

# Introduction: A New Old Story

## Relearning a New But Familiar Practice

*Marketing is telling the world you're a rock star. Content Marketing is showing the world you are one.*

You're late.

But don't worry. I am too. I've been writing pieces of this book for the last seven years. But we're here, and as one of my mentors used to say to me, "As long as we're breathing, it's not too late."

So, take a breath.

Let's back up a moment. Hello. Welcome. I'm Robert Rose, and I've been working in the world of marketing and content strategy for nearly 30 years. I started as a marketing assistant in television at Showtime Networks in Los Angeles in 1995. It was, at that time, a "day gig" designed to pay the bills while I pursued a career in playwriting and screenwriting. However, it was there that I met some amazing people, who would turn me on to the art and science of marketing. It was a job that subsequently turned into a life's passion that still gets me out of bed every day. Throughout my career I've worked as a marketing research manager, product marketer, digital marketing consultant, director of sales and marketing, vice president of strategy, CMO, and back to consultant again. At every single step, my greatest joy has been rolling up my sleeves to do the real work of marketing and learning the myriad industries I've come to understand a bit better.

I am a student practitioner through and through. I proudly stand on the shoulders of the giants I've learned from such as Peter Drucker, Michael Porter, Madam C.J. Walker, Theodore Levitt, Philip Kotler,

Don Schultz, Rita Gunther-McGrath, Youngme Moon, and Clayton Christensen. Whatever marketing thinking I bring to my clients, or my books, these are but a few of the teachers that helped me bring it forward.

What you're holding in your hand, or listening to, is the culmination of more than a decade of research, work, and personal experiences in deploying both successful and failed content-driven marketing strategies for businesses of all sizes.

## Content marketing strategy lives

Wait, what? Content marketing *strategy*? Is that even a thing?

Yes. It is. Back in 2003, I was the CMO of a small startup technology company that focused on the (then) new and disruptive idea of enterprise cloud computing. As I like to say, we were in the cloud before being in the cloud was cool. There, I inadvertently helped create what would become more widely known as a content marketing approach. Our little company had no money, no brand, and little time to make a big dent in our market. We were, quite literally, working out of an old Victorian house with folding tables as desks.

Our competitors were the giants of the tech world such as Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard (today's HP), and Oracle. They were selling traditional, server-based enterprise software while we were the disruptive new kid on the block. We knew we would never beat these companies when it came to SEO, advertising spend, event presence, or sales prowess. We were also emerging from the dot-com bust – so anything “new” or “innovative” was viewed with a healthy amount of skepticism.

So, as a ragtag team of business managers, we made a set of simple—yet at the time audacious—conclusions:

- 1 We knew we could be a mile deeper than any competitor when it came to subject matter expertise. We had a unique point of view about the future of enterprise marketing software (the idea that would become known as software-as-a-service) and we could help the world understand it better than anyone.

**2** We all had media backgrounds—so we knew content and design. We knew how to create it, transform it, produce it, and distribute it so that we appeared much bigger and more impressive than we actually were.

We transformed our marketing team into a publishing unit. We used a substantial amount of our marketing budget to launch a blog, write white papers, create webinar programs, events, training. We became one of the few companies that reporters and analysts looked to for true guidance on where the software-as-a-service market was going.

Then, a funny thing happened. It worked. The company grew.

I found my calling. After a few years, I left the startup company in much more capable hands to grow into the successful company it would become, and I went all in on content marketing.

In 2009, I joined up with this guy named Joe Pulizzi who came from the world of business publishing. He had just formed a new media company called the Content Marketing Institute. I became their first chief strategy officer, and together we wrote one of the first books on content marketing strategy in 2011. We called it *Managing Content Marketing* because, at the time, we noticed the profound changes that digital technologies and social media were having on *both* the traditional worlds of publishing media and the practice of marketing. As we said back then:

This new engagement of the consumer—with keen awareness of their relationships and emerging social networks—now correlates to every single aspect of our businesses. Marketing now influences how publishers publish, accountants account, researchers research, developers develop, service people service, and even how leaders lead.<sup>1</sup>

Our conclusion at the time was that yes, marketing and media have changed. The question is, what are we going to do about it?

The answer to that question was, of course, this new approach we called “content marketing.” We wanted that book to be the “owner’s manual” for how marketers could integrate this new effort into their ongoing marketing strategy.

## An old, new story

So, here we are, a little more than a decade later (did I mention I feel late?), and content marketing strategy is still considered by many to be a new, innovative, and disruptive force. It's not that the approach hasn't grown in popularity or been covered by other authors. There have been hundreds of books on content marketing, covering everything from how to write more valuable content, to how to treat various digital content channels, to developing better customer relationships. Heck, even Joe and I, collectively, have written five other books on content marketing since 2011.

So, do we really need another book on content marketing? Why have *you* opened or tapped play on yet another book that claims it will enlighten you to the practice? Well, maybe the reason is because your business is still trying to figure out what content marketing is. Or perhaps you've tried content marketing and feel like it's not working for you the way you hear about it working for others. Or maybe you have a college professor who has assigned you this reading to understand this new process in business.

The reason I felt it was the right time is because so much of what is written about content marketing strategy focuses on either the first or the second word. I wanted to write what I've learned about the third word. Instead of writing a book about content, I wanted to write a book about how we *manage* content marketing. Strategically. So, yes, it's an old, new story.

But whatever your particular reason, maybe you feel late to the content marketing strategy party. So, here's something that will either comfort you or keep you up at night. Ready for it?

You are not alone.

Few companies have a content marketing strategy completely figured out. There are some that do, such as Cleveland Clinic, Red Bull, Arrow Electronics, HubSpot, and REI, that have purposely devised content marketing strategies that are meant to be differentiating. They have consciously designed, implemented, and measured a content marketing approach based on learned best practices. They are succeeding. But there are others, such as Amazon, Microsoft, JPMorgan Chase, and LEGO, that have backed into what *we* would call a smart

content marketing strategy. They have built brand and marketing programs around the idea of developing valuable content and operating like a media company. However, most of these companies wouldn't consciously acknowledge that they built a content marketing strategy. If asked (and some of them have been) these companies would say that acquiring or launching a full media company operation was just a smart business strategy to diversify their ability to consistently reach their consumers. They're right of course. They haven't read any of the books or been influenced by the Content Marketing Institute. They might not even recognize the fact that they're taking a unique approach to content marketing. And they are also succeeding.

As content marketing has grown as a practice, we've observed both types of companies over the years. You'll hear much more about both as we get deeper into this book. And, of course, content marketing isn't new at all. It too is an old, new story.

There has been no shortage of spilled digital ink talking about how content marketing has been around for at least 100 years. We all point to the Michelin Guide—a tire manufacturer that wrote a travel guide in the 1920s that evolved to become one of the premier global restaurant rating services. Yes, that's right—when you eat at a Michelin-starred restaurant the rating comes from the same company that makes the tires on your automobile. Or many will cite John Deere's *The Furrow* magazine and how, since 1895, this magazine has helped farmers understand how to farm better. Many will also look to LEGO as a prime historical example. This was a turnaround story, where the company utilized an ability to produce print magazines, feature films—and now digital experiences—to drive product stories. As the vice president of marketing there once said: “We used to be a toy manufacturer. Now we're turning more and more into a media company to tell our story about these bricks. We need a lot of content to tell that story.”<sup>2</sup> These are all examples of companies that discovered the value of content marketing well before there was a name for it.

However, both these older companies and the new ones that have developed content marketing struggle with convincing their leadership that these initiatives are worth continuing. No matter how old the practice of content marketing, it remains a new concept for many

businesses. Over the last few years I've met and/or consulted with every single one of the companies listed above, as well as many others that serve as "content marketing case studies" at conferences. The *people* in those companies, without exception, are just like all of us: they feel late, work hard, and lurch along an evolving journey to continue to make the business case. Every. Single. Day. The leader at one of the most frequently mentioned content marketing case studies said to me in 2022: "I wish my boss could see all the times we're mentioned as a case study for content marketing. I still fight for budget and relevance every single month."

So, guess what? The continuing struggle to create a business case for our creative approach of content marketing is not a sign that the practice is unproven, that the hundreds of books over the last decade were wrong, or that we should abandon hope for our past failed efforts. It's just a sign that content marketing is becoming a normal part of our beloved practice of marketing. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't. It is an art as much as science, and marketers will always be in the business of balancing their relevance against broader business goals.

The biggest obstacle for content marketing now—and why I felt compelled to finish this book now—is that the classic content marketing adage "*we need to act like a media company*" is mostly misunderstood. What gets most companies into trouble is that they feel like content marketing is creating stuff that helps them market themselves as a media company would. Nope. It matters not whether your company understands content marketing as a discrete approach, or whether you're more like Amazon or Microsoft and just adopting a media operation model because it's smart business. The goal is not to *market* ourselves as a media company. The goal is for marketing to *operate* as a media company does. Our job is not to change content to fit a new marketing goal. The job is to change marketing to fit new content goals.

Content marketing is a new operation for which we build business cases—a scalable, functional model of content that's as important as any product or service we offer in our marketplace. When making a renewed business case for content marketing, remember that no single new marketing approach is going to change the business. However,

one new approach to marketing can be a reason the business decides to change.

That's what this book is for. Change. Like I said, we're late. But neither of us is *too late*.

## The world of marketing changed after 2020

Consider that in 2019, my consulting firm helped 35 businesses develop a business case and strategy for content marketing as a function in the business. At least 25 of those focused on developing a better lead-generation engine. Four focused on brand and purpose-driven strategies (things like climate, diversity, ESG, etc.). The one remaining focused on loyalty and better customer experiences post-sale.

By the way, all these clients were firmly in the camp of "We're doing this project because we have to be more organized, measured, and scalable when it comes to valuable content."

Then, consider that in 2022, we worked with 52 companies (yes, business has been good, thanks for noticing!). Thirty-nine of them were focused on how content marketing can help enhance every part of the business funnel. In other words, post-pandemic the question of content marketing was no longer one of how to enhance top-of-the-funnel marketing tactics. And it was no longer a question of how we can get more organized or measured around a branding strategy. The question was how to build a functional content and marketing *operation* strategy. Full stop.

Truth be told, this pronounced shift from focusing on content to the operation of content as a strategy is why this book is late. The business case and need now is this: how do we institute content marketing as a functional process, a key operation within the integrated marketing mix, and not just a series of well-produced content assets that are used in one-off campaigns?

The challenges that this book addresses are twofold:

- 1 How do you successfully build (or merge, as the case may be) marketing operations personnel that handle digital content strategy (governance, processes, structured content, data, and technology)

with content marketing team members (creating valuable, purpose-driven, delightful content experiences)?

- 2 How do you scale this new operation so that it is efficient, measurable, and manageable?

The evolved business case for content marketing has changed into building a strategic operation that can build value over time. This is your new objective. And you'd better be sharp about it because you're about to get yelled at (maybe you'll be yelling at yourself if you're a solopreneur).

If your 2023 business case for content marketing is to prove the concept of showing your boss how competitor X has an amazing blog, competitor Y won an award for their thought leadership program, or competitor Z is driving better brand awareness with their print magazine, you'll mostly get shrugged shoulders and a raised eyebrow. You see, many marketers are still answering the “why should we do content marketing?” question with “more, great, content.” They wonder why the C-suite would be skeptical. But the truth is they aren't. They're wondering why it's taken so long for us to get to more, great, content. “You're late!” Put simply: many content marketers are asking to build this new innovative media product and the CEO is saying, “We're not even good at what we're already doing, and yet you want to build something new?”

## What content marketing strategy is about

Make no bones about it—this pushback from the C-suite hits every aspect of any content marketing strategy we want to implement. As an example, consider two very different companies—one a B2C retail company and the other a B2B technology consulting firm. In both cases, the company's CEO issued a directive to launch strategic content marketing as a core piece of their communications strategy. But here's the thing: neither of those CEOs said the words “content marketing strategy.” Rather, the directive from one was to get a strategy rolling to become the most recognized thought leader in their space. The other's mandate was to find a way to reach new audiences with digital media versions of their valuable products.



Both CEOs also challenged their teams to handle these initiatives without increasing their budgets. Rather, they said, “Find a way to do it with all the content you’re already producing.”

Both companies had to fix the entirety of content as a strategic function in order to make the resources available to accomplish their very different objectives. “Beware,” one of them said to us. “Our CEO now doesn’t believe we can do this. She believes we already have too much content.” But, as it turned out, it was *not* that the CEO didn’t believe in content marketing. Nor was it that she didn’t understand what content marketing is. She simply questioned why no one had bothered to think strategically about how to operationalize all this stuff in the first place.

That’s what this book addresses—a modern way to think about evolving a content marketing strategy.

## Four challenges to inspire this book

In my continuing role as chief strategy advisor for the Content Marketing Institute (CMI), I’ve been lucky enough to help plan and study the organization’s global research efforts for the last 11 years. In CMI’s 2023 research across thousands of marketers at businesses large and small, we examined which factors marketers attributed to having little or no content marketing success.

By a huge margin, the top two factors were “content creation challenges” and “strategy issues.”

To the point I made earlier, this is where the “*we-already-suck-at-it*” pushback originates. Senior management are quite right in asking why they should invest *more* in content, when the brand struggles to manage and measure the content you’re already creating.

Of course, most businesses are far too genteel for anyone to say this part out loud. In modern business, senior management couch their concerns with responses like:

- “There is already too much content. Shouldn’t we reduce the amount of content we are creating?”
- “Content marketing costs too much. Isn’t social/search advertising/paid media more efficient?”

- “How can we compete? I don’t know if we’re capable of creating differentiated content. Isn’t there too much noise these days?”
- “We can’t tie the content marketing approach to revenue. Where’s the data? How will we measure this?”

Let’s first acknowledge that every single one of these concerns is or has been true at different times. In this book, we’ll look at the modern business case for content marketing and put it in the context of where we are today. We’ll also explore frameworks for looking at each of these concerns.

## Concern 1: There’s already too much content

Here’s an interesting twist that we’ve found across the hundreds of clients we’ve worked with over the last couple of years. Almost none of them create too much content. Yup, you read that right—almost none of them. But almost all of them create too many assets.

Wait, what? What do we mean by that?

As marketers and business practitioners, we are trained to think container first, content second. We start with “I need a web page” or “I need an email” or “I need a blog post.” Then we go right to creating content for that container. It’s inefficient and it assumes that ideas are cheap and the value of content is realized in the production and design (as opposed to content creation) capabilities.

This focus on content production is a symptom of not having codified any type of strategic content operating model. Yes, we can build a smart “factory” of content, but unless there’s a specific purpose behind what we put on the assembly line, the widgets won’t ever be valuable, no matter how glittery the design, and we won’t know when we’re making too many.

This book will explore an answer to the “there’s already too much content” objection. We’ll acknowledge it and respond that this is the primary business opportunity for putting a strategy behind content marketing.

Developing an operational model for content marketing is the critical piece of solving your ability to track how much you are

spending *and* to plan, activate, and measure all the content you will produce.

That brings us to the second concern we'll address in this book.

## Concern 2: Content marketing costs more

Somewhere in the collective consciousness of marketing—especially digital marketing—“paid media” (e.g., advertising) became the de facto standard for how much things should cost. Any new approach to marketing that comes along is put through the same filter: Is it cheaper or more expensive than advertising? If it's cheaper, it must be worth doing, and if it's more expensive, it's not.

The troubling thing about this question is that it makes two assumptions: (1) “Advertising” and the costs associated with it are as good as it's going to get and won't degrade further, and (2) we are pitching content marketing as a replacement for paid media (spoiler alert: this is the biggest culprit for the business case challenge). In other words, it may be true that content marketing is more expensive than advertising today, but what if advertising completely fails one day and we haven't invested in an alternative form of marketing? Or what if (and hear me out just a second) advertising on its own actually costs more than we truly admit?

That brings us to the second (and bigger) erroneous assumption—that we are proposing content marketing as a replacement for advertising. This isn't true. Content marketing provides multiple ways to draw value and ALL of them are interdependent with public relations, paid media, sales, and even loyalty programs.

At its heart, a great content marketing program is a media *product* operation that builds, activates, and promotes our customer experiences and ultimately benefits the sale of our other products and services. In this book, I will present a framework that demonstrates the role content marketing plays in the marketing mix. Content marketing should not be implemented as a set of one-off campaigns that are meant to replace (or be cheaper than) paid media advertisement. In fact, quite the opposite: the content marketing approach is about developing the *product of content*, with which we will integrate all other types of marketing including paid media.

In this book, I will present a framework to demonstrate that content marketing is a part of the integrated marketing mix—not separate from it.

## Concern 3: Our brand can't compete with content marketing

If our business were hurting, and the head of product management came to the CEO and said, “We can't create great products,” how might the CEO react?

What if that situation were reversed? In either case, the head of product management might be looking for a job. The ability to create great products and services is *core* to a business.

If we're treating content seriously, why would we expect anything less? The only reason this assertion will be true is if we don't try hard or care.

Remember, exceedingly few companies have this truly figured out. You are *not* too late. Not yet. As an example, PR firm Edelman and LinkedIn recently conducted research about the potential of thought leadership for B2B marketing. Almost half (48 percent) of decision-makers spend an hour or more per week engaged in thought leadership.<sup>3</sup> Then, 15 percent of those same decision-makers rated the quality of the thought leadership as “excellent.”<sup>4</sup> Further, only 29 percent of them said they gain valuable insights more than half the time.<sup>5</sup>

If you're not providing the best content for your industry, the real question is, who is? Are you going to rely on your competitors to set the bar (or fail to, as the case may be) for what “smart” or “valuable” looks like in your business? Every successful business these days has a way of demonstrating differentiating value through the way it communicates. Everything else can be copied.

This book will demystify the business storytelling process and provide a framework for how marketing practitioners can start to think about getting to a differentiating core story.

That brings us to the last objection that we'll cover in this book.

## Concern 4: We can't tie content marketing to revenue

The short answer here is: then don't.

There are myriad other ways to associate content marketing with adding wealth to the business. Revenue is but one.

We can dig deeper. The real assertion here, however, is that content marketing is “too fuzzy” to associate with a sale—and thus it's hard to draw a straight line to revenue. Now, this may be true, but it's not an argument for not doing content marketing. This is simply a challenge to how you design your measurement program—and ensuring you apply the proper goals to your content marketing operation. Show me a company that struggles to measure content marketing, and I'll show you a company that struggles to measure marketing.

Each of the various content operating models will have different (and distinct) measurement goals. This is why it's so critical to understand the operating model. In this book, we'll examine how to design a measurement plan that is actually rooted in business value for content marketing and demonstrates value as a long-term investment.

This is what we're really driving for: a business case for a content operating model that drives value for the entire business.

## This book is a question, not an answer

Most business books are meant to provide degrees of clarity around what's on the horizon. As I write the introduction to this book in December of 2022, I'm sitting on a deck here in Santa Barbara, California, overlooking the beach, and it's a gray, rainy day. My view is varied shades of gray; the sand, the water, the sky, all different, and yet so similar that they seem to merge with one another. I can't help but appreciate the metaphor.

If I've learned any one thing in working on content marketing strategy for the last two decades, it's that there is no such thing as perfect clarity, or the perfect content marketing strategy. It's all shades of gray.

I won't promise you that this book will give you a paint-by-numbers checklist to create a strategy that's guaranteed for your business. Some of the models will be right for you. Some of the models will be wrong. Hopefully, all of them will be useful in some way.

Here's what I know. The strongest content marketing strategies I've ever seen are all built to do one thing: change.

Marketing is evolving. Yes. Again. But interestingly, and perhaps in a way ironically, both content strategy and marketing as practices are becoming more valuable and more enriching to the business. How?

Well, let me just pose this as the first question. What if content and marketing in the future (as practices) and their output were treated just as importantly in your business as the development of your current products or service? In other words, what if, in the future, marketing was seen not just as an expense line item in business that is made up of activities that use content to *describe the value* of your product and services so that you might reach audiences and persuade them to become customers? What if, rather, marketing was seen as a profit center where the primary function is to *create valuable experiential media-driven products* for audiences that can be monetized in multiple ways—one of which is the expanded or ongoing purchase of your traditional products and services?

Now, some of you (only a few to be sure) are saying: "Hey, wait a minute Robert. Didn't you also write a book about this very thing called *Killing Marketing*?"

Well, yes and no.

In our 2017 book, Joe and I argued a business case for content marketing, saying that it might become one way that a business can start to create marketing programs that also pay for themselves. We said that the practice of content marketing might eventually blend into the overall marketing strategy approach.

As I sit here and watch the rain on the beach, and the grays merging with one another, I can't help but to think of the possibility that it might actually be the other way around.

It might be that the entire practice of marketing will morph into what we now call content marketing.

What if we content marketers and our approach to adding value, monetizing audiences, and treating all of our content as being as important as a product are the future of marketing, full stop?

There's a famous quote attributed to Peter Drucker: "The best way to predict the future is to create it." Whether or not he said it, there is a variant that I prefer. Dennis Gabor, a physicist who won the Nobel Prize, wrote a book called *Inventing the Future*. In it, he says a version of the quote that I like better in a modern world of technology and artificial intelligence:

Rational thinking, even assisted by any conceivable electronic computers cannot predict the future... All it can do is map out the probability... Technological and social inventions are broadening this probability all the time... The future cannot be predicted, but futures can be invented.<sup>6</sup>

In the pages ahead I've got a few more questions for you to ponder. It's time to start inventing futures. I can think of no more perfect person to do that than you.

It's your story. Tell it well.

## Notes

- 1 Pulizzi, J, Rose, R and Hayzlett, J (2011a) *Managing Content Marketing: The real-world guide for creating passionate subscribers to your brand*, Cleveland Ohio McGraw-Hill Education, p.7
- 2 Millington, A (2015) Lego says it wants to be a "small giant" as it backs consumer-focused marketing, *Marketing Week*, <https://www.marketingweek.com/lego-says-it-wants-to-be-a-small-giant-with-consumer-focused-marketing/> (archived at <https://perma.cc/HJS5-4HM7>)
- 3 Kingbury, J, Bernoff, D, Barik, T and Buzicky, H (2021) Thought Leadership Impact Study | LinkedIn & Edelman, <https://business.linkedin.com/marketing-solutions/b2b-thought-leadership-research> (archived at <https://perma.cc/6W3G-VGPJ>).
- 4 Ibid
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Gabor, D (1972) *Inventing the Future*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 207

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