

How branded content is changing communications



By Louise Marsland

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"Great content is content that has been crafted by an editorial expert."

Content marketing is probably the biggest shift in communications since branding evolved to be a marketing science on its own and branding agencies grew from within advertising agencies 20-odd years ago. It affects not only marketing, but media as well.

The biggest threat to media may well be from brands putting their money into their own branded content channels, not other media competitors, as brands are harnessing the consumer craving for engaging content, as well as that innate human desire to be part of the story.

Why should brands continue to pay for advertising in poorly edited publications that don't invest in content and may only reach some of that brand's demographic - when brands can clearly target their consumers with expert, created and curated content written by top journalists and segmented with the latest data tools?

Since custom publishing launched in South Africa in the late 1990s, publishers have been convincing brands to spend more money with them by producing glossy coffee table showcase magazines to appeal to the higher demographic strata. But since social media made the distribution of information more democratic and cost effective, involving those very consumers in the creation of content, publishing is available to everyone - brands included.



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John Brown was one of the first leading custom publishers in South Africa to brand itself as a content marketing agency, although as MD Lani Carstens says, it is still about editorial, editorialised-branded content.

"It is editorially-led. Beautiful advertising is storytelling, but it is advertising. We take branded content, but we editorialise it. So we use the best editors, the best writers, because they know what readers want, that is how we differentiate. That is quite key."

John Brown recently became part of the private equity-backed, UK-headquartered Dentsu Aegis Network. The management team, which includes Carstens, has retained 15% of the business. Carstens says the agency network will add

to John Brown's client offering with data, search and other digital skills and John Brown will bring its content expertise to the table.

Advertising agencies are becoming the 'new' publishing channel. There is a whole new publishing model within agencies which makes absolute sense, says Melissa Attree, director of content strategy for Ogilvy & Mather Cape Town.

"We have been creating beautiful content within advertising agencies for years. We are now taking that and repurposing it for brands across other channels."

Attree, who studied journalism and worked as a marketer on leading brands, as well as a social media strategist, was headhunted for her new position of Director of Content Strategy at Ogilvy & Mather Cape Town. "Our biggest challenge (in South Africa) is to get marketers to start briefing agencies differently. Marketers want a 90 second TV commercial. And we need to interrogate briefs better."

There is a battle looming between content agencies and advertising agencies which are beginning to compete in client pitches, but a trend this year and the next will be the acquisition of specialist content marketing agencies by ad agency networks. Dentsu Aegis and John Brown is only the start.

"We are in fact working with a leading brand where content strategy will be leading their marketing and communications strategy. That is the ultimate goal," says Sue Disler, head of digital, Cedar Communications SA.

Disler also emphasises that content marketing is an editorial-led strategy, not copy-led. "We don't just produce content, there is a strategy behind it. That is the main difference. Content strategy links to communications and marketing strategy."

Content marketers, Disler says, look at all the research into the consumer segment being targeted, conducting new research where necessary. The main difference between advertising and content marketing is that content is viewed as a "test and learn" strategy. With a content strategy, a long term strategy is produced and put in place, but reviewed constantly.

Let's be clear: this is not independent journalism. This is branded content. However, the consumer is choosing to engage with this content because it is often very well packaged, beautifully crafted, contains information they want and from brands they LIKE and TRUST. It used to be the media that enjoyed that privileged role in the past.

It also means the media owners have to work even harder at attracting advertisers and in effect have to harness many of the skills that commercial agencies and digital agencies have in order to compete. The fact is the consumer is in charge - up to a point. It's the algorithms from digital giants like Facebook and Google that we really need to worry about - media and brands alike.

But, as Attree says, this is the rise of the 'Journalist 2.0'. Globally, more big brands are developing their own content channels. Journalists need to repurpose themselves. Carstens agrees that it is important for editorial specialists to reinvent themselves as content producers.

Riaan Wolmarans, head of content, MetropolitanRepublic, believes journalists have a lot to offer agencies with their wide frame of reference, general knowledge and content consumption profile and broad worldview.

The next thing is to build a newsroom inside the agency, Wolmarans says, something Ogilvy & Mather Cape Town have done this year. "The idea of the newsroom is to show business that what we produce will grab consumers' attention long after the ad campaign," says Wolmarans.

Content craft

New Media group creative director, Crispian Brown, says content marketing in a nutshell is about incredibly expert people

crafting great editorial, irrespective of the platform, and publishing it. "The relationship editors hold with their readers is gold... it is a huge privilege to hold that bond of trust with our customers. It is quite a responsibility if you are a consumer editor, but even greater when there is a client in the middle who is handing over their brand to you to manage."

In fact, Brown says a better description for content marketing in the digital age is '*conversation marketing*': "We have valuable and rewarding conversations with our clients' customers and listen to what they say. We engage, listen, measure, adjust. Conversation marketing formalises that."

New Media content director, Adelle Horler, says content marketing needs to persuade customers, unlike advertising which "shouts", telling consumers what to do. "Content marketing is writing with an agenda. Absolute brand value has to be infused in the writing. It has to be content that changes behaviour or urges you to take action. Content marketing changes how you feel about a brand... it's a willing agenda."



Melissa Attree

Attree says there are four 'Cs' around content creation: Curating; Commissioning; Creating; Crowdsourcing.

"The last bit is crowdsourced content - asking our community what they want. We create a 'content playlist' based on that. We want to tap into the community."

Disler says content marketing works when a brand is truly content-led in their communications and you have the five or six agencies from PR to digital, to advertising and content, all working towards the same goal. "It is about understanding the client's business, the media plan, who the audience is, understanding the data. It is awesome when you get to a point when everyone is in the room and gets it and comes up with the most amazing work."

Some of the challenges on this content journey for brands is how do they create content and how do they distribute that content. Attree and her team use search, social media, native advertising, syndicated content, and content on other people's blogs.

Content has a long tail and Attree says it is about taking one piece of content and turning it into other pieces of content. "You need to repurpose content for all channels to reach as many as possible. Different brands need different things, but content is the stuff we create: whether it be multimedia, information, content either has to entertain, educate or empower.

"Content is more of a long term game and one has to have a long term view of content. It is about building up a readership and syndication and that kind of process to build brand awareness. People make better decisions when they have trust in a brand."

Strategy

Carstens points out that they are in fact competing with the ad agencies, but that they also work a lot with the above-the-line agencies and digital agencies. "We are a full service agency, but we are clear about what we don't do: direct marketing, radio or TV advertising. Our speciality is editorial-led branded content. We are going to rely more and more on the strength of content. Dentsu Aegis is the first agency group to acquire a content agency."

It is all about great content and whether that content engages the brand's target audience, no matter the platform. Carstens uses the word "craft" a lot. "Great content is content that has been crafted by an editorial expert, content you will be reading in print or digital, with the view that you are writing for the audience and not necessarily for the brand only. We write for the fish, not just the fisherman."

As Disler points out: "It's the strategy behind the content that is important across all the channels. The tone and messaging in every channel that features the branded content needs to be the same. One voice. And it is also about producing damn good journalism.

"The biggest difference between what we do as a content marketing agency and an ad agency or PR agency or digital agency, is the interrogation of what the content should be to start with: it is all very well doing research and marketing, but you need to interrogate down to whether people are reading an article and how many people read something and whether they engage with that content, whether they want more... and so on."

What is very important today, Disler adds, is measurement. "Measurement is key, as is the marketing of content. The story is a 'result of' the implementation. You are not producing content for content's sake. You are producing it for a reason. If you don't know what that reason is, then you are not doing content marketing. There needs to be a goal behind it. This is real stuff, not stuff you make up. It is about real stories that consumers love. It needs to allow consumers to engage.

Attree also advises brands to ensure they have their own property online that they own and where their content lives. She has never proposed building massive properties on rented land, for example, like Facebook. Rent your presence on social media platforms as part of marketing strategy and build to own on your own channels as part of your business strategy.

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