

The agile content marketing roadmap: Integrating strategy and execution

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grew up in publishing, experiencing and leading the industry's transition from print-only to cross media from the inside. He has served the media industry for 15 years in various senior sales and marketing roles, in business development and in general management. During the past 20 years he has been working as an international independent strategist, specialising in marketing innovation and content marketing. His motto: 'I believe #ContentMarketing is to today what advertising was to the 60s! Mad Men become Meaningful Men!' He is a regular speaker at international conferences, including Content Marketing World, Content Marketing Masters and The Content Marketing Academy, and serves as guest lecturer at various international Business Schools. He is co-founder of Content Marketing Fast Forward. The first edition of his book the Agile Content Marketing Roadmap will be published by the end of 2019.

Abstract

This paper analyses the challenge of developing an adaptive strategic process for content marketing that fits a continuously changing internal and external environment. It presents a visual framework, published under Creative Commons, where strategy and execution are integrated in an agile process.

Keywords

content marketing, agile, strategy, advertising, branded content, Agile Content Marketing Roadmap, marketing innovation

INTRODUCTION

As new technology influences both consumer behaviour and the marketing channel landscape, content becomes increasingly essential as the currency to earn attention from our audiences and customers. The shift from an ad-campaign-driven broadcasting strategy to a more continuous process of content marketing, however, is a fundamental change for most organisations. This paper describes the background and building blocks of an agile methodology, published under Creative Commons,¹ that empowers brands in their transition process towards a content-based marketing approach.

MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS, TRANSFORMING IN A TECHNOLOGY STORM

The impact of technology on how we communicate and interact with our

existing and potential customers is immense. Although the symptoms of this transition are extremely diverse, the author believes that the essence can be brought back to two principal effects:

1. Anyone can become a publisher and
2. The control of the communication process is shifting.

Anyone can become a publisher

Only recently, less than one single generation ago, building a media venture required tremendous investment power. The creation, production and distribution of content was a labour-intensive and capital-intensive process. The entire operation required the involvement of large numbers of skilled experts, for whom one needed substantial office space and specialised technical facilities. Being a

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publisher of magazines and newspapers, or being a so-called media ‘tycoon’ in the radio and television industry, was therefore not only something very exclusive but also something extremely powerful as the medium controlled valuable access to their audiences.

Today, every single person can independently become a publisher. Every individual has access to almost all information, to the tools that compensate for limited training in creating content, and to channels that allow publication and distribution of content.

Most people are moderate-scale publishers today, without even realising it. When sharing their favourite images or comments on any of their social networks, building and maintaining their loyal network of family, friends and other followers, they are effectively doing what could exclusively be done by media companies in the recent past: building an audience with content.

Some individuals have been doing this extremely successfully, developing a blogger or vlogger business from scratch in only a few years, competing with established long-standing media companies that often have more experience, track record and resources. Many non-media companies large and small have adopted this approach as well, and some have successfully become the voice of the industry in their sector, competing with or sometimes even replacing established publishers. As a result, they now own a direct channel to their industry audience.

The control of the communication process is shifting

While anyone can become a publisher today and launch a media operation, whatever the ambition and scale may be, the life of marketers and media executives is not

getting any easier. Opportunity knocks, but at the same time the place is getting crowded and noisy. Several hundreds of hours of video are uploaded every minute. Nearly 70 million blog posts are published on WordPress every month. These numbers illustrate the vast and growing amount of content published by individuals and businesses.

As the amount of content created and published grows, the number of different channels grows as well. Anyone born before the mid-80s knows from experience that the once comfortably limited number of communication channels has multiplied into an unlimited list of touchpoints available at the audience’s fingertips.

We have media types, such as magazines, newspapers, life events, radio stations or television stations. We have devices, such as a smartphone, tablet, laptop and television sets; we have social media networks, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn. We have applications, such as e-mail, smartphone apps and games. All together, they form an expanding ecosystem of potential touchpoints through which your audience is navigating effortlessly on a continuous basis to select the content of their choice.

With an overload of content and channels, people adopt tools and develop habits to manage their daily content consumption. Technologies come as varied as on-demand television, ad blockers and social media feeds, helping people to increase their control of incoming content. At the same time, people have been speed-trained over the last few years to see, evaluate and act on incoming impressions to select and process what is presently valuable and relevant and what is not.

Also, privacy legislation has recently added a third layer of eye and ear protection to your audiences in the form of

the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which obviously has an impact beyond companies based in Europe.

It is clear that all these developments, technical, human and regulatory, point in the same direction: the control of the communication process is shifting from the sender in the previous payer-dominated broadcast era towards the empowered audience in the world of today and tomorrow.

THE POT OF GOLD AT THE BRIGHT SIDE OF CHANGE

As technology redefines the rulebook for success in marketing communications, the adverse effects seem to be most visible at first. The media sector is facing an uphill battle for economic survival as their business models of a different age become outdated, the challenge for brands to actively reach out to audiences seems to become more complicated by the day, and outbound sales operations in business-to-business (B2B) frequently bounce on new barriers.

As always, change brings both threats and opportunities, and we need bright and positive thinkers to point us in the right direction. Marketing visionary Seth Godin probably deserves the recognition of identifying the opportunity first. He understood extremely early that we had to shift from focusing on winning the attention of people to winning their hearts.

In 1999, Seth Godin published his book *Permission Marketing*,² in which he called the existing marketing method ‘interruption marketing’. Who thought that it was a good idea to start a relationship with a future customer by crashing in as an uninvited guest, shouting for attention, at any giving moment? Godin was spot-on in forecasting that technology would end the

power of this practice and that the age of what he called ‘permission marketing’ had arrived. The title of his book is accompanied by the ultimate summary of content marketing: *Turning Strangers into Friends and Friends into Customers*. These eight words cover all important topics such as the need for value in communication to build a relationship and the understanding that buying is an integral part of a more extensive journey.

We had to wait almost another ten years, until 2010, when Joe Pulizzi launched the Content Marketing Institute (CMI) and content marketing, defined as a customer-centric and content-driven marketing approach, started its journey to become mainstream.

BRANDS BECOME MEDIA, BUT NOT OVERNIGHT

Brian Solis was probably one of the first, roughly ten years ago, to coin the phrase ‘businesses must also become media’,³ linking that conclusion to the observation that ‘our content becomes beacons to represent our brand and value proposition where our direct voice may be absent’.

So, brands *can* become media. We might even argue that brands *must* become media. The next million-dollar question then is *how* the brand’s marketing operation can be turned into a media operation.

Many brands are facing a number of challenges to successfully deal with this transition. The four most significant challenges are as follows:

- **Constant change**
The technology-driven change process is not a project with a defined start date and end date. When change becomes a constant, it is hard for brands to frame the challenge and to come up with a plan to deal with change. The risk, and

often reality, is that we act on the stimuli of novelties without seeing the complete picture and that we are unable to develop a holistic and flexible approach.

- Complexity

If 'brands become media', they face the challenge of setting up an additional, completely new business operation ('publishing') within the existing essential business operation of the company. The range of skills needed varies from journalism to customer journey development, from data to design and from content distribution to implementation of tech solutions.

The development of this new 'media operation' inside our organisation is not an isolated project starting from scratch. It is a transition from our existing marketing, communication and sales structure and methods that have to be executed in real time without disturbing the current business operations.

- Commitment

By nature, change and complexity create a feeling of uncertainty in any business operation. Although most business leaders will publicly advocate that change brings opportunity, reality shows that a conversation about starting an exciting adventure into the 'marketing unknown' quickly turns into an uncertainty-avoidance debate around return on investment (ROI). As marketers we must understand that the C-suite rightfully challenges our great vision about innovation of marketing communication, and that it is our responsibility to offer assurance about risk and outcomes. Although getting marketing innovation approved by senior management is, timeline-wise, often one of our first challenges, the subsequent need to obtain buy-in for new approaches from our peers and teams will probably be the most crucial challenge. If we have

selected, hired and trained staff to be the best in marketing approaches of a different age, it may not come natural to all of them to let go of habits and give change a chance.

- Collaboration

Once we have the internal commitment to start developing a new marketing approach in a complex and constantly changing environment, we need to develop an organisational structure and culture where collaboration can thrive. As we move from a vision to first versions of our content-driven marketing activities, and then onwards to scaling successful pilots, we constantly need the support of internal team members and of agencies and experts in our external ecosystem.

In order to deal with the first two challenges 'constant change' and 'complexity', we can fall back on learnings from software development. From the 1990s onwards, software engineers have started to implement so-called agile development methodologies to be able to quickly react to change throughout the development process and to break up large complex projects into manageable partials that can be realised independently.

From 2010 onwards, various thought leaders in marketing, especially those close to the tech development space like Scott Brinker,⁴ started publishing ideas on transposing agile principles from software development to marketing. Ultimately, a group of agile marketing front runners came together and published the Agile Marketing Manifesto⁵ in 2012. The Manifesto consists of seven 'values':

1. Validated learning over opinions and conventions
2. Customer-focused collaboration over silos and hierarchy

3. Adaptive and iterative campaigns over Big-Bang campaigns
4. The process of customer discovery over static prediction
5. Flexible versus rigid planning
6. Responding to change over following a plan
7. Many small experiments over a few large bets

The agile methodology aims to accelerate the process and improve the end result through partial deliveries enabling early customer involvement for validated feedback and continuous improvement. Personally, the author likes to present 'agile' as a mindset rather than as a methodology. If we use it as a mindset we can pick and choose from the agile toolbox as we see fit in specific situations, avoiding the risk of making agile the goal instead of the means to an end.

The other two challenges, 'commitment' and 'collaboration', revolve around the lack of understanding of how to go through the transition needed for 'brands to become media' safely and successfully.

We need commitment from different teams within our organisation, from people with different levels of education, experience and responsibility, from people of different generations and from people who are close to the marketing operation or who may have a substantial mental distance from marketing as it is known today.

In spite of all their differences, all these people have one thing in common: understanding gives them the confidence to engage from their job perspective in a project that is new to the entire organisation and then enables them to define and play their role in the collective change process. This means that understanding relates to both the emotional element of knowing where we are heading, why it is necessary and what the ultimate reward will be and to the rational

element of how we can make the challenge into new work territory feasible.

INTEGRATING STRATEGY AND EXECUTION

Agile marketing practices are becoming more and more popular in marketing teams with a strong focus on digital. Most of the agile frameworks, however, are used only in the implementation and execution phase of a content marketing strategy. The process of strategy development is often defined and planned as a separated project.

One typical approach is to compose a temporary strategy team, with members sourced to represent all internal stakeholders and invited because of their knowledge, experience and/or contribution to the team dynamics. The team works for a limited period with the data collected for this purpose and may organise one or more brainstorm sessions to come up with the best possible strategy. Once the strategy is presented and approved, it is delivered as a solidified foundation to the team in charge of execution. The temporary strategy team is praised and dissolved.

There is nothing wrong with this widely adopted approach that delivers great strategies. In a marketing world of constant change and high complexity, however, a static strategy document may either be outdated quickly or miss out on opportunities for improved results based on additional insights during the execution phase. The separated strategy development approach implies that all relevant information will be available during the strategy project and that this context will not change during the operational lifetime of our strategy. In reality, change is constant, complexity is too significant to capture and process all relevant data, and we will continuously come across advanced insights that can add depth and focus to our strategy.

Using continuous implementation feedback is not an invitation to develop a different strategy every month, but merely a natural next step to integrate the strategy development phase and the execution phase into one seamless process and benefit from today's possibilities to iterate quickly or pivot if needed.

THE AGILE CONTENT MARKETING ROADMAP

To combine the *understanding* needed to obtain *commitment* and enable *collaboration* with the *agility* needed to deal with *constant change* and *complexity*, a visualisation of the integrated process of strategy and execution offers a common language for everyone involved.

The Agile Content Marketing Roadmap is a six-step iterative framework, freely available for use through Creative Commons.⁶ Through its visualisation it offers a common language for everyone involved, independent of education, job type or experience. It also offers a definition of the various building blocks to ensure that everyone involved is on the same wavelength.

The iterative process consists of six phases (Figure 1):

- Goals
- Analysis
- Strategy
- Concept
- Implementation
- Monitor

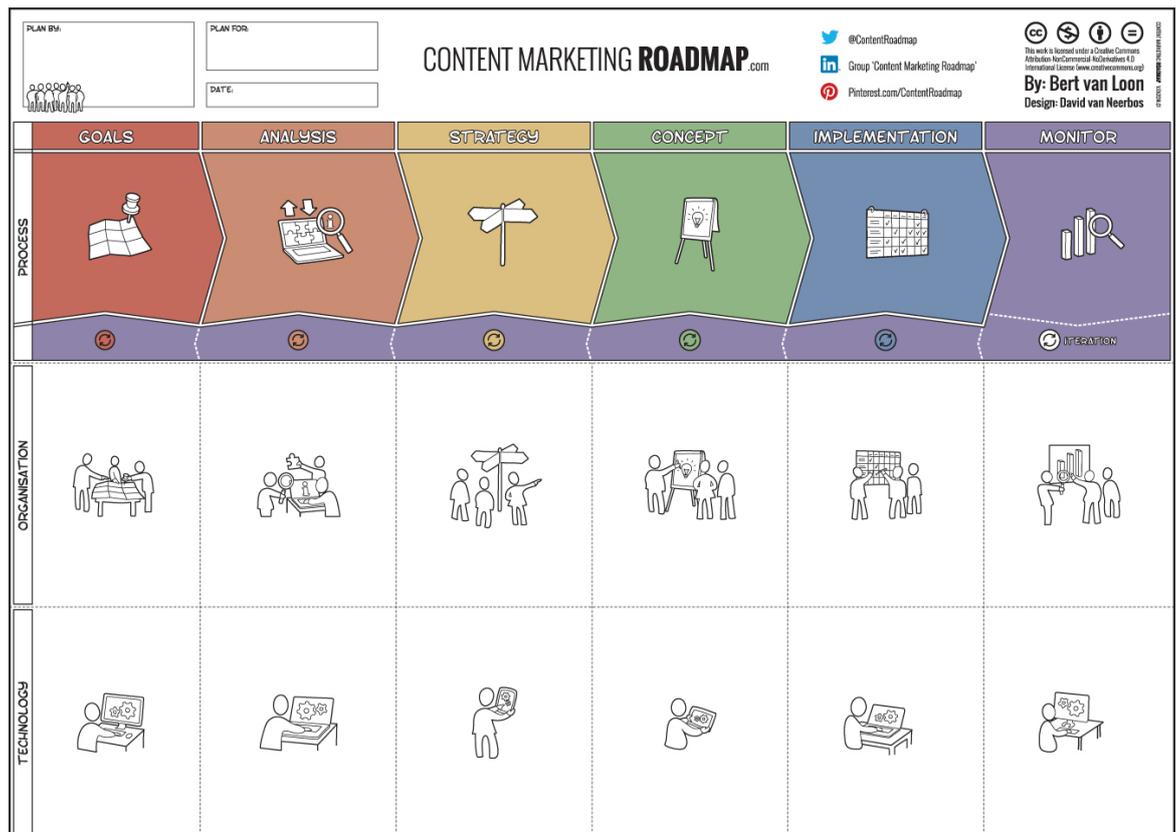


Figure 1 The Agile Content Marketing Roadmap

At first sight, the visualisation is more linear than circular, where a circular visual might be expected. The disadvantage of a circular visualisation would be that the insights collected from the monitor phase only link back to the first phase of the process. Since this framework integrates both the strategic process and the implementation process, monitoring insights may give input to optimise any of the process phases at any given time. The two-way linear visualisation of the process illustrates the seamless integration of the processes and the maximum flexibility. In reality, one can even start with a content marketing project without any (documented) strategy and gradually develop strategy version 1.0. using insights from the project and other data in the analysis phase. All values from the Agile Marketing Manifesto are reflected in the flexibility and the integration of the framework.

Each of the six phases has a distinct role and relates to the other stages. In every stage we focus on the process of that phase and on the organisational issues and technology topics related to that stage.

Goals

Always start with the end in mind. What does your organisation want to accomplish? What is the purpose of your efforts? The words ‘goals’ and ‘objectives’ are often used as synonyms, and yet there is a subtle but important difference. In this first stage we use the word ‘goals’, because this describes broad, primary outcomes. Objectives should be measurable, concrete and specific and will be defined after the analysis in the strategy stage.

In this phase we want to define strategic intent, which basically boils down to the prioritisation of one of three main marketing communications (marcom) goals.

- Branding
- Action
- Relationship

The prioritisation of one goal over the other two gives context throughout the analysis phase and offers a first broad direction for our strategy (Figure 2).

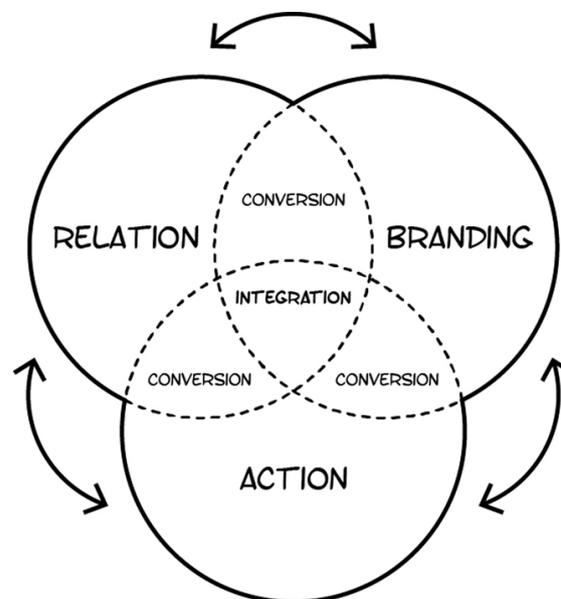


Figure 2 Three main goals: branding, action and relationship (BAR)

Analysis

In order to enable us to make choices, for example, about objectives, important messages, audiences, channels and other priorities, we need to have access to all the relevant information. We need the right data to help us to make well-founded decisions in the strategy stage.

The Content Marketing Roadmap identifies 14 different areas to create a complete situation analysis (Figure 3):

- Audience insights (persona, journey)
- The context of our audience conversations

- The competition we are up against (business competitors, established media, search rankings)
- Regulatory external factors (government, industry, investor-related, etc.)
- The content that is currently available, including relevant metadata
- The performance of our current content and the reason behind that performance
- Our channel's reach. Paid, owned and earned; in print, digital and in-person media
- The current and previous lead generation methods and how they have evolved over the past years

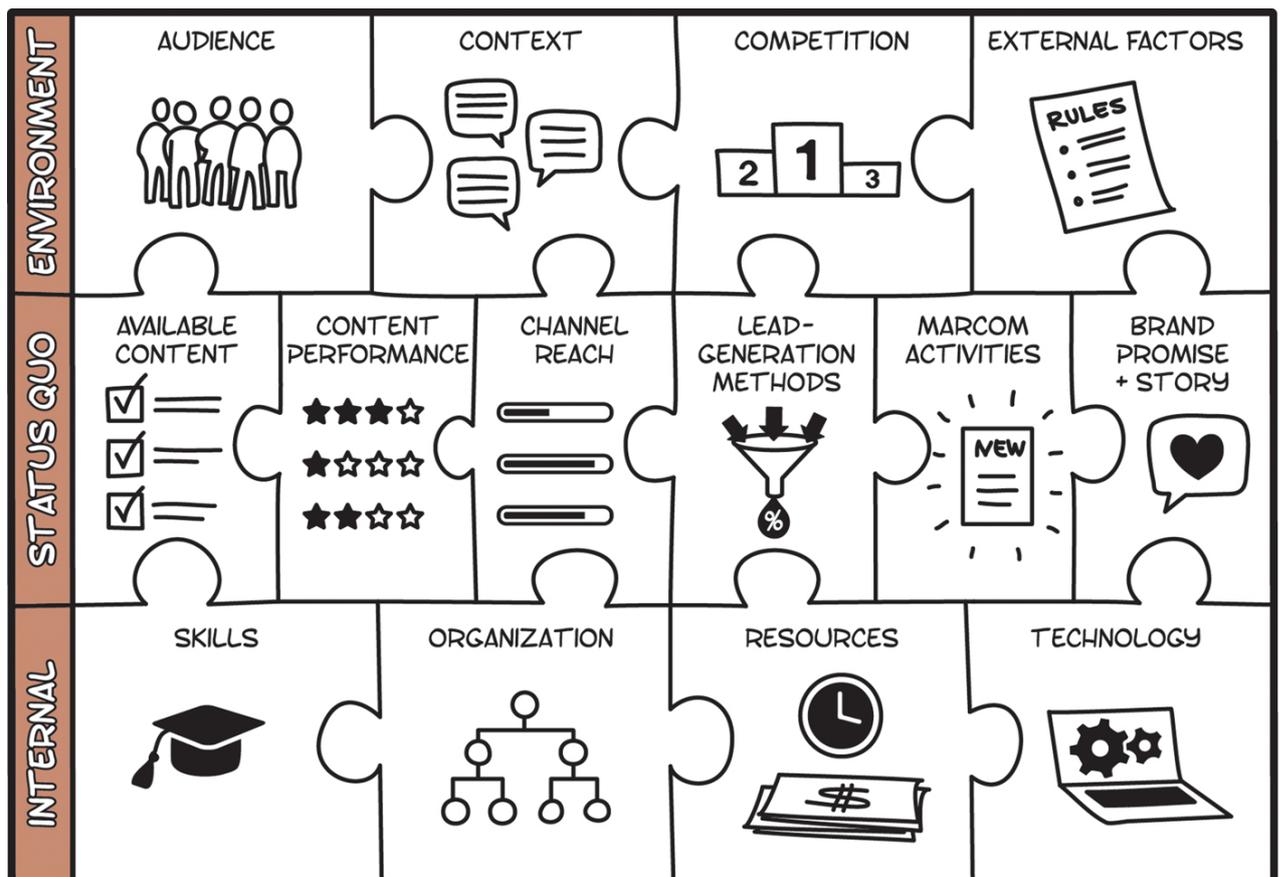


Figure 3 14 fields of analysis

- The current and previous marcom activities
- Our current brand story and brand promise
- The skills available in our internal and external organisations
- The structure and mandates of our organisation
- Our resources to develop and execute our content marketing plan
- The technological framework, tools and policy of our organisation

Obviously, the analysis stage can be very time consuming. It all depends on how much information is readily available to be included in your plan. If you do not have time to perform a thorough analysis for each of the 14 areas, you can decide to live with that reality. If you need to work on assumptions, gut feelings and educated guesses, be sure you are aware of the limitations of that choice, and share that understanding with your team.

At the heart of the Content Marketing Roadmap and the Agile Mindset is the idea of adding release numbers to the outcomes of every stage. Should you be obliged to work with limited data during the first time that you perform this analysis, mark the outcome as version 0.1. and update the release numbers as you move forward, learning from pilot projects, for example, until you reach version 1.0., etc.

Strategy

The only focus during the strategy phase is to make a choice from the alternative options that were produced after the analysis phase. If you do not make choices, there will be no clear direction, and all that is left is confusion. In the strategy stage, you will define SMART objectives, and you will make decisions about,

for example, important audiences and important messages, priority channels, available resources, key performance indicators (KPIs) and metrics. This is also the moment when you have to write down your content mission statement, describing the value of your content programme for your audience in order to engage with them and develop a mutually valuable relationship.

Once you have completed this step, you are halfway through the Agile Content Marketing Roadmap. Experience teaches us that the strategy should be shared and promoted throughout the company. It is a crucial moment for everyone because it is the basis of all further activities and efforts.

It is also an important element if you want to be successful in the next step: creative concept development. The strategy and other elements of your analysis will be the building blocks of a clear briefing for your creative agency or colleagues.

Concept

Finally, it is time to challenge the right-brained people who work for your organisation, internally or as an agency, for example, to the maximum of their abilities. There is so much content available for your audiences that you have to be sure that your content is 'epic' enough to stand out of the crowd and do its work, that your content has enough *oh!* to make it *Coh!ntent*.

The creative concept is essential to ensure that your content marketing activities have long-term potential. Three important elements may be distinguished:

- it should have a clear signature in order to link it to your brand;
- it should be scalable so that you can easily create a long-term content calendar;

- it must be consistent and synergetic across all media outlets, channels and customer contact points.

Implementation

Content marketing is not a campaign; it is a process! More than that, it is a commitment to your audience and to your organisation. This means that you have to create a solid foundation on which you can build your content programme. The right organisational set-up and effective and efficient tools will help you to operate like a publisher.

You are probably familiar with the quote ‘Culture eats strategy for breakfast’ attributed to Peter Drucker. If you do not breathe life into your strategy in the implementation stage, that strategy is just a paper tiger lying dormant in a drawer or on a digital drive.

The first priority from an organisational point of view is to define clear and mandated ownership of the content marketing operation. You will need a ‘marketing entrepreneur’ who shares the vision fully, who is motivated and knowledgeable to lead a team through the change and development process, and who has the guts and common sense to take decisions and create something new under uncertain circumstances. Defining ownership is also directly related to the challenge of dissolving or restructuring the marketing silos that were formed to match the requirements of a different age in marketing. The ecosystem of marketing specialisations now have to work together to offer a consistent and seamless experience to the audience.

Once the leadership is clearly defined, the next challenge is to create the right configuration of skills needed. Here again we borrow from software development, as we develop T-shaped marketer profiles.

The horizontal bar on the ‘T’ represents the wide variety of knowledge fields of which the marketer has to have enough basic insights to be able to collaborate in and contribute to team efforts. The vertical in the ‘T’ shape indicates the deep specialisation in a specific knowledge field. To build the right configuration, the basic question, obviously, is whether we need the skills internally or in our external supporting ecosystem. The three main considerations to answer that question are the needed capacity, whether it is strategic to the execution and outcomes and whether the skill is abundantly available on the market.

With leadership and team formed, we are ready to document processes and governance to kickstart our content marketing operation. From pilot projects to scaled successes, from content campaigns within an integrated strategy to the long-term content base, from hygiene and hub content to hero content. The steering elements for that process are threefold: the strategy, the creative concept and the data collected in the monitor stage.

Monitor (and improve!)

I like to challenge marketers to change their mindset, be it a business colleague in the marketing department or an external agency hired to deliver a specific result against agreed payment. This is a helpful exercise to clarify what the exact end-deliverables are that you agree to come up with as agreed in the strategy. It is also a first step to clearly define with your — internal — client which KPIs you agree on as a measure for success. The third advantage of this mindset tweak is that the marketer, thinking as an agency, does not feel obliged to discuss all metrics that are building blocks towards the end deliverable with the internal client

teams. The qualification and optimisation of the components needed to obtain the end-deliverables should be the territory of the marketing department alone and not subject to discussion in a daily town-hall meeting.

The number of metrics in marketing funnel stages prior to the end deliverable easily become overwhelming. It is advisable to limit those KPIs to the proverbial 'daily dozen'. Effective metrics are actionable, they are impactful and, of course, the data must be easily accessible.

You have defined your objectives, your KPIs and your metrics. This means that you can use all available data to monitor your results and hunt for ways to improve them. If, in spite of all your previous analytical and creative efforts, the results do not meet your expectations, you can start the process of identifying the cause of the problem. This would include asking the following questions: Were your expectations too high and unrealistic? Should you modify your delivery strategy and switch channels? Can you improve the results by changing the tone of voice? You are now able to tweak and polish your programme to perfection or return to the analysis and strategy stage to pivot if needed. Remember, however, that it takes a long time to create overnight success!

CONCLUSION

When looking at the challenges, I expect that we will all face constant change and complexity for many years to come. An agile framework is a powerful antidote to help you stay in control of your content marketing strategy. Integrating your strategy development and the implementation in one single process will allow you to be flexible and adapt to change and new insights. The visualisation of that integrated

agile process offers a common language for everyone involved in the project and helps to gain confidence for your marketing endeavours in uncharted territory.

If you consider working with either this or a similar framework, I would like to conclude with two considerations.

Before you start, please check that all important stakeholders agree to your vision of why content marketing and 'brands become media' are essential to make your business future proof. Your plans to use a framework like the Agile Content Marketing Roadmap may help to convince those stakeholders, but understanding the 'why' is essential too.

When you start, please adapt and improve the Agile Content Marketing Roadmap as you see fit. It is not a rule book, but a framework that can be used both in a corporate environment and in microenterprises, in commercial and in not-for-profit contexts, in business-to-consumer and in B2B. You can and should tailor the application of the framework to your specific needs as you see fit. After all, that is what marketing agility is all about.

References and notes

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