



Business to business digital content marketing: marketers' perceptions of best practice

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to draw attention to the emerging phenomenon of business to business (B2B) digital content marketing, offers a range of insights and reflections on good practice and contributes to theoretical understanding of the role of digital content in marketing. B2B digital content marketing is an inbound marketing technique and hence offers a solution to the declining effectiveness of traditional interruptive marketing techniques.

Design/methodology/approach – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 key informants involved in B2B content marketing in the USA, UK and France, in five industry sectors.

Findings – B2B digital content marketing is an inbound marketing technique, effected through web page, social media and value-add content, and is perceived to be a useful tool for achieving and sustaining trusted brand status. Creating content that is valuable to B2B audiences requires brands to take a “publishing” approach, which involves developing an understanding of the audience’s information needs, and their purchase consideration cycle. Valuable content is described as being useful, relevant, compelling and timely. Content marketing requires a cultural change from “selling” to “helping”, which in turn requires different marketing objectives, tactics, metrics and skills to those associated with more traditional marketing approaches. The article concludes with a theoretical discussion on the role of digital content in marketing, thereby contextualising the findings from this study within a broader exploration of the role of digital content in marketing and relational exchanges.

Originality/value – As the first research study to explore the use of digital content marketing in B2B contexts, this research positions digital content marketing with regard to prior theory, and provides both an agenda for further research, and suggestions for practice.

Keywords Internet marketing, Value, Brand, B2B marketing, Metrics, Social media marketing

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

According to [Smith and Chaffey \(2013\)](#), the web is a pull marketing environment in which companies pull customers to their brand websites through search engine optimisation and social media. In pull marketing, companies are seeking to capture the interest of customers who are already seeking information, advice, a product or a service. Recently, there has been growing interest in the potential of pull or inbound digital marketing in which customers and prospects actively seek out brands that provide engaging and valuable content which is relevant to their needs ([Halligan and Shah, 2010](#)). Not only does “inbound marketing” positively discourage explicit selling



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messaging and a brand-centric approach, but it actively encourages brands to take a customer-centric perspective on their propositions and also engenders higher levels of trust from those customers and prospects that seek it out. This is consistent with the service dominant logic philosophy, in which customers are viewed as part of an extended enterprise and as co-producers of the firms' marketing. Further, [Lusch and Vargo \(2009, p. 6\)](#) suggest that "inbound marketing is made more effective and efficient and whole when your customers are viewed as a partner to be 'marketing with' or 'co-creators of value'". This stance heralds a paradigm shift from outbound (described by some as interruptive) to inbound marketing ([Halligan and Shah, 2010](#)).

Content is a key component of inbound marketing techniques, and hence an understanding of how content can be used in marketing, or more specifically, in engaging customers, is central to the development of an effective inbound marketing approach. There are some ambiguities as to the nature of content, and the definition of content marketing, which this research seeks to address. However, as a starting point we suggest that content includes the static content forming web pages, as well as dynamic rich media content, such as videos, podcasts, user-generated content and interactive product selectors ([Smith and Chaffey, 2013](#)), and adopt [Pulizzi and Barrett's \(2008, p. 8\)](#) widely used, but untested, definition of digital content marketing: "the creation and distribution of educational and/or compelling content in multiple formats to attract and/or retain customers". This definition of digital content marketing was proposed to capture the use of digital content by a firm as a means of drawing B2B customers to their online space (e.g. a website or social media presence), and promoting ongoing interaction and engagement with the brand community. This is the notion of digital content marketing that is the focus of this article. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained by viewing this incarnation of the use of digital content in marketing as part of a wider landscape in which digital content is used in the marketing exchange. Specifically, the term digital content marketing has also been used to refer to the marketing of digital content as a commodity ([Koiso-Kanttila, 2004; Rowley, 2008](#)), otherwise referred to as the digital goods business ([Bradley et al., 2012](#)); typically, this use of the term refers to "paid for" content in B2C contexts, such as the music and apps sectors. More recently, with the advent of social media, there has been increasing interest in the role of user-generated content in influencing brand reputations, the development of brand communities and the co-creation of the brand ([Christodoulides, 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013; Quinton, 2013](#)). Hence, we summarise key theoretical stances and research findings in the literature review, as a basis for the development of a theoretical exploration of the role of digital content in marketing exchanges which aims to position the findings from this study within a wider landscape.

Returning to digital content marketing in the incarnation that is the focus of this article, this is particularly appropriate in B2B contexts in which companies often form long-term relationships with their customers ([Kaplan and Sawhney, 2000](#)), and are increasingly engaged in the co-creation of mutual value ([Cova and Salle, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2011](#)). In addition, the sales cycle is often long, complex and multifaceted, and involves many participants ([Ramos and Young, 2009](#)). The ready availability of rich information to all of those involved in the various stages of the purchase process is valued by B2B customers. Consistent with this, [eConsultancy's \(2012\)](#) recent survey confirmed that content marketing and its associated digital marketing techniques now are among the key priorities for both B2C and B2B marketers, and recently Google

introduced a new algorithm, Hummingbird, that has the potential to promote content and inbound marketing (Lin and Yazdanifard, 2014). On the other hand, only 39 per cent of brands have an explicit content marketing plan, and 60 per cent of the content was “dull and irrelevant”, focusing just on product messages (CorporateVisions, 2012). Furthermore, research on inbound marketing, in general, or content marketing, more specifically, is virtually non-existent.

Accordingly, the specific aim of the research reported in this article is to contribute to understanding of digital marketing in B2B contexts by examining the growing phenomenon of content marketing, from the stance of practitioners in content marketing. This is the first study to explore the use of digital marketing in B2B contexts. The more general aim is, through this study in a relatively unexplored area, to contribute to theory-building associated with the use of digital content in marketing exchanges. More specifically, the objectives of this study are to:

- surface and propose a definition of digital content marketing;
- enhance understanding of aspects of the strategic decision-making associated with content marketing;
- develop criteria for content selection and development;
- offer recommendations regarding future practice in B2B digital content marketing; and
- propose and discuss a holistic framework for the use of digital content in marketing exchanges.

The next section of this article presents a review of the published literature on digital content marketing, and summarises relevant theoretical and empirical foundations. Then, the interview-based methodology is outlined. Findings are reported next, in three sections that align with the first three objectives. Finally, the Discussion and conclusions section summarises the research findings and discusses them with reference to prior research and theory, offers recommendations for practitioners and researchers and proposes a holistic framework regarding the use of digital content in marketing exchanges.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Insights into B2B digital content marketing*

There has been no prior academic and peer reviewed research specifically into digital content marketing. However, there have been several surveys by well-regarded marketing research agencies (Handley and Chapman, 2011; CorporateVisions, 2012) and books that offer advice on digital content marketing (Handley and Chapman, 2011; Wuebben, 2012; Rose and Pulizzi, 2011). This section will use these sources to explore the definitions of digital content marketing currently in circulation, and some of the key practitioner debates.

2.1.1 Definitions. The notion of “content” has its root in the publishing world where words, images and motion graphics have to be sufficiently interesting for the target audience to seek out the publishing platform whether it is a newspaper, magazine, TV or radio channel. However, the concept of content as used in B2B digital content marketing is less familiar, and hence less clearly defined. For example, Handley and Chapman (2011, p. 21) define content as “anything created and uploaded to a website: the words,

images or other things that reside here”. Halvorson and Rach (2012, p. 13) suggest that content is “what the user came (to your website) to read, learn, see or experience”, and Wuebben (2012, p. 5) sees content as the key component to telling a brand’s story, “the story of your product or service and propels your brand into the hearts and minds of your prospect, customers and others”.

The next important step is consideration of how these notions inform definitions of content marketing. Pulizzi and Barrett (2008, p. 8) proposed one of the first definitions of content marketing: “the creation and distribution of educational and/or compelling content in multiple formats to attract and/or retain customers”. Later, Rose and Pulizzi (2011, p. 12) suggested: “content marketing is a strategy focussed on the creation of a valuable experience”. Others (Halvorson and Rach, 2012; Scott, 2011; Bloomstein, 2012; Odden, 2012) each suggest variations which give the topic a slightly different focus. Silverman (2012, p. 14) concludes that the purpose of content marketing is to “draw in leads and supplement brand credibility”, whereas Godin (2007, p. 34) simply remarks that content marketing “is the only marketing left”.

2.1.2 Character. Various commentators have suggested that content marketing represents a change of role for B2B marketers, and associate it with inbound marketing, publishing and story-telling. They claim, for example, that as a form of inbound marketing, content marketing requires a change of mind-set from a “broadcast” mentality, where brands broadcast a one-way stream of product-based selling messages hoping to “interrupt” the recipient from whatever they are doing. Rather, organisations need to adopt an “inbound” approach (Halligan and Shah, 2010; Odden, 2012) whereby customers actively seek out a brand because it provides them with relevant, engaging content which educates or entertains them. Odden (2012) suggests that customers are now expecting brands to invest in their relationship with them before they get into a purchase scenario. Jefferson and Tanton (2013) agree that a paradigm change in marketing philosophy is required, and suggest that this involves a shift from selling to helping, which will only be achieved if organisations commit to this and develop the necessary skills.

Another aspect of being a content marketer, it is suggested, is the need to take on and learn the role of publisher. As Baer (2012) suggests: “all companies now find themselves in two industries: the business they are actually in, and the publishing business”. An important characteristic of publishers is that they carefully identify and define target audiences and consider what content is required to meet their needs (Scott, 2011). According to Rockley and Cooper (2012, p. 56), this is a substantial cultural shift for many B2B organisations, as most corporate marketing is structured: “in order to create content around products and services rather than from a publishing perspective which emphasizes the customer’s interests”. Many authors and commentators suggest that a core purpose of content marketing is to tell the “story” of the brand rather than simply to broadcast product-based messages to customers and prospects (Bhargava, 2012; Halligan and Shah, 2010; Pulizzi and Barrett, 2008; Pulizzi, 2012a; Signorelli, 2012). Yet industry surveys suggest that too much of B2B brands’ website content is still focussed on company, product or services (CorporateVisions, 2012). The key point of developing a B2B brand’s story is to differentiate it from its competitors: “differentiate means telling a different story (to that of your competitors) – not the same story told incrementally better” (Rose and Pulizzi, 2011, p. 76).

2.1.3 Objectives. Content marketing objectives must form part of a defined content strategy, defined by Bloomstein (2012, p. 101) as: “the practice of planning for the creation, delivery and governance of useful, usable content”. The key objectives for content marketing as identified by Rose and Pulizzi (2011) are:

- brand awareness or reinforcement;
- lead conversion and nurturing;
- customer conversion;
- customer service;
- customer upsell; and
- passionate subscribers.

Interestingly, these objectives are very similar to the objectives for social media marketing in small and medium-sized B2B brands as observed by Michaelidou *et al.* (2011), perhaps as a result of their common foundations in the creation and sharing of digital content. Rose and Pulizzi (2011) also propose an “analytics pyramid” or hierarchy of objectives, with the first level being suitable for the analytics team, the second level for reporting managers and the top level for top-level management. In a recent content marketing study, lead generation (51 per cent), brand awareness (38 per cent) and thought leadership (34 per cent) were cited as the main objectives (B to B Magazine, 2012).

Building a trusted authority position is widely mooted as one of the primary drivers for the success of content marketing (Pulizzi, 2012a; Fill, 2009; Silverman, 2012; Scott, 2011). Usefully, Peppers and Rogers (2011) identify the four key elements of a content marketing strategy that could enhance trust:

- (1) shared values (with the customer);
- (2) interdependence (mutual value in the relationship);
- (3) quality communication; and
- (4) non-opportunistic behaviour.

An approach that incorporates these elements is particularly useful for B2B brands with their wider decision-maker involvement and extended purchase timescales.

2.1.4 Content selection. Many commentators agree that the key success criterion for content in content marketing scenarios is that it should be in some way great (Pulizzi and Barrett, 2008), remarkable (Halligan and Shah, 2010) or awesome stuff (Handley and Chapman, 2011), in contrast with standard selling messages. Halvorson and Rach (2012) suggest that content is more or less worthless unless it supports a key business objective and fulfils customer needs, while Davis (2012, p. 23) argues that:

[...] you need to create content that your audience wants and needs. Often that content will have little to do with the actual products you sell and more to do with the audience you are looking to attract.

Davis proposes the “virtues of valuable content” as being the confluence of frequency, quality and relevance. Jefferson and Tanton (2013) point out that content needs to vary with the platform, with, perhaps, Facebook content being funny, beautiful or inspiring, whereas newsletter content should be newsworthy. However, as is evidenced in

CorporateVision's survey (2012), many commentators suggest that B2B brands are missing these messages, and still consider content marketing as simply another opportunity to communicate product-driven selling messages rather than solving the audience's problems (Wuebben, 2012; Pulizzi and Barrett, 2008; Handley and Chapman, 2011; Stelzner, 2011).

2.2 Theoretical and empirical foundations

While research on digital content marketing in the sense used in this study is extremely sparse, there are established bodies of theory and/or research in a number of related areas, including B2B buying processes, B2B brand-building, information quality and other aspects of the use of digital content in marketing exchanges. We draw insights from these areas to build a theoretical platform from which to better understand and elucidate the nature of B2B digital content marketing.

2.2.1 B2B buying processes. B2B buying processes are characterised as multi-stage and complex, involving many decision-makers. Marketers' objective is to move potential customers through the pre-purchase stage to the purchase stage, and then to further assist customers in the post-purchase stage (Harrison-Walker and Neeley, 2004). The post-purchase stage is important, as B2B purchasing managers tend to form strong bonds with those suppliers who satisfy both the firm's organisational needs and the purchasing manager's personal needs (Tellefsen, 2002). In addition, there is evidence that while B2B buyers are influenced by information from numerous sources, they frequently use the Internet as their initial source of information (McMaster, 2010). Indeed, Adamson *et al.* (2012) found that B2B customers typically completed around 60 per cent of a purchase decision before any conversations with a supplier.

2.2.2 Brand-building, buying and trust in B2B markets in the digital age. Acknowledging that content marketing commentators view brand awareness and the creation of a trusted status as key objectives of content marketing, we turn to B2B branding theory. Traditionally, branding was regarded as superfluous in the B2B context, with the focus being on the dedicated sales force (Kotler and Keller, 2006; Leek and Christodoulides, 2011). However, brand-building has become increasingly important for B2B companies, especially for those companies in worldwide, commoditised technology markets where the brand is a signifier for trust (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006). A better brand reputation has been found to give the buyer a greater feeling of assurance of the product quality, which leads to a greater willingness to pay a price premium (Bendixen *et al.*, 2004), and confidence that suppliers will stay the course of a long customer relationship (Glynn, 2012). In particular, it is recognised that the corporate brand has a fundamental role in the creation of sustainable relationships between an organisation and its multiple stakeholders (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Schwaiger and Sarsted, 2011). Accordingly, B2B brand owners are becoming more proactive in managing their digital brand presence. Yet, in this endeavour, they face two key challenges. First, in digital environments, trust is both important in engaging customers in remote locations, and more difficult to achieve (Ibeh *et al.*, 2005; Li *et al.*, 2012). Second, with the advent of growing participation in social media, brand reputations are more vulnerable, and indeed, some would argue that the more active and interested the customer community associated with a brand, the greater the chance that the "ownership" of the brand identity is contested (McCarthy *et al.*, 2013). Brand owners may have no option but to acknowledge that they are losing control of their brands and

to view brand-building as an interactive process in a conversational environment (Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2011) and to empower customers in the co-creation of brand meaning (Christodoulides, 2009) and value (Iglesias *et al.*, 2013). In many instances, especially in B2C social media contexts, this is associated with co-creation of the content on the brand's website or social media presence, and hence B2B marketers, for whom brand reputation is pivotal to long-term relationships, might usefully consider ways to develop a more collaborative approach to content development.

2.2.3 The use of digital content in marketing exchanges. Digital content is used in a variety of different ways in marketing exchanges. In this article we focus on the relatively new phenomenon of B2B digital content marketing, in which the digital content is typically used as an inbound marketing technique to pull customers to the website, and to potentially create brand community dynamics associated with the website. Typically, such content is provided free by the organisation to promote their products and services, and more widely to cultivate relationships with the other organisations that are their customers; the content might be referred to as "non-paid" content.

However, the term "digital content marketing" has been used by other authors (Koiso-Kanttila, 2004; Rowley, 2008), in a rather different context, to refer to the trading of digital content or goods over the Internet, where both the products and their delivery are digital (Koiso-Kanttila, 2004). Bradley *et al.* (2012) refer to this as the digital goods business. The digital goods business is typically concerned with "paid content", such as dating services, digital music and online newspapers. Interestingly, and of relevance to this research, Koiso-Kanttila (2004) comments that in this context, the term "digital content" is widely used in industry analysis, while the term "digital product" is used in the academic literature. All of the major seminal works in this area are essentially theoretical (Bradley *et al.*, 2012; Koiso-Kanttila, 2004; Rowley, 2008). In addition, all comment on the lack of research into digital content marketing. Nevertheless, they do raise some interesting issues which are revisited in the Discussion and conclusions section, such as the difficulty in fixing notions of value in relation to digital content and its consequences, the notion of value in use (Rowley, 2008), the different roles of content in different business models (Bradley *et al.*, 2012) and the key characteristics of digital content (Koiso-Kanttila, 2004; Rowley, 2008; Wolk and Theysohn, 2007). In addition, Wolk and Theysohn (2007) draw attention to the role of content in driving traffic to a website.

Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmanson (2013), an interesting recent contribution in the information systems literature, propose that social computing/media has the potential to cause a paradigm shift in the online content industry, and argue for a strategic approach that makes the social experience central to the content websites' digital business strategy. This acknowledgement of the importance of social media as an environment for the creation of user-generated content is acknowledged by many other authors, and has been discussed in relation to its potential influence on brand reputations, the development of brand communities and the co-creation of the brand (Christodoulides, 2009; Iglesias *et al.*, 2013; Quinton, 2013). Thus, there is a third type of digital content marketing, where, unlike in the two categories discussed above, the content is not produced by the organisation, but by its customers or other users of their website; such "social content" (Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmanson, 2013) has a pivotal role in building and maintaining marketing relationships between the organisation and its customers,

and also, particularly in B2B contexts, supports sharing and evolution of customer knowledge (Rowley, 2002).

Finally, while for ease of exposition the three types of digital content marketing have been distinguished from each other, it is important to acknowledge the importance of hybrid or “freemium” models, in which a website offers most of its content for free, but restricts access to some premium features to fee-paying customers, or those prepared to exchange their contact details for access to the premium content.

2.2.4 Content and information quality. Finally, recognising that content is information, we look to the information quality literature for insights into how users evaluate the usefulness of information. According to Hilligoss and Rieh (2008, p. 1477):

[...] information quality refers to people’s subjective judgment of goodness and usefulness of information in certain information use settings with respect to their own expectations of information or in regard to other information available.

Further, Rieh (2002) proposes that information quality has five facets: usefulness, goodness, accuracy, currency and importance. More specifically focusing on web content, Fink-Shamit and Bar-Ilan (2008) suggest that in their assessment of information quality, users consider the credibility of content, credibility of the site, predictive relevance and veracity. Authority, or the reputation of the source or the author, is also widely cited as an important factor when evaluating information on the web (Freeman and Spryrikiadis, 2004; Eysenbach and Kohler, 2002; Tillotson, 2002; Fink-Shamit and Bar-Ilan, 2008).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research approach

B2B digital content marketing is in a relatively early stage of development, and the knowledge base is dominated by advice from practitioners and consultants. Therefore, an inductive approach, informed by an interpretive stance and executed using a qualitative methodology, has been adopted for this study. Such an approach is useful for understanding and developing rich descriptions of interviewees’ attitudes, perceptions and behaviours (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Saunders *et al.*, 2009), and may act as a basis for theory-building. In addition, Daymon and Holloway (2011) suggest that qualitative research techniques are useful when gathering data from professionals such as marketing communications practitioners. More specifically, the method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggest the interview is a “conversation”; interviews are useful, in the context of this in-depth, exploratory study, to illustrate what is happening within the subject area and lead to new insights (Saunders *et al.*, 2009).

3.2 Key informants

Key informants were identified and recruited through professional networks. One of the researchers is a practitioner in the digital marketing area, and was able to make use of his experience, professional connections and credibility in this area, to encourage high-profile experts to participate in the study. Key informants were selected on the basis of their ability to comment on current practice and challenges in digital content marketing. This might be described as a purposive sample (Silverman, 2010), constituted to draw on the specific knowledge of the participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Participants all held senior positions in their organisations and worked in B2B

markets in one of the following sectors: technology hardware and software, recruitment, business and professional services, marketing services and recycling and renewables. These sectors include both manufacturing and service sectors and are representative of the opportunities and challenges faced by B2B businesses in utilising content marketing. Companies based in the UK, USA and France are included. Informants can be divided into companies using digital content marketing (users), and those, typically in marketing services companies, (advisors), who are advising other companies on their digital marketing strategies. The number of participants is consistent with that used in other qualitative studies that require informants from business backgrounds (Veloutsou and Taylor, 2012; Wallace and De Chernatony, 2007). Table I shows the profile of the research sample.

3.3 Interview design and data collection

Semi-structured interviews were chosen, as they provide a framework for the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee, while allowing flexibility (Bryman and Bell, 2011), and scope to pursue interesting emergent topics (Liedner, 1993). An interview guide was developed with nine open-ended interview questions, which align with the research objectives as shown in Table II. Between four and six

Interviewee	User (U) or adviser (A)	Job title	Location	Company activity
1	U	Operations Director	UK	Translation services
2	A	President/Founder	USA	Marketing services
3	A	President	USA	Marketing services
4	A	President/Speaker	USA	Marketing services
5	U	Vice President of Thought Leadership and Marketing	France	Recruitment
6	A	Chief Executive Officer	USA	Marketing services
7	U	Senior Director of Global Marketing	USA	Software
8	U	Chief Marketing Officer	USA	Software
9	U	Head of Marketing	UK	Recruitment
10	U	Head of Branding and Corporate Publications	France	IT hardware and software
11	U	Content Marketing Director	USA	Software
12	A	Chief Content Officer	USA	Marketing and training services
13	A	Chief Operating Officer	UK	Marketing services
14	U	Head of Marketing	UK	Renewables
15	U	Vice President of Marketing	USA	Software and services

Table I.
Profile of key informants

Research objective	Interview question
Surface and propose a definition of content marketing	What is your definition of content marketing?
Enhance understanding of aspects of the strategic decision-making associated with content marketing	How are you selecting the content marketing distribution channels that you are currently using? What marketing objectives have you set for your content marketing? How are you justifying the use of content marketing within your business? How are you using content marketing to increase the trusted status of your brand? What do you consider to be the significant internal or external obstacles to content marketing success? What measures do you use to evaluate the effectiveness and ROI of your content marketing?
Develop criteria for content selection and development	What criteria are you using to select the digital content you are currently creating? What do you consider to be the characteristics of content which can be considered truly "great"?

Table II.
Interview questions mapped against research objectives

additional prompts per question were included in the interviewers' version of the guide, to support the researcher in ensuring that all aspects of the question had been explored.

The interview guide was pre-tested and then piloted with a research/practitioner working in a role similar to the proposed interviewees to establish content validity (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). This pilot interview confirmed that the questions were relevant and comprehensible and that the interview length was appropriate. All interviews were conducted within a one-month period, using Skype. A week prior to their interview, interviewees were sent a copy of the interview guide showing the nine interview questions. Each interview took between 40 and 50 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

3.4 Ethics

The subject matter of this study is not contentious and unlikely to be subject to any corporate or professional ethics committee jurisdiction (Bell, 2010), or to be business critical and, thus, pose any risks to participation. All responses were regarded as confidential and no attribution was made of any comment to a named individual. Participation in the interviews was voluntary. All interviewees were read a pre-prepared interviewee advisory statement outlining the purpose of the research and offering a copy of the transcript. Any question could be skipped if interviewees preferred (Bell, 2010), and participants were offered the opportunity to withdraw their contribution up to a given date prior to submission of the final report (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). No participants exercised this option.

3.5 Analysis

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted to identify themes and perspectives (Creswell, 2009). Given the researchers' familiarity with the topic, manual analysis of the transcripts, using standard office productivity software, was used to support an intuitive approach to the process (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). The Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis checklist was utilised throughout the analysis phase to maintain consistency of approach. Transcripts were edited to remove extraneous comment and then themes were colour-coded. Finally, colour-coded responses were collated into individual Microsoft Word documents for analysis and comparison. Care was taken to avoid selecting data which matched the researchers' pre-conceptions and avoid bias (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

4. Findings

4.1 Definitions and essence

4.1.1 *Content.* Commencing with definitions of content, participant 7 (P7) offered a definition, which summarised the stance taken by most participants:

Any kind of information in many different types of digital formats, such as video, written texts graphics, slides [...] any kind of digitally presented information delivered essentially over the Web, over the internet or in any kind of social network.

This is further amplified by P12's comment that content is "anything that you create or share that tells your story".

To provoke further reflection on the nature of content, the interviewer proposed a typology of content types (social media content, web page content and value-add content) and invited views on this typology. Of the 11 participants who expressed an opinion on this typology, seven (P1, P2, P3, P5, P9, P10 and P14) agreed that it was a useful and accurate reflection of the types of content that B2B marketers produce and would be a useful model. Other useful comments included:

I think that (the typology) captures it pretty succinctly but they're not all mutually exclusive (P9).

[...] maybe "format" and then "purpose" of content might be two ways to think about it too (P8).

4.1.2 *Content marketing.* Participants offered a wider range of comments on the definition and nature of "content marketing". While there was a reasonable level of consensus over the scope and nature of content marketing, a number of different perspectives were evident. The most concise definition was offered by P2:

Valuable, compelling and relevant content on a consistent basis to attract and retain customers through information that they actually want to receive.

However, many participants suggested that since content marketing was a relatively new term the topic was marked by "relative immaturity" (P5) and a lack of consistent definitions. Some participants explicitly stated that the definition of content marketing was not well understood by marketers:

[...] for me [...] (it) is perhaps the most poorly defined sub-segment of marketing (P15).

I think there's a fair amount of confusion around it (P8).

[...] we're still at a very early phase of this content marketing and people barely understand it (P3).

Moving onto related issues regarding the nature of content marketing, several participants commented on the growing importance of inbound marketing. They acknowledged that customers are no longer willing to be subjected to "being interrupted by brands" (P2), and that this was leading to a significant increase in the adoption of inbound marketing techniques (P2, P4, P7, P8). Inbound marketing where "customers actually want to receive our marketing" (P2), was cited as a key driver of content marketing adoption (P2, P6, P8). Indeed, inbound and content marketing were seen by some as inextricably linked, if not interchangeable (P6, P8).

Many participants referred to the notion of brands behaving like publishers and telling stories about their brands to engage customers in dialogue. Digital marketing techniques are perceived as enabling marketers to converse with customers; as P11 observed "you no longer need to have a television station or a radio station to become a publisher". However, it was noted that a key success factor for a "brand as a publisher" (P2, P8, P11) was to be able to "tell a good story" (P2, P3, P5, P11, P12, P13). P11 suggested that the definition of a "brand as publisher" was:

Being a story teller and engaging an audience, customers and prospective customers in the story in a meaningful way that's about the brand, not about the company.

However, P2, P8 and P10 shared the view that with technology easily available and low barriers to entry, publishing digital content could be construed as being too easy, leading to a lack of clear objectives in digital content marketing; P2 commented: "the majority of the companies we talk to cannot clearly articulate why they are creating content".

4.2 Strategic aspects

4.2.1 Objectives. The study sought to understand how participants configured their content marketing objectives within the context of a content marketing plan or strategy. Consultants/advisers were keen for client brands to develop a separate or stand-alone content marketing plan (P2, P6, P12 and P13). On the other hand, only P5, among the clients, had a separate content marketing plan, with all other client participants who responded explicitly to this question saying that it formed part of their overall marketing plan (P6, P7, P9, P10, P14).

Many participants cited several objectives for their content marketing. Lead generation was the most commonly mentioned objective (P2, P3, P5, P6, P10, P12, P15) with P5 commenting:

(we have a) pretty heavy sales orientated set of objectives.

Aligned to this, P1 and P6 also identified a key objective as generating traffic to their websites.

Brand awareness or brand-building (P1, P2, P7, P9, P10, P11) was also an important objective, suggesting that a lot of practitioners were viewing content marketing as a substitute for advertising as a means of distributing their brand messages. As P7 stated:

[...] our content marketing objectives are quite specifically intended to reach the audience of people that don't know exactly what we do.

However, there was also evidence that participants were keen to use content marketing as a means of building a thought leadership position for their brands and enhancing the brand's status as a trusted brand (P2, P6, P10, P12, P14). Some participants (P8, P9, P14) felt that it was important for their brands to take a strong position on key market issues and be prepared to discuss them, even if their position was contentious. As P8 summarised:

[...] you need [...] to take a stance and have an opinion about things, even if not everyone agrees with you.

Participants agreed that “trust” was an important attribute of their customer relationships, and noted that trust is earned over time and requires consistent behaviour (P2, P6, P8, P11). As P2 suggested:

Content is a promise to your customers and if you don't keep that promise in some kind of a regular format, they'll forget about you.

Participants identified several key characteristics of the content marketing approach that they believed contributes to brands status as a trusted source. They emphasised strongly that content marketing should not try to explicitly sell or use selling language (P2, P6, P8, P9, P10, P11). Overt selling language is easily discernible by customers and prospects and diminishes the perceived value of the content. P6 also noted:

If you can take that position where you're giving them some great content and not asking for the sale, not only will you build credibility and trust, but you're going to be the one who gets the business down the road.

However, adopting this stance can be a challenge for B2B content marketers whose executive management still perceive content marketing in the same way as other marketing methods. As P9 observed:

I'm still battling (to) get them to accept that there doesn't have to be a sales message at the end of everything.

Participants also expressed their views on the type of content that is most useful in building trust. There was a general agreement that long-form content in either text or video formats was most useful. The most cited content format for engendering trust was market research and reports (P2, P5, P6, P9, P11) whereby the brand commissions its own original research into a key market issue. P11 summarised several participants' views:

(research) has by far been one of the most successful types of content [...] in building trust to (sic) our brand.

However, P11 also noted that even original research as a content marketing tool was potentially being undermined by its own popularity, “it seems that everyone does it now, so how trusted can it be?” Other long-form text content such as case studies (P1, P3, P14), whitepapers (P3, P9, P12) and E-books (P4, P9, P12) is also considered important in allowing a brand to expound its view on issues important to customers and prospects. Other formats such as webinars, blogs and video were also suggested as key trust-building tools.

4.2.2 Justifying investment. Several participants argued the case for content marketing on the basis that a large proportion of B2B purchase decisions are being made

before the customer makes direct contact with the vendor. However, many had experienced difficulties in persuading executive management to commit to investment in content marketing, and felt that executive management struggled to understand the concept of content marketing and hence there was a need for internal education (P3, P5, P11, P14). In particular, B2B content marketers face challenges in persuading executive managers to view content marketing differently and not to apply established campaign-based criteria. As P13 said:

It's not campaign led. Content marketing is a culture not a campaign.

P2 took the view that the time that content marketing activities take to deliver measurable results can be longer than other marketing activities ("expect nothing to happen for the first six months") and that this mitigated against executive management's understanding of the value of content marketing to the customer and the brand. Other participants argued the case with their managers by suggesting "advertising's not working any more" (P5). P5 and P11 considered appealing to the ego of executive management by positioning content marketing not only as a brand builder, but also as reputation builder for them individually by, as P5 suggested, making them into "internal rock stars". However, it was widely acknowledged that the most effective way of justifying content marketing is by testing, measurement and showing results, with pilot studies being particularly useful (P1, P2, P3, P6, P7, P9, P10, P12, P13).

4.2.3 Distribution channels. There was no strong consensus on the criteria for choosing content marketing distribution channels. Five participants identified that media choices were made on the basis of where targeted recipients were "likely to congregate" (P13), which may not necessarily be where brands hope or expect them to be because:

[...] customers are now in charge and they'll tell you what and how they want to consume it (P11).

Others suggested that the media which drove most engagement (P1, P12) or those that were most affordable (P10) were most likely to be selected. Two suggested that the plethora of channel choices was both a benefit and an obstacle (P3, P12). Finally, P7, P8, P9 and P12 emphasised the importance of on-going testing of content distribution channel efficiency.

4.2.4 Measuring effectiveness. P2 reflected the views of others, in noting the importance of setting quantifiable goals for content marketing:

[...] if you don't put a number to it of some kind, you never know when you hit the objective.

P11 and P13 elaborated further, pointing out that it was important to understand the customer journey that content marketing was seeking to influence before metrics could be selected and applied. Nevertheless, many of the participants were utilising the same metrics that they use for other marketing activities. Four participants (P3, P7, P9, P11) referred to the groups of metrics recently identified by the Content Marketing Institute: consumption, lead generation, sharing and sales. However, P11 cautioned against setting too many objectives noting:

I'd rather have two KPIs that I can do something about than thirty KPIs that mean nothing to me.

Web analytics were also identified as key to the measurement of content marketing efficacy (P3, P12, P14). Other primary metrics used by participants included bottom-line profit or sales (P1, P11), cost per new customer (P8) or the number of backlinks generated by the content (P9).

4.2.5 Obstacles to success. All participants had faced challenges when implementing content marketing. The most significant challenge for seven participants (P2, P3, P7, P8, P9, P10, P12) was related to the cultural shift associated with content marketing. P2, P3, P7 and P9 faced the problem that their brand's executive management:

[...] want to see highly promotional pieces of content coming out of marketing (P7).

As P3 commented too many B2B marketers are:

[...] in the traditional marketing mind-set where they think this content needs to be selling.

P4 and P6 elaborate further:

[...] they end up just talking about their products and services because that's what marketers have done for ages (P4).

[...] they (B2B brands' executive management) are in love with what they do, they're in love with their products and they want to tell the world about it (P6).

P8 and P12 suggested that brands struggle to understand that content marketing is a significant cultural commitment and not simply a new tactic or single campaign. P10 added that:

[...] this way of working calls on skills that marketers and communicators inside companies don't normally have.

Time lag to delivery of measurable results was cited by P2, P3 and P10 as an obstacle to engaging their executive management, a situation often exacerbated by the long purchase cycles that are common in B2B markets.

Time and budget resources were, not unexpectedly, posed as real obstacles to content marketing implementation (P1, P6, P7, P10, P14), as was access to, or engagement of, subject experts (P1, P5, P6, P11, P14) who were potential content authors, but were not always available, due to time pressures. The rising popularity of content marketing has also created significant clutter within the markets of several participants. Both P1 and P11 complained that low barriers to entry for the creation and publishing of digital content makes it difficult for their high-quality content to "get through all of the bad content" (P11). Other assorted obstacles included: unwillingness to engage in a proper planning process (P2), legal compliance processes (P3) and the perception that high-quality content was perceived as "giving away the source of our thought leadership or expertise for free" by the brand's executive management (P7).

4.3 Content selection and development

4.3.1 Selecting content types. The most consistently suggested content selection criteria was that of "shareability"; that is, brands seek to create content with the expressed intention of it being readily and freely shareable (P1, P5, P6, P7, P8, P12, P14). In addition, there was agreement that content should be created according to the needs of the customer or intended recipient and that those needs must be defined by research and testing (P9, P10, P11, P12). As P11 explained:

[...] you have to know who the right people are before you create any piece of content [...], [...]. I think one of the reasons why that happens (ineffective content) is because the content marketer or the marketer just doesn't understand who he's trying to reach and what their pain points and what they're interested in.

P12 elaborated further suggesting that content selection criteria should be defined as:

[...] meeting the needs of your customer first, and not about does it further our agenda.

P1 and P6 identified that content must be useful and relevant to the customers or prospects (see also later on "Great" content), which P11 and P12 further characterised as solving a problem or addressing a customers' pain points. Creating content that addresses a "hot" or trendy issue in the market place was considered important (P6, P11). P11 mentioned looking at competitors' content creation as a guide to the types of content that their brand should create.

A key facet of B2B marketing is the targeting of messaging to prospects and customers dependent on where they are in their buying cycle. Most participants agreed that content should match a buyer's position in their customer journey (P1, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P11, P12, P13, P14); P12 summarised this:

I think it's a matter of knowing what will resonate with them at various stages of the buying cycle.

However, many felt that undertaking this journey-based targeting of content was "difficult" (P1, P5, P6, P10), with P10 commenting, "we're not quite sure about where they're falling in the purchase cycle". Others noted that such targeting requires continual testing to ensure accuracy (P7, P8, P9, P11). P5 and P10 also observed that B2B buying cycles are often long and this makes journey-based targeting more difficult.

4.3.2 "Great" content. When asked what they perceived to be "great" or effective content, participants talked in terms of the content being of value to customers. They saw effective content as being that which engages and is interesting to the audience (P1, P2, P6). In particular, great content adds value by making helping the audience to do something better, or by solving a specific problem or pain they have in their professional life (P1, P2, P3, P6, P9, P12, P15):

(the) best way to do that is to provide something of value, content that's going to help them to do something better, improve something in their lives (P6).

[...] my audiences have always responded best to content that creatively and succinctly smoothes an unspoken pain (P15).

In summary, P2 suggested that B2B marketers should simply make the content "valuable, relevant and compelling".

These customer-centric attitudes were balanced by the recognition of the need to deliver some kind of positive business outcome (P2, P5, P11). Participants argued that making content useful and valuable and not persistently selling the brand's products would ensure that content would be more shareable (P2, P5, P7, P9, P11) and that this would be the "social proof that your content is great" (P2).

Some participants (P1, P8, P12, P13) suggested that a potential measure of the quality of content could be whether the audience would be prepared to pay for it. P12 said:

[...] will your customer thank you for it [...]. will they pay you for it, will they thank you for it?.

At the very least, several participants emphasised the audience's role in evaluating content "greatness". P11 suggested that it is, "the people consuming the content (that) make it great". P4 commented in the language of the content, "the content has to use the language that those people use", while P15 observed that truly effective content marketing is grounded in a brand "viewing itself through the customer's eyes". P12 suggested that brands should aspire to become a content brand, and not just a brand that creates content.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1 Summary and discussion of empirical findings

In the face of evidence that B2B purchasers are becoming increasingly reliant on the Internet to gather information during the early stages of the buying process (Adamson *et al.*, 2012; CorporateVisions, 2012), content is playing an increasingly important role in B2B buying processes and it is important that organisations develop their content marketing strategies accordingly.

This research is the first to explore digital marketing practitioners' views on the nature of, and processes and challenges associated with, B2B digital content marketing.

First, based on our thematic analysis of participants' comments on the nature of content marketing, we offer the first empirically grounded conceptual definition of digital content marketing:

B2B digital content marketing involves creating, distributing and sharing relevant, compelling and timely content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying consideration processes, such that it encourages them to convert to a business building outcome.

This definition offers a more open definition than the much-quoted practitioner definition offered by Pulizzi and Barrett (2008), in that it goes beyond creating and distribution of content to include content sharing, is more specific about the key characteristics of content, makes reference to the buying process and is open as to the potential business outcome. An important point is that being in a position to engage customers at the relevant point in their buying consideration relies on organisations having a clear view of their buying cycle, which, in turn, depends on continuing engagement with the customer. On the other hand, interestingly, and arguably short-sightedly, practitioners, in their rhetoric about acting as publishers, neglect to consider user-generated content, and the value that this might have in community and brand-building.

Second, the study provides some empirical evidence in support of the views promulgated by previous commentators:

- Participants concurred that a key rationale for adopting content marketing was that purchasers were increasingly passing through a significant part of the buying process before making contact with suppliers (Halligan and Shah, 2010; Odden, 2012).
- Participants recognised the primacy of focusing content on the needs of the audience (Halvorson and Rach, 2012), and the importance of avoiding recycling of selling messaging in the guise of content (Stelzner, 2011).
- Participants talked in terms of adopting a publisher's mindset, with its focus on understanding audience needs, and story telling (Baer, 2012; Davis, 2012; Handley and Chapman, 2011; Wuebben, 2012).

- Although many content marketers did not have a separate content marketing strategy, as recommended by Bloomstein (2012), they were able to identify objectives for their content marketing. Typically, they identified several objectives, key among which were lead generation, brand awareness and brand-building, offering thought leadership and achieving trust brand status. This list aligns with a recent survey reported in *B to B Magazine* (2012) that also identified the primacy of lead generation. On the other hand, it suggests that achieving a trusted brand status is less central than other commentators recommend (Pulizzi, 2012a; Fill, 2009; Scott, 2011). There is also some alignment of objectives with research conducted on social media (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011), arising from common concerns with the creation and, ultimately, sharing of digital content. There is also evidence to support commentators' views that many B2B brands are still viewing content marketing as another opportunity to communicate product-driven selling messages (Pulizzi and Barrett, 2008; Stelzner, 2011).

In addition, this study offers further insights into the challenges associated with developing an effective digital content marketing strategy. These include:

- The need for content marketing KPIs and metrics and the development of appropriate dashboards.
- The challenges associated with recruiting and developing subject experts who were also capable of “journalistic” story-telling, to be able to generate good quality content. This aligns with the debate in the information sciences literature on the authority or reputation of the source or the author (Tillotson, 2002; Fink-Shamit and Bar-Ilan, 2008).
- The importance of creating “great” content, defined as content that helps customers to do something better or to solve a problem. Great content is seen as content that is interesting and of value to customers. These notions align to some extent with the notions of web-based information quality, that suggest, for instance, that information quality has the five facets of usefulness, goodness, accuracy, currency and importance (Rieh, 2002).
- Challenging the selling mindset of traditional marketing, and leading the culture change in B2B organisations, such that the long-term nature of content marketing in supporting reputation and partnership building is recognised by executive management.

In the absence of prior research, other than some useful practitioner surveys that profile the approaches that B2B businesses are taking to digital content marketing, there is plenty of scope for further research into digital content marketing. In particular, practitioners might be interested in case study research that provides exemplars and benchmark studies in different sectors. From a theory development perspective, further exploration of the character of content that is valued by business customers, would benefit from a stronger grounding in previous research on information quality, and its dimensions, coupled with exploration of how judgements of information quality are made in B2B buying and relationship building processes. Such research is likely to explore the roles and behaviour of different stakeholders at different stages in the buying/relationship cycle. In addition, survey based studies, using quantitative approaches, would provide useful insights into the range of digital content marketing practices adopted in different sectors, the value that digital

content marketing can deliver and the challenges to be negotiated, and in allowing the developments of measures for key variables, would offer a basis for theory testing.

In their journey to explore and improve their B2B digital content marketing practices, practitioners should:

- acknowledge digital content marketing as constituting a paradigm change, from selling to the customer, to helping the customer, and develop an understanding of how this might be achieved through content in the digital channel;
- adopt a strategic approach content marketing that views it as an ongoing cultural stance where the focus is on building an authentic relationship over the longer term, rather than conducting a series of short-term campaigns;
- align their content marketing objectives with prioritising building a trusted brand status, over, for example, short term sales or lead generation objectives;
- develop an understanding of how, for their business, digital content marketing complements other marketing activities;
- in selections recognise that good is relevant, compelling and timely, which in turn makes it valuable and useful for the customer;
- recognise that providing valuable content requires an understanding of customer information needs at different points in time, and at different points in their buying/relationship process;
- develop an understanding of the role and effectiveness of different types of content (e.g. social media content, web content and value-add content), for different audiences; and
- develop metrics and measurement tools that align with digital content marketing objectives, and include metrics relevant to relationship building, and customer development, taking into account factors such as customer lifetime value.

5.2 Towards a holistic theory of digital content marketing

This section positions B2B digital content marketing within a wider framework that also encompasses other types of digital marketing. First, while acknowledging the explanatory value of more specific definitions for the various types of digital content marketing, including that for B2B digital content marketing proposed earlier in this section, we argue that a generic definition that covers all types of digital content marketing is useful. For this purpose, we adapt the [American Marketing Association \(2013\)](#) definition of marketing, thus:

Digital content marketing is the activity associated with creating, communicating, distributing, and exchanging digital content that has value for customers, clients, partners, and the firm and its brands.

This definition is intended to encompass all of the different incarnations of digital content marketing. [Table III](#) summarises these incarnations simply in terms of three key types of digital content marketing. Important points to note are:

- (1) In this research, we have focussed on “Not-paid for” DCM in the B2B context. Organisations also use this in B2C contexts where they are seeking to draw consumers to their website and brand community. Indeed, in this context, the freemium model, which is a hybrid of “not paid for” DCM and “paid for” DCM is widely adopted.

Table III.
The types of digital
content marketing

Characteristics of DCM	Originator of content	Originators' key aim	Users of content	Users' key aim
<i>Types of DCM</i> "Not-paid for" DCM	Organisation	Customer engagement and building relationships, knowledge and brand community Business product or service purchases, or contracts	Business client organizations; consumers	Business purchase decision-making Business intelligence Consumer decision-making and purchase
"Paid for" DCM	Organisation	All of the above, but in addition, sales of the DCM	Consumers	Positive experience regarding the digital product and its delivery Market intelligence; persuasion; relationship and community building
Social DCM	Brand community members	To express views; to learn from the organisation and other users	Organisation	

- (2) In “paid for” DCM, the focus for the organisation is on achieving sales of the digital product (e.g. music, e-books, apps), and for consumers, the focus is on the experience of the digital product and its delivery.
- (3) Social DCM is differentiated by its focus on user-generated content, but the organisation also has a role in managing the communication in its social media spaces, and in general, to provide community leadership to ensure that value is created through content and interaction for all stakeholders. Again, many social DCM initiatives do not stand alone, but are rather part of wider DCM activity, involving either or both of “paid for” or “not paid for” content.

There are two key concepts that lie at the heart of all types of digital content marketing – community and value. There is no doubt that both are difficult to achieve, but there are strong theoretical foundations that can be used to inform the further development of a holistic approach to digital content marketing. On community, there is established literature on brand communities (Fournier and Lee, 2009; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) and on online communities (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996). Recent years have witnessed the advent of online brand communities, as one of the features of branding in the digital age (Kim *et al.*, 2008) and the notion of brand co-creation in online social spaces (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). Digital content, whether it be “not paid for”, “paid for” or social, is at the heart of brand-building processes. Turning to value, the research reported in this article suggests the importance of the content being valuable and useful to the audience, and helping them to complete a task or solve a problem. Similarly, with “paid for” content, the consumer is likely to be seeking some functional or hedonistic gratification in exchange for their payment. Such stances are confirmed by the theoretical literature on information quality and credibility (Hilligoss and Rieh, 2008; Rieh, 2002). Using the theoretical frameworks in these areas has potential to advance understanding of value in digital content marketing. However, in this endeavour, it will be important to acknowledge that the value of digital content is contextual and such that its value in use by different users on specific occasions is difficult to predict in advance (Rowley, 2008).

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