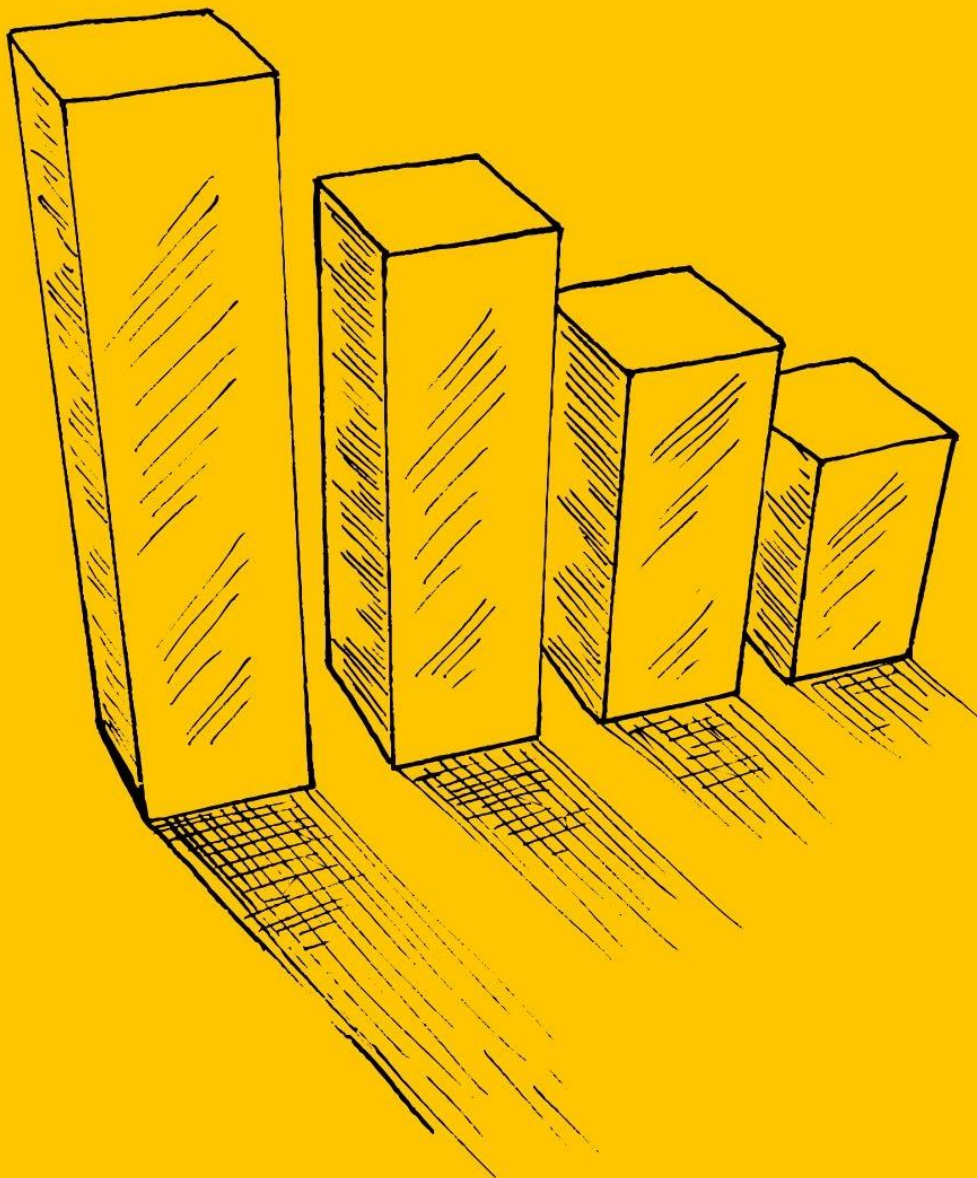


B2B Content Distribution

Current Challenges

Future Trends



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What's the primary purpose of content? Is it to drive traffic (interest)? Or better still sales leads? If those are your goals and you follow the standard content marketing advice I suggest you will be disappointed.

Let's assume you run a small to medium-sized B2B manufacturing operation. Your marketing people have been pushing hard for your commitment to invest in content. You recognise content marketing is not free and there are significant costs involved. You have a decision to make.

The worst fluff content you can find on the subject will tell you 'build it and they will come' - what nonsense. If we make a list of the (supposed) benefits of content and rank them in (alleged) priority order we get:

- Increased traffic to the business website.
- More visibility in the marketplace.
- More sales leads.
- Improved competitive position.
- Increased credibility.
- Keep existing customers engaged.

We argue that list is upside down. It will be a real struggle to achieve the top three organically unless your business happens to be the dominant force in the marketplace. Why is explained in detail in Appendix A.

Our content focus is (in priority order):

- Keep existing customers engaged.
- Improve credibility with existing customers
- Resolve customer (& targets) problems & education.
- Improve competitive position.

There is a balance to be struck but we maintain content marketing should focus on existing customers.

Of course. securing new customers is important. Existing customers may not deliver the required business growth. Some will leave for a variety of reasons. But if content marketing is to be successful there must be a clear focus on a prime objective.

In many B2B markets, the customer (and target customer) base tends to remain relatively stable. If churn is high that's something to investigate first.

What Are You Trying To Achieve?

What is the key problem you are trying to overcome? What are the main issues holding you back in your existing customers? Are you perceived as a 'me to' type supplier? Are your competitors perceived to be better at 'X' or 'Y.' Is that perception justified?

What are our competitors doing? What are their strengths and how can you neutralise them?

What are your advantages and what makes you stand out as a credible supplier? How can you build on that foundation?

Identify who (what groups) you are trying to reach and why. What is the message you are trying to deliver? How can you help your customers overcome the challenges they face?

With target groups and messages in place identify how customers make purchasing decisions. Who is involved in those decisions and what is their influence. What are their needs? How can you make an impact? Your sales and customer service teams should provide much of the information you need.

Take a step back - What is the goal. What obstacles to progress do you need to remove? This process is not easy and it takes time and effort. Sometimes it involves facing some brutal truths but it is an essential first step. Miss it, or fail to give it the attention it deserves and everything that follows WILL fail.

Remember to clearly differentiate goals from objectives.

Once you know what you are trying to achieve break it down into time-limited objectives. Only then can you get to strategy. The how we are going to do it and how content fits into that process. The content strategy must be in place before moving on to the content plan.

Look carefully at the returns you can expect from an existing customer-focused content marketing process. Can you expect customer retention rates to increase and by how much? Is it going to increase your referrals and what is that worth? What can you afford to spend? Who is going to do the work and who will manage it? These are all important questions to ask.

The Content Plan

With the target audience identified and a firm understanding of the challenges to be overcome it is time to move on to the content plan. What are the objectives you are trying to achieve and what type of content is best to achieve those objectives? Who is going to produce those key pieces of content and in what order? Remember, no one person or department can do it alone.

With the key pieces of content dealt with it is time to move on to secondary content. Working with sales, customer support and anyone else who works with customers identify:

- Where are the customer pain points.
- What are common objections?
- How can we help them use our product or services?
- What are common questions?
- What smoothes the purchasing decisions.

How can you help existing customers understand the potential problems with technology/products? Think through what can go wrong and be ready for the day it happens. Help customers understand the shortcuts lower price competitors take and the potential implications.

At all times try to think through what is the best content format. Is it text, or video? Would it be best to cover an issue in a webinar that customers can either attend or download later? Are there any speaking opportunities at conferences or exhibitions?

Assemble this content into a plan covering what will be delivered and when. It may seem like an overwhelming task but a significant amount of content may already exist. Many companies in B2B markets create a mass of content for internal consumption.

Market research reports, product qualification reports, internal sales training guides, responses to customer complaints, reports on product failures and more. Obviously, some information will be confidential but much can be repurposed.

The plan should identify what we do and in what order, who is responsible for what? What is the desired outcome of each piece of content and how are they interlinked? How does content fit in with other marketing activities such as exhibitions and events?

When there is a plan its purpose and desired outcomes must be communicated internally. Unflinching management support is vital.

Every plan needs flexibility. Think through what could come out of the blue to knock it off track and, in general terms, how will you react.

The Importance Of Thought Leadership

Let's imagine you and your competitors decide to take the same existing customer focussed approach. Then what will make one business stand out from the rest?

It is the business that publishes consistent thought leadership content that wins. Assuming they can deliver that content to customers.

A thought leader is “an original and inspired thinker who takes principled stands, and as a result introduces the element of tension that draws others to them.” - Russ Klein - CEO AMA

What is thought leadership content? It is content that addresses where markets are heading and the challenges that presents. As the name suggests it is based on a firm understanding of the market, research or innovative thinking.

Thought leadership content will bring customers back to read more. With that content comes credibility and an improved competitive position.

Sales Support Content

Whatever route you decide to take it is essential sales and marketing work together. Marketing may craft the process and the content but without sales, they are working blind. Sales need marketing to keep existing customers engaged and to smooth the path to sales with new prospects.

Only 8% of companies have strong alignment between their sales and marketing departments - Forrester

Content must be relevant, regardless if aimed at existing or potential customers. If it is not relevant it is useless. This is where external sales, internal sales and customer service staff can have a valuable input.

Marketing can act as the main intelligence gathering party. While sales should feedback intelligence from the front line.

Some target accounts will be well covered, while others will not. Marketing must build the brand and run awareness campaigns to touch those prospects sales find it hard to reach.

Marketing should also work to identify competitor strengths and weaknesses in target accounts.

With target accounts and prospects identified sales, marketing and key account managers should work together to ensure prospects have the personalised information they need when they need it.

Different members of the customer's decision making team need different information (content) at different points in the sales cycle.

Sales need to identify roadblocks to progress and deliver information to the right person, at the appropriate time to address those concerns. The costs can be high, but without some level of content personalisation, the account based sales process is likely to fail.

Original research sets content apart from the rest. It is not the same old content regurgitated in a different form. It has depth, it makes the prospect think, makes them compare, gives them insights. Content of value and raises the perception of a supplier.

Sales and marketing should work together to identify a target customer (or group of customers) common problem. Marketing should then research the issues and outline potential solutions. If content addresses a problem, is credible and has some depth it builds trust.

Content To Win Over Competitor Key Accounts

In the battle to win over competitor key accounts, there is no quick fix. It requires a process, delivered month on month, that leaves you in a position to strike when the time is right. Sales must work closely with marketing to identify key personnel and satisfy their needs.

There are two key issues at play. The first is relationships, and the second is fear of change. Competitors will have built close personal relationships with key purchasing decision influencers. Decisions have both an emotional and logical element.

Fear of change is a natural human emotion, and it can also have an impact on overcoming the competition. A move away from something that is working, even if it is not ideal, tends to be avoided.

Sticking with a solution (or company) that has been in place for years does not tend to affect career prospects. Switching to another solution that ultimately fails tends to have a negative result.

With key contact within competitor key accounts identified establish the nature of the relationship. This can be a challenge and takes time.

With an understanding of people and relationships in place, the next step is to understand the information needs of target contacts. Then decide on the best way to reach them. That can be content, direct contact or events.

Deliver useful and relevant information. Push content into the channels targets are most likely to engage with.

Provide information on market trends and new technologies and solutions. Particularly those where competitors are weak. Any information that addresses target customers' key questions or needs is helpful.

Content To Capture Prospects

Even if significant business growth is not a target it is a mistake to forget new customers. Working the same way with the same customers can isolate suppliers from market trends. A proportion of existing customers will leave. It is inevitable.

As new customers are in the same market as existing customers it is natural to assume they will search out the same content. To a point that is true but new customers will be at a different point in the buying cycle and will have different needs.

Sales and customer service can help with understanding prospects information needs. Market research can also help to uncover insights into what could be of interest. Ultimately it is more difficult to uncover prospects needs than existing customers.

With content identified it must slot into the content plan. Producing content has a cost, not just in the marketing department but across the whole organisation. New customer content will increase that cost significantly.

Content Delivery

Content delivery is the point where most content marketing processes founder. Where do prospects look for (and consume) content? After all the effort involved in creating content, how do we get it in front of prospects?

With existing customers, it is easier. At least you have crossed the awareness hurdle. Ideally, customers should use your site as a resource. It should be the first place they look for answers. But to get to that position takes a lot of time and a lot of content. It takes time to build trust.

You may say customers find content in the search results pages. That may be true but they could be searching for the online version of their favourite publication. If your content is not there they will not read it. The target is not Google, it is the online publication.

If you plan to rely on delivering content to prospects online we suggest you will struggle (unless you are the dominant player in your market). The reasons are touched on above and discussed in detail in Appendix A.

Of course online search is not the only consideration. There are other online delivery channels including social media, Email (and webinar) and Ads. These are discussed below.

Social Media Content Delivery

In B2B markets LinkedIn should be the first channel to investigate. That said, don't discount Facebook or Twitter (or Pinterest if your product has visual appeal). YouTube can be useful for some B2B businesses and a complete waste of time for others.

LinkedIn suffers from a reach problem, but is discussed as a special case below. On all other social media channels reach is awful. The chances of a follower (existing customer) reading your content are low, the chances of a prospect engaging, lower still.

Facebook defines Organic reach as how many people you can reach for free by posting to your page.

We suggest organic social media activity is a brand building exercise - That is all. It delivers content to existing customers and followers. To generate leads from social media content (including LIN) you need Ads - as discussed below.

LinkedIn Content Delivery

LinkedIn is the primary social media channel used by businesses in B2B markets and rightly so. The statistics show that more potential B2B target prospects are on LIN than other social media channels.

That said, organic engagement on the channel has crashed over recent years. Now content posted organically will mostly only be seen by first level connections and direct followers. They need to deliver lots of likes, comments and reactions if your content is to spread.

The declining reach on LIN has led to some poor practice. InMail has become the new cold calling. This is driving more and more of the best potential targets for B2B businesses away from the channel.

Also note, you need to be careful with your demographics. For example if your target is senior engineers they are likely to be aged 35+. Only 30% of LIN users are in this age band.

However, if a B2B business do intend to spend on social media Ads we suggest LIN is probably the best channel to test first. If any time and effort is to be spent on organic social media content promotion then LIN (and possibly YouTube) as probably the best options. LIN do often deliver new options (like Newsletters) that are worth considering.

Content Delivery - Email

One major advantage of an existing customer focus is you should have their contact details (including email). You can then deliver the right content, at the right time and personalise the experience.

The alternative is to find a way to build a relationship with a prospect over time. You offer something of value. The purchase price for someone interested in that item is their email address. You now have the details of someone who has at least some basic interest in what you offer.

The prospect is interested enough to take the time to establish if you can solve their problem. They have enough interest to risk giving out their email address.

The item of value is information. It must be unique and offer something of real benefit to the prospect. These items (assets) will take a significant amount of time and effort to create. It must be different from the content created for customers as you should not gate that content.

The problem is this - It's that pesky traffic issue discussed above. Little traffic to your website/blog equals few downloads and prospect email addresses. The only alternative is to effectively pay for the prospects email address and use Ads.

Paid Content Delivery

What if you accept you need to go the paid content promotion route. Do you exchange part (or all) of your SEO costs for advertising costs? That is exactly what Google wants you to do but there is a need to be pragmatic here. You could pay to promote your content.

The paid route has another potential advantage. Your business is no longer at risk of a Google or social media algorithm change destroying your customer acquisition process.

Advertising is not free (obviously) but neither are SEO and social. Before making decisions between the two (or some combination) you need to evaluate what a new customer is worth. What is their lifetime value?

From this comes the maximum you can afford to pay to acquire a customer given your existing cost of sales. That part is straightforward but from there it becomes much more complex.

eMarketer estimated that Google's net U.S. digital ad revenue was \$39.58 billion in 2020.

Solutions

First, let's re-state the problem. We want to deliver information to existing customers, specific target individuals and prospects (those in market). We also want to raise awareness among those who are not a prospect but may become ones in future.

Delivering information (content) online is difficult for small to medium-sized businesses that are not the dominant force in their marketplace. It is particularly difficult to reach prospects online without a significant Ad budget. Unfortunately, Ads are generally getting more expensive.

Many offline marketing techniques, some utilised for centuries before the internet became a thing, are still effective. Some can enhance the effectiveness of online marketing techniques. We suggest a general (steady) move away from online and back to offline, retaining online only where there is a clearly defined justification.

Let's imagine your business makes components. A designer needs a particular component for a new design. Consider where is the first place a designer goes for information. Is the internet? We suggest not.

Where do they go? They might ask colleagues for recommendations. There are in-house communities like Slack. They might interrogate customised in-house data and systems.

When customers resort to the web we suggest they already have an idea of what they need. Now they want to know more. They have questions, but are not ready to engage with a supplier.

This is not new, as it was discussed, time and again during the rise of inbound marketing. But, the search experience (be it Google or Bing) is awful.

So, from the customer's viewpoint, what do they need? They need slick internal information stores (let's call them knowledge bases) that they can easily access. Again, not new, remember all the hype about intranets?

They need knowledge bases provided by suppliers and intermediaries they can interrogate to have their early-stage questions answered. Thereby, eliminating the need for online search, or multiple web page clicks. With the growth in deep learning-driven tools, this is (in principle) now possible.

We suggest the future for the customer in search of information is a combination of knowledge bases (in-house and external), the internet, traditional information sources that have existed for decades and face-to-face interaction (internal and external). An evolving and complex environment for marketers. The focus on online marketing is over. In truth, it has been over for years.

Should you wish to explore any of the above topics in more detail then please get in touch. It costs nothing to talk.

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You can read more about us, how we are organised and how we work at <https://outsourcedmarketingservices.co.uk/how-we-work>.

We support the B2B account-based sales process by facilitating customer access to the information they need, when they need it

Given the rapid rise in machine learning based tools since October 2022 our current focus is the impact these tools will have on content distribution in 2024 and beyond. You can read our musings on these issues on our Blog.

Appendix A

The Problem With Online Content Delivery Channels

Information Delivery - What's Changed?

The earliest known flint arrowheads date back at least 40,000 years. We can safely assume these were traded (exchanged) in some way.

Move on through history and for centuries, little changed. Sales were based on show and tell and, when tribes started to move and interact, word of mouth. There were obvious limitations with this approach, but that all changed with the development of the printing press.

Now there was a way to deliver a message to a greater audience. All it needed was some way to increase access to that message. First, the audience needed to be educated and secondly, there needed to be a mass delivery mechanism.

By the early 1980s, those problems were solved. Print was joined by other mass media, including television and radio. Marketers had developed efficient ways to create awareness and generate enquiries. Then along came the internet.

Everybody could (in theory) now have instant access to the very latest information. The World Wide Web was simply the latest information delivery medium.

In the early days of the internet, there was a scramble to get online. At first, the website was the receptacle for business information – An online brochure and/or catalogue.

Over time, more content in various formats was loaded online. Its purpose? To take over the role of awareness building, education and lead generation from traditional media.

Facebook launched in 2005, so social media marketing became a thing. Also in 2005, the term inbound marketing was (allegedly) first used by HubSpot's Brian Halligan.

Inbound theory suggests a firm's audience is resistant to information pushed their way. It claims best practice is to allow customers to seek out the information (pull) they need online.

Online marketing developed at a pace from that point forward. Some tried to guide prospects along a path from awareness to sale using the old (long obsolete) AIDA model. Others used a mix of content and Ads, with Ads the priority for those with commodity type products.

As marketers flocked to inbound marketing, the amount of content online exploded. Too much content online makes it more and more difficult to stand out. The concept of inbound marketing suggested the customer was in control and pulled information when needed. That assumes they could find it!

Online Content Marketing - An Example

Let's assume you have a relatively new website built on solid technical foundations. You write an insightful blog post. It takes a stand on an important issue relevant to your industry. You include original research and graphics. The post runs to over 3,000 words.

You make sure the post remains on topic and relevant to your keywords and their synonyms. You work hard on your structure and headings. You include relevant images and write powerful headings and meta descriptions. You link out to relevant and credible sources. In short, you follow all the (alleged) blogging best practices.

You publish the post and leave it for a week or two to allow it to index and percolate through the search results. You run google analytics to view the impact on your organic results (negligible). You look at landing and exit pages (nothing). You know it's a little early to expect anything but you look at incoming links (struck out again).

You run many relevant queries and view the SERPS. There is lots of content on the first few pages that are nowhere near as relevant or expansive as yours. You run multiple relevant queries and you are consistently outranked. Why? What happened?

The problem is twofold. First, you failed to promote your content but much more important your website has insufficient authority. You can publish the best, relevant, in-depth, researched content but without authority you are unlikely to rank. What gives a website authority (as perceived by the search engines)? Many things, more on that below..

Now let's assume your website has built up some authority over time. Now your blog content has a better chance to rank but remember this:

- You will always be outranked by the big brands and the major news outlets.
- If your market is highly competitive and/or your competitors were first to spot the opportunity and have a strong web presence you will find it difficult to rank for many of the queries you may wish to chase.

That said you may be able to secure a satisfactory amount of website traffic. So what conversion rate can you expect? It depends on what you count as a conversion. It depends on the purpose of each piece of content and the method you use to keep visitors engaged and moving through your site.

As a rough guide, my own rule of thumb is on a small, B2B manufacturers blog between 1 and 2% of organic visitors should take some form of positive action. That action could be as basic as signing up for a download. That is not a lead.

One extreme example can be found at - <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2020/11/lack-of-lead-generation-content-engine/>

Search Engine Optimisation

As discussed above, without authority your blog post will not rank on the search engines when a prospect types in a relevant search phrase. If it does not rank, it will attract little attention.

To explain, let's start with a brief history of SEO. The early versions of the search engines were relatively simple beasts and worked on keywords and backlinks.

It was possible for anyone with some knowledge to game these early search engines. Hence, several years of chaos followed until the search engine businesses started to get a grip on the situation.

In the late 1990s through early 2000s there was no great effort to digitise existing print content. So what did the search engines need as they grew? That's right something to search for. Hence, search engines rewarded (via improved visibility) those who produced high-quality content and delivered it online.

Businesses with an understanding of SEO (keywords and links at the time) good quality content and a consistent publishing schedule could rank, be found and grow their business.

They could raise awareness of their products or services and generate leads. For a time online marketing worked, that is it worked organically with limited (if any) use of advertising. It is important to note those who built authority during this period, largely retain that authority. Latecomers to the party are at a distinct disadvantage.

The search engines (Google was the major player by this stage) became a victim of their success. They based their ranking process on links and content, but that allowed individuals and businesses to game the system.

As a result, the search engines were at risk of delivering a poor user experience. That makes online advertising less attractive, so something had to be done. In relatively quick succession (2011 to 2013), Google rolled out the Panda, Penguin and Hummingbird algorithm updates.

Penguin addressed dubious link schemes. Panda aimed to promote high-quality, relevant and original content - we will return to that below. Hummingbird was different, it aimed to understand intent and context - semantic search.

From late 2012 (knowledge graph) onwards Google has built on this model by incorporating Artificial Intelligence (Rank Brain -2015, Bert - 2019, Neural Matching - ongoing) into their algorithms. This allows the algorithms to understand the user's query the context and their intent. The algorithms can also understand the relationship between things (entities).

How Ranking On Google Works - An Opinion

So, we have moved on from ranking based on keywords in content and backlinks to ranking algorithms that are much more sophisticated. Here is a (simplified) **opinion** on how ranking in Google works today.

First, remember this: Google's purpose is to return a selection of results in response to a query, not necessarily the best results.

So instead of competing for up to ten (organic) positions on page 1 of the search results page, you are really competing for three or four

All that follows assumes webpages have no technical SEO issues and allow crawling and indexing. Additionally, we assume, webpages deliver a positive user experience, including speed and layout.

At the top level, Google expects a site to be trustworthy and have authority. These two elements are closely linked. We will add a subset to authority, defined as popularity.

Some sites Google knows to be trustworthy (authoritative) regardless of other signals. For news outlets that might be the BBC. In electronic memory components it might be Micron. In pharmaceuticals it might be Pfizer. They are (as perceived by Google) trustworthy sites in their sector - end of story.

Beyond the obviously trustworthy sites, the search engines have some way of allocating a site a trust/authority score. This is a comparative measure (your site vs competitor) and is signal-driven. In the early 1990s, those signals were backlinks and keywords, but now it is much more than that.

There is much talk in the SEO community about EEAT (experience, expertise, authority, trust). Authority and trust are touched on above, but taking EEAT as a group, how would a search engine measure such a thing? Anyone can make whatever claims they wish on a webpage and it's easy to fake reviews and testimonials.

One possible measure is what others say about a business or entity. Therefore, I believe Google has some way of measuring "popularity." At a simplistic level this might be mentions of an entity on news or social sites. It could be measured via click-through ratio, social shares or time on site.

User experience (UX) might be an element of popularity and brand mentions could also have an impact. How is popularity measured, we don't know, but elements such as CTR are too easy to game.

Why is Authority/Trust (or EEAT, if there is such a thing) so important? Because we believe it is the first element is a screening flow. The first gate.

Your webpage sits, indexed with millions of others, ready to service a user's query/locale/intent. When that request comes in Google makes a first selection (first screen) of pages.

If your page misses the cut you are out of the game. Any further measures further down the line that you could have passed with flying colours don't matter.

In our view, the search results are biased because of that first cut. It restricts good quality content on any website without authority/trust (as perceived by Google) rising to the top.

Remember, as discussed above (it appears) Google is measuring authority based on brand (the big boys in any industry) and longevity (established authority in the dim and distant past).

Of course Google are aware of this problem. They do have mechanisms to bring forward new content. I don't believe, at this time, those systems are very good.

As discussed above, most of the recent algorithm changes implemented by Google are related to intent and relevance

Google (as the dominant player in search) has moved on from keywords alone to understand the intent of the query. What is the searcher looking for?

From there, what content from the vast amount available is most relevant to satisfy that search intent.

But, as described above, many of the tools involved in this process use deep learning techniques. They are relatively slow and expensive so we guess they only come into play at a second (or lower screen).

Perhaps your content would have been a great fit when measured against intent/locale/quality. If only it had not fallen at the first screening fence.

There are other key pages on your website where conversions happen (often referred to as money pages). The problem with money pages is they tend to be relatively short and to the point.

Their purpose is to encourage a prospect to take action. The keywords and phrase they use are the same keywords and phrases competitors use. If your website missed the authority cut, your money pages will not rank.

Backlinks & Content

In the early days of search engines, backlinks were. I suggest, a key driver of authority. They probably still have an impact, but their influence has dwindled over time.

Now, I believe, engagement measures (popularity) are much more important. Unfortunately many still put significant resources into generating content to secure backlinks, that (we suggest) is a waste.

There are many types of blog post, the most common are:

- Answering questions.
- How to.
- News items.
- Listicles.
- Infographics.
- Case study.
- Thought leadership.
- Resource lists.
- Reviews.
- Expert interview snippets.

If we assume our target is prospects and our aim is more traffic and/or leads. If we take the blog posts outlined above and categorise each by its primary goal then:

- The purpose of listicles, expert interview snippets, reviews and infographics is links.
- How to, answer posts, resource list posts and news posts are targeted at traffic.
- The prime purpose of case studies and thought leadership posts is credibility.

Remember at the end of every organic traffic link there is a real person. What were they looking for? Depending on the type of blog post (especially how to and answer types) they may take what they need and leave.

if prospects do land on your online pages or blog content the chances of them returning are low. It takes time to build a relationship and credibility. Most B2B markets are not click/buy, it takes time to make a sale.

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