



How to Plan your Content to Generate Leads and Boost Sales

A strategic content marketing plan in 5 easy steps

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4 January 2018

Introduction

Is yours a typical environmental and engineering services firm, focusing on the delivery of strong client work, recruitment of great people, and investment in technology for the company? If so, it may be that marketing, in particular content marketing, is being neglected.

Or it may be that your content strategy is simply lumped into your overall marketing strategy. Although integration with your firm's marketing strategy is important, the absence of a carefully developed and documented content strategy can make it difficult to convert content investments into business improvement.

Indeed, in today's highly competitive and resource-constrained world, a strategic content marketing plan can make all the difference.

Benefits of a strategic content marketing plan

In the past, environmental and engineering consultancies relied on personal referrals and repeat customers to sustain their businesses. Marketing, commonly known as 'business development' in the consulting world, was largely about engaging with current and past clients.

In today's marketing world, however, referrals may not be enough. Content marketing, on the other hand, builds trust. Instead of receiving the transferred trust that comes from a typical referral, your company establishes that trust over time by providing your audience with quality content.

Indeed, with the Internet such an important marketing phenomenon, content marketing is essential for professional service firms. Content marketing involves creating, distributing, and sharing relevant, compelling, and timely content to engage customers, build relationships, and establish authority and thought leadership in your niche market.

Content marketing has proven benefits for any industry. The most often-cited benefits are:

-  Generating leads
-  Building brand awareness
-  Engaging with prospects

Strategic content marketing benefits professional service firms in other ways as well. Your services and products, water and wastewater treatment plants for instance, are big-ticket items with long service lives. A sale depends on connecting with multiple decision makers. Content marketing can help progress leads through this sometimes long, sales funnel.

The best way to ensure quality and consistency in your content is to have a plan. A strategic content marketing plan.

A robust content marketing strategy shifts the focus of your content agenda. Rather than a mad dash, it's a smart, coordinated approach. An approach that delivers consistent business improvement. With a documented strategy, you can deliver quality content consistently.

Features of a strategic content marketing plan

A strategic content marketing plan:

1. Identifies goals for content marketing that align with desired business outcomes.
2. Describes your audience and how that audience changes through the sales funnel.
3. Contains a content calendar that uses topics and tactics to lead your audience where you want them to go.
4. Assigns metrics that will allow you to measure the success of your content marketing campaign.
5. Schedules regular plan reviews to ensure continued relevance.

If you document your plan it becomes even more powerful. Use it to engage management, the sales team, the entire work force.

BIG BENEFITS

THE TWO BIGGEST BENEFITS
OF A **DOCUMENTED**
CONTENT MARKETING
STRATEGY ARE THAT:

1.) IT ALIGNS TEAM AROUND
COMMON MISSION/GOALS
(81%) AND

2.) IT MAKES IT EASIER TO
DETERMINE WHICH TYPES OF
CONTENT TO DEVELOP (81%).

CMI, 2018

This series of posts will take you through how to develop a strategic content marketing plan in 5 steps. The first step is to set goals.

Step 1: Set goals that focus your content marketing

By defining goals for your content everyone on the team understands what each asset is intended to achieve and how it will look when that happens. Setting goals also allows you to measure the success of your content strategy.

The goals for your content marketing must be consistent with your company's desired business outcomes. You need to be able to document which business outcome you want to impact through your content creation.

Remember, content marketing builds trust. Your company builds trust over time by providing quality information. Make your content marketing count by defining goals that will achieve the desired business outcomes.

GOALS

A GOAL PROPERLY
SET IS HALFWAY
REACHED.
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High-level goals for strategic content marketing can be to:

-  Increase brand awareness.
-  Drive more traffic to your website.
-  Generate sales leads.
-  Convert more leads into customers.
-  Improve retention and drive upsell.

However, many content marketing plans fail to realize that goals change through the sales funnel. You should define different goals for each stage of the funnel:

Top-of-funnel goals should be about building *awareness* of your brand and your solutions.

Middle-of-funnel goals are about allowing prospects to *evaluate* your solution.

Bottom-of-funnel goals are fundamentally about *converting* leads into customers.

Top-of-funnel goals

At the top of the sales funnel you are working to increase awareness of your brand, your solution. Your prospects are cold. They may not even know they have a problem much less that you hold the solution.

Therefore, at the top of the funnel your content should provide information to your prospects about a problem in the industry. A problem with a currently-available solution that may not be quite as good as your solution.

Your actual product (aka your solution) should not be touted at the top of the funnel. Focus on the science behind your innovative technology that sets your solution apart.

Thus, goals at the top of the funnel can be to:

- 💧 Increase awareness
- 💧 Increase engagement
- 💧 Grow website traffic
- 💧 Grow retargeting lists



Not all goals will apply to your situation. There may be other goals that better suit your business. Pick the ones that align with your business objectives. p

Middle-of-funnel goals

In the middle of the funnel your prospect realizes they have a problem. She is evaluating solutions, seeing which solution will solve that problem. You draw her further into the middle of the funnel by offering useful, educational content she wants to download. You are warming up the prospects and moving them into the funnel with offers.

Offers in the middle of the funnel should be 'gated'. This means the prospect must supply a name and email address to download the offer. You then use email to further engage with the prospect.

Goals in the middle of the funnel may be to:

- 💧 Grow email lists/leads
- 💧 Grow retargeting lists
- 💧 Initial Customer Acquisition

Goals in the middle are about warming up your prospects. You allow them to evaluate all the options at this point. Getting them to pick your solution happens in the bottom of the funnel.

Bottom-of-funnel goals

At the bottom of the funnel, your prospect is making a decision. A decision about how to solve their problem. Your content in the bottom of the funnel is about convincing the prospect that your solution will solve their problem.

Your prospect is now paying more attention to what you offer. She's looking at different packages and options. Your ultimate goal in the bottom of the funnel is to help that prospect make the final decision to purchase your solution.

Goals in the bottom of the funnel are about:

-  Nurturing leads and customers
-  Maximizing immediate customer value
-  Increasing retention
-  Increasing buyer frequency
-  Growing retargeting lists

Again, choose goals that align with your business goals.

Setting goals for your content marketing strategy is a powerful step. Aligning content goals with business goals increases the efficiency and efficacy of your content investment.

In Step 2, we look at how understanding your audience will help you reach your content marketing goals.



Step 2: 'Speak' to the right audience

In your industry, the sales funnel is long, and many people are involved in the decision-making process. To target your content to the right audience, you will need to identify the key personas in each stage of the sales funnel. Your content can then be crafted to provide value to each of them.

Thus, after establishing the goals for your content, the next step in developing a strategic content marketing plan is to identify your audience. To identify the right audience, you start by answering these key questions:

- 🐼 Who is our content meant to reach at each stage of the sales funnel?
- 🐼 How can we provide value to each of them, beyond our products and services?
- 🐼 How can we use our content to support them through their buyer's journey?

By identifying the key personas in each stage of the sales funnel, your content marketing can be strategically targeted.

Developing key personas

You can start to develop key personas by looking at your current client base and answering a few simple questions like:

- 🐼 Do your clients all work at companies of a certain size?
- 🐼 Do they hold similar job titles?
- 🐼 Do they work in the same industry?
- 🐼 Do they use the same software?

AUDIENCE

WHEN YOU TRY TO
TALK TO EVERYONE,
YOU TALK TO NO ONE

OLD MARKETING SAYING

This will provide a very basic type of persona: e.g. a 30 to 45-year old female, who works in water quality management, at a utility company of 100+ employees.

PERSONAS

58% OF CONTENT B2B
MARKETERS CONSIDER
'AUDIENCE
RELEVANCE' THE MOST
IMPORTANT FACTOR
IN DETERMINING
CONTENT MARKETING
EFFECTIVENESS.

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To develop a more in-depth profile, more information is required. What sort of technologies does she use to do her job? How does she get information- social media, internet searches, conferences and workshops? What sort of information does she need?

With all this quantitative data, you can begin to construct key personas as they change through the sales funnel. Don't forget that these personas represent real people, real clients. How do your clients make decisions? Consult with your customer service and sales teams to find out. Better yet talk to the clients themselves. Attend in-person calls, trade shows, anywhere you can talk to real people.

Changing dynamics

It is also very important to understand that while your key personas can be mapped to different stages in your sales cycle, or to various types of content you are producing, the people your persona

represents are not static or inflexible.

Changes in the market can alter your personas attitudes toward your solutions:

-  Has there been a major weather event (i.e. flood, drought, storms)?
-  Has there been a major change in the regulatory framework?
-  Is a certain sector heading into 'boom' conditions?

Before you develop your content calendar for the new year, try going back to the drawing board with your personas, looking closely at whether each one still accurately reflects your target audience's current life situation and purchasing needs.

To develop and maintain your key personas, it's important to take the time to talk to actual clients. Let people know that you're just as interested in learning what they may need now as you were when you last spoke with them.

If you do this regularly enough, you'll notice that some answers have shifted over time, and it's these shifts that should be informing your persona updates.

Now that you've identified your goals and audience, it is time to think about what tactics will appeal to your audience. In Step 3, you choose tactics that achieve goals and engage prospects



Step 3: Choose tactics that achieve goals and engage prospects

Is your content achieving your goals? Is it talking to your audience?

We have looked at how important goals are to strategic content marketing. We saw how your audience changes through the sales funnel. Now you need to develop content that will achieve your goals by engaging your audience.

Next, we look at the types of content -tactics - that will support and encourage your prospects in their journey through your sales funnel.

For you see, the tactics you use to deliver your content will change, along with your goals, through the sales funnel:

-  At the top of the funnel your content needs to build AWARENESS
-  In the middle of the funnel, content must enable EVALUATION
-  At the bottom of the funnel, your content needs to CONVERT

Top-of-funnel tactics

At the top of the funnel you are striving to build awareness. Awareness of your brand and your products. Awareness that your solution will solve your prospects' problem. You may even need to make your prospects aware that they have a problem, a problem you can solve!

At the top of the funnel you provide quality information that informs your audience. Content should be engaging and informative not full of hype.

TACTICS

STRATEGY WITHOUT
TACTICS IS THE SLOWEST
ROUTE TO VICTORY.

TACTICS WITHOUT
STRATEGY IS THE NOISE
BEFORE DEFEAT.

SUN TZU

There are many tactics that are effective at the top of the funnel.

- 🔗 *Blogs* are a brilliant top-of-funnel tactic. Provide relevant and timely information about your industry and provide it consistently. Decide on a schedule and stick to it.
- 🔗 When you upload a blog you then post *social media updates* with links back to your blog and website.
- 🔗 *Whitepapers* are a great call to action. By downloading the white paper, prospects are showing an interest. Be ready to draw them further into your sales funnel.
- 🔗 *Infographics* provide information in an entertaining and easy to digest format. By requiring an email address to download, they become a powerful call to action.
- 🔗 *Newsletters* build and maintain relationships. Keep the content 80% information/ education and 20% about how you work, how you interact with your community, your employees.
- 🔗 Provide *primary research* on trends in your industry. Conduct and report on surveys of your customers about their pain points, issues with current solutions, emerging trends.

Regardless of the tactic used, always provide value. The top of the funnel is about building awareness. Establishing trust. And that only comes through quality content provided consistently.

Middle-of-funnel tactics

In the middle of the funnel your prospects are evaluating your solution. Making comparisons. Showing some interest but keeping a distance.

Therefore, in the middle of the funnel, your tactics should provide information that will assist them in their evaluation of your solution.

For you, the middle of the funnel is all about lead magnets. Lead magnets that compel your prospects to take action.

What is a lead magnet? A lead magnet is an irresistible bribe that gives a specific chunk of value to a prospect in exchange to their contact information.

In the middle of the funnel the best tactics include:

- 🔗 *Educational resources*: case studies, free reports, eBooks, and white papers. Numbered-list white papers provide information in an easy-to-read and skim-able format.
- 🔗 *Useful resources*: checklists, templates, tool kits, resource lists all provide that chunk of value that compels your prospect to give you their contact information.

LEAD MAGNET

AN IRRESISTIBLE BRIBE
THAT GIVES A SPECIFIC
CHUNK OF VALUE TO A
PROSPECT IN EXCHANGE
TO THEIR CONTACT
INFORMATION.

DIGITAL MARKETER

- 🔹 *A quiz or survey* on a relevant industry topic can entice readers to divulge contact details as well as provide valuable information for blogs and articles.
- 🔹 *Webinars and events* are an opportunity to provide valuable content while gathering contact information.

In the middle of the funnel your tactics must continue to provide valuable information. Information your prospects are willing to trade their contact details for. Lead magnets that change prospects into leads.

Bottom-of-funnel tactics

At the bottom of the funnel you are striving to convert your leads into customers. Here you need to provide specific details about your solution. Enough detail to convince your lead that your solution will in fact solve their problem.

At the bottom of the funnel effective tactics include:

- 🔹 Showing how your solution works with a *demo/free trial*.
- 🔹 Providing specific, technical information in a *backgrounder white paper*. Give your leads all the information they need to convince themselves that your solution will solve their problem.
- 🔹 Using *customer success stories* to demonstrate how your solution worked for a specific customer. These stories are closer to testimonials than case studies. The point is to demonstrate your solution and your services.

We can now see that the tactics you use change as your goals change through the sales funnel. It is also clear that mapping your content to your buyers' journey is critical for a good return-on-investment for your content:

- 🔹 At the top of the funnel publish content that builds AWARENESS of your brand, your solution.
- 🔹 In the middle of the funnel provide information that encourages EVALUATION of your solution.
- 🔹 At the bottom, tactics must CONVERT leads into customers.

In Step 2, we check out how to measure how well your tactics are working through metrics.



Step 4: Metrics that mean something

How do you know if your content is ‘working’?

Over the past weeks we’ve seen how goals, audience, and tactics for your content marketing change through the sales funnel. But you will never know if your content achieved the intended goal if you don’t track metrics.

It is important to tie the metrics to the goals of your content marketing strategy. You must also make sure that systems are in place to track the chosen metric. Develop procedures to make sure all metrics are monitored. Ensure that both positive and negative results are actioned.

In this week’s post we align metrics to your goals, the audience, and tactics as they change through the sales funnel.:

- 👤 Did your content build AWARENESS at the top of the funnel?
- 👤 Did your content enable EVALUATION in the middle of the funnel?
- 👤 Did your content CONVERT leads into customers at the bottom of the funnel?

Top-of-funnel metrics

Top-of-the-funnel goals aim to build awareness of your brand and your solution. Your metrics need to tell you if the tactics you use are achieving those goals.

METRICS

IF YOU DON'T
MEASURE IT, YOU
CAN'T IMPROVE IT.

OLD MARKETING
SAYING

Although *site engagement rates* are fun to watch, they are little more than vanity metrics. Metrics for site engagement include:

- 🐼 bounce rates,
- 🐼 number of site visits and
- 🐼 average session length.

When another website links to a page on your website, like your blog, it increases your *number of inbound links*. Search engines use the number of inbound links to rank your site. The more the better!

Monitoring *traffic by channel* will help you focus appropriate tactics on all channels.

When visitors don't respond to your call-to-action, you move them to your *retargeting list*. You then segment the retargeting list and retarget them based on their site activities.

Middle-of-funnel metrics

In the middle of the funnel you are trying to keep prospects moving through the sales funnel. You are offering lead magnets to increase leads and email list growth. Metrics that will help in the middle of the funnel include:

- 🐼 *Number of leads generated and email list growth*: direct measures of an asset's success. You can track lead growth through a CRM and email list growth through email service providers like MailChimp.
- 🐼 *Offer conversion rate*: tells you how many visitors opted in to your lead magnet offer. It is quoted as a percent of total visitors to your landing page.
- 🐼 *Retargeting list growth*: allows you to try other engagement options with visitors that didn't take up the original offer.
- 🐼 *Newsletter email open/click-through-rate*: track this and learn what interests your list; what headlines and content are working.

Bottom-of-funnel metrics

At the bottom of the funnel you want to keep your list happy. You don't want to bombard them with offers. You want to keep upselling and cross-selling. You may want to retain customers on any pay services you offer. So, what metrics will tell you if your prospects are happy? Of course, the *number of sales-qualified leads* is **the** important metric at the bottom of the funnel. However, other metrics are worth considering:

- 🐼 *Offer conversion rate*: determined by dividing the number of purchases by the number of sales page visits.
- 🐼 *Promo email open/click-through-rates* can be monitored by your list manager.
- 🐼 *Retargeting list growth* represents another opportunity to target leads with alternate offers to spark their interest.
- 🐼 By determining your *average customer value*, you can decide how much you can spend to acquire customers.
- 🐼 *Retention rate* will tell you how many customers stayed with you during a given period. To calculate, subtract the number of customers acquired during the period from the number you have at the end of the period. Then divide that number by the number of customers you had at the start of the period.
- 🐼 By monitoring *buyer recency/frequency* rates, you can keep your brand and messaging in front with quality content.

Over the past few weeks we have seen how goals, audience, tactics, and metrics for your content marketing change through the sales funnel:

- 🐼 At the top of the funnel your goals, tactics and metrics focus on building AWARENESS of your brand, your solution.
- 🐼 In the middle of the funnel your goals, tactics and metrics aim to provide information that encourages EVALUATION of your solution.
- 🐼 At the bottom, your goals, tactics and metrics need to CONVERT leads into customers.

In Step 5 you document you plan, implement it, and incorporate regular reviews to keep the document live.



Step 5: Document, implement, and review your plan

You've spent a lot of time (yours and others on the team, hopefully), pulled together a lot of information, and identified a lot of actions going through this planning process. Now document it! You will generate a powerful statement about your intentions. About how content marketing will achieve your desired business outcomes.

A documented strategy helps you gain support from the executive team. A plan keeps content producers strategically aligned. However, it doesn't have to be complex or overly long. In fact, with a short, sharp targeted plan it may be easier to gain traction with management.

Document it: A simple, 5-step plan template

A simple plan is a great place to begin if you have no documented strategy at all. If you have a detailed strategy but struggle to gain traction, boiling it down to a simpler format may make it easier to implement. A documented strategy can help you:

- 💧 crystalize your content marketing strategy,
- 💧 gain stronger buy-in more quickly from executives or clients, and
- 💧 keep content producers strategically aligned.

Regardless of the format, the point is to get it down on paper and get everyone to agree to its resourcing and implementation.

I have developed a template for a Strategic Content Marketing Plan based on these 5 steps. You can download a free copy of [the template here](#).

Implement it

Effective implementation is about developing and delivering tactics that support the strategy. Three powerful tactics are whitepapers, case studies, and newsletters.

Whitepapers

White papers, being persuasive essays, are a powerful way to market your product, process, or service. They pull in potential buyers by providing rich, substantive content that educates, rather than sells. Like an academic paper, an effective white paper is well-researched and

based on established facts and logical arguments.

An effective white paper is persuasive without the hard sell (Fig.1). By avoiding fluff and the heavy sales pitch, your white papers will have a lasting, lucrative value that can have a measurable impact on your brand's bottom line.

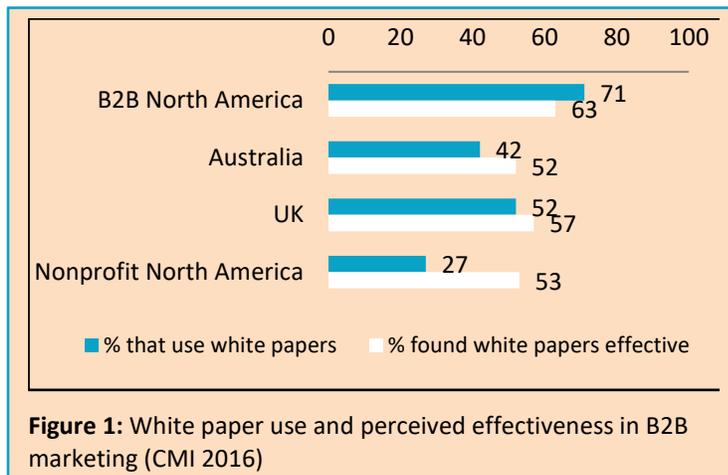
As well as engaging and educating your clients, white papers make an excellent call to action in a strategic content marketing campaign.

Downloading the white paper

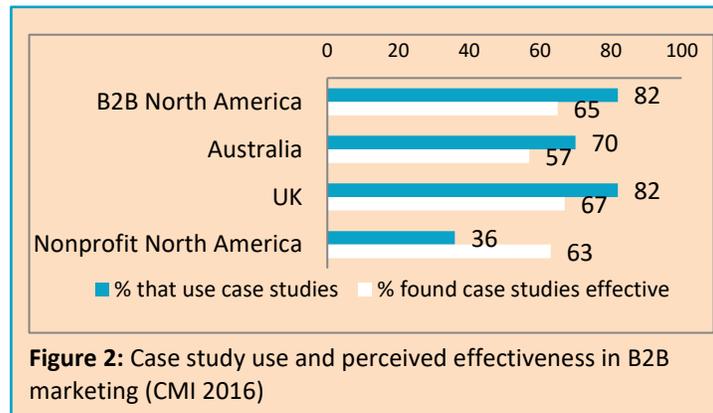
indicates an interest and should be followed up. Email and other contact information should be collected when they request the download, providing valuable contacts to add to your list.

Case Studies

Case studies, also known as 'good news stories', are powerful lead generators and should be part of the mix of tactics in your strategic content marketing plan. This is of particular importance for the professional service firms. Competition is fierce in the water world and keeping your brand relevant by telling your success stories is an effective tactic (see Figure 2).



A good marketing case study not only highlights your outstanding work, it can also serve as a teaching tool that gives readers a better understanding of the ways your products, processes, or services can help them solve their problem. Case studies can be published on social media, on your website, and in your periodic newsletter.

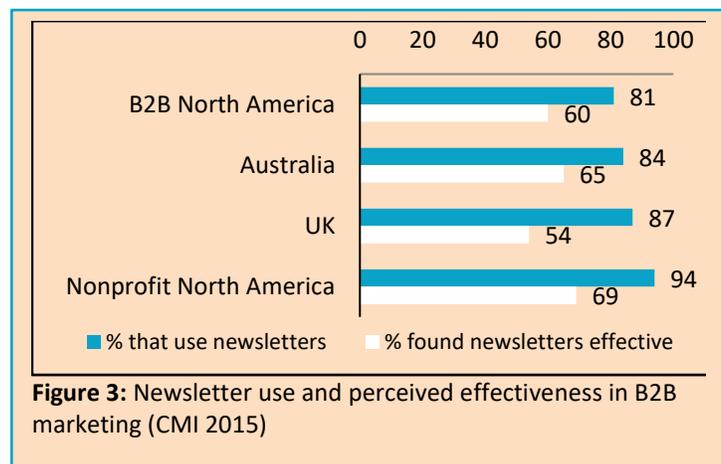


Newsletters

In the competitive world of water and wastewater treatment, maintaining strong relationships with current and potential clients is critical. Newsletters, delivered to your email list, are a cost-effective tactic to build relationships and to position your firm as thought leaders in your field (Fig. 3).

Content for your newsletter can come from all areas of your firm and can really tie the various parts of your content marketing strategy together. By re-purposing content from case studies and white papers you not only leverage these content assets in new channels but also keep you top of mind with your clients.

Whatever your goals, however many tactics you have identified, your audience will not benefit if you don't implement your content marketing plan.



Review it

Your strategic content marketing strategy is a living document. You need to review the plan regularly to ensure it remains relevant. Within the plan itself, specify review periods for all sections of the plan. Review periods will be different for each section of the plan:

- Goals – 5-yearly
- Content Calendar – annually
- Audience – annually and/or event-based
- Metrics – quarterly

REVIEW

HOWEVER BEAUTIFUL
THE STRATEGY, YOU
SHOULD
OCCASIONALLY LOOK
AT THE RESULTS.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

Conclusion

Content is here to stay. If your company wants to stay on the top pages of Google, it is going to have to use content marketing. And effective content marketing is only possible with strategic planning.

Go through the process. Document it. Implement it. Review it. Your success is guaranteed!

If you don't document your plan, it won't be as effective!

Download a FREE template that helps you develop a strategic content marketing plan in 5 easy steps!

<https://www.watercopy.com/ms4-landing-page/>