
The 5 new laws of content

What they mean to your organization



Brian Davies, Managing Partner

B2B content marketing has evolved from a niche area of interest to an industry-wide phenomenon. According to the Content Marketing Institute, 92% of B2B marketers use some degree of content marketing to reach their customers. However, widespread adoption does not equal widespread mastery. I set out to identify some workable laws around content, so that marketers could systematize and optimize their operations.

These laws will not address every eventuality a business might face. Nor should they be thought of as eternal, as the industry continues to evolve. However, B2B content marketing has gained enough momentum — and demonstrated enough consistent challenges — to justify these laws as a guide for more effective marketing.

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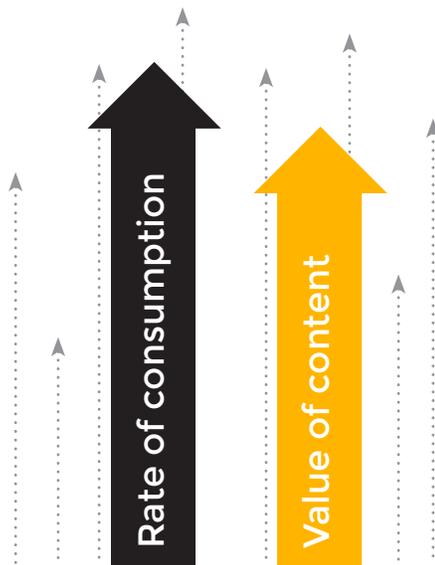
The law of consumption

I am a baseball fan, and more specifically, a Chicago Cubs fan. I read several blogs on the team on a daily basis, but a short time ago, I noticed that I always read these blogs in the same order. I started to wonder why that was. All of them are well written and one of them, which had now been relegated to last on my reading list, was the first one I had found. Then I came upon the answer — the blogs that had the most up-to-the-minute content were the ones I read first. This brings us to the first Law of Content:

As the rate of content consumption increases, the value of cutting-edge information also increases.

For the “consuming connected,” there is now more information to read, watch, analyze and share than at any time in history. Yet, for many, simply consuming these vast tides of information is not enough. We now place a very high premium on the currency of information.

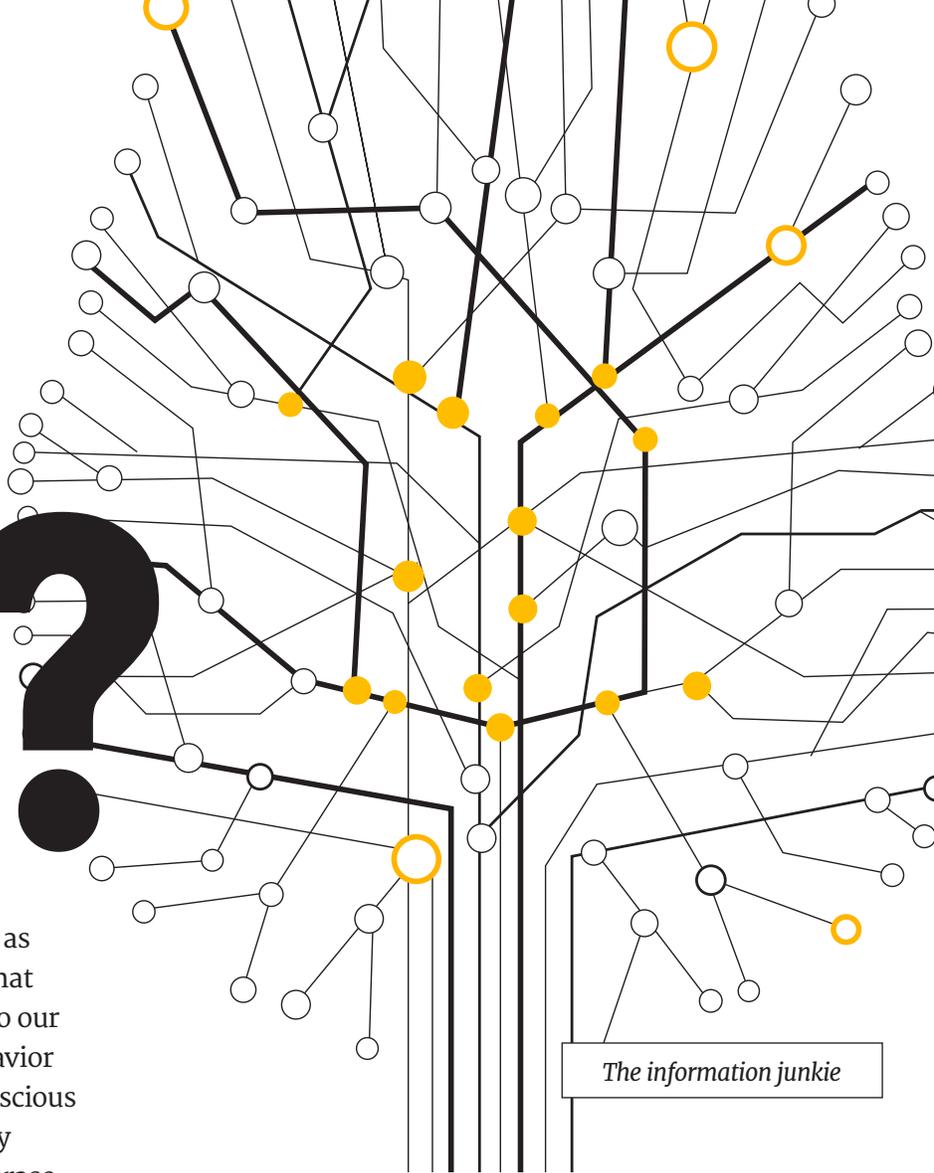
Experience has shown that with many types of communication — social media being the foremost example — audience engagement is increased when content is filled with new (preferably as close to real time as possible) commentary and context. This is especially true with web content, as frequently or recently updated pages are more likely to receive high SEO rankings. Even content that is written or produced at length (e.g., white papers, collateral, videos) is not immune to the effects of this phenomenon. While people will always appreciate the effort that goes into this “slow content,” they will increasingly seek out the latest — even if it sometimes comes at the expense of the greatest.



why?

It might have to do with our physical make-up as much as anything else. A recent study shows that our brains change their hardwiring according to our behavior, eventually accommodating that behavior and making it less under the control of our conscious free will. * The availability of fresh content may actually enhance the desire for it, giving the phrase “information junkie” a literal meaning.

The implications of this law for content producers are significant — content is perishable, and marketers are increasingly aware of it. As a joint report by the Content Marketing Institute and MarketingProfs reveals, 56% of marketers increased their content creation spending over the past 12 months. The need to scale up content creation is likely to increase still further as the rate of content churn rises.



The information junkie

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The law of complexity

Entropy, a law used in the study of thermodynamics, has found application in a number of other fields as well. This is because it loosely describes something we all know by casual observation: The amount of chaos in a system tends to increase with the complexity of the system. This holds true for the second Law of Content as well:

As the complexity of content increases, the challenge of managing it increases.

When your organization was eking out a couple white papers a year, the need for a content plan — much less a content strategy — was nonexistent. Yet, today content is the fuel of the marketing engine. Everything from nurture marketing programs to search engine optimization to social media demand a steady supply of it. With so much content around, it is more important than ever to manage its collective presentation in ways that create meaning. This calls for a documented content strategy — something 63% of businesses don't currently have, according to the Content Marketing Institute. And it calls for a new skill set — the skill set of a curator.

To return to our science example, a curator is an “information chemist.” He or she must strategically develop, select and

place content in the appropriate vehicles, in the appropriate environments, in order to engage the audience, convey a message or inspire action.

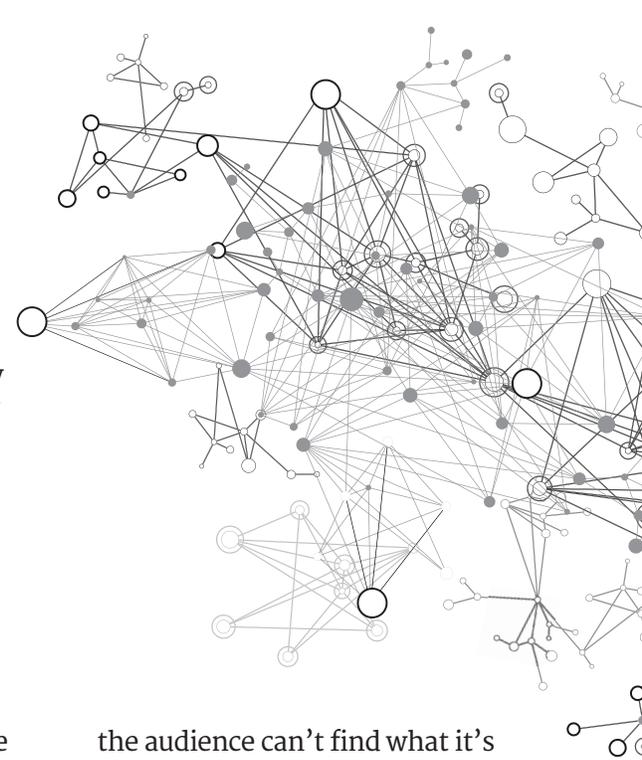
The majority of organizations are set up to sell products and services, not to manage the production and delivery of a wide array of editorial material. This can result in creating content for content's sake, with little alignment with the strategic interests of the organization. In other cases, words, images, audio and video can be shoehorned into vehicles that weren't truly designed with the real-world content requirements of the audience in mind. When these things happen,

the audience can't find what it's searching for, or worse, doesn't value what it finds. Either of these eventualities can tarnish the very brand the content was meant to burnish.

Organizations need to take a hard look in the mirror. If they don't have a rigorously documented content strategy and the curatorial capability to execute it on staff, they need to hire or outsource that capability — and before they execute their next wave of content.

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The law of reputation

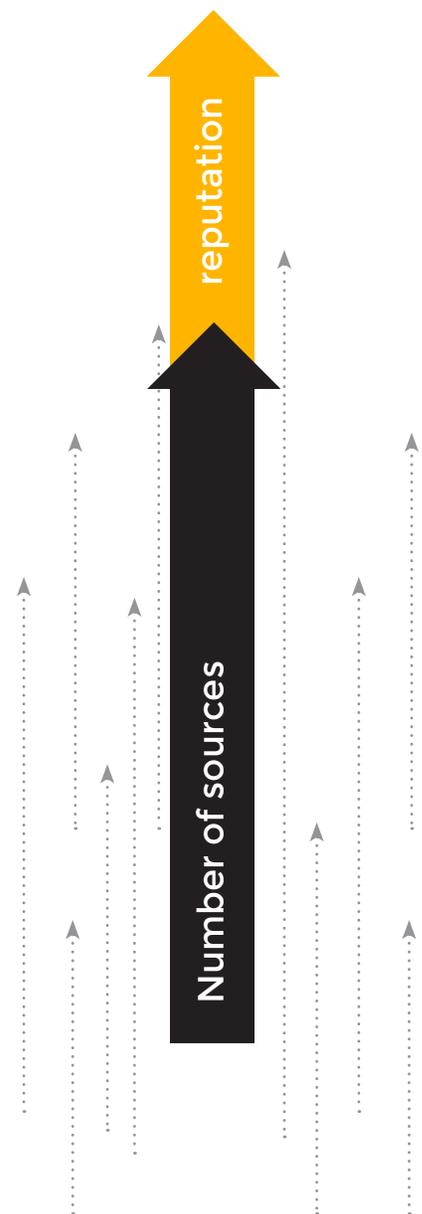
There is a world of difference between a carefully cultivated, well-researched news outlet and a minimally fact-checked blog — and consumers know this. Institutions that produce quality information have carefully cultivated reputations that set them apart from their less-reputable counterparts. This suggests the third Law of Content:

As the number of content sources increases, the importance of source reputation increases.

Everyone has heard the expression, “Opinions are like (fill in the body part), everyone’s got one.” And so it is with viewpoints on everything from where whole industries are heading to why product “A” is better than product “B.” The internet has been a great equalizer, enabling almost any person or organization to publish content. But that doesn’t mean all content is equally good. In fact, the vast majority of it is far less than that.

I recall a video from a few years back in which one of the characters deadpans the line, “So basically I thought the best approach would be to repeat exactly what you told me on the first call and shuffle the words around a bit.” This statement summarizes much of the content on the Internet — unoriginal and devoid of critical thought. Bad content can be more than uninformative; it can be insidious or frankly dangerous. Lots of online material is now produced at “content farms,” companies that employ large numbers of writers to generate content designed specifically to be ranked highly by search engines. While this content might pass muster with indexing technologies and algorithms, the discerning reader can usually spot it a mile away. What’s more, factually incorrect or deliberately misleading content continues to proliferate, which means reliable content producers must work harder to cut through the noise.

As a result of these trends, consumers will increasingly rely on the sponsor of content as a shorthand for its quality. The implication for content producers? Sharing useful information can help build credibility and trust, but only a strong brand will ensure that your content is both consumed and valued.



The law of evolution

The stand-alone, paper resume is no longer the uncontested king of job searches. Today, job-seekers develop online portfolios, answer employer-submitted questions via an automated phone system, or even upload videos of themselves explaining their background and expertise. The experience becomes much richer than we would have thought possible a decade ago. This brings us to the fourth Law of Content:

As technology improves, the production value of content goes up.

Increases in bandwidth, processing power and storage do not mean the written word is in immediate danger of losing its seat at the content table, but it clearly has less elbow room than ever before. “Share of eyeballs” for richer content is growing, which makes sense given that motion and sound can make for a more informative or engaging user experience.

Growth in online video consumption, arguably the highest form of content production value now available, has been increasing rapidly for some time.

The implications of this law for content producers are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the content that is produced will be more involving, increasing message penetration and the likelihood of further

brand engagement. On the other hand, producing such content will be more time consuming and resource intensive (e.g., video equipment, editing software, skilled creatives, etc.) than the written word. This means more and more content will need to be outsourced, at least for those organizations that have not made the capital expenditures to make such production possible in house.

According to Zazzle Media, 65% of marketers find it a major challenge to consistently produce content that engages prospects and customers. This percentage will likely go up as technology — and the production value of content — continue to advance.



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The law of exchange

What is the difference between a report from Frost & Sullivan that costs \$6,000, and a report on the same topic that is available in exchange for an email address? Clearly, the anticipated value of the content. Yet, in either case, content can be viewed as the linchpin of a quid-pro-quo transaction. This gives rise to the fifth Law of Content:

As the value of content increases, the value of what it is exchanged for increases.

This law has significant implications for the kind of content that is created by content producers. “Thought leadership” has been defined by Gartner as “the giving — for free or at a nominal charge — of information or advice that a client will value so as to create awareness of the outcome that a company’s product or service can deliver, in order to position and differentiate that offering and stimulate demand for it.” Central to this definition is the expectation of exchange — in a best-case scenario, a prospect may become a customer after being impressed with some intellectual capital; in a worst-case scenario, a prospect grants the content producer permission to contact them in the future with the implicit understanding that

they may be interested in receiving additional content.

Businesses are increasingly incorporating thought leadership into their marketing mixes, because C-Suite executives demand it. Edelman reports that 58% of decision-makers spend at least an hour a week reading thought leadership, up 8% from just a year ago.

The right content can indeed be a manageable tool to drive business, but getting it “right” requires strategy. Industry issues must be carefully aligned with organizational capabilities, and both must be looked at through a brand/positioning lens. If this all sounds beyond the talents of the wordsmiths you employ, you are in

need of a good content strategist. The upfront costs for these services may be more, but the demand for higher value content downstream will make it all worthwhile.

Other laws may be added or adapted as content marketing continues to evolve, but one thing remains certain: Content marketing represents a tremendous opportunity for brands and brand building. To take full advantage of this opportunity, many organizations will need to stop thinking about content as simply grist for communication and view it in its proper light — as a brand asset worthy of strategy, planning and resource allocation.

**Learning-Induced Gray-Matter Plasticity by Janina Boyke, Joanna Driemeyer, Christian Gaser, Christian Büchel, and Arne May*

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