

**Building Bridges for Bridge & Burn:  
How small lifestyle brands use content to  
extend their reach online**

**by**

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Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Publishing

in the  
Publishing Program  
Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY  
Spring 2016

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## **Abstract**

Many have heralded the death of quality content and mourn the demise of paid roles for traditional writers and publishers in the digital age. But in fact, a new model for marketing is opening up new avenues for quality content. Brand publishing, also known as content marketing, will drive the future of content. This paper examines this development and best practices for brand publishers within the current marketing landscape. Chapter one looks back through the past ten years to consider the factors that have caused this shift. Chapter two looks at brand publishing in action, outlining the characteristics of successful branded content and addressing some of the risks and pitfalls to which marketers can fall prey when they publish original content. Chapter three quantifies the impact of *brand newsrooms* on the bottom line and establishes which metrics are worth measuring. Finally, chapter four sees this new model of marketing applied to a growing apparel brand based in Portland, Oregon, and reveals the impact that a documented content strategy had when executed in the summer of 2014.

**Keywords:** content marketing; brand publishing; content strategy; digital marketing; blogging; storytelling; brand journalism

## **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks are due to my parents, my MPub comrades and the good people of Bridge & Burn.

I could not have completed this program or project without the support, encouragement, and meals provided by Hillary Choularton, Julie Frizzo-Barker, Rachel Pick, Nina Pak and Robin Cairns.

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# Introduction

“Content marketing is the only marketing left.” – Seth Godin 2005<sup>1</sup>

Just a few years ago, as the best lifestyle magazines fell left and right in the wake of recession, many heralded the death of quality lifestyle publishing.<sup>2</sup> As much-loved magazines like *Domino*, *Blueprint*, *Gourmet* and *ID* closed their doors, readers and writers alike wondered if the economy and the Internet had teamed up to kill content. But in the five years following there was, in fact, an unexpected surge in content production—but it wasn’t coming from the likes of Hearst or Condé Nast—the giants of lifestyle publishing. Rather it is digital marketing that is facilitating a rebirth of quality content, and it’s being driven by lifestyle brands. Going forward much of the best content and journalism will come from brand marketers, not the traditional press. Brands stepped in to fill the gap, using it as a means to attract new customers, deepen affinity, showcase product, and build a network of engaged ambassadors.

There is now an opportunity for small brands, with small marketing budgets to affordably engage a larger, international market through story-driven branded content. It’s also an opportunity for entrepreneurial writers, editors, and publishers to become a different kind of content producer—writing about their passions, often within a specific niche. Seeing this opportunity, I identified a Portland-based apparel company with an excellent product and a small but devoted following. Founded in 2009, Bridge & Burn, is run by a small team without a dedicated marketing role. From May to August in 2014, I filled this gap, developing and implementing a content marketing strategy that included social media, original articles, blogger collaborations and affiliations, and reshaping the

<sup>1</sup> Godin, Seth. *All Marketers Are Liars: The Power of Telling Authentic Stories in a Low-Trust World*. New York, NY: Portfolio, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Laban, Janel. “Breaking News: Domino Magazine Is Closing — Condé Nast Folds Domino.” *Apartment Therapy*, January 28, 2009. <http://www.apartmenttherapy.com/breaking-news-domino-magazine-75149>.



Bridge & Burn story. Though this was content marketing on a small scale, the results were significant both from a brand and a retail perspective. It supported a growth trajectory that Bridge & Burn continues to follow.

## Chapter 1. The Brand Ecosystem

Within traditional publishing there have historically been strict lines between advertising and editorial. In the 1940s, the introduction of advertorial content was an attempt to blur those lines,<sup>3</sup> to the consternation of both readers—who opposed the sense of being duped by advertisers—and professional associations, which took the liberty of creating clear guidelines designed to help publishers preserve unbiased journalism.

Brand publishing flips this model on its head. Brands have become the publishers. They are commissioning and publishing the same genres of content one might purchase off a newsstand—fashion, decor, cooking, crafting, DIY. These publications boldly bear company names, and as we will see in the coming pages they are drawing significant readership that converts to sales. Smart marketers are using content to introduce new consumers to their brands and to deepen the affinity that existing customers already feel. Often this is not content that specifically extols the virtues of a particular product or service, but that promotes a desired way of life associated with the product or that educates consumers through insider expertise or insight.

Though this may seem like a completely new way to think about publishing, in fact marketers have always been the ones funding content—through their ad spends. The shift we are currently seeing, however, is where once brands were *renting* space to reach their audience—sometimes paying six figures for a one-time shot at speaking to another publication’s readers—now brands *own* the publishing space.<sup>4</sup> This chapter examines the conditions that facilitated this shift. It also explains the difference between brand publishing and blogging, and why traditional publishing practices are so effective when applied to brands.

<sup>3</sup> “Advertorial.” Wikipedia, accessed November 11, 2015

<sup>4</sup> Lazauskas, Joe. “4 Audience Growth Trends for 2015.” *The Content Strategist*, November 10, 2104. <https://contently.com/strategist/2014/11/10/5-audience-growth-trends-for-2015> (accessed November 11, 2015)

## 1.1. Outbound to inbound – the changing landscape of marketing

Our examination of the move away from traditional publishing models begins, instead with a look at traditional *marketing*. Historically, bringing a product or service to market meant shouting its virtues from street corners, doorsteps, down cold telephone wires, or from magazine pages, televisions screens, or radio speakers. What we once thought of as simply “marketing” is now categorized as “outbound marketing.”<sup>5</sup> Marketers were forever seeking out potential customers and chasing them down with a one-way product-centric message. It’s an approach that was, and still is, costly, hard to measure, and often thankless.

Today customers come directly to brands, seeking them out, whether deliberately or circuitously. Often, once those customers have found a brand and like it, they start to do the traditional evangelism work on the brand’s behalf—extolling and sharing the virtues of a product with their own extended personal network. Those personal networks are now much larger thanks to digital media.

The Internet enabled this shift, yet it took some time for marketers to see this potential. In fact, when digital channels emerged, many marketers just treated it as an extension of the old street corners. They introduced banner ads—the billboards of the web—and continued to rent space in order to reach an audience, rather than using “the many dimensions of our media culture to tell more complex stories faster and more effectively than they ever could have using televisions commercials.”<sup>6</sup>

Marketers tried to replicate the existing model of advertising on the web, but in a world where people *can* skip ads, they *will* skip them. The same way we mentally block out billboards, bin direct mailers, and physically mute commercials, we also block out web banners—whether subconsciously or overtly with adblock extensions built right into

<sup>5</sup> “Interruption Marketing.” Wikipedia, accessed January 3, 2016  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interruption\\_marketing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interruption_marketing)

<sup>6</sup> Godin, *All Marketers Are Liars: The Power of Telling Authentic Stories in a Low-Trust World*. 2005 p.79

our browsers. Increasingly we suffer from “banner blindness.”<sup>7</sup> Recent research suggests consumers reject banner ads at rates greater than 99%.<sup>8</sup> On average, in 2013, display ads had a click-through rate of around 0.11%—and that number has continued to drop.<sup>9</sup>

In such a crowded landscape where consumers are immune to self-promotional messages, marketers needed a completely new model. More than 10 years ago, marketing guru Seth Godin coined the phrase “permission marketing.”<sup>10</sup> Rather than pulling consumers’ attention from what they are currently doing, permission marketing means promoting your product only when the customer gives advance consent—either through a newsletter subscription, a Facebook “like” or a Twitter “follow.” Consumers now have control over the marketing they receive, and the best time to gain permission is when a consumer has deliberately sought you out for content or information they need or want.<sup>11</sup> In this new model, marketers don’t chase down consumers; consumers search for marketers.

In his 2013 report called *Managing Content Marketing Transformation*, Trip Kucera—now Senior Director of North American Marketing at Oracle—refers to the new model as “nurture-based demand generation.” This is the foundation upon which emerged “content marketing” or “brand publishing” (terms that can be used interchangeably).<sup>12</sup>

“Content” may include any number of things: e-newsletters, whitepapers, photography, case studies, infographics, videos, books, magazines, and some would even include webinars or workshops. What they all have in common is they are delivered through content channels wholly owned and managed by the brand. It’s a marked shift away from the old rented-space model. How did the shift happen? Three factors played

<sup>7</sup> Sullivan, Laurie. “Banner Blindness: 60% Can’t Remember the Last Display Ad They Saw.” *Online Media Daily*, March 18, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Biale, “56 Reasons Why Content Marketing Works - 2014 Edition.” 2014

<sup>9</sup> Chaffey, “Display Advertising Clickthrough Rates.” 2013

<sup>10</sup> “Permission Marketing.” Wikipedia, accessed November 11, 2015

<sup>11</sup> Rose, Jonny. “Content Marketing: Why Brands Are Becoming Publishers.” *The Guardian*, May 31, 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/media-network/2013/may/31/content-marketing-brands-publishers>

<sup>12</sup> Kucera, “*Crossing the Chaos: Managing Content Marketing Transformation.*” (2013)

roles in this change: new digital publishing tools, search engine optimization (SEO), and social media.

### **1.1.1. Simple Digital Publishing Tools**

Traditional publishing and advertising media are complex and costly. The intricacies of production and distribution mean that, until very recently, only specialized publishers could broadly disseminate content. Brands were at their mercy, paying high fees for a magazine page, newspaper inches, or a 30-second TV spot.

The World Wide Web didn't immediately simplify things—until the advent of Content Management Systems (CMS), adding content to a web page required coding expertise. Integrating complex technology, IT teams and web development processes with marketing made for a slow digital publishing process and the result was mostly static promotional websites. The arrival of simple user-friendly content management tools—initially custom solutions, and later open source or highly affordable hosted solutions like Wordpress, Squarespace, and Shopify—meant marketers could move up the distribution chain<sup>13</sup> and, according to Ann Handley and CC Chapman, authors of the seminal book *Content Rules*, now, “Everyone is the media. Everyone is a publisher.”<sup>14</sup>

### **1.1.2. Search Engine Optimization**

Search engines opened up the web and made permission-marketing possible. For example, if you make the best raw Japanese denim jeans, you no longer needed to shout it from a billboard, television, or newspaper page. Instead, passionate “denimheads” who search for “20 oz. selvedge denim” or other highly specific keywords can find brands selling those particular wares. Marketers are far more likely to engage someone who comes deliberately hunting for a product than someone who sees or hears a mention of

<sup>13</sup> Murdock, Toby. “Why Marketing Will Fund the Future of Content.” *Content Marketing Institute*, September 16, 2011. <http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2011/09/future-of-content>

<sup>14</sup> Handley, Ann, and CC Chapman. *Content Rules*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011. page 31

that product out of context. “The process of discovery is more powerful than being told the right answer,” says Godin.<sup>15</sup> Conversion is often a natural next step.

But as web content grew, search had to get smarter in order to deliver relevant results. Search algorithms evolved and it wasn’t enough to simply have the right keywords embedded on the page. Google began to rank websites on article relevance and publishing frequency. In response, brands—both business to business (B2B) and business to consumer (B2C)—launched blogs. Initially these housed company news or touted product features. But in the race to stay on top of Google’s results pages, companies needed more frequent content and content that related to specific user queries. To earn repeated consumer clicks, they began hiring dedicated writers to produce this content, and to stay relevant they began emulating popular magazines—actively producing service and lifestyle content with a looser link to product but a direct correlation to information users are searching for on the web. In the new search landscape, it becomes less important to say you have raw Japanese denim and more important to have educational resources available on how to care for it, tips on how to style it, or a profile of the Osaka-based factory that has been producing it for 50 years. Marketers need to continually optimize for search engines by creating fresh and highly specific content.

### **1.1.3. Social Media**

Brands saw the potential that social media offered to connect with their consumers every single day, on platforms that already had high levels of engagement. Twitter and Facebook in particular took the place of billboards as brands began to splatter their product-centric messages across these new media. But these self-promotional messages only go so far with consumers. In the words of Content Marketing Institute founder Jar Baer, “Content is fire and social media is gasoline.” Neither does much without the other. He explains, “Use the social side to introduce people to your

<sup>15</sup> Godin, *All Marketers Are Liars: The Power of Telling Authentic Stories in a Low-Trust World*. (2005) page 89

content and help them engage with it. Let's not use social media just to tell people how great we are."<sup>16</sup>

There are only so many ways to extol the virtues of a product or service before consumers will get bored and un-follow. Brands discovered that in order to retain their social audiences they needed fresh content to fill their broadcasting channels. Smart marketers used this as a way to draw consumers back to their owned properties. Oreo Cookies are a prime example. The brand has been praised for its witty and fast-acting social media team. This team uses various channels to push original content—short films, channel-specific campaign imagery and original recipes housed at the Nabisco Snackworks website.<sup>17</sup> The brand has 775,000 followers on their Twitter account, 14,600 Pinterest followers, 1.1 million Instagram followers and more than 41 million Facebook fans—all of whom receive daily reminders of their favourite cookie or just moments of delight that lodge the Oreo brand in their minds.<sup>18</sup>

Combined, simple digital publishing tools, search, and social media form the foundation for a thriving brand publishing landscape, but they also remove any option brands have but to publish content. According to Handley, the reality is that “each company with a website already *IS* a publisher... Even if all a company does is publish a blog or a Facebook page or a Twitter stream, that's all publishing.”<sup>19</sup>

## **1.2. From company bloggers to brand publishers**

Social media and SEO are great for driving customer acquisition, but not for building meaningful engagement or long term retention. This is where content steps in. But if every brand has the ability to put content online, what sets corporate bloggers

<sup>16</sup> Muldoon, Pamela. “4 Metrics Every Content Marketer Needs to Measure.” *Content Marketing Institute*, June 11, 2012. <http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2012/06/metrics-content-marketing-jay-baer>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.snackworks.com>

<sup>18</sup> Stats pulled from Oreo social channels as of November 11, 2015

<sup>19</sup> Roque, Celine. “Scaling: How to Grow Up From a Brand Blog to a Brand Publisher.” *The Content Strategist*, May 20, 2014. <http://contently.com/strategist/2014/05/20/scaling-how-to-grow-up-from-a-brand-blog-to-a-brand-publisher>

apart from serious brand publishers? It's not enough to simply post company news or product features. Brand publishing involves story, strategy, and measurement.

Less than a century ago, the introduction of a new product was remarkable in itself, and marketers only had to let consumers know a product existed and was available in order to drive sales. Now, awareness alone won't suffice. Ever since the industrial age when production was mechanized and pushed to a massive scale, story has become central to marketing. "Making isn't hard anymore," explains Godin. "The places where you actually tell your stories and authentically live up to what you say you're going to do—that's where the leverage is now."<sup>20</sup>

Now selling depends on creating an emotion or a desirable future state. "Stories only work because consumers buy what they don't need... they buy stuff they want because of the way it makes them feel," says Godin.<sup>21</sup> With its "hard-wired ability to create hooks and stories, using people and passion to narrate complex propositions," traditional publishing has much to teach brands about creating those necessary feelings.<sup>22</sup> Like any story, a brand story needs a beginning, a middle, and an end; characters, plot, and good guys who triumph over obstacles. "And in the end, the brands that tell consistent, compelling stories about themselves and their products are the ones who build real brand affinity and equity with their customers," says Sam Slaughter, VP of Contently—the online bible for content marketers.<sup>23</sup>

True brand publishers take this to heart. It should come as no surprise that many traditional journalists—those storytellers by trade—are making the transition to brand journalism. After all, content marketing requires the same skills: research, interviewing, and excellent written communication, but all within a very targeted niche. These seasoned writers are helping brands respond to the somewhat unexpected rise in demand for well-written and well-researched branded content. Though for years the literati expressed concern that the Internet, and mobile, would kill long-form writing, it

<sup>20</sup> Godin, *All Marketers Are Liars: The Power of Telling Authentic Stories in a Low-Trust World*. 2005. page 29

<sup>21</sup> *ibid* p.82

<sup>22</sup> O'Neill, Susi. "Content Marketing: Make Your Content Count." *Marketing (00253650)*, March 2014, 1–1.

<sup>23</sup> Slaughter, Sam. "Discarding the Joker." *Adweek* 54, no. 37 (October 21, 2013): 17–17.



has actually had the opposite effect. Though content producers have been creating a noticeable output of short content on the web—posts ranging from an average of 300 to 1,000 words—readers are actually demanding more long-form content.<sup>24</sup> Readers are far more likely to share long, in-depth content, and in terms of SEO, posts of more than 2,000 words are more likely to land on the first page of Google’s results.<sup>25</sup>

Though it may seem counterintuitive based on screen real estate alone, the resurgence of long-form is also being largely driven by mobile technology. Consumers on mobile devices spend more time reading than those on desktops,<sup>26</sup> presumably because mobile readers are often doing so while waiting or commuting. Thus, when companies invest in high quality, long-form content their customers spend more time on branded websites. Engagement goes up; bounce rates go down.<sup>27</sup> There’s a huge opportunity for brands to uncover and share meaningful, thoroughly researched stories. “Stories,” explains Godin, “make it easier to understand the world. Stories are the only way we know how to make an idea spread. Marketers didn’t invent storytelling. They just perfected it.”<sup>28</sup>

Marketers have also perfected strategy and measurement—the two other features that distinguish corporate bloggers from brand publishers. Marketers have historically loved planning around measurable KPIs, yet too often they fail to apply these practices to content marketing, relegating blog content to the purview of a junior staffer or intern. To create meaningful, resonant content, marketers need a thorough understanding of audiences and their needs: how they consume content, what they value, and what gap in their lives can be filled with a product or service. It means having a clearly articulated action that content should elicit, and measurable outcomes. Clear objectives paired with data give content marketers the goalposts they need to iterate and align their branded publications. A clearly articulated plan and quantifiable results are the only way to

<sup>24</sup> Levand, Susan. “Three Game-Changing Content Marketing Highlights of 2014.” *Promotional Marketing*, December 24, 2014, 1–1.

<sup>25</sup> Kagan, Noah. “Why Content Goes Viral: What Analyzing 100 Million Articles Taught Us.” *OkDork.com*, April 21, 2014. <http://okdork.com/2014/04/21/why-content-goes-viral-what-analyzing-100-millions-articles-taught-us>

<sup>26</sup> Levand, “Three Game-Changing Content Marketing Highlights of 2014.” 2014

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Godin, *All Marketers Are Liars: The Power of Telling Authentic Stories in a Low-Trust World*. 2005. page 2

demonstrate the impact of content marketing efforts. And that impact is ultimately the defining difference between brand bloggers and brand publishers.

### **1.3. Why brand publishing works**

Whether they are selling a product or service, brand publishers almost universally share the same goals, and those goals are what connects them to traditional marketers. They may articulate them differently, but their goals can generally be summed up as such: increase awareness, foster loyalty and drive conversion. Content is thriving under the banner of brands because it truly is an effective tool for accomplishing these goals. Research conducted by the Content Marketing Institute found that 79% of ‘best-in-class’ marketers rate digital publishing as the most effective customer acquisition tactic.<sup>29</sup> With the help of search and social media, brands can use content to make an impression on completely new (often international) audiences in a way many couldn’t afford to through traditional outbound marketing.<sup>30</sup>

Over time, awareness turns to loyalty—a long term relationship, built on trust. Loyalty and lasting brand success rely on the ability to build rich relationships with consumers who are hungry for engaging content and personalized experience. Consumers want to feel a connection to the brand before they buy. Particularly in the case of high-end lifestyle brands, by the time consumers purchase a product, they’ve already bought into the accompanying culture and feel as though it’s part of their identity.

Awareness and loyalty work together toward the ultimate goal: sales or conversion. On average, companies with a defined content publishing program see double the web conversions of companies without, explained Kucera in his 2013 report. “Companies who can successfully shape their buyers’ vision earlier in this process will more successfully convert interest into latent need, latent need into blatant sales

<sup>29</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Ann Handley. “B2C Content Marketing 2015 Benchmarks, Budgets and Trends - North America.” *Content Marketing Institute*, October 15, 2014.

[http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2015\\_B2C\\_Research.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2015_B2C_Research.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*

opportunities, and are more likely to win more business in the process.”<sup>31</sup> Done well, content marketing creates a lasting affinity with customers. But there are three very practical reasons why marketers are latching onto publishing as a major component of their marketing: it is affordable, it reaches consumers early in the sales cycle, and it yields invaluable data.

### **1.3.1. Brand publishing is affordable**

Compared to a traditional print, TV, or radio buy, digital publishing yields a remarkably high return on investment. Indeed, for the price of a writer’s salary—far less than the cost of a single national television spot—brands can create recurring marketing content that has a lengthy shelf life. Content-driven tactics are far more affordable than display ads.<sup>32</sup> Marketers in Hubspot’s definitive annual poll say, overall, content marketing makes up a quarter of their annual budget and they had so much confidence in the value of these efforts, more than half said they would increase their spending in 2015.<sup>33</sup>

### **1.3.2. Brand publishing reaches consumers early in the sales funnel**

Because so much self-serve product information is now available online, buyers engage in the actual sales process much later in their decision cycle.<sup>34</sup> Where they might have once engaged a sales person to offer product information or insight, buyers are now answering their own questions online, ahead of time. Content marketing is an opportunity for marketers to step in and answer these questions first—before about.com, reddit or consumer review sites do—and in doing so, to connect with consumers much earlier in the sales funnel—either in the decision-making stage, or even before consumers know they’ll be making a decision at all. “For marketers,” explains Kucera, “this trend means that identifying ready, qualified buyers is no longer enough, but

<sup>31</sup> Kucera, “Crossing the Chaos: Managing Content Marketing Transformation.” (2013)

<sup>32</sup> Chernov, “2014 State of Inbound.” (2014)

<sup>33</sup> Pulizzi and Handley, “B2C Content Marketing 2015 Benchmarks, Budgets and Trends - North America.” (2104)

<sup>34</sup> Kucera, “The Hidden Sales Cycle Revisited | Aberdeen Group.” (2011)

instead they must out-educate the competition to gain mindshare and shape the prospect's vision early.”<sup>35</sup> Doing so means providing better, more findable content, targeted around specific consumer inquiries to which your brand can respond.

### **1.3.3. Brand publishing yields legitimate data**

Marketers love data, but traditional outbound methods yield very little in the way of measurable results. Marketers may be able to track sales data tied to a particular promotion or look for a spike in sales if a certain item appears in a print ad, but that's often where it ends. Digital publishing offers a wealth of data that marketers can use to optimize their content and double-down on what's working. Content offers marketers the opportunity to continually test, measure, and optimize.

Before marketers can optimize however, they must earn the attention of their consumers. Producing content isn't enough—content must be excellent, frequent and relevant. Brand publishing pioneers can show us how. The following chapter examines best practices that have yielded strong results up to now.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*

## **Chapter 2. Early Adoption Stories and Best Practices in Brand Publishing**

Knowing the potential for brand growth through publishing is one thing, but doing it well is another matter. Though marketers increasingly understand content is the future of marketing, many are cautiously, and often blindly, testing the waters. Some have entered boldly into the space and there is much to learn from their successes and failures. This chapter draws on stories from content marketing pioneers and leaders to extract best practices and potential risks in this burgeoning space.

It's worth noting there are differences between brand publishing strategies for B2C marketing and those for B2B marketing. Branded B2B content is most effective when designed to educate and inform. Successful B2B content marketers use their industry knowledge to position themselves as experts and convert leads into sales.<sup>36</sup> While this kind of service content also plays a role in B2C content, more often consumers are interested in content that inspires and entertains. B2B marketers proffer insights; B2C marketers promote lifestyles. What connects them both, is that the best ones all do it by telling stories.

This paper primarily examines B2C brand publishers, but the same benchmarks listed below can easily extend to B2B content and have value regardless if your audience is a business or a consumer. B2C marketers need to latch onto topics consumers are passionate about personally—be it sports, fashion, healthy living, gardening, or creative expression. But the same principle applies to business audiences. Handley and Chapman wisely point out: “Figuring out what your prospective customers are interested in,

<sup>36</sup> Wegert, “What’s the Difference Between B2B and B2C Content Marketing?” 2014.

creating stuff that meets those needs, and delivering it to them is what you need to do. And that, by the way, is exactly what publishers do.”<sup>37</sup>

## **2.1. Characteristics of great branded content**

An estimated two million blog posts are published each day.<sup>38</sup> It’s tempting to assume that quality content will get lost in the deluge, but readers are hungry for substance—for something to emerge beyond the rubble of BuzzFeed lists and link-baited home videos. But brands need to earn their spot at the top of the heap. We only need to look to those brands whose content is thriving—based on frequency (which suggests resources are being allocated, and indicates it is probably offering some ROI) and on social engagement—to identify four common characteristics which other brands would be wise to emulate. These brands reveal that great brand publishing is: human, useful or entertaining, credible, and community driven.

### **2.1.1. Great brand publishing is human**

Good brand publishing is rooted in empathy. Marketers can’t simply blanket their publishing channels with formulaic content and expect readers to respond. Consumers are looking to build relationships. Human connection goes a long way. For consumer-facing brands, there are endless opportunities to reveal real human stories, showing empathy for your readers.

The camera industry offers perfect examples. Canon cameras are widely considered among the best in the world. They have a devoted following and they are used for fascinating things—their customers take stunning photos and videos around the world—photos and videos that are the visual foundation of some of the best online storytelling out there. But Canon’s digital channels tell a different story. Their websites and online newsrooms (both global and Canadian sites) are dry pages of corporate news

<sup>37</sup> Handley and Chapman, *Content Rules*. 2011. page 19

<sup>38</sup> Hiner, Jason. “Infographic: What Happens in a Single Day on the Internet.” *TechRepublic*, March 9, 2012. <http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/tech-sanity-check/infographic-what-happens-in-a-single-day-on-the-internet>

and product updates. There is nothing to hint at the beautiful stories their products enable. Their YouTube channel has a banner of product thumbnails, and is titled “Canon Imaging Plaza.” The underwhelming video on their homepage is populated with actors and has text placed at intervals describing features.<sup>39</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, the wildly popular and constantly viral GoPro camera doesn’t talk about their product—they focus on the passions of their users. Their content speaks directly to human aspirations, starting with the bold, simple proclamation “Be a hero” emblazoned across their homepage.<sup>40</sup> Their video content racks up millions of views versus the few hundred or thousand garnered by each of Canon’s videos, because GoPro speaks to human passions and put themselves in their customers’ shoes. They latch on the things their adventurous photographers care about most. It’s no wonder GoPro’s YouTube channel has over 3.5 million subscribers while Canon’s has only 101,000.<sup>41</sup>

### **2.1.2. Great brand publishing is useful or entertaining**

There’s an element of altruism in great content marketing. It’s not just reaching out to pull consumers in; it offers up a gift—fills a gap in their skills or knowledge, fuels dinner table conversation, inspires, or engages curiosity. Great brand publishers never leave a reader thinking “so what?” And if a reader can easily answer that question, they’re very likely to pass that gift along to their networks.

As brands prepare content for publication they need to consider what value they are adding to a consumer’s day. For many lifestyle brands, it may resemble the service and entertainment content in popular newsstand magazines. If the goal is to create positive connections and ultimately to drive sales, then the solution is simple: give customers something delightful or become a reliable source of information.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.canon.ca> accessed December 2015

<sup>40</sup> <https://gopro.com> accessed December 2015

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/GoProCamera> and <https://www.youtube.com/user/CanonNorthAmerica> accessed December 2015

Great brands successfully accomplish both. J.Crew—a much-loved online clothing retailer is great model for lifestyle brands looking to connect with a broad audience. The brand has fostered huge social engagement that draws readers back to J.Crew’s owned platforms. Their blog features inspirational styling, aspirational individuals and entertaining videos. It also has a wealth of practical resources for the sartorially inclined: how to choose a tuxedo, how to care for cashmere, the secret language of monogramming, and a narrated history of the fisherman’s sweater.

By contrast, Banana Republic—a brand with a similar audience, product, and price point is entirely focused on the virtues of their product. They add no value through their content, and it shows in their customer engagement levels. While Banana Republic has 200,000 more Facebook followers than J.Crew,<sup>42</sup> their posts receive a third of the customer interactions. A typical J.Crew post earns an average of 600 “likes” while Banana Republic’s posts garner roughly 200 “likes.”<sup>43</sup> The average J.Crew post is shared seven or more times, while Banana Republic posts are usually only shared twice. The lesson is, it’s hard to engage with branded content that is entirely self-serving.

### **2.1.3. Great brand publishing is credible**

As a marketer the goal is to build a lasting relationship with consumers, and the best relationships are built on trust. Building that trust might mean giving customers a peek into your operations, as online retailer Everlane has successfully done in their content marketing. It might mean giving a voice to your CEO as Tory Burch has continually done through the digital publication Tory Daily.<sup>44</sup> It might be as simple as showing the faces of your customers and telling their stories.

“Great marketers tell stories we believe,” says Godin.<sup>45</sup> For consumers to believe those stories they need to align with brand values. In 2014, the US fast-food giant Chic-fil-a famously launched an online magazine called *Let’s Gather*—an attempt to draw on

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/BananaRepublic> accessed March 13, 2015

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/jcrew> accessed March 13, 2015

<sup>44</sup> Tory Daily <http://www.toryburch.com/blog/torys-blog.html>

<sup>45</sup> Godin, *All Marketers Are Liars: The Power of Telling Authentic Stories in a Low-Trust World*. 2005 page



the popularity of food- and community-focused quarterly journal *Kinfolk*. The first two editions of *Let's Gather* featured stories that extolled the benefits of superfoods, introduced readers to functional fitness, and featured a DIY family who gave up store-bought groceries for a year. These stories were genuine but nothing about them aligned with the ethos of fast food reconstituted fried chicken. Nowhere do salmon, chia seeds or kale appear on the Chic-fil-a menu. Rather, these stories belonged to Whole Foods or a community food co-op. It's no surprise *Let's Gather* stalled after two issues.

Creating credible content starts with intimately knowing your audience and having a clearly articulated brand. If a content team has clear brand and voice guidelines, and writers have bought into the culture, then it becomes difficult to stray from the course. There are brands doing this extremely well. Food storage brand Ziploc, for example, has the potential to be incredibly dull. But Ziploc identified that its primary audience is resourceful and budget-conscious. The brand doesn't try to be a design-driven product but instead embraces their functional, crafty, affordable position. Doing so made a clear case for teaming up with popular, crafty young blogger, Joanna Hawley.<sup>46</sup> In 2013 and 2014 she took over the Ziploc Holiday blog,<sup>47</sup> posting just the sort of baking and decor ideas that resonate with Ziploc fans, usually (but not always) incorporating Ziploc products. The result is spot on the brand. It's also useful, entertaining and believable—the association doesn't feel forced.

#### **2.1.4. Great brand publishing is community-driven**

A natural extension of knowing your audience is engaging it. True engagement extends beyond “likes.” Great brand publishers develop such a devoted following, their customers will create content for them, and doing so deepens and extends that devotion. Social media gives brand platforms the opportunity to gather input from consumers and the tools to discover exactly what consumers are saying about them elsewhere.

Community engagement has two components. The first is inviting feedback. Great content is often a conversation. Historically, brick and mortar stores gave

<sup>46</sup> [www.jojotastic.com](http://www.jojotastic.com) accessed December 2014

<sup>47</sup> <http://holiday.ziploc.com> accessed December 2014

companies the opportunity to get direct consumer feedback on product. Now brands receive that feedback through their digital channels—Twitter, Instagram, Facebook. Allowing consumers to speak into the brand offers them a sense of ownership. The second part of engagement is giving consumers a platform and inviting them to create content on the brand’s behalf. That may mean curating user generated content (UGC)—as GoPro does with their video content—or making customers the subject of your original content. Doing so not only fosters ownership and investment, it also increases the reach of content exponentially, as socially-engaged users are quick to let their networks know if they’ve been featured by a brand. An invested community that shares content is the fastest path to brand growth.

Photo-editing-software-turned-popular-mobile-app, Visual Supply Co. has perfected this. The centrepiece of their branded content is curated “Grid” of user photos.<sup>48</sup> They also feature in-depth profiles of the fascinating creatives who already use and love VSCO products. Taking it a step further, they recently introduced a million-dollar scholarship fund to support their artists.<sup>49</sup> All recipients need to do is document their progress on the VSCO Grid. VSCO users can’t wait to create content and it perfectly perpetuates use of the product.

## 2.2. Challenges and risks

There’s a reason not every brand is operating a thriving publishing empire. While the actual practice of developing custom content isn’t new—John Deere launched its own customer magazine in 1895 and Michelin Tires’ *Michelin Guide* launched five years later.<sup>50</sup> But it’s difficult to do well. There are three common challenges that can keep brands from succeeding in their publishing efforts.

<sup>48</sup> <http://grid.vSCO.co/grid/1> accessed December 2014

<sup>49</sup> <https://vSCO.co/about/initiative> accessed December 2014

<sup>50</sup> Pulizzi, Joe. “What Content Marketing’s History Means for Its Future.” *Content Marketing Institute*, September 28, 2013. <http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2013/09/content-marketing-history-and-future>

### **2.2.1. Challenge 1: Sustaining Quality**

With so much content online, only excellence rises above the fray. Producing excellent branded content is challenging. As more and more branded content appears, the competition for eyeballs grows and so does the disparity in quality. Those that last will be the brands who—like our favourite magazines and newspapers—put the quality of content and their readers’ desires first.

But creating excellent content and keeping talented storytellers is costly. Doing it well means hiring journalists, writers, editors, and publishers from traditional media—those whose jobs have always been to create top quality content. And not surprisingly, swaths of journalists have recently taken jobs with brands.<sup>51</sup> This bodes well for big brands, but many smaller brands struggle to put forward a big investment before they are sure of the return.

### **2.2.2. Challenge 2: Momentum and Resourcing**

Sustained momentum is a challenge for any publisher, but particularly for brand publishers who typically have pre-existing marketing priorities in their remit. It’s both a resourcing and a budget issue. Excellent writing and beautiful imagery will find an audience, but great content doesn’t come cheap. The best content marketers invest resources and time into their content and don’t cut corners on quality. That usually means hiring new staff to maintain a consistently excellent flow of content.

Maintaining momentum requires not only dedicated editorial oversight, but community involvement. Taking advantage of UGC can simplify the marketer’s role. Sourcing through a community of fans and creatively repurposing every bit of content for multiple channels is a good solution to fill content gaps. But brands that are serious about consistently generating excellent content will find they need to build their teams internally. An in-house team can react quickly, giving an immediacy to content and a

<sup>51</sup> Wilson, “The Talent Pool to Fill Roles in Content Marketing Careers Leaves Much to Be Desired.” 2014. <http://www.skyword.com/contentstandard/news/the-talent-pool-to-fill-roles-in-content-marketing-careers-leaves-much-to-be-desired>

sense that consumers are getting an authentic inside perspective instead of factory-manufactured messages.

### **2.2.3. Challenge 3: Resisting Self-promotion**

Brands can be incredibly well-resourced and have a pool of in-house talent, and yet still miss the mark. This is the most common pitfall of content marketers: believing their channels exist solely to promote their product. Like any great publisher, great brand publishers put their readers first—shifting the focus from the product to the consumer.

The minute marketers abuse their publishing channels, using them as a billboard with the old marketing model in mind, they risk losing any affinity they have fostered. Handley and Chapman agree: “Good content doesn’t try to sell. Rather, it creates value by positioning you as a reliable and valuable source of vendor-agnostic information.”<sup>52</sup> Creating value may mean building content that helps solve consumers’ problems, makes them laugh, or feeds their desire for inspiration—and often doing so without ever mentioning a product. There’s a balance to be struck in brand publishing, as illustrated earlier by Chic-fil-a’s flopped digital magazine. Content should map back to a broader narrative—the story a brand is telling about itself, but it should always serve the consumer, not the product.

There’s one more challenge all brand publishers face—one that’s so inseparable from the practice that it merits its own chapter: measuring success.

<sup>52</sup> Handley and Chapman, *Content Rules*. 2011 page 39

## Chapter 3. Iterating and Measuring Brand Publishing

Brand publishing stands in the middle of marketing and publishing, but once content has been produced and disseminated—the publishing role—it takes on solely the characteristics of marketing. Measurement, iteration and optimization become central.

Marketers now have an unprecedented ability to target and track the outcomes of their efforts, and as a result there are hundreds of possible metrics. One of the greatest challenges for content marketers is knowing just what to measure. “I think the only (metric) that I care about is: Will people miss you if you are gone?” said Godin recently.<sup>53</sup> This may be the gold standard for brand publishers, but the executives funding the platforms, salaries and collateral costs of content marketing care about a measurable return on their investment. Brand publishers need to measure so they can optimize what’s working and apply those learnings to future content. This chapter examines the measurable benefits of brand publishing and what metrics content marketers can track to assess their success.

### 3.1. ROI: The benefits of brand publishing

Tracking and measuring take time—time away from producing content, so many marketers let it fall by the wayside, and then pay the price when CEOs want to know the return on their investment. Seeing the ROI starts with an understanding of company goals. Though the ultimate goal may be sales, dollars are not the heart of content marketing and monetary return is rarely immediate.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Lazauskas, “Marketing Legend Seth Godin on the Future of Branded Content.” 2015

<sup>54</sup> Kuenn, Arnie. “How to Prove Content Marketing ROI with Metrics.” *Content Marketing Institute*, February 14, 2014. <http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2014/02/prove-commitment-content-marketing-roi>

Before sales comes engagement. To that end there are various outcomes to track. A new brand may simply be hoping for increased awareness. An established brand might be looking to deepen loyalty or foster a network of engaged brand evangelists. An evolving brand may be looking to connect with a new audience segment. These are all benefits of a well-executed content marketing strategy.

## **3.2. KPIs: Measuring Success**

When gauging the success of content marketing efforts, there are five key areas to measure: consumption, retention, sharing, longevity, and conversion. Marketers can't draw data from just one of these categories. Together these categories will give a broad perspective of how content is performing, but some of these deserve more weight than others.

### **3.2.1. Consumption**

Consumption is the first thing brands typically measure: are people actually reading it? When measuring how many people are consuming content, some metrics are easier than others to track. For that reason it's tempting to fall back on simply counting page views and unique visitors. These are great metrics for selling ad space on a website, but they are not incredibly useful for measuring actual engagement with content. Far more effective gauges are time on page and average finish. Do readers actually stick with you to the end?

It's about more than just time on a page or on a site. A more accurate indication of consumption is the amount of time users have content open in an active window, scrolling and clicking.<sup>55</sup> Engaged time, it turns out, is also a great indicator of retention. Visitors who read an article for three minutes are twice as likely to return as those who read for only one minute.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Roque, Celine. "7 Content Marketing Metrics You're Probably Undervaluing." *The Content Strategist*, August 21, 2014. <https://contently.com/strategist/2014/08/21/7-content-marketing-metrics-youre-probably-undervaluing>

<sup>56</sup> Roque, "7 Content Marketing Metrics You're Probably Undervaluing." (2014)

### **3.2.2. Retention**

If the goal is affinity, then retention—return visits and overall frequency of return—is incredibly valuable. Yes content marketers must constantly look to extend their reach to new visitors, but the kind of engagement that leads to purchase is best indicated by frequent visits, low bounce rates and a high number of pages per visit.

### **3.2.3. Sharing**

Marketers often speak of the importance of reach—how many viewers were exposed to a brand. But much like consumption there are varying levels of engagement encapsulated in the idea of “reach.” More important than the number of likes or views or even follows is the number of shares. Sharing indicates a consumer valued your content or felt sufficiently moved by it to attach their name to it. It shows they feel someone else will place as much value on it as they do, or it can indicate they want their own image to be associated with a particular brand’s.

### **3.2.4. Longevity**

Good content stands the test of time. Research from link shortener bit.ly reveals the half-life of an average link is about three hours—in those three hours a link typically receives half the clicks it will ever receive in its lifetime.<sup>57</sup> The longevity of a piece of content is not only a good metric for showing content’s impact on brand awareness, but it is also useful for extracting trends that can help refine an editorial strategy. What content is still attracting readers a week, a month, or even a year after it was published? These pieces often hold useful lessons about relevant search terms that readers care about, topics that resonate with readers, or how to craft shareable headlines. Brands should always have content that is timely, but balance it with “evergreen” content that will have relevance to readers and land on Google search results pages long into the future.

<sup>57</sup> Roque, “7 Content Marketing Metrics You’re Probably Undervaluing.” (2014)

### **3.2.5. Conversion**

In B2B content marketing, the number of inquiries generated from a page of content, can be used as a gauge of success. Those publishers can use content to draw customers into the funnel as leads, and their job is nearly done—from there, conversation rate depends on the capabilities of a sales team. But for consumer-facing brands rooted in ecommerce, leads are rarely a compelling metric. The number of items added to cart or newsletter signups fall flat without another touchpoint to push customers to completion. Sales are what really matter. Units sold and the dollar value of purchases once consumers have been exposed to content will always be the most compelling KPI for executives. Fortunately reporting tools make it easy to track exactly how many items were purchased as a result of a particular enewsletter, tweet or share, and whether a particular piece of blog content was a touchpoint in the path to purchase.

Within marketing teams at large brands, marketing measurement and content creation are often distinct roles. For small companies, a single content marketer must assume responsibility for both hats: publishing and assessing. Accounting for the reach, longevity and dollar value of content is one of the surest ways to ensure those content marketing efforts continue to have their own budget line item for as long as it takes to make a significant difference to a brand’s customer engagement and loyalty. But measuring isn’t simply about proving the value of the content created—it’s also the single most valuable way to improve content and double down on what is working. As the next chapter reveals, often it is very small adjustments that yield significant results.



## **Chapter 4. Brand as Publisher: Building a Brand Publishing Program at Bridge & Burn**

Bridge & Burn is an apparel company based in Portland, OR. They are known for functional, classic men’s and women’s clothing, particularly suited to Pacific Northwest trends and climate. It’s a small company with only four full-time employees, including owner Erik Prowell, but they have a dedicated following in Oregon, up and down the west coast, and also a growing market in Canada, Japan, and Australia.

### **4.1. The Opportunity**

I discovered the brand, as do many of its customers, through Pinterest. I didn’t know at the time that Pinterest was a very deliberate publishing channel for Prowell, and one of Bridge & Burn’s most active at the time. Until May 2014, Prowell had been managing all the brand’s marketing single-handedly, and in fact until about six months prior he had been handling most of the brand’s operations (including design, sourcing, production management, distribution and promotion) as well. While he’s a skilled photographer and writer, he had no capacity to spend time on anything beyond essential promotional pieces and occasional social media posts. Growing a content marketing program, say Handley and Chapman, requires “time, talent and budget.”<sup>58</sup> Bridge & Burn was short on these. “Historically I was doing all the blogging and marketing myself. And as the business grew I didn’t have time to maintain it. We were getting by, there was no planning around marketing, just success through random opportunities and chance,” explains Prowell. Seeing the potential for the brand to significantly build its following by developing a catalogue of engaging content, I proposed to Prowell that I would spend four months—May through August 2014—developing and executing a publishing strategy for Bridge & Burn.

<sup>58</sup> Handley and Chapman, *Content Rules*. 2011 page 32

Though Bridge & Burn had excellent visual assets, I arrived in Portland to discover there was no brand documentation beyond an outdated “About” section of the website. What they did have was a great product and an increasingly devoted—if small—following. Prowell had recently hired a junior designer, a customer service/office manager, a retail manager and a part time bookkeeper to free him up to focus on design, partnerships and growth. While he had serious plans for expansion—he was looking at opening a second store in San Francisco and exploring options for domestic production—he had never articulated his long term goals for the brand or a strategy for engaging a larger fanbase. This would be the first task. The strategy would clarify and articulate the brand’s identity, provide voice guidelines, recommend a publishing cadence, and outline content types each designed to meet certain objectives—be it to sell specific products, engage influencers, increase findability or drive customers to the brick and mortar flagship.

## **4.2. Process and Implementation**

Though lack of time and a tiny team were the brand’s greatest barriers up to that point, the absence of any strategic brand documentation or marketing strategy was also a significant setback. I laid a foundation for future content marketing efforts by articulating the brand position—what it stands for and how it sounds—and by working with Prowell to document Bridge & Burn’s history, and to clarify its mission and values. Following a brand discovery process that involved staff interviews, external research, and evaluating perception of customers who tweeted or commented about the brand, I conducted a competitive analysis. The goal was to see how similar brands position themselves, but also to examine other digital publishing models—their cadence, tone, and approach to outreach—as a gauge for where to position Bridge & Burn. We identified Prowell’s goals for the business: to open a second shop, expand distribution, and increase web sales by 15% by the following year. At the time, Bridge & Burn’s ecommerce site was grossing an average of \$15,000 a month—a number that typically dips in the summer months as spring stock clears out.

Pulizzi and Handley’s 2015 Content Marketing benchmarks reveal that only 27% of content marketers document their strategy, so Bridge & Burn was not an anomaly.

Those that do document a strategy report a higher rate of return on their efforts.<sup>59</sup> Using all of the information gathered from Prowell, his team, and independent research, I outlined a publishing strategy which included an editorial program designed to increase engagement and convert to sales. I developed customer personas and from there created branded voice and tone guidelines as well as parameters for Bridge & Burn’s social media channels—outlining function, frequency and owner for each channel. I managed most of these channels (Prowell continued to manage his successful Pinterest feed) and used them to direct to content. And from there, I used content to direct to product.

The simple act of describing the brand, defining the voice and tone, and outlining a straightforward strategy was a crucial jumping off point. It meant there were tools that would enable Prowell to offload some of the burden of marketing to a future hire. It gave me benchmarks to aim for and a clear path for execution. With Prowell’s help I identified a brand story rooted in living life without regrets and continually moving forward. In fact, this is a brand story that is already suggested by the name “Bridge & Burn” which was inspired by Prowell’s mission to never look back with regret. Many marketers are too immersed in their own brand operations to recall the emotional core behind it or what makes it interesting to outsiders. C.C. Chapman, co-author of definitive content marketing book *Content Rules*, advises bringing in someone from outside your organization—like a journalist—who’s great at identifying that emotional core and finding stories.<sup>60</sup> With alignment on the brand story and voice, I took on that role of external journalist to tackle rewriting the About Us page on [bridgeandburn.com](http://bridgeandburn.com), which included the addition of Prowell’s own “bridge burning” moment that led him to found the company (see appendix 1). It was a chance to reveal the human, authentic face behind the brand. Also Prowell had been receiving some negative feedback from customers who discovered that many of the brand’s products were made in China. “Made in China” can mean a broad spectrum of things. As a brand, Bridge & Burn came about thanks to Prowell’s relationship with a Canadian-owned niche production facility in China. This boutique factory is known for their ability to do small production runs with excellent attention to detail. They have incredibly high standards of production and of

<sup>59</sup> Pulizzi and Handley, “B2C Content Marketing 2015 Benchmarks, Budgets and Trends - North America.” 2014

<sup>60</sup> Chapman, “C.C. Talks Content on Social Media Examiner | Content Rules.” (2011)

social welfare for workers. Customers had a deep misunderstanding of this. We identified the opportunity to own and shape the story by adding a “Manufacturing” page to the website (see appendix 2).

Next, it was time to ramp up the brand’s social channels. As mentioned, Prowell was active on Pinterest and somewhat active on Instagram, but didn’t have time to devote to fostering audiences on Twitter and Facebook (which at the time was still the top engagement channel for brands—though this has since been surpassed by Instagram).<sup>61</sup> We established a cadence for posting daily on these channels, to align with that of Bridge & Burn’s closest competitors, as discovered in the competitive review. As we began to post, we experimented with day of the week and time of day until we identified a schedule that performed best for engagement. Generally speaking, late afternoon posts performed best on Instagram. Early afternoon and later in the evening performed best for Facebook. Twitter was inconclusive because engagement was consistently low.

The next challenge was to create a steady flow of content to share on those increasingly active social channels. At the time Bridge & Burn had an infrequently-used blog, with monthly posts. Among the posts was one long form article written by Prowell that focused on a local entrepreneur. It told the story of a woman who embodied the Bridge & Burn ethos of never looking back and taking the risk to do the work you find fulfilling—a reflection of a particularly west coast mindset. Prowell had a vision to turn this into a series called Bridge Burners—quarterly long form profiles about entrepreneurs who have bucked the system and become their own bosses—and it became the cornerstone of the content program. Other content components balanced a focus on product, people and places—including a simple series on staff style, a series profiling the brand’s stockists throughout North America, and season-specific gift guides. Part of the strategy was also to partner with bloggers who aligned with the brand, empowering them to create content using our products, but also teaming up on projects—original on-location shoots, collaborative art projects, and influencer interviews. With all the content types laid out in the strategy, the intention was to publish once or twice per week.

<sup>61</sup> Neff, Jack. “Engagement With Brand Content Soared 52% Last Quarter,” June 22, 2105. <http://adage.com/article/digital/engagement-brand-content-soared-52-quarter/299131>

## **4.3. Challenges**

The strategy yielded positive long term results which we'll examine later on, but off the bat it encountered two challenges: resourcing and shifting priorities to focus on immediate returns through external influencer partnerships rather than on long term affinity through storytelling.

### **4.3.1. Resourcing**

In fact, it didn't take long before we identified a serious bottleneck in our intended publishing cadence. As a designer and business owner, Prowell is meticulous about the quality of photography and graphics put before consumers. Indeed, his curated aesthetic and careful attention to detail have been key to building a successful lifestyle brand, and it's one of his greatest strengths. But as the only person on the team capable of executing visuals to his desired standard, he struggled to find the time to produce visual assets while also designing and producing his 2015 spring/summer line. Producing written content was only useful insofar as visuals could be prepared to accompany it. At any time we had a backlog of posts awaiting images or supporting graphics.

This is a common challenge. Just a few years ago content marketers cited lack of budget as their greatest challenge. But as of 2014 marketers say their biggest obstacle is lack of time (57%).<sup>62</sup> Aware of the problem, Prowell hired a part-time photography assistant roughly halfway through my time with Bridge & Burn. This greatly increased our capacity as a team, and in the second half of my placement the cadence of content we could create picked up, along with site traffic to [bridgeandburn.com](http://bridgeandburn.com). Following my departure the photographer was promoted to full time Marketing Lead. With this person on board, content could move more efficiently. But creating words for the blog continued to play second fiddle to a growing priority of partnering with influencers.

<sup>62</sup> Pulizzi and Handley, "B2C Content Marketing 2015 Benchmarks, Budgets and Trends - North America." 2014

### 4.3.2. Shifting Priorities

At Bridge & Burn, a shifting focus towards using influencers to create promotional content on their own channels is a reflection of a massive trend in brand marketing and public relations. Increasingly bloggers, Pinners, and Instagrammers are key promoters and drivers of sales. Those partnerships can lead to quick wins and immediate sales, and as a result, the majority of my time was devoted to managing relationships with these influencers—through affiliate network management, press outreach and blogger relations. The approach is incredibly effective in terms of driving sales, but used up time I had hoped to dedicate toward experimenting with developing our own content in-house.

The focus on these immediate returns—a coordination role that could have been performed by an entry-level intern—kept me from diving as deep into content as I had hoped. The ROI was immediately evident, but I was interested to see the impact that strategically and expertly crafted content could have over time. Brands with small budgets can be averse to investing in marketing efforts that show slow returns. Owned content is typically a significant investment of time and one that rarely produces immediate results.

“You’re trying to build relationships over a long period of time,” explains Baer. “It’s not the smash and grab, and I think people are overeager to generate results. Too many companies act like 19-year-old dudes. They try to close the deal on the first night.”<sup>63</sup> It’s a struggle to invest the time and cost of any assets up front, knowing you may not see a return for a season or more. Prowell recognized that it was a rare opportunity to have a seasoned writer at his disposal and ensured some time was carved out for branded storytelling, but because he could see such powerful results of building affiliate networks with bloggers, he shifted his priority for how I spent my time. Though this redirection of efforts was disappointing, overall it was likely a significant driver of success for the brand itself. In fact, Bridge & Burn saw results astonishingly quickly. The lesson for me as a content creator is that there is value in using a mix of channels and mix of content types. Consumers engage with various forms of content—some consumers

<sup>63</sup> Muldoon, “4 Metrics Every Content Marketer Needs to Measure.” 2015

respond to bite-sized visual content through Instagram, others are curators who want the thrill of discovery through Pinterest, others are looking to engage with longer content and unearth the people or ethos behind the brands they patronize—and for a brand looking to be discovered there is huge value in meeting readers on the channels and blogs they are already frequenting.

## **4.4. Results**

Despite challenges, a breadth of content was produced over four months and social engagement continued to grow. On average the number of followers on Bridge & Burn’s social channels grew by roughly 5% each month. I took over tracking this growth from Prowell during my time at Bridge & Burn and the steady increase in engagement was excellent motivation to continue building all social channels.

And there were opportunities to create excellent original content. We added five longform articles to the Bridge Burners series which, six months later, were still the posts with the highest reader engagement. Staff profiles offered an opportunity to promote specific pieces from the Spring line and show them on real Portland locals. Stockist profiles extended our content beyond Portland, facilitating deeper connections with wholesalers who purchase from Bridge & Burn each season, and these partners often spread our content through their own social networks. Those external influencer partnerships we invested so much time in also yielded content that could live on the Bridge & Burn blog. We developed content collaborations with notable influencers which resulted in projects featured on both our owned channels and influencer channels. This included an original styled shoot in San Francisco created by popular Bay-area blogger Emma Robertson (Emmadime), and collaborative photoshoots in the Portland area with Pinner and stylist Casey Keasler and Instagrammer and jewelry designer Hannah Ferrara (Another Feather). Thanks to our relationship-building efforts, we also had product featured throughout Ziploc’s holiday collaboration with Joanna Hawley (Jojotastic). Those relationships not only exposed the brand to each of those influencers’ significant audiences, they also solidified relationships that will serve the brand in the long term. These kinds of results are meaningful for brand-building but are not always

measurable. Fortunately Bridge & Burn also saw significant measurable results in terms of reach and sales.

#### **4.4.1. Conversion**

In January 2015 Prowell reported his best holiday season to date and his first profitable year. He far exceeded his target for sales growth. In the month of November—the most important month for shopping in the United States—Bridge & Burn saw a 118% lift, year on year, in online sales. We'll see below that traffic also increased, but conversion rate increased with it. Overall, the number of transactions year on year went up more than 102% and the revenue from these transactions reflects a 90.92% increase in sales (dollar value). It's not uncommon, with a lift in site traffic, to see a decreased conversion rate. When more and more traffic is funnelling in, it often brings less relevant traffic. That Bridge & Burn's conversion rate actually increased with the increase in traffic suggests that shoppers are truly connecting with the brand, being referred by on-brand, relevant sources, and that consumers are increasingly hitting the site with the intent to purchase.

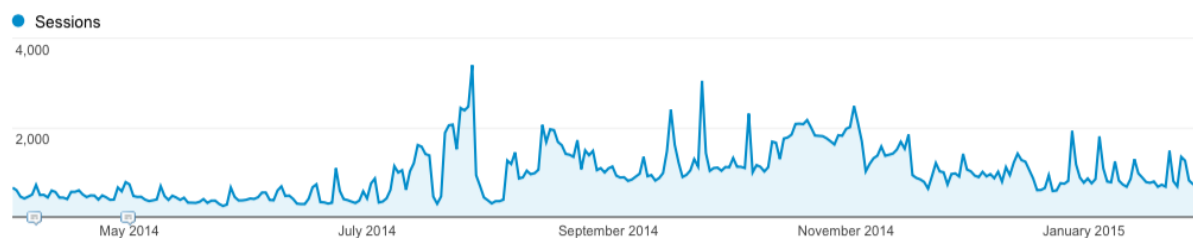
These are certainly notable results, but looking specifically at traffic to blog content, the results are even more remarkable. The number of transactions from visitors to the blog soared 350% year on year—the conversion rate was up 213%. Revenue (the actual dollar amount) from blog traffic increased by an incredible 974%. This leap was due to one small change. We began from a very low baseline: though Prowell had, on occasion, used the blog to feature specific product, that content rarely linked to the featured item's ecommerce product page. The simple act of linking blog images and photo captions to the associated product pages can be credited for the massive leap in conversion. These are small changes that a deliberate strategy can help create which yield big results.

Anecdotally, Prowell claims that when a product was featured on the blog and, subsequently on social media—particularly on Instagram—his team saw a notable surge in online purchases and in-store inquiries about that particular item. This has prompted him to implement an additional strategy for his team, focused on identifying slow-moving items, photographing and featuring those items across all content channels.



Certainly the growth and monetary success Bridge & Burn experienced can be attributed to many factors—content is only a portion of what drove the brand’s success in the year following my placement. Blogger partnerships, social media reach, adding affiliate networks, bringing on a new designer to help extend the product line, and having an additional photographer and dedicated marketer have all played a role, but without a doubt, developing and articulating a content marketing strategy was instrumental in the company’s growth. And Prowell says that seeing the momentum caused by these deliberate content marketing efforts prompted him to put even greater focus and resources towards content marketing going forward.

#### 4.4.2. Reach and Engagement



**Figure 1. bridgeandburn.com engagement lift**

**Google Analytics revealed overall traffic to bridgeandburn.com climbed steadily during the months of content production and into the holiday season.**

In the course of my four-month project term, traffic to bridgeandburn.com climbed steadily month on month—an average of 15% each month. But it’s the year on year reach metrics that are really notable. During the holiday shopping and sale season, November 1 to January 31, the number of sessions leapt up 84% year on year and the number of users climbed 88% year on year. The percentage of overall sessions from new visitors went up 3.3%. Though this number isn’t significant, it reveals that the surge in sales is predominantly from return visitors who are coming back more frequently and purchasing more, which may suggest they feel a greater affinity towards the brand.

In terms of engagement across the site, there were some wins and losses. Page views increased by 69.9% year on year. But with the increase in traffic, the average time on site decreased by 3% and the bounce rate went up 2%. This is largely due to a spike in traffic that came from a post on a popular sub-reddit, which mentioned a sale. The

subreddit post drew a good deal of traffic, but due to the nature of the post, most of these visitors wouldn't be ideal Bridge & Burn customers, willing to pay up to \$400 for a jacket. With a jump in traffic from sources like reddit, it's not unusual for the quality of engagement to dip, as many of those users are not visiting with the specific intent to purchase.

As with sales, these engagement metrics can be attributed to numerous factors, so it's worth looking specifically at Bridge & Burn's content pages. Overall the blog saw a 106% jump in page views. Visitors to these pages spent 20.7% more time on site than they did the year prior and were 11.27% less likely to bounce from the site. As of January 2015, the five Bridge Burner posts created during my placement remained the five most visited pages on the blog. Users spent an average of 3.5 minutes on these pages. By comparison, users spent an average of 1 minute and 50 second on other Bridge & Burn content pages. Across the web, on average more than 55% of readers online spend less than 15 seconds reading pages.<sup>64</sup> For Bridge & Burn to capture the average reader for more than three minutes is notable.

Engagement is also increasing on the brick and mortar level. Content, says Prowell, is driving people to the store and deepening connections. Perhaps more importantly, implementing a strategy at Bridge & Burn marked a priority shift. "The marketing and branding are the most important things right now," said Prowell in a January 2015 interview. "We're reinforcing our brand better. Our online presence establishes us more as a real entity." In addition to creating the marketing lead role, prior to my departure Prowell, seeing the need for a dedicated social media role brought on a part-time community manager who I was able to interview and select. Both the marketing lead role and the community manager role were valuable assets for maintaining the momentum established during my placement. But they also played a role in shifting the weight of publishing and marketing off Prowell's shoulders so he could continue to develop the quality of the product and the collaborations that motivate many customers to engage with Bridge & Burn's content in the first place.

<sup>64</sup> Haile, Tony. "What You Think You Know About the Web Is Wrong." *Time*, March 9, 2014. <http://time.com/12933/what-you-think-you-know-about-the-web-is-wrong>

## Conclusion

For small niche brands like Bridge & Burn, discovery is half the battle for survival. Once found, the other half is sharing a compelling, aspirational brand story. In the historic marketing landscape, a brand with only a single shop and limited wholesale distribution would get lost alongside big names with multi-million-dollar marketing budgets. These small brands can't afford the old "rented space" model wherein they pair their ads with a traditional publisher's content. In that landscape, discovery would be the exclusive privilege of local Portlanders and few keen aficionados who hunt down new and obscure brands.

Instead, Bridge & Burn is on a steady growth trajectory thanks to the wonders of owned publishing channels: a plug-and-play ecommerce platform with built in digital publishing tools that enable fast and frequent storytelling. Social media brings the stories from that platform directly to the homes and hands of would-be customers through channels like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest, and SEO helps those potential customers seek the brand out for themselves using relevant keywords. Suddenly the marketing playing field is levelling out for brands that know how to make the most of these digital opportunities. Now it is easy and affordable to connect with customers before they even begin the decision-making process. Once customers do step into the sales cycle, brand stories are already rooted in their minds and that affinity makes it easy to close a sale. For Bridge & Burn this has meant finding a new international customer base that would never otherwise have been exposed to the brand and who are willing to pay a relatively high pricepoint for high quality basics—because they understand the value. That value was conveyed through content.

The challenge faced in my time at Bridge & Burn—maintaining momentum due to limited resourcing, both human and financial—is the same challenge that holds many brands back from seeing the potential returns on publishing. Bridge & Burn made the most of limited resources by focusing on stories that were easy to tell. They were easy to

tell because those stories belong to the brand or are deeply connected to it—like staff picks and stockist profiles. By zeroing in on key stories that were human, that had strong brand alignment, and that were not overtly self-promotional, Bridge & Burn saw steady growth that very quickly led to conversion—regardless of the absence of a dedicated marketing budget and a one-person marketing team.

As more brands discover the growth potential created by digital publishing, they too will create opportunities to find, tell, and publish stories. This is great news for writers, editors, and photographers who want to create more than just brochureware for brands, and it's also great news for readers who feared that the lifestyle content they loved to read in magazines would die with an evolving media landscape. As brands increasingly build publishing or content marketing teams, storytellers are finding paid opportunities to exercise their creativity. Whether that is unearthing and sharing a brand's own stories that will delight consumers or enrich their lives; partnering with other media savvy creatives like bloggers, pinners and the “instafamous” to create third party content; or sourcing and publishing user generated content, there is a renewed demand for those who can identify the right stories, shape, and tell them.

But doing so for the long run means having a documented strategy, then measuring the results and iterating the output. In this way, journalists must also become marketers and continually show a return on the investment in their stories. This doesn't mean “selling out” or telling only stories that revolve around a brand's product or service. Bridge & Burn's most-consumed content—the in-depth Bridge Burner profiles—reveal that the most human stories often perform the best. And provided they are also deeply aligned with core brand values, they serve as valuable brand-builders that eventually drive conversion.

The power to tell stories and the motivation for it, have moved into the hands of brands that are keen to respond to customers' increasing desire for authentic, relevant content instead of outdated outbound marketing techniques.

In this new landscape, well-crafted stories and beautiful images will draw consumers towards brands that invest in excellent content. This content is often a first touch point for new customers and is instrumental in a brand's online findability. If

properly aligned with brand values—and if it’s human, useful or entertaining, credible, and rooted in community—it deepens affinity with customers, and affinity converts to sales and repeat purchases. As a result, customers who buy into the brand are increasingly motivated to show their love by sharing content, helping to actively promote the brand itself. The longer and more in-depth that content is, the more likely it is to be shared. Because this fresh approach to marketing is comparatively affordable and yields legitimate data, it’s easy to pivot efforts and adapt to what’s working and what’s not. In order to sustain these publishing programs they must be meaningfully measured.

The results will speak for themselves, but success takes time, focused resources and effort. Even Bridge & Burn’s quick gains are just one step in the right direction. “I think we’re still scratching the surface with it,” says Prowell. “It made it clear that brand and marketing are where we need to focus.” The lesson for brands like Bridge & Burn, is that it’s not enough to rely on a great product—brands must tell stories that make their product meaningful by giving them context. For journalists and content creators who simply want to tell great stories without falling victim to the tempestuous winds of traditional publishing, this bodes a promising and profitable future.

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## Appendix A.

### Bridge & Burn “Our Story” page

#### HISTORY

##### OUR BRIDGE BURNER STORY

Erik Prowell was well into a masters degree in computer science when he realized he didn't want to spend his life slouched in front of a computer. With no formal design training, but industrious and down-to-earth, he took a calculated leap and decided he was through working for anyone but himself. With a burgeoning t-shirt line already gaining traction, he launched headlong into the new venture.

The moment he traded his PC for a design-friendly Mac, his coding days were officially over. The first t-shirt he created on his new computer featured a hand holding a match to a bridge and the words "Don't look back." He never did. From his garage in Bend, OR, No Star Clothing spread across North America and beyond, and picked up a devoted fanbase. In 2005 No Star HQ moved north to Portland, along with Erik.

An idea for "sophisticated hoodies" led Erik and his then business partner to Vancouver, BC, where a seasoned designer gave them a crash course in apparel design—fit, fabric and tech packs. She also gave them the gift that would later be the catalyst for Bridge & Burn: an introduction to a boutique factory in China—prized for unusually small runs, high production quality, and excellent working conditions.

La Merde clothing was born. "Streetwear for the library" it combined Erik's more traditional west coast aesthetic and his partner's hip hop roots. A deal with a major department fell through when buyers discovered La Merde's English translation. And cuss words, it turns out, can't be trademarked.

In 2009, after three successful seasons, Erik dropped the street influence and launched Bridge & Burn—a small line of functional, definitively west-coast outerwear. The next season brought Bridge & Burn's much-loved shirting.

In 2013 the Bridge & Burn Flagship store opened in downtown Portland, giving firsthand access to customer feedback and a home for events, collaborations and our hands-on design studio. The line continues to grow beyond North America into Asia and Europe, but the focus has never shifted from functional design, beautiful detailing and incredible fit. Now we celebrate other Bridge Burners—bold entrepreneurs who have stepped out on their own and "burned the bridge" of working for anyone else. Read some of their stories on our [blog](#).

## Appendix B.

### Bridge & Burn “Manufacturing” page

