



Are You Willing to Share?

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When Stephen Barnes set up the Hong Kong Visa Centre, he knew that the secret to business success lay in giving away his knowledge, not charging for it. In a twist to the way businesses often jealously guard their expertise, Barnes decided to share his insights with visa applicants as often as possible, free of charge.

In doing so, he employed a practice commonly known as 'content marketing'. Companies using content marketing typically develop and share useful information in order to engage, help, and ultimately sell to their customers and prospects. But actual sales messages, if any, are kept to a minimum. By focusing entirely on their audience's needs, and delivering content to support those needs, companies benefit from improved lead generation, increased brand recognition, and better customer engagement.

The practice is growing globally. The industry's Content Marketing Institute (CMI) recently found, for example, that 61% of marketers in Australia plan to increase their content marketing budgets in 2013. Meanwhile,

adoption among business marketers stands at 95% in the UK, 91% in North America, and 98% in Australia, according to the CMI.

Content marketing isn't a new idea. In fact, one of the earliest known examples was a customer magazine published by US tractor maker John Deere. The date was 1895. What has changed, however, is the ease of sharing content. With low barriers to entry and the ability to control one's own distribution—for example, through a website or email newsletter—companies can reach a global audience at a very low cost.

One business, Kuno Creative, saw online sales leads increase by more than 600% when it switched from traditional search engine optimisation (SEO) techniques to content marketing. In a video discussing its success, Chad Pollitt, the company's Director of Inbound Marketing, says, "Businesses are in the business of solving people's problems... So, the content you produce needs to centre on solving people's problems, because that's what people want."

In today's digital world, content marketing is a practice that has particular benefits for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) seeking a wider online audience. By providing answers to common questions, companies can demonstrate their value and differentiate themselves from their competitors. These SMEs are also more likely to reach prospective customers in the first place, as they will naturally use the same phrases those people are using to search online.

Businesses concerned about meeting a regular publishing schedule may also benefit from an editorial calendar that maps out content in advance. If, for example, a business owner is speaking at an industry conference one month, it's easy to turn that speech into an article the next month. Alternatively, a company might develop one or two reports each year, from which it can then create several shorter blog posts or podcasts.



A US company installing fibreglass swimming pools may seem an unlikely content marketing champion. But Marcus Sheridan, an owner of River Pools, first explored the practice when sales dropped in the struggling economy in 2008. His approach was simple. He decided to use a blog to answer the questions his customers most frequently asked, including the one competitors dared not answer: 'How much does a typical pool cost?'. The approach was so successful that visitors to River Pools' website soared, as did the company's sales.

There are, however, some challenges for those new to the practice. Many SMEs are put off because they don't know where to start, worry about not having enough to say, or don't have the time or resources to commit to a regular publishing schedule. But, by focusing on customers' typical concerns, even the smallest company can produce relevant and helpful content. A business might, for example, write about an industry trend and its likely impact on customers, or develop case studies showing how existing customers have overcome their business problems using the company's services.

At the Hong Kong Visa Centre, Barnes has built a huge online resource of blog posts, case studies, and short videos, all aimed squarely at those seeking help with visa applications. "It's all about answering questions and solving problems," he says. "It's about portraying your knowledge and gaining a level of trust and goodwill from your audience."

"We structured our content in such a way that customers stand a really good chance of being able to find us online," he says. "If it becomes immediately apparent that we know what we're talking about and that there is the opportunity for them to have all their problems addressed for free, our hope is that when they're ready for professional assistance, they'll come our way rather than going elsewhere."

For SMEs in today's digital environment keen to reach new prospects, increase customer engagement and, ultimately, improve sales, the lesson is clear. Increasingly, it pays to share. ■

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