as a means of generating value.
- ▶ An **INSPIRE subscription** is measured by generating an increasingly proactive conversation with a target audience. For example, you might use interactive polls or other data retrieval methods to garner additional information about your visitors (especially return visitors) in order to start to build a valuable set of insights. Consider how Brandeis University uses its [“Which Career Is Right for You”](#) quiz to generate leads.
- ▶ A **REACH subscription** is where we actually achieve an addressable audience. Here we are looking at those who are signing up for future delivery of the content that our owned media property promises. Here you are not only extracting data for access to content, but you are incentivizing people to provide their data willingly, in exchange for receiving valuable content on a consistent basis. Think here of GE’s GE Reports – a magazine that operates just as a “for profit” magazine operates. Their “value,” as Managing Editor [Tomas Kellner](#) reports, lies in the 15,000 email subscribers that receive daily updates.

It’s a process, to be sure. So, even if you can only dedicate a small portion of your time to building an audience, your focus should be on building and motivating audiences to subscribe to the content you create in whatever way will provide the greatest benefit to your business.

AUDIENCE: DETERMINING WHO THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY NEED

So, the audience element of this framework aims to uncover, and be in tune with, those whom you want to subscribe to your content. That audience can be broken out into two equally important spokes:

1. The internal stakeholders who may need to sign off on, participate in, or benefit from your content marketing program to make it successful
2. Those whom you are trying to reach externally to help continually grow your business

As you look to engage both types of audiences through your initiatives, consider how their needs may change over time. As with setting your content marketing plan, you should plan to regularly re-evaluate these audiences and their needs as you progress along your content marketing journey.

Why?

- ▶ As you continue to tell more and more engaging stories, you may find that you are better able to identify and establish 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 for you to answer during this stage are:

- ▶ Who are you talking to?
- ▶ What is each group's content marketing persona – aka, the profile of their needs, behaviors, current user state, and defining characteristics? These can get as detailed as you'd like, and should be expanded as new people, or groups, join your audience list.
- ▶ What do they need? What would they value?

You should also consider how consumers' needs will shift as they move down your sales funnel. 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 their buyers' journeys will help you identify the content required to nurture them through each stage of the purchase process.



STORY: PLOT IS WHAT HAPPENED, STORY IS WHY IT HAPPENED

As a marketer, you are likely experienced at describing the value of your products and services. You know how to craft unique value propositions, unique sales propositions, features, benefits, and even reasons to believe. However, what you have not typically been trained to do is create value that's independent of your products or services.

In short, when marketers create content, they focus on *what happened*, rather than on *why it needed to happen*.

Storytelling is not intended to be a “selling” tool; rather, it's a method of delivering business value through content by building strong consumer relationships that can be nurtured into thriving customer communities. Understanding who you are and what audiences you're trying to reach will be meaningless endeavors unless you can clearly identify the specific and unique value you will deliver in exchange for your audience's trust and support.

That value is your **story**. It should be informed by your passions, as a business, and serve as the through-line that will inform all your future content initiatives.

Story is the unique idea that enables you to monetize the subscribed audience that will gather around it.

One thing to consider: The word “story” can sometimes imply that there’s a clear beginning, middle, and end to what you will be creating. But within this content marketing framework, this is not necessarily the case. There are no fixed narrative rules you need to follow, nor is there a rigid structure for gathering or identifying the elements of your story. You simply need to view your content through the lens of value creation, purpose, and (yes) heart. This is the only way to establish the trust and rapport that’s essential to turning content consumers into loyal supporters and long-term customers.

Once you’ve established your story, you can start to work toward mapping the media experiences that will serve as the expression of that story (e.g., a blog, email newsletter, digital magazine, webinar program, etc.). And, of course – because our new experiences are built to operate continuously – we need to create a strategic process under which they will operate.



PROCESS: CONTENT MARKETING IS AN ONGOING OPERATION, NOT A SHORT-TERM CAMPAIGN

Once you have created your purpose and goals, audience personas, and a story to deliver, you need to decide how all those plans will get translated into action – i.e., you need to determine your **process**.

As discussed, if you are viewing content marketing as simply an alternative form of campaign-based marketing, you are failing to plan for its continual success. Instead, you must start to look at content marketing as a sustainable, ongoing operation. In other words:

You need to create an operational plan that enables your team (or even an entire department) to function as a media company, rather than working under an endless, campaign-driven marketing mentality.

As you look to structure those operations, it will be important to look at the unique facets of your organization, and construct the appropriate guidelines that will suit your needs. Think of the output of your work as a “playbook” that contains everything a team member would want to know when creating content on behalf of your business, including:

- ▶ The steps involved in your content marketing process, and the order in which they should be executed
- ▶ The owner of each of those tasks, and the other players who should be involved
- ▶ The brand and quality standards you have established, and guidelines on how they should be maintained
- ▶ The primary content format and media channel you will concentrate on, and the best practices that should be followed in their use
- ▶ Who your content creators/contributors are, and how your team will be expected to support/manage their efforts
- ▶ What other resources you can access to facilitate your efforts (both internally and externally)

In our book, [*Experiences: The 7th Era of Marketing*](#), Carla Johnson and I outline a concept for content creation management (CCM). Through our research with both large and small organizations, we've discovered that, while there's no single, precise way to create a content creation management process, there are best practices that can be followed.

Because there are so many considerations that you must account for in your operational processes, it may help to divide your plan into distinct categories so you can organize and execute on them successfully. These categories might include:

- ▶ A content taxonomy (aka a navigational structure that makes it easy for your audience to discover your content)
- ▶ A standard routing process, or workflow (and common variations)
- ▶ Required team skills and resources
- ▶ Editorial style and contributor guidelines
- ▶ A channel plan, and codes of conduct
- ▶ Required tools and systems for optimal productivity and efficiency



MEASUREMENT: MEASURING FOR MEANING, NOT MEDIOCRITY

Measurement comes at the end of this framework; but, like your goals, it should also factor in at every other phase of your content marketing approach.

Of course, just because you can measure just about anything these days, doesn't mean that you should. Metrics can be all-consuming and confusing, so start by focusing on what you really need to know, based on what goals you are looking to achieve.

There are two fundamental concepts to understand when it comes to content marketing measurement:

1. **Don't mistake success of your platform for a contribution to the business.** For example, if you're going to launch an owned media platform (like a blog), it must first attract and build a subscribed audience before it can be expected to function as a successful lead generation engine. Therefore, your blog deserves the same effort, promotion, and time to succeed that you would devote to any business initiative. In turn...
2. **Each content marketing goal should be measured in context to its purpose and adjusted accordingly, over time.** Just because you are working toward a particular business goal (for example, increasing lead generation) doesn't mean you can't also measure the other milestones of value that platform (e.g., a blog) reaches as it builds toward success. For example, given a purpose of generating leads, the first value you may actually create with your blog is an improved marketing database (e.g., the subscribed audience we mentioned earlier). The second goal you may deliver based on that improved marketing database might be a more efficient ad targeting effort, or improved SEO through your content platform. Eventually, your blog will actually deliver more leads to the business. Figure out the right timing of achieved goals and their relative value to your business.

To illustrate: You have goals – you've stated them explicitly as a key piece of this framework. Hopefully your goals align to multiple lines of value across the purposes you have created. For example, your content marketing initiative might have these three goals (hopefully you will have more):

- A. A 10% increase in qualified leads in your pipeline with no extra cost per lead
- B. A rich audience database that will give product managers insight into direct marketing alternatives (SEO vs. ads vs. events) resulting in a 20% effectiveness in ad spend
- C. Leads that come through content marketing will increase ASP (average sales price) by 20%

Those are three very achievable goals. But you can see immediately that one may come before another in time. As you build your operational plan, Goal B may actually be the first thing you can achieve. Goal A may be the second, and Goal C could be something that is realized last.

So, the platform must succeed first before it can help further your business goals. In other words, you *must* get to that rich audience database goal first before you can realize increases in the number of qualified leads or average sales price.

Additionally, there will be other (perhaps hundreds) of KPIs (key performance indicators) that will gauge progress you are making toward reaching your goals. Together, your goals and KPIs can be mapped into your timeline so that you are setting correct expectations and getting buy-in around achieving those goals over time. This is measuring *in* time.

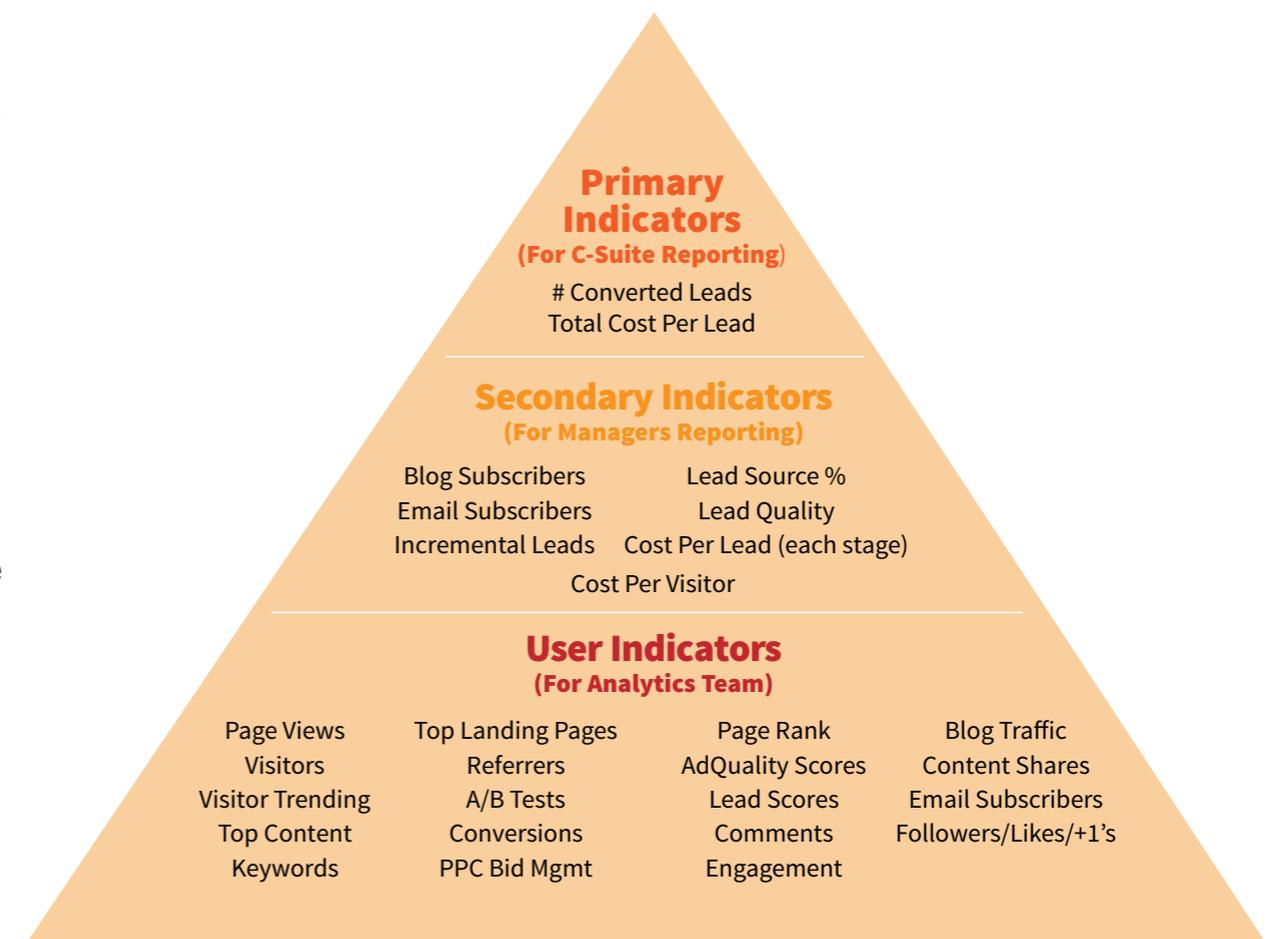
MEASUREMENT: FINDING MEANING IN THE MATHEMATICS

Then, how do you map all those metrics? What's working? What isn't? And what do you 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 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.

It may take some convincing internally, but it's well worth it. Expecting results overnight will ultimately lead you to feel like you're failing even when you aren't. 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.

GOAL: Increase Leads 10% with No Increased Cost





Looking for extra guidance on any of these steps – and how to put them into play in your organization? Content Marketing University provides all the training and education you'll need to become a more effective content marketer. [Sign up now](#) to be the first to know when enrollment has begun for our next semester!

About Content Marketing Institute

[Content Marketing Institute](#) is the leading global content marketing education and training organization, teaching enterprise brands how to attract and retain customers through compelling, multichannel storytelling. CMI's [Content Marketing World](#) event, the largest content marketing-focused event, is held every September in Cleveland, Ohio, USA, and the [Intelligent Content Conference](#) event is held every spring. CMI publishes the bimonthly magazine [Chief Content Officer](#), and provides strategic consulting and content marketing research for some of the best-known brands in the world. CMI, a UBM company, has made the Inc. 500/5000 list from 2012-2015. Watch this [video](#) to learn more.