

**The Balancing Act:  
A Study of Journalism, Marketing & Publishing  
in Digital Content Marketing**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

This study explores how the skillsets of journalists, marketers, and publishers are balanced in digital content marketing, an approach to online advertising that promotes sustained consumption of ads by presenting them as desired media experiences. This exploration is accomplished in two parts. First, by providing a detailed investigation of digital content marketing as a practice, including its history, approaches, growth, and challenges. Second, through analysis of ECHO Storytelling Agency, a Vancouver BC-based custom publisher that expanded to begin offering digital content marketing services in 2014.

Keywords: journalism, marketing, publishing, content marketing, online marketing, digital content marketing.

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# Introduction

Content marketing, the broad topic of this Simon Fraser University master of publishing project report, promotes leisure consumption of advertising by presenting ads as desired multimedia experiences. Importantly, content marketing ads do not primarily discuss the products or services of the companies they promote. Rather, such ads provide entertainment or general information to targeted audiences. Web posts that may combine video, audio, images, or text are a particularly common content marketing format. Referred to in this report as “digital content marketing,” this format enables companies to reach potentially large online audiences that are typically targeted to represent the company’s desired customer demographics. Once an audience for digital content marketing is established, its behavior can be influenced, useful market data can be collected, and, in optimal cases, their affinity for the company can be increased.

To accomplish these goals, digital content marketing must balance the core competencies of its three pillar industries: journalism, marketing, and publishing. First, digital content marketing requires a journalist’s skill at identifying, researching, and creating compelling content. Next, digital content marketing requires a marketer’s business-oriented skillset to generate and demonstrate benefit to the advertiser, referred to as ensuring return on investment (ROI). Finally, the approach requires a web publisher’s ability to identify and reach online audiences. Achieving and maintaining a balanced approach to benefitting consumers, generating ROI, and reaching audiences represents the central challenge of digital content marketing.

As this report further demonstrates, the global rise of digital content marketing has generated significant, as yet unmet labour demand within the marketing industry for individuals and organizations with journalism and publishing competencies. This still-growing opportunity may be especially viable since, unlike traditionally published web content, content ads do not typically need to generate profit directly, such as through paid subscriptions. On the contrary, digital content marketing’s costs are considered marketing expenses intended to support an advertisers’ primary business. In this sense, digital content marketing posts are well-suited to thrive in the current online content economy, in which stable profits can be difficult to derive from web content itself.

Though digital marketing content does not typically need to generate independent profit, as traditionally-published web content often does, content marketing web posts only succeed when they please consumers, ensure ROI, and reach audiences consistently. Analysing the best practices for achieving these goals is the primary objective of this report. One obstacle to providing clarity on these best practices is that digital content marketing remains poorly understood by general audiences. To address this, section one of this study consists of an overview of digital content marketing, including disambiguation of the practice, description of common approaches, explication of its recent growth, and analysis of its challenges. Once this foundation of understanding about digital content marketing has been established, section two describes how journalism, marketing, and publishing competencies are balanced within the digital content marketing activities of ECHO Storytelling Agency in Vancouver, B.C.

Founded as ECHO Memoirs in 1999, this boutique custom print publisher embarked in 2014 on a strategic services expansion into digital content marketing. Within this report, ECHO's partial pivot from publishing into digital content marketing represents pursuit of the previously described revenue expansion opportunities available to publishers and journalists within the marketing industry. Section two further discusses ECHO's foundational commitment to honest storytelling. This defining feature of the company, referred to internally as ECHO's "storytelling philosophy," manifests distinctly in several journalistic practices, especially the extensive interview, research, and document review phases of all ECHO projects. In particular, section two investigates how ECHO's storytelling philosophy affects their approach to balancing digital content marketing's three pillar industries: journalism, marketing, and publishing. The section also briefly analyses how ECHO's updated self-description as a "storytelling agency" positions them to offer storytelling services in a wide variety of industries and contexts.

All evidence presented regarding ECHO Storytelling Agency is based on the author's personal impressions and observations obtained while completing an internship there during the summer of 2016. Working full-time as a content marketing co-ordinator, I contributed to the conception, creation, distribution, and analysis of numerous published digital content marketing examples. This included contributing to ECHO's own blog and email newsletter, as well as providing digital content marketing services to several of



ECHO's clients. In addition, I attended staff and project meetings at ECHO that provided insight into their storytelling-based approach.

Digital content marketing's need to equally incorporate the competencies of journalism, marketing, and publishing is well described as a "balancing act" only if the term is understood include all the risk of sudden failure it implies. Indeed, maintaining this balance is more challenging than it may initially appear, since failure to achieve digital content marketing's goals can result equally from either over- or undervaluing the contributions of any one of the three pillar industries. Erring in any direction can render a digital content marketing strategy ineffective at engaging consumers (journalism), attaining ROI (marketing), or reaching audiences (publishing). Providing readers with a clearer understanding of the precarity and intricacy of this balance is the primary objective of this report.

Two additional aspects of this report require final acknowledgement. First, it relies on journalistic sources, some of which are themselves digital content marketing examples with a bias to promote the practice. These were included since achieving the report's goals required the most up-to-date information available and because digital content marketing has not been widely studied academically. Second, for privacy reasons, none of ECHO Storytelling Agency's digital content marketing clients will be identified by name within the report.

# Section 1:

## Understanding Digital Content Marketing

### 1.1 Disambiguation

Before moving discussing digital content marketing's history, practices, recent rise, and current challenges, it is worthwhile to disambiguate the approach from two other types of advertising: traditional and native.

To begin, content marketing is perhaps most readily understood in contrast to traditional advertising, which generate interest in a company and its products or services by directly providing relevant information to the consumer. Traditional ads may be humorous or otherwise entertaining, but are not typically designed for sustained engagement. Rather, traditional ads tend to be found interspersed within desired media experiences, such as television programs, with consumers tacitly accepting exposure to these ads as a form of partial payment for their desired content. Traditional advertising is client-focused for marketers, in that its primary objective is ensuring the communication of information about their clients to the audiences, while providing consumer enjoyment is a secondary concern. In content marketing, this relationship is reversed. The client-focus of traditional ads and the extent to which they detract from desired media leads to risk of their being ignored by disinterested consumers. However, the informative content and openly transactional nature of traditional ads provides consumers with beneficial clarity.

A much finer distinction exists between content marketing and native advertising.<sup>1</sup> Like content ads, native ads provide consumers directly with desired media experiences intended for leisure consumption. Yet, like traditional ads, native ads are found amidst traditionally published content, such as within a typical magazine or newspaper. Furthermore, though a disclaimer is generally present, native ads are designed to blend in with the surrounding content in those traditional publications. Finally, uniquely among

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<sup>1</sup> Pulizzi, Joe. "Native Advertising Is Not Content Marketing." *Content Marketing Institute*, 26 Aug. 2015, [contentmarketinginstitute.com/2015/08/native-advertising-content-marketing/](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2015/08/native-advertising-content-marketing/).

all forms of advertising, native ads are typically created by the publishers of the traditional content amidst which they appear.

For example, when native ads appear in *The New York Times*, either in print or online, they are created by the publisher's native advertising division, T Brand Studio (Fig. 1.1).



Figure 1.1 Logo of T Brand Studio

One of whose early major successes was 2014's "Why The Male Model Doesn't Work," a detailed, journalistic investigation of US women's prison system created to support the Netflix original drama *Orange is the New Black*.<sup>2</sup> This example reveals two clear distinctions between native advertising and content marketing. First, by offloading the responsibility for content creation onto *The New York Times*, Netflix has eliminated the need to develop or acquire web journalism competencies internally. Second, an even greater distinguishing aspect of native advertising is displayed by this article's direct access to *The New York Times*' established audience, which content marketing examples do not enjoy.

A concluding digital content marketing example will help to firmly establish the differences between content, native, and traditional advertising. Consider a publication called *The Agenda* (Fig. 1.2), which is exclusively accessible within the mobile web app of high-fashion brand Gucci. On an approximately weekly basis, *The Agenda* publishes multimedia content, including text, images, and videos intended for leisure consumption. This content covers emerging fashion trends and lets users engage with the Gucci brand without ever being prompted to make a purchase. In maintaining *The Agenda*, Gucci must strategically balance journalism, marketing, and publishing competencies to effectively engage individual consumers, ensure ROI, and reach audiences.

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<sup>2</sup> Moses, Lucia. "Inside T Brand Studio, the New York Times's Native Ad Unit." *Digiday*, 2 Dec. 2014, [digiday.com/media/new-york-times-native-ad-unit/](http://digiday.com/media/new-york-times-native-ad-unit/).

On the other hand, an example of native advertising would be if Gucci paid a traditional fashion magazine, like *Vogue*, to create Gucci-related editorial content and publish it

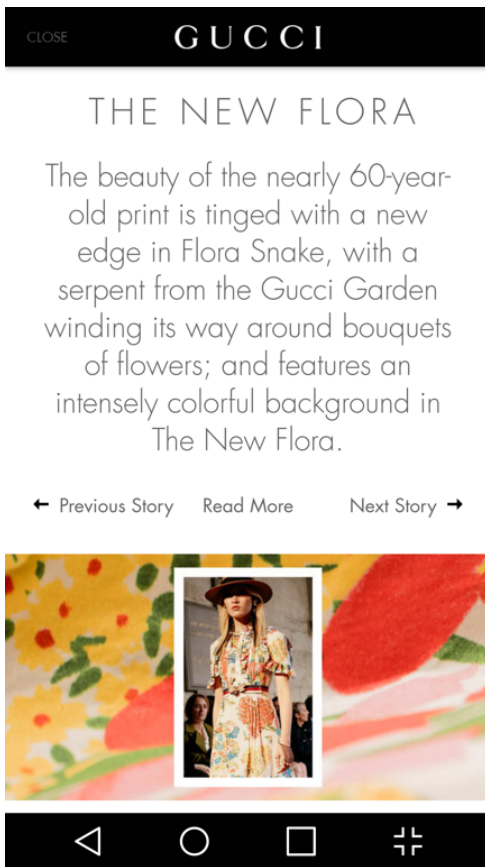


Figure 1.2 *The Agenda* content platform by Gucci

alongside *Vogue* content on a *Vogue*-owned platform. And if Gucci simply pays to have images of its products and supporting copy appear amid *Vogue*'s editorial content, that would be traditional advertising. Of course, nothing prevents Gucci, or any company with the necessary marketing budget, from engaging concurrently in content, native, and traditional advertising efforts.

However, what is most notable in the example of *The Agenda* is that, as an independent digital content marketing platform, it gains no access to *Vogue*'s or any other pre-established audience. On the contrary, *The Agenda* actually competes with *Vogue* for the attention of similar, fashion-savvy audiences. This necessity to compete with traditionally published content for consumer attention is a hallmark of all digital content marketing efforts.

## 1.2 History & Development

Now that digital content marketing has been disambiguated from traditional and native advertising, a brief summary of its historical development, from the distant past to present day, will help contextualize its benefits to companies and consumers. Of course, the content marketing approach pre-dates the internet. Potentially the first North American example was *Poor Richard's Almanac*, a general interest annual first published in 1732 to support Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia printing press.<sup>3</sup> Among

<sup>3</sup> Aughtmon, Scott. "4 Lessons From One of History's Most Inventive Content Marketers." *Content Marketing Institute*, 9 Apr. 2014, contentmarketinginstitute.com/2014/04/lessons-historys-inventive-content-marketers/.

the oldest ongoing content marketing efforts is *The Furrow* (Fig. 1.3); first published in 1895 by US farm machinery manufacturer John Deere, it initially focused on relating

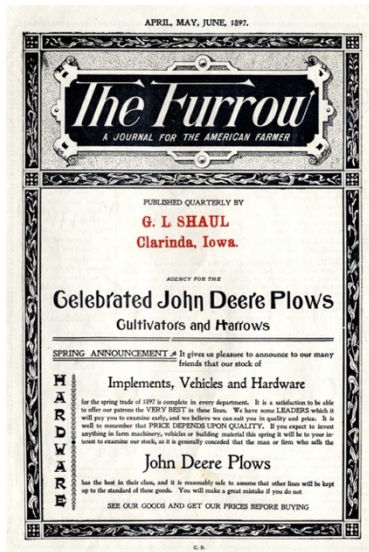


Figure 1.3 *The Furrow* by John Deere (Spring 1897)



Figure 1.4 Poster for *The Lego Movie* (2014)

practical farming methods but has since developed into a leading agricultural lifestyle publication available in print and online in multiple languages.<sup>4</sup> Other historically relevant content marketing examples include the *Michelin Guide*, initially published in 1900 by the French tire manufacturer to increase driving in Europe; the commercial radio station WLS “World’s Largest Store” Chicago, operated by retail giant Sears starting in 1924; and the G.I. Joe comic books and children’s cartoons funded by the Hasbro toy company beginning in 1982 to generate interest among children in a re-launched version of the famous toy line.<sup>5</sup>

Each of these past content marketing efforts provided a target audience with rich, desired media experiences in order to either influence that audience’s behavior or improve their opinion of the company creating the content. The essence of content marketing remains unchanged today and the approach is still employed in virtually all media formats. As evidence, consider the diverse content marketing approaches taken by Danish toy company Lego, which include hosting international builder clubs and competitions, a print magazine, theme parks, video games, and feature films (Fig. 1.4).<sup>6</sup> All of these Lego content marketing formats are, at their core, designed to promote Lego’s larger toys

business, but the content on each platform is intended to be consumed for leisure purposes by the targeted audiences and they do not, at least initially or in a traditional sense, appear to be ads.

<sup>4</sup> Gardiner, Kate. "The Story Behind 'The Furrow', The World's Oldest Content Marketing." *The Content Strategist*, 3 Oct. 2013, contently.com/strategist/2013/10/03/the-story-behind-the-furrow-2/.

<sup>5</sup> Irby, Chris. "The Surprisingly Awesome History of Content Marketing." *Dex Media*, 20 Oct. 2015, dexmedia.com/blog/surprisingly-awesome-history-content-marketing-ben-franklin-jimmy-kimmel/.

<sup>6</sup> Kristula-Green, Noah. "The Lego Movie Isn't a Great Film, It's a Brilliant Commercial." *The Guardian*, 19 Feb. 2014, theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/19/lego-movie-is-great-commerical.

This imperative to avoid appearing obviously “ad like” remains within digital content marketing, this report’s primary content marketing format of interest. Nevertheless,

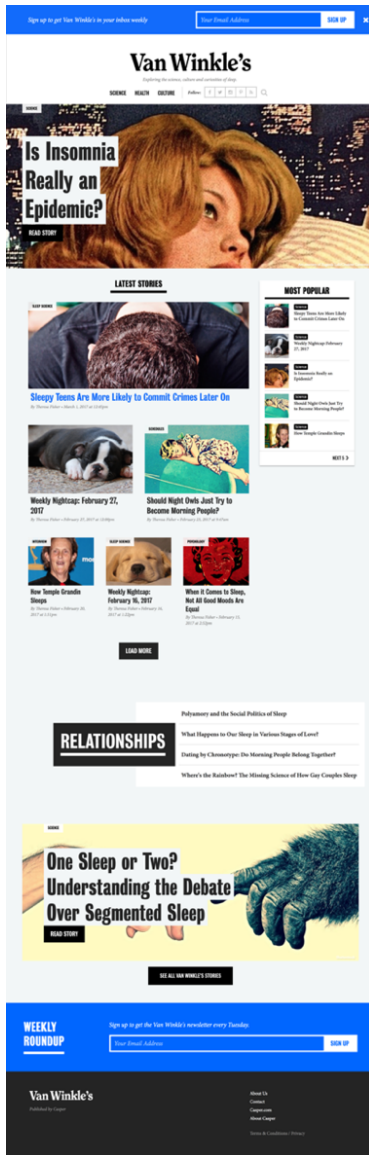


Figure 1.5 *VanWinkles.com* front page (3 March 2017)

certain examples of digital content marketing are better disguised than others. For an example of the best hidden variety, consider *Van Winkle's*, an entire website that is actually an elaborate digital content marketing effort. It was launched by start-up mattress-by-mail company Casper in 2015 and features a clean, inviting layout similar to successful traditional content sites, like *BuzzFeed* or *The Huffington Post* (Fig. 1.5). Importantly, *Van Winkle's* never posts about Casper’s products or even about mattresses in general. Instead, the site sticks steadfastly to its stated editorial mission of “exploring how sleep affects and informs our lives...as related to science, health, family, pets, sex, or travel.”<sup>7</sup>

There are also no display advertisements on the site, while the only stated connection to Casper appears in small print at the bottom of each page and within the *About Us* section. This lack of clear promotion of Casper demonstrates that the benefits of *Van Winkle's* as a marketing platform are not based in directly driving mattress sales. Rather, it was designed by Casper to primarily develop an audience for sleep-related web content. That audience’s interests, based on the success or failure of individual posts, can then be tracked as a form of market research that may influence Casper’s future

traditional advertising. Further, even the subtle associations with Casper are partly intended to increase the audience’s overall esteem for the company.

However, not all modern digital content marketing efforts are published on independent platforms like *Van Winkle's*. Especially for smaller companies, this approach may be

<sup>7</sup> Fisher, Theresa. "About Us." *Van Winkle's*, [vanwinkles.com/about](http://vanwinkles.com/about).

logistically impractical and provide fewer measurable benefits when compared to the primary alternative, which is a blog on the company's website. One benefit of the company blog approach is increased visibility for the company's website resulting from blog traffic. The company blog approach to digital content marketing is, indeed, extremely common. Business-to-business (B2B) content marketers reported blogs as their most critical publishing format in 2016.<sup>8</sup> While business-to-consumer (B2C) content marketers reported blogging tied for second with email newsletters, with both lagging behind social media posting;<sup>9</sup> though it is notable that both email and social media content marketing strategies frequently provide links back to a company's blog.

The purpose of this section was to demonstrate that digital content marketing did not develop in a vacuum. Rather, it is the logical conclusion of a historical marketing practice that has merely been updated and adapted to suit the current web-connected era. Further, the section sought to briefly introduce two of digital content marketing's most popular expressions: independent websites and company blogs. The next section will describe digital content marketing's recent growth and current practices in greater detail.

### 1.3 Growth & Practices

The strategy's centuries-long history notwithstanding, the term content marketing was first coined in 2001 to better describe emerging digital marketing services offered at Cleveland, Ohio's Penton Custom Media.<sup>10</sup> In the years since, the term's popularity has grown rapidly, though this growth has been particularly noticeable since about 2008 (*Fig. 1.6*). Today, digital content marketing is almost a business imperative in North America, with 89% of business-to-business (B2B) companies<sup>11</sup> and 86% of business-to-consumer

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<sup>8</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 28 Sept. 2016, Pg. 29. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2017\\_B2B\\_Research\\_FINAL.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2017_B2B_Research_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2C Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 19 Oct. 2016, Pg. 27. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017\\_B2C\\_Research\\_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017_B2C_Research_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Pulizzi, Joe. "Content Marketing All the Rage as a Term." *Content Marketing Institute*, 1 Mar. 2001, [contentmarketinginstitute.com/2012/03/content-marketing-term/](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2012/03/content-marketing-term/).

<sup>11</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 28 Sept. 2016, Pg. 6. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017\\_B2B\\_Research\\_FINAL.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017_B2B_Research_FINAL.pdf)



(B2C) companies<sup>12</sup> reporting current engagement in the practice. In addition, over half of all remaining companies report intention to begin creating digital marketing content during 2017,<sup>13,14</sup> which would raise total participation in the practice by all North American businesses to well over 90% by 2018.

One of the primary causes of digital content marketing's rise at around the turn of the millennium was the increased difficulty of engaging users with online display ads, which

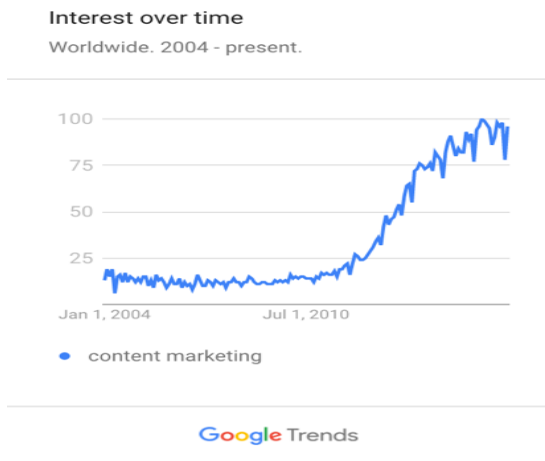


Figure 1.6 Search frequency for 'content marketing' by Google Trends

are clickable ad panes that typically appear on the periphery of published web content. Online display ads are similar to traditional print advertisements, in that both seek to reach the established audience of desired published material in order to promote a company's product or service. The main difference from print ads is that, when clicked upon, online display ads can direct consumers to a brand's preferred online landing page. Using click-through rates (CTR) as a measure of engagement, we can see

how online display ads have steadily decreased in effectiveness over time. The format was first used in the mid-90s and CTR first settled at about 5%, but by the late 1990s average CTR had fallen to around 3% of viewers.<sup>15</sup> Over time, average CTR for online display ads continued falling sharply before reaching its current level of about 0.1%, or about one click for every thousand views.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2C Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 19 Oct. 2016, Pg. 6. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017\\_B2C\\_Research\\_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017_B2C_Research_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 28 Sept. 2016, Pg. 6. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017\\_B2B\\_Research\\_FINAL.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017_B2B_Research_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2C Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 19 Oct. 2016, Pg. 6. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017\\_B2C\\_Research\\_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017_B2C_Research_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Li, Hairong and Leckenby, John. *Internet Advertising Formats and Effectiveness*. Center for Interactive Advertising, Oct. 2004. Accessed 12 Jan. 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Chaffey, Dave. "Display Advertising Click Through Rates Digital Marketing." *Smart Insights*, 8 Mar. 2017, [smartinsights.com/internet-advertising/internet-advertising-analytics/display-advertising-clickthrough-rates](http://smartinsights.com/internet-advertising/internet-advertising-analytics/display-advertising-clickthrough-rates).



In addition to the issue of decreased CTR, over 600 million internet users worldwide now run ad blockers to avoid seeing display ads altogether, with the installation of this

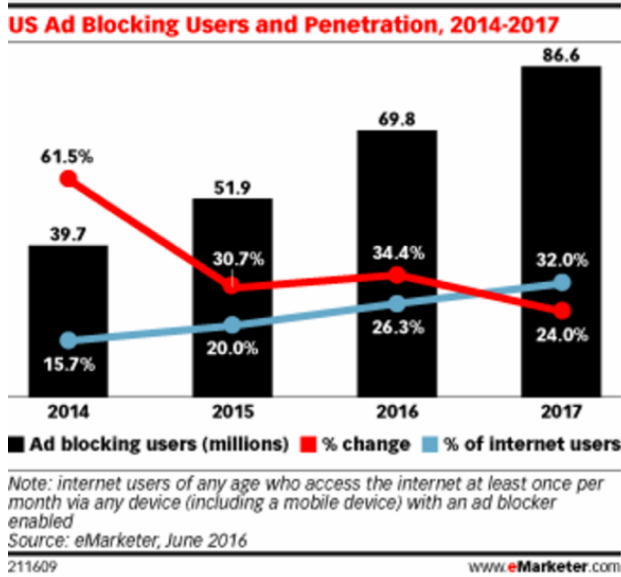


Figure 1.7 US ad blocking growth chart by eMarketer

software growing by over 30% in the US during 2016 and predicted to rise more in the coming year<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 1.7). Perhaps more distressing to web marketers, the prized 18-to-32-year-old demographic block ads at by far the highest rates.<sup>18</sup>

In response to the decreased effectiveness and visibility of online display ads, many web advertisers have sought to improve the overall efficiency of the display ad approach through automated or “programmatic”

ad buying and placement. However, even this approach has come under recent scrutiny for its dubious effectiveness<sup>19</sup> and the likelihood of a company’s online display ad being automatically placed alongside web content they might find objectionable.<sup>20</sup>

Given that online display ads are now rarely clicked on, increasingly blocked by consumers, and potentially linked to objectionable content, it is understandable that companies would seek an alternative in digital content marketing. Indeed, this need for additional online advertising options helped to spur the creation of the first company blogs starting around 1999. Uptake of the practice was helped by the release that year of Blogger, one of the first easy-to-use content management system (CMS), and later in 2003 by the release of current leading CMS, WordPress. These user-friendly publishing tools helped democratize digital content marketing, enabling blogs to proliferate. To aid

<sup>17</sup> Cortland, Matthew. *2017 Adblock Report*. Page Fair, 1 Feb. 2017. [pagefair.com/blog/2017/adblockreport/](http://pagefair.com/blog/2017/adblockreport/).

<sup>18</sup> "Who Blocks Ads, Why and How to Win Them Back." IAB, 2016, [iab.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/07/IAB-Ad-Blocking-2016-Who-Blocks-Ads-Why-and-How-to-Win-Them-Back.pdf](http://iab.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/07/IAB-Ad-Blocking-2016-Who-Blocks-Ads-Why-and-How-to-Win-Them-Back.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Battelle, John. ---. "The Programmatic Problem." *Digiday*, 27 May 2014, [digiday.com/media/programmatic-advertising-context/](http://digiday.com/media/programmatic-advertising-context/).

<sup>20</sup> Alba, Davey. "YouTube’s Ad Problems Finally Blow Up in Google’s Face." *WIRED*, 25 Mar. 2017, [wired.com/2017/03/youtubes-ad-problems-finally-blow-googles-face/](http://wired.com/2017/03/youtubes-ad-problems-finally-blow-googles-face/).

in the discoverability of blog posts, early digital content marketers used search engine optimization (SEO) techniques, such as keyword targeting. At times, this approach led to stilted copy that overused target words and phrases intended to make content marketing blog posts more discoverable – a practice now pejoratively referred to as keyword stuffing.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, companies increasingly began paying Google directly to have their content marketing posts appear higher in search results – a practice called search engine marketing (SEM). Though these discoverability approaches changed over time, both SEO and SEM remain common practices in digital content marketing today.<sup>22</sup>

Several years later, the rise of mobile computing and social media networking caused common practices in digital content marketing to begin evolving rapidly once more. The



Figure 1.8 A smartphone displaying the Twitter app

inflection point of this shift could be seen as 2008, the year after Apple released the first iPhone and when Facebook first reached one hundred million active users (a number now standing at 1.8 billion or around a quarter of the world's population). The effects of the simultaneous growth in adoption of mobile computing and social networking were significant, causing consumers to increasingly view the internet as a combined mobile and social experience (Fig. 1.8). By mid-2014, mobile computing accounted for over half of worldwide internet access, leading content marketers to increasingly design web posts to be adaptable for mobile viewing.<sup>23</sup> By 2015, 90% of North American mobile web access time occurred in applications, compared to 10% in web browsers where SEO and SEM are effective; drilling deeper into those numbers, 19% of mobile browsing occurred on Facebook app alone and 31% on all social media apps

<sup>21</sup> Marrs, Megan. "Understanding the Dangers of Keyword Stuffing." *WordStream*, 21 Mar. 2012, [wordstream.com/blog/ws/2012/03/21/dangers-of-keyword-stuffing](http://wordstream.com/blog/ws/2012/03/21/dangers-of-keyword-stuffing).

<sup>22</sup> Samson, Eric. "Top Strategies to Integrate SEO/SEM into Your Marketing Plan." *Business*, 3 Mar. 2017, [business.com/articles/seo-selling-to-customers/](http://business.com/articles/seo-selling-to-customers/).

<sup>23</sup> Murtagh, Rebecca. "Mobile Now Exceeds PC: The Biggest Shift Since the Internet Began." *Search Engine Watch*, 8 Aug. 2014, [searchenginewatch.com/sew/opinion/2353616/mobile-now-exceeds-pc-the-biggest-shift-since-the-internet-began](http://searchenginewatch.com/sew/opinion/2353616/mobile-now-exceeds-pc-the-biggest-shift-since-the-internet-began).

combined.<sup>24</sup> This consumer-driven movement toward mobile computing and social media browsing reduced the effectiveness of search-based discoverability strategies. As a result, 85% of business-to-consumer (B2C) digital content marketers now utilize social media for content publishing and promotion, with Facebook being the most common platform.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, 83% of business-to-business (B2B) digital content marketers utilize social media, with LinkedIn as the top platform.<sup>26</sup> Social media promotion is now also the top paid discoverability strategy for B2C digital content marketers, significantly ahead of SEM.<sup>27</sup> This need to pay social platforms to make marketing content discoverable has led concerned industry observers to increasingly describe social media as a “pay-to-play system.”<sup>28</sup>

Behind only social media and blogging, email newsletters were the third most implemented digital content marketing tactic by B2B companies during 2016.<sup>29</sup> Also popular among B2C advertisers, email newsletters are both publishing and promotion platforms for digital content marketing in the sense they may contain web marketing content and may also link to such content on a blog or website. In addition to being adaptable to achieving multiple goals, email newsletters are favoured by digital content marketers because they reach audiences directly, arriving at set, predictable intervals in the consumers’ email inboxes. Since email newsletters must be subscribed to, the audience has demonstrated an interest in receiving this content, thus increasing the likelihood it will be consumed. Building a voluntary email list of interested subscribers also enables marketers to reach that audience with special offers and provides

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<sup>24</sup> Khalaf, Simon. "Seven Years into The Mobile Revolution: Content Is Still King" *SVP Publishing*, 26 Aug. 2015, Accessed at: [flurrymobile.tumblr.com/post/127638842745/seven-years-into-the-mobile-revolution-content-is](http://flurrymobile.tumblr.com/post/127638842745/seven-years-into-the-mobile-revolution-content-is).

<sup>25</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2C Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 19 Oct. 2016, Pg. 27, 30. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017\\_B2C\\_Research\\_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017_B2C_Research_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 28 Sept. 2016, Pg. 28, 31. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017\\_B2B\\_Research\\_FINAL.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017_B2B_Research_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2C Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 19 Oct. 2016. Pg. 27, 33. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017\\_B2C\\_Research\\_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017_B2C_Research_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Proulx, Mike. "There Is No More Social Media -- Just Advertising." *AdAge*, 2 Apr. 2015, [adage.com/article/digitalnext/social-media-advertising/297841/](http://adage.com/article/digitalnext/social-media-advertising/297841/).

<sup>29</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 28 Sept. 2016, Pg. 28. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017\\_B2B\\_Research\\_FINAL.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017_B2B_Research_FINAL.pdf)

additional behaviour metrics to analyze, including the frequency with which the audience opens the newsletter or clicks on any web links it may contain.

Although social media, blogging, and email newsletters are the most common tactics in digital content marketing, individual digital content marketers must choose which to employ or focus on, and whether to incorporate any of the numerous other common tactics, which include video, webinars/webcasts, online courses, infographics, or whitepapers/ebooks,<sup>30</sup> or if it might be worthwhile to attempt an emerging tactic such as virtual or augmented reality,<sup>31</sup> internet-of-things integration, chatbots, and even artificial intelligence.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, digital content marketing is a complex marketing practice involving numerous variable strategies and approaches, between which any digital content marketer must choose to pursue those most likely to assist in achieving their particular set of business objectives.<sup>33</sup> A constant evolution of digital content marketing is occurring because those engaged in the practice must strive to create content that is superior both to that of their competitors and to the content posted by traditional publishers. Of course, digital content marketers must further ensure that this content generates sufficient ROI and is discoverable by audiences. All of which has led to the regular emergence of newly favoured content formats, as well as new ways of making digital marketing content both profitable and discoverable.

Regardless of the precise approach taken, the mere fact that nearly all North American companies now engage in digital content marketing represents a radical shift in standard industry practices. This shift has necessitated the training and employment of a new category of business professional: digital content marketers. The current and emerging challenges faced by this group are discussed in the following section.

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<sup>30</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 28 Sept. 2016, Pg. 28. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017\\_B2B\\_Research\\_FINAL.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017_B2B_Research_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> Gregory, Jennifer. "Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality: The Next Frontier in Social Media Marketing." *THINK Marketing*, IBM, 16 Nov. 2016, [ibm.com/think/marketing/augmented-reality-and-virtual-reality-the-next-frontier-in-social-media-marketing/](http://ibm.com/think/marketing/augmented-reality-and-virtual-reality-the-next-frontier-in-social-media-marketing/).

<sup>32</sup> Papandrea, Dawn. "IoT, AI, Chatbots: Creative Ways Content Marketer Use New Technology." *Insights, Newscred*, 17 Jan. 2017, [insights.newscred.com/content-marketers-new-technology/](http://insights.newscred.com/content-marketers-new-technology/).

<sup>33</sup> MacKenzie, Keith. "The Evolution of Content Marketing: Why Darwinism Matters to Your Strategy." *The Content Standard by Skyword*, 20 July 2016, [skyword.com/contentstandard/marketing/the-evolution-of-content-marketing-why-darwinism-matters-to-your-strategy/](http://skyword.com/contentstandard/marketing/the-evolution-of-content-marketing-why-darwinism-matters-to-your-strategy/).

## 1.4 Current Challenges

One major challenge currently facing digital content marketers is ensuring discoverability, especially amid increased competition from the ever-growing wealth of media content available online. The discoverability challenge is in some ways eased and in others exacerbated by the platform dominance of Google for search and Facebook for social networking. As of 2015, Google and Facebook combined collected 64% of all US digital advertising revenue,<sup>34</sup> and during 2016 together accounted for 90% of all online marketing revenue growth.<sup>35</sup> The significant and growing dominance of Google and Facebook has been widely described as a digital advertising duopoly.<sup>36</sup> On the one hand, this business reality makes it very clear where marketers can reach the largest audiences. However, as with all forms of monopoly, it leaves digital content marketers with few alternatives and, as a result, somewhat beholden to the whims of Google and Facebook. This has led to several challenges, especially relating to the fact that the terms of paid promotion and the best practices for making content organically discoverable on either Google or Facebook can change at any time. For example, since 2015 Facebook has steadily decreased the frequency that company posts appear in front of consumers organically, thereby increasing advertisers' incentive to pay Facebook directly to promote that content.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, Google frequently updates its search algorithms, forcing digital content marketers to react by constantly tweaking their content output to function best within each new update. This is an ongoing business reality that requires significant attention from digital content marketers, partly due to competition from other digital content marketers who are attempting to remain similarly caught up with current SEO best practices for Google search.<sup>38</sup> This constant need to react to decisions made by the digital marketing duopoly and other promotional

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<sup>34</sup> Gjorgievska, Aleksandra. "Google and Facebook Lead Digital Ad Industry to Revenue Recors." *Bloomberg*, 21 Apr. 2016, bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-22/google-and-facebook-lead-digital-ad-industry-to-revenue-record.

<sup>35</sup> Ingram, Matthew. "Google and Facebook Have Taken Over the Digital Ad Industry." *Fortune*, 4 Jan. 2017, fortune.com/2017/01/04/google-facebook-ad-industry/.

<sup>36</sup> Slefo, George. "Here's Why Google, Facebook Will Continue to Dominate Mobile." *AdAge*, 14 Mar. 2017, adage.com/article/digital/google-facebook-digital-duopoly-stats-emarketer/308282/.

<sup>37</sup> DeMers, Jayson. "How Facebook's Changing News Feed Could Dictate The Future Of Content Marketing." *Forbes*, 28 July 2015, forbes.com/sites/jaysondemers/2015/07/28/how-facebooks-changing-news-feed-could-dictate-the-future-of-content-marketing/#38d42c25568c.

<sup>38</sup> Dholakiya, Pratik. "SEO Trends to Prepare for in 2017." *Search Engine Land*, 6 Dec. 2016, searchengineland.com/seo-trends-prepare-2017-263710.

platforms has been compared within digital content marketing circles to the risk of building a home on rented land, implying the feeling of severely limited control over one's own future.<sup>39</sup>

Another persistent challenge is the difficulty of objectively demonstrating digital content marketing's effectiveness. That is to say, even when marketing content is consumed consistently by large audiences, it remains unclear to many how that consumption translates into return on investment (ROI).<sup>40</sup> One potential response is that content marketing may actually be best described as a combined public relations (PR) and marketing effort. This is true in the sense that, while generating increased sales is possible with the approach, much of its benefit derives from improving a company's perceived favourability among consumers by providing them with desired media experiences they will enjoy and benefit from. Yet, even as a pure marketing strategy, digital content marketing has significant measurable benefits, with evidence suggesting it generates more leads, defined as interactions with new customers, than traditional advertising at greatly decreased costs.<sup>41</sup> These leads can be developed into sales within a digital content marketing approach through the inclusion of calls to action, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this report. While companies must invest significantly to develop, create, host, and promote digital marketing content, the cost savings exist in part because there is no ad-buy fee to publish digital content ads.<sup>42</sup> That is, unlike in traditional advertising or even native advertising, in which ad space must be purchased from a traditional content publisher, digital content marketing is published directly by companies for their audience. And so, the primary argument for digital content marketing's ability to generate ROI is that its multiple benefits, including those related to PR, lead generation, nurturing sales opportunities, providing cost savings, and enabling audience development, make the approach worthwhile.

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<sup>39</sup> Battelle, John. "To Be Clear: Do Not Build Your Brand House On Land You Don't Own." *Search Blog*, 28 Feb. 2014, [battellemedia.com/archives/2014/02/to-be-clear-do-not-build-your-brand-house-on-land-you-dont-own.php](http://battellemedia.com/archives/2014/02/to-be-clear-do-not-build-your-brand-house-on-land-you-dont-own.php).

<sup>40</sup> Chen, Peter. "Three Realizations Needed to Prove Content Marketing ROI." *Relevance*, 21 Jan. 2015, [relevance.com/three-realizations-needed-to-prove-content-marketing-roi/](http://relevance.com/three-realizations-needed-to-prove-content-marketing-roi/).

<sup>41</sup> Hail, Steve. "Content Marketing Costs 62% Less Than Traditional Marketing." *Ad Rants*, 16 Mar. 2013, [adrants.com/2013/05/content-marketing-costs-62-less-than.php](http://adrants.com/2013/05/content-marketing-costs-62-less-than.php).

<sup>42</sup> DeMers, Jayson. "Product Marketing vs. Content Marketing: Which is Better and Why?" *Forbes*, 28 May 2016, [forbes.com/sites/jaysondemers/2016/05/28/product-marketing-vs-content-marketing-which-is-better-and-why/2/#760ff0be5987](http://forbes.com/sites/jaysondemers/2016/05/28/product-marketing-vs-content-marketing-which-is-better-and-why/2/#760ff0be5987).

Another potential challenge for digital content marketing relates to a growing societal disdain toward advertising.<sup>43</sup> After all, disinterest in online display ads contributed to the rise of digital content marketing in the first place. So the question remains whether that same anti-advertising sentiment will eventually detrimentally undermine the effectiveness of digital content marketing. Of course, the fact that content ads manifest as desired media experiences makes them more resistant to ad fatigue, but consumers now routinely rate user-generated content as more reliable than any form of corporate messaging.<sup>44</sup> That growing consensus among consumers has led to an offshoot of digital content marketing known as influencer marketing,<sup>45</sup> in which companies directly compensate individuals with large online and especially social media followings to directly promote the company's products to their own audiences.

A final challenge to digital content marketing is increased competition for consumer attention online. In part, the growth of digital content marketing has increased the competition between any one digital content marketing post and all others, particularly those covering the same or similar topic niches. The potential over-supply of content ads is heightened, however, by the similar wealth of traditionally published web content online, which has been exacerbated more recently by the rise of on-demand streaming content from services like Spotify, Netflix, and YouTube. In such a competitive climate, only the most sophisticated, compelling, and high-quality online media content will succeed. Indeed, there is cause for concern in the latest digital content marketing research, with only 25% of B2C and 21% of B2B content marketers describing their current efforts as "Very Successful" and only 6% describing their overall digital content marketing approach as "Sophisticated."<sup>46,47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> An, Mimi. "Why People Block Ads." *HubSpot Research*, 13 July 2016, [research.hubspot.com/reports/why-people-block-ads-and-what-it-means-for-marketers-and-advertisers](https://research.hubspot.com/reports/why-people-block-ads-and-what-it-means-for-marketers-and-advertisers).

<sup>44</sup> "Social Influence: Marketing's New Frontier." *Crowdtap / Ipsos Media*, 2014, Accessed at: [corp.crowdtap.com/socialinfluence](http://corp.crowdtap.com/socialinfluence).

<sup>45</sup> Roumeliotis, Ioanna. "Peddling Authenticity: Social Media Influencers Undermine Traditional Ads." *CBC News*, 20 Mar. 2017, [cbc.ca/news/business/social-media-influencers-beckerman-twins](http://cbc.ca/news/business/social-media-influencers-beckerman-twins).

<sup>46</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2C Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 19 Oct. 2016, Pg. 7 & 13. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017\\_B2C\\_Research\\_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017_B2C_Research_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 28 Sept. 2016, Pg. 7 & 13. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017\\_B2B\\_Research\\_FINAL.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017_B2B_Research_FINAL.pdf).

Digital content marketing's many significant challenges have caused some to question if it is on track to fulfill its initial promise as an innovative and effective marketing technique.<sup>48</sup> Of course, many in the industry counsel patience and optimism. For example, Content Marketing Institute co-founder Joe Pulizzi assesses content marketing's current challenges using The Gartner Hype Cycle (Fig.1.9).<sup>49</sup> First

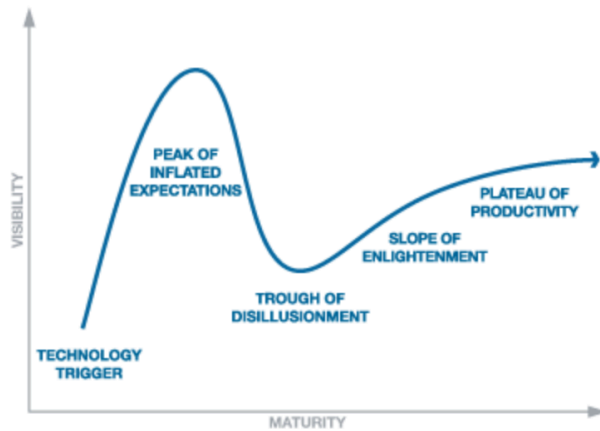


Figure 1.9 The Gartner Hype Cycle

introduced in 1995 by Gartner, an American IT advisory firm, this conceptual framework states that early rapid advancements in new technologies tend to generate excess optimism, or “hype,” leading to premature peaks in expectation for the technology’s profit potential; this is followed by disappointment as the technology inevitably underperforms these lofty expectations, causing

observers to enter the “trough of disillusionment.”<sup>50</sup> Pulizzi believes content marketing reached Gartner’s disillusionment phase in 2015, but he argues that in 2016 it began ascending Gartner’s fourth phase, the “slope of enlightenment,” characterized by increasingly accurate assessments of a technology’s legitimate limitations and uses. Pulizzi further predicts content marketing will soon enter Gartner’s final phase, the “plateau of productivity,” in which a stable relationship is formed between a technology’s perceived and actual utility.

While it is unclear if the challenges of discoverability, demonstrating ROI, ad fatigue, and increased competition will be effectively resolved, digital content marketing is certain to remain a primary marketing tactic in the immediate future, with over 70% of B2C marketers indicating intent to create more digital content in 2017 than in 2016, and only

<sup>48</sup> Matthews, Dan. "How Effective is Content Marketing?" *Forbes*, 31 July 2014, [forbes.com/sites/danmatthews/2014/07/31/how-effective-is-content-marketing](http://forbes.com/sites/danmatthews/2014/07/31/how-effective-is-content-marketing).

<sup>49</sup> Pulizzi, Joe. "Content Marketing – It's Going to Get Weird." Content Marketing Institute, 20 Jan. 2016, [contentmarketinginstitute.com/2016/01/content-marketing-weird/](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2016/01/content-marketing-weird/).

<sup>50</sup> "Hype Cycle Research Methodology." *Gartner Inc* [gartner.com/technology/research/methodologies/hype-cycle.jsp](http://gartner.com/technology/research/methodologies/hype-cycle.jsp). Accessed 12 Jan. 2017.



2% planning to publish less.<sup>51,52</sup> Further, digital content marketing is now well established as an accepted marketing expense, constituting over a quarter of average overall B2B advertising budgets in 2016.<sup>53</sup> Another positive development in digital content marketing is rapidly solidifying industry consensus of the importance of quality over quantity in digital content marketing,<sup>54</sup> which may indicate ascension up Gartner's slope of enlightenment. Previously, too many digital content marketers had taken a quantity-first approach that many in the industry saw as contributing to increased ad fatigue among consumers.<sup>55</sup> Growing agreement on the primacy of quality is reflected by the 77% of self-reportedly "successful" B2C businesses and 85% of "successful" B2B content marketers who strongly correlate content quality with their success, a factor cited more often than strategy, distribution, or measurement tactics.<sup>56,57</sup>

However, these and other encouraging developments have led directly to perhaps the biggest emerging challenge facing digital content marketing: finding sufficient capable labour power.<sup>58</sup> This growing need for talent is likely to remain a primary challenge, as the overall global value of the digital content marketing industry is projected to reach over \$300B USD by 2019<sup>59</sup> (Fig. 1.10). Further, given that digital content marketing's primary challenges revolve around creating quality content, ensuring ROI, and achieving

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<sup>51</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2C Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 19 Oct. 2016, Pg. 26 & 41. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017\\_B2C\\_Research\\_Final.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017_B2C_Research_Final.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 28 Sept. 2016, Pg. 27 & 42. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2017\\_B2B\\_Research\\_FINAL.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2017_B2B_Research_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 28 Sept. 2016, Pg. 27 & 42. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2017\\_B2B\\_Research\\_FINAL.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2017_B2B_Research_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> Makover, Yaniv. "Content Marketing: Focus On Quality Over Quantity." *CMO.com by Adobe*, 30 June 2015, [cmo.com/opinion/articles/2015/6/29/content-marketing-focusing-on-quality-over-quantity.html](http://cmo.com/opinion/articles/2015/6/29/content-marketing-focusing-on-quality-over-quantity.html).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2C Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 19 Oct. 2016, Pg. 15. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017\\_B2C\\_Research\\_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017_B2C_Research_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 28 Sept. 2016, Pg. 15. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017\\_B2B\\_Research\\_FINAL.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017_B2B_Research_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>58</sup> Lazauskas, Joe. "Confessions of a Former Ad Exec: There Are Not Enough Quality Content People." *The Content Strategist*, Contently, 21 July 2016, [contently.com/strategist/2016/07/21/former-ad-exec-confessions-not-enough-quality-content-people/](http://contently.com/strategist/2016/07/21/former-ad-exec-confessions-not-enough-quality-content-people/).

<sup>59</sup> Quinn, Patrick, and Leo Kivijarv, PhD. "Global Content Marketing Forecast 2015-2019." PQ Media, 2015, Accessed at [pqmedia.com/gcmf-2015-2019.html](http://pqmedia.com/gcmf-2015-2019.html).

discoverability, the skills most in demand will be those traditionally characteristic of journalists, marketers, and web publishers, respectively. Pursuit of the revenue

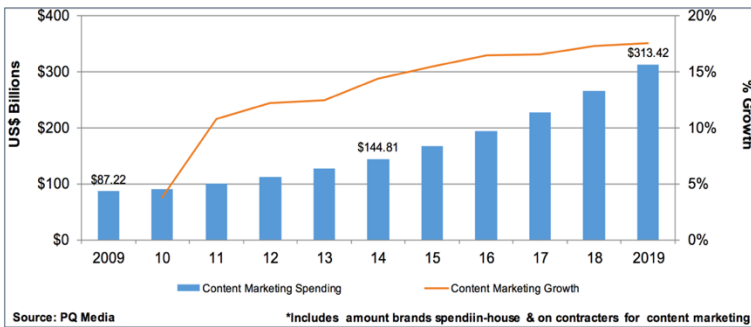


Figure 1.10 Projected global growth of content marketing by PQ Media

opportunities presented by the growth of digital content marketing is represented in this report by the strategic services expansion of boutique print publisher ECHO Memoirs in 2014, when it became ECHO Storytelling Agency and

began offering digital content marketing services. The company’s current practices are the subject of the remainder of this report. In particular, it will detail how ECHO’s storytelling-based approach is expressed by its journalism, marketing, and publishing competencies within digital content marketing.

## Section 2:

# ECHO Storytelling Agency

### 2.1 Company Overview

Established in 1999, ECHO Storytelling Agency is a boutique custom print publisher that began offering digital content marketing services in 2014. Before discussing ECHO's particular storytelling approach to balancing journalism, marketing, and publishing competencies within digital content marketing, it will help to first place the company within the larger context of the digital content marketing industry. In particular, it will be of benefit to position ECHO within the three primary methods companies use to implement digital content marketing strategies, which include in-house content teams, traditional marketing agencies, and dedicated content studios.

The most straightforward approach to implementing digital content marketing is by hiring or assigning internal employees to develop and execute a company's strategy. This option enables companies to closely oversee implementation. It is also the most common approach, with 79% of all original digital content marketing posts having been created in-house during 2016.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, some companies choose to contract out the execution of some or all of their digital content marketing strategy. The main advantage of utilizing a traditional marketing agency in this capacity is that a full-service agency can manage both their clients' digital content marketing and all other advertising approaches simultaneously. However, the efforts of traditional marketing agencies may at times be too rooted in the client-first traditional advertising perspective, as opposed to the audience-first digital content marketing approach.<sup>61</sup> The third option is to utilize a content studio, such as Vancouver's ECHO Storytelling Agency.

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<sup>60</sup> "2016 Content Marketing Staffing & Tactics Study." *Curata*, Pg. 37. 2016, Accessed at [curata.com/resources/ebooks/2016-CMStaffing-Tactics-Study](http://curata.com/resources/ebooks/2016-CMStaffing-Tactics-Study).

<sup>61</sup> Boyles, Chris. "Why Agencies Screw Up Content Marketing." *Digiday*, 27 Feb. 2014, [digiday.com/marketing/agencies-content-marketing/](http://digiday.com/marketing/agencies-content-marketing/).

Content studios vary in size from single owner-operators to massively scaled global enterprises, but they all offer digital content marketing as their primary marketing service. Within this ecosystem, ECHO is a small, boutique studio, with around a dozen permanent employees and a slightly larger pool of freelance contributors. As such, they are able to select clients and projects carefully, then strive to provide exceptional attention to detail within their unique storytelling approach. By contrast, Vancouver's Quiet.ly is a comparatively larger, mid-sized content studio. Compared to ECHO's storytelling approach, Quiet.ly is also notably more data-driven, as they offer more robust data analysis and efficiency optimization services and use in-house analytics and publishing software.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, dwarfing both ECHO and Quiet.ly is one of the largest content studios, New York's Contently, which provides digital content marketing services primarily as to sell proprietary business software designed to streamline content analysis and publishing.<sup>63</sup> Contently employs over one hundred thousand creative freelancers and counts Coca-Cola, Wal-Mart, and General Electric among notable clients.<sup>64</sup>

Becoming a content studio, or developing one within a larger existing organization as ECHO has done, is a particularly viable option for companies that currently employ journalism or publishing professionals since they already have some of the skills needed to plan and execute digital content marketing strategies. With fifteen years of experience creating custom content for corporate and private clients, ECHO did not need to change radically to adapt to the marketing industry. In fact, ECHO remains best described today as essentially a custom publisher that simply offers digital content marketing services among its various publishing products. But in the broadest possible sense, ECHO's owner and staff have long considered themselves first and foremost to be storytellers, a term now widely favoured by digital content marketers to describe their unique competencies.<sup>65</sup> A deeper look at ECHO's publishing history will shed light on the relative ease of their expansion into digital content marketing.

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<sup>62</sup> "Why Quietly?" *Quietly*, [quiet.ly/why](http://quiet.ly/why). Accessed 18 Mar. 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Sebastian, Michael. "Shane Snow's Story Behind His Storytelling Empire Contently." *AdAge*, 14 Oct. 2014, [adage.com/article/news/shane-snow-s-story-storytelling-empire-contently/295352/](http://adage.com/article/news/shane-snow-s-story-storytelling-empire-contently/295352/).

<sup>64</sup> Content Creation." *The Content Strategist*, [contently.com/solutions/talent/](http://contently.com/solutions/talent/). Accessed 18 Mar. 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Hadden, Greg. "Content Marketing Is Moving Toward a Zen State of Storytelling." *Adweek*, 4 May 2016, [adweek.com/brand-marketing/content-marketing-moving-toward-zen-state-storytelling-171231/](http://adweek.com/brand-marketing/content-marketing-moving-toward-zen-state-storytelling-171231/).

ECHO Memoirs was founded in 1999 by journalist-turned-publisher Samantha Reynolds, who remains ECHO's principal owner and operator. Initially, ECHO exclusively offered



Figure 2.1 – A custom published memoir by ECHO Memoirs

custom personal memoir publishing (*Fig. 2.1*). Their typical clients for this service are high-net-worth individuals who can afford to fund the extensive research, writing, design, and production work required. To be clear, these memoirs are not generally made available to the public. Instead, copies tend to be purchased in large quantities by the client, then distributed privately to their family, friends, employees, and business associates, etc., to serve as a permanent record of that individual's struggles, accomplishments, and values.

Throughout the process of creating such a memoir, ECHO's abiding foundational love of history and storytelling helps to make the result engaging and comprehensive.



Figure 2.2 A custom corporate magazine by ECHO Memoirs

As time went on, Reynolds and her staff realised that ECHO's custom publishing services were in demand not only by individuals but also by companies requiring similar high-quality custom publishing services. This led to an initial expansion of ECHO's product offerings to include what could be called corporate memoirs, often ordered by companies to commemorate significant corporate anniversaries. At times, ECHO also creates custom corporate content in other publishing formats, including print magazines or company culture books used for training purposes (*Fig. 2.2*). Given that some of these corporate custom publishing materials have

very likely been used for promotional purposes, ECHO had arguably already entered the content marketing industry before embarking on their strategic expansion into digital content marketing in 2014.

All ECHO projects are guided by the company's enduring storytelling philosophy, which begins with getting to know their subject as deeply as possible. This typically requires many hours of journalism-style interviews and rigorous document research. The object of this phase is to determine a client's core values, such as 'innovation' or 'community,'

and to isolate the handful of key narratives or events that have contributed most to forming their personal or corporate identity. Only after completing this phase can ECHO create content they believe will accurately reflect their clients' histories and values. Above all, ECHO has always insisted on learning and conveying moments of struggle, error, or setback that were overcome by their subjects, believing that any narrative lacking these components will fail to engage audiences.

Discussing what has been essential over time to ECHO's storytelling philosophy, Reynolds states,

“ECHO has always had a love and acceptance of the people and stories that cross our path.... For me, it's so intimate for somebody to say, *here's my story*, that it's almost sacred. So it's always been important for us to fall in love with that story and to serve it well. It's really an insatiable curiosity. I think everyone that has been drawn to work at ECHO over the years loves the feeling of when a new movie starts, and the credits roll. We all just love story.”

Partly responding to increased demand from existing clients, Reynolds and her team decided in 2014 to expand ECHO's services into digital content marketing. These new services include the strategic development, design, creation, publishing, promotion, and ongoing analysis of digital content marketing campaigns, as well as related video production and web design services. Additionally, ECHO is currently developing and implementing new marketing services, including story-discovery workshops and storytelling strategy consultation. Various other aspects of their ongoing partial pivot are still being theorized, tested, and optimized. As such, any attempt in this report to capture ECHO's digital content marketing approach offers only a fleeting glimpse of a fluid and quickly-evolving business strategy.

However, one thing is abundantly clear: what matters most at ECHO is adhering at all times to their honest storytelling philosophy. Although media formats may evolve over time, ECHO's enduring focus on storytelling and their self-description as a storytelling agency positions the company well to capitalize on any motivation or format through which stories may be told in the future. Still, while ECHO certainly foregrounds storytelling, like all other content studios they must balance within their digital content

marketing approach the distinct competencies of journalism, marketing, and publishing professionals. How ECHO's daily practices demonstrate pursuit of this balance is discussed throughout the remainder of this report, beginning with the first pillar: journalism.

## **2.2: Journalism Practices**

The foundational ECHO storytelling approach is inherently journalistic to the degree that it even represents a key differentiating factor that helps set ECHO apart among content studios. At ECHO, this especially strong commitment to the journalistic pillar of digital content marketing begins with the staff. It is intuitive, then, that the 2014 expansion of their storytelling mandate required the hiring of several new staff members with high-level journalism experience. These included their director of content strategy, Shannon Emmerson (Canada Wide Media); senior digital strategist, John Bucher (*BCBusiness*); and story director, John Burns (*The Georgia Straight*, *Vancouver Magazine*). This hiring approach extends to the creative freelancers ECHO works with on all their storytelling projects, as ECHO story director John Burns explains:

“Journalists are comfortable navigating the needs, and ego, and self-understanding of the clients, on the one hand, and the needs of any kind of audience to have an interesting story on the other. Journalists are also more self-confident and willing to fight for an interesting story, I find, than those in sister disciplines like, say, PR.”

Indeed, a core component of ECHO's overall storytelling approach at which journalists excel is in getting clients to open up about their struggles, flaws, and mistakes. This journalistic attribute could be referred to as “digging” for relevant details and enables ECHO to achieve their philosophical priority to publish honest, relatable stories. At ECHO, they frequently reinforce this philosophy to clients by asserting that no audience will take a story seriously if it progresses in the manner of, “things were good, and then they got better.” Getting to the root of a story and telling it well, while remaining sensitive to a client's needs for support and encouragement, is at the heart of great journalism and represents a major component of ECHO's storytelling process. But it is not only

ECHO that values journalistic experience in the digital content marketers. Others have argued that traditionally trained marketers can learn much from journalists in terms of story development and audience engagement.<sup>66</sup>

Speaking in 2016, former award-winning investigative journalist, Cameron Conaway, then a newly appointed digital content marketing manager for a task-management software company, put it this way:

“Everything I’ve learned about content marketing has been about providing quality, valuable content. Journalists already have that in their DNA. In addition, they have mastered the fundamentals of writing. They know how to hook a reader. They know how to work on deadlines. They’re used to the pressure of the beat or a newsroom, and they know how to produce quality content day in and day out.”<sup>67</sup>

At ECHO Storytelling Agency, a commitment to journalism is evident in all their digital content marketing strategies and processes. Indeed, ECHO’s journalistic research phase for new clients helps them to ensure that the tone of all digital content honestly reflects the company for which it is created. In journalism, this is called developing an editorial voice. Their research phase further enables ECHO to determine what specific topics the content marketing posts for a given company will cover and in what level of detail, which journalists call defining an editorial mission. Finally, their research into clients’ history, struggles, and values helps ECHO to craft what they call a brand story for their clients, which the content itself is then designed to reinforce. This means there are always two narratives at play within a given piece of digital marketing content at ECHO. First, the story being told overtly in the content, which is designed to benefit the consumer, and a second, subtle brand story about the client.

As an example, consider ECHO’s response when approached by a local business interested in using brand storytelling to promote a new piece of exercise equipment.

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<sup>66</sup> Conaway, Cameron. "5 Lessons Content Marketing Can Learn from Journalism." *Content Marketing Institute*, 21 Dec. 2016, [contentmarketinginstitute.com/2016/12/lessons-content-marketers-journalists/](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2016/12/lessons-content-marketers-journalists/).

<sup>67</sup> McDermott, Clare. "Inside the Mind of a Journalist in Content Marketing." *Content Marketing Institute*, 28 June 2016, [contentmarketinginstitute.com/2016/06/journalist-content-marketing/](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2016/06/journalist-content-marketing/).



After taking the time and care needed to deeply understand the client's brand story, ECHO helped determine that the optimum target audience was elite college and pro-level athletic trainers who could best appreciate the product's specific virtues. As a consequence, the content's tone needed to be highly technical, while the editorial mandate became reviewing the anatomical science behind the product. The storytelling formats employed included blog posts, social media, videos, and most notably a long-form scientific report. Providing this type of detailed original research, often in return for a consumer's email address, is a common tactic when targeting advanced audiences, with the resulting digital content alternatively referred to as ebooks or white papers.<sup>68</sup> Due to its relatively high production costs, the strategy cannot be undertaken lightly, but it was deemed the best way to communicate the fitness company's brand story to its ideal audience. In part, ECHO has the luxury of pursuing this approach since numerous members of their in-house and freelance staff have the journalism savvy required to write competently on complex topics.

Within the content development and creation phase, as well, ECHO follows typical magazine publishing and journalism practices, which includes employing an overall collaborative approach. This has been referred to in the digital content marketing industry as creating a "brand newsroom" atmosphere, although the term "brand magazine" might be equally fitting, and ECHO represents an excellent example of how it can work.<sup>69</sup> To be clear, this approach is far from the industry standard with research indicating that 40% of all in-house content marketing teams consist of just one person.<sup>70</sup> However, attempting the "brand newsroom" or "brand magazine" approach means tapping into the spirit of collaboration that exists collectively between a team of writers and between a writer and editor, which is integral to good journalism. Indeed, gaining access to a team of dedicated content creators is one of the most distinct benefits of hiring a content studio like ECHO.

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<sup>68</sup> Neuwirth, Roxanne. "Why White Papers Still Matter: Their Role in Effective Content Marketing." *Content Marketing Institute*, 21 Sept. 2014, [contentmarketinginstitute.com/2014/09/white-papers-matter-effective-content-marketing/](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2014/09/white-papers-matter-effective-content-marketing/).

<sup>69</sup> Lazauskas, Joe. "Virtual Vs. Physical: The Two Brand Newsroom Models Taking Over Content Marketing." *The Content Strategist*, 27 Mar. 2017, [contently.com/strategist/2017/03/27/brand-newsroom-models-content-marketing/](http://contently.com/strategist/2017/03/27/brand-newsroom-models-content-marketing/).

<sup>70</sup> *Content Marketing 2016: Staffing, Measurement, and Effectiveness Across the Industry*. Contently, 2016. Accessed at [contently.com/strategist/2016/01/11/content-marketing-2016-staffing-measurement-and-effectiveness-across-the-industry/](http://contently.com/strategist/2016/01/11/content-marketing-2016-staffing-measurement-and-effectiveness-across-the-industry/).

So how does the “brand newsroom” approach work in practice at ECHO? To begin, no piece of ECHO content is the work of a solitary individual. From concept to execution, there is input from multiple parties including the client, creator, and very often ECHO’s director of content strategy, Shannon Emmerson who explains the company’s journalistic, story-driven approach in the following way:

“Story is a great hook because content marketing is all about creating compelling content that will drive someone to take action. So we use story-driven content marketing to add a layer of emotional and intellectual engagement – something that fires people up. We’ve kind of switched the game [in marketing] to being expert storytellers first and foremost.”

At ECHO, story ideas for particular digital content marketing web posts are typically surfaced collaboratively by all team members working on that particular project. Sitting face-to-face, they pitch ideas for new content that are then rated, discussed, and honed by the group. In this way, ECHO’s content marketing approach mirrors how a team of journalists and editors at a magazine might collaborate to generate story concepts. Once a viable content idea has been generated and approved by the client, a creator is assigned from either ECHO’s internal team or from among ECHO’s extended freelance contractors to produce the first draft. At this stage, an initial editing and review process is completed either by Emmerson or another member of the ECHO team to ensure accuracy, originality, quality, adherence to both editorial voice and brand story, and finally, sufficient utility to the intended consumer. As needed, changes are made to the draft before the content is either published, in the case of ECHO’s own content, or presented to the client for final approval. In this manner, ECHO closely follows journalistic practices by employing a multi-perspective approach to sourcing and implementing content ideas, including the maintenance of a writer-editor dynamic.

At times, ECHO does utilize statistical research when determining which content ideas to pursue, especially by tracking the success of past topics they have published on using web traffic and social media analytics tools. But ECHO does not rely on statistical analysis to the extent some other content studios seem to, including some of their local competitors, based, for example, on Quiet.ly’s previously detailed data-centric

approach.<sup>71</sup> Rather, the ECHO Storytelling Agency storytelling approach is more aligned with the journalistic tradition of pursuing a topic, or news “beat,” relentlessly and largely intuitively to identify the most interesting emerging and related stories.

At each stage, executing ECHO’s storytelling digital content marketing approach requires characteristically journalistic skills and competencies. However, content marketing is not a purely journalistic endeavor. In order to succeed, any digital content marketing post or strategy must also achieve its business function as an advertisement. That is why successful implementation of any digital content strategy also requires the core competencies of the marketing industry. ECHO’s approach to meeting this challenge will be discussed in the following section.

## 2.3 Marketing Practices

Although ECHO Storytelling Agency’s unique positioning as story-driven content studio places their overall approach most in line with the journalistic tradition, all of their digital content marketing services remain essentially advertising endeavors. As such, ECHO must pay due attention to demonstrating return on investment (ROI) from their brand storytelling activities to their clients. As mentioned earlier, accomplishing this is helped by digital content marketing’s ability to generate new leads with less investment than traditional marketing, while further achieving various non-sales related business goals, including market research and public relations objectives. Indeed, the diverse merits of the approach are increasingly being recognized by the marketers and companies involved. Among both business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) companies, lead generation, lead nurturing, brand awareness, customer retention, and customer engagement all ranked ahead of generating sales as stated digital content marketing goals for 2017.<sup>72,73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> "Why Quietly?" *Quietly*, quiet.ly/why. Accessed 18 Mar. 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 28 Sept. 2016. Pg. 36. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2017\\_B2B\\_Research\\_FINAL.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2017_B2B_Research_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>73</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2C Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 19 Oct. 2016. Pg. 36. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2017\\_B2C\\_Research\\_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2017_B2C_Research_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf).

Still, while generating increased sales is rarely the exclusive goal of digital content marketing, the approach can encourage specific actions among the audience, including the creation of sales opportunities. This is primarily done through calls to action (CTAs) placed either within or on the periphery of the content. A CTA can take various forms, but it is always a suggestion to the consumer to take an additional action, such as follow a company on social media, subscribe to an email newsletter, further investigate a company's products, or even directly visit an e-commerce site. Although the primary apparent goal of any digital content marketing post should always be providing the consumer with a desired media experience, making marketing CTAs visible enough to at least be readily noticed by consumers of that content is widely considered an acceptable industry best practice.

Another advisable marketing practice in digital content advertising is generating a formal strategy document that explicitly states a company's intended approach, budget, and goals, with the latter defined in measurable key performance indicators (KPI). These can include such objective metrics as the average time spent by consumers on a particular digital platform, "likes" or engagement levels on social media, or even a specific number of sales obtained through CTAs. Without formal strategy documentation, digital content marketing risks becoming unfocused and fiscally inefficient.<sup>74</sup> Research backs this up, given that while only 37% of all B2B companies reported having a documented content strategy, approximately 60% of "successful" content marketers did, while 87% of "unsuccessful" approaches were undocumented.<sup>75</sup> These rates were approximately matched among B2C companies,<sup>76</sup> suggesting that, while the practice remains relatively uncommon, content strategy documentation correlates strongly with success.

At ECHO Storytelling Agency, each of these marketing practices for digital content marketing is closely followed. To begin, ECHO excels at documenting content marketing

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<sup>74</sup> Chaffey, Dave. "10 Reasons You Need a Digital Marketing Strategy in 2017." *Smart Insights*, 9 Jan. 2017, [smartinsights.com/digital-marketing-strategy/digital-strategy-development/10-reasons-for-digital-marketing-strategy/](http://smartinsights.com/digital-marketing-strategy/digital-strategy-development/10-reasons-for-digital-marketing-strategy/).

<sup>75</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 28 Sept. 2016. Pg. 4. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017\\_B2B\\_Research\\_FINAL.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017_B2B_Research_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>76</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2C Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 19 Oct. 2016. Pg. 4. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017\\_B2C\\_Research\\_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017_B2C_Research_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf).

strategies. They create detailed preliminary strategy documents for each new client that set out the frequency and platform for all web posts and define the project's intended KPI. To a large degree, tracking progress of these KPI relies on website and social media analytics data obtained from a variety of sources. This includes tracking data on audience size, demographics, country or city of origin, behaviour on the platform, and acquisition source. By knowing who is reading their content, or even who is reading individual pieces of content, ECHO improves their sense of what content their targeted audience demographic enjoys most and how they tend to find it, which can help immensely to improve content targeting.

The strategy documents that ECHO produces for its digital content marketing clients are comprehensive in scope. Among their various components, they include highly detailed marketing personas. At ECHO, these fictional customer personas are given extensive personal backgrounds, including life histories, meaningful relationships, personal interests, and deep aspirations. The personas are, of course, given names and are referred to by them frequently by all members of the team throughout the life of that project. These strategy documents are regularly referred to and updated as priorities and strategies change, and specific KPI are meticulously tracked and discussed frequently with ECHO's clients. In fact, new reporting is created at regular, often monthly, intervals for ECHO clients to gauge the extent to which the project's marketing goals are being achieved and to propose additional methods that might improve that performance. Of course, ECHO Storytelling Agency acknowledges openly with their clients and within strategy documentation that the business case for digital content marketing is not based solely on directly increasing sales. Rather, that its benefits include the building of trust with a targeted audience through honest storytelling. Notably, this marketing goal cannot be achieved by a single piece of content, just as a deep personal bond is not formed during a single interaction. And so, to ECHO, each piece of storytelling content that they publish represents a chance to better familiarize an audience with their clients' unique brand stories in low-stakes, beneficial interactions. ECHO rightly acknowledges that digital content marketing is long-term marketing approach, requiring patience and persistence to succeed.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Hall, John. "Content Marketing Is a Long-Term Commitment, Not A Campaign." *Forbes*, 13 Apr. 2014, [forbes.com/sites/johnhall/2014/04/13/content-marketing-is-a-long-term-commitment-not-a-campaign/#28b5c603ab80](https://forbes.com/sites/johnhall/2014/04/13/content-marketing-is-a-long-term-commitment-not-a-campaign/#28b5c603ab80).

A good example of ECHO's storytelling marketing approach is captured by their own viral content marketing video, "#TellThemNow – The Father's Day Video That Will Melt Your Heart" (Fig. 2.3). Released in June



Figure 2.3 A content marketing video by ECHO Storytelling Agency

2015, the video features spontaneous, heartfelt conversations between fathers and their children and has received over 690,000 views on YouTube. The vast majority of viewers of this video will never be ECHO clients. They simply enjoy the content for its own sake and might ideally at least become aware of ECHO in the process. Meanwhile, those interested in ECHO's services can see from the video's success that ECHO excels at creating compelling marketing content.

Further, they learn that infusing web content with heartfelt, personal narrative is a major part of ECHO's storytelling-based brand story. All of this could move potential clients to pursue a business relationship with ECHO. The use of a hashtag in the title of the video could further be considered a CTA that provides another measurable KPI for the project.

Although improved brand storytelling is central to ECHO's business case for digital content marketing, they do frequently include CTAs in their content to help generate ROI. Examples of this are seen frequently in ECHO's digital content marketing output for a regional chain store, for whom ECHO creates multiple content articles weekly as part of an overall content marketing strategy that also incorporates social media platform management provided by ECHO. In many cases, this takes the fairly straightforward form of links within the content's text leading to the client's e-commerce sales platform. Another approach is to subtly design an entire article around a service or product that the company sells in its stores. For example, a post's manifested content may be tips and tricks when preparing for a road trip, but ECHO could mention within that post that the company sells something especially handy for such occasions, like tents, camping chairs, or beverage coolers. Another key approach is to offer detailed advice to the audience throughout the post that partially serves as evidence that the store's expert staff can help consumers in-store with similar concerns. In an important sense, this serves as a CTA to visit the store and request such advice. Other standard CTAs used

include adding closing lines to the ends of posts that mention the company directly or encouraging consumers to follow the company's social media channels.

Overall, ECHO's approach to digital content marketing more than adequately incorporates industry-standard marketing strategies. In fact, their level of strategy documentation and results tracking, in particular, go well beyond industry norms. It has now been shown how ECHO carefully balances the imperative to generate ROI within their journalistic storytelling approach. What remains to be clarified is how this content is then made appealing and accessible to readers. This is done through ECHO's web publishing practices as discussed in the following section.

### **2.3: Publishing Practices**

Just as ECHO Storytelling Agency are relatively new entrants to the marketing industry, ECHO also needed to significantly develop their internal web publishing competencies following their 2014 expansion into digital content marketing. For the purposes of this paper, the web publishing aspects of digital content marketing are considered to primarily include selecting and designing content platforms, adhering to pre-determined publishing schedules, and employing various promotional strategies to enhance the discoverability of content. Within any ongoing digital marketing strategy, these publishing techniques may often appear to be merely procedural matters, but their importance should not be underestimated. Without sufficient focus on publishing competencies, digital marketing content will remain unsuccessful even if its content is sufficiently compelling and optimally employs tactics designed to ensure ROI. In short, this is because it simply will not be consumed by a large enough audience to be effective.

To investigate ECHO's publishing practices for digital content marketing, this report will focus on their internal content marketing efforts, which include content published on ECHO's blog, email newsletter, and social media platforms. Indeed, ECHO Storytelling Agency, like virtually all content studios, is both a provider of digital content marketing services and an active participant in the approach for their own purposes. Their primary publishing platform for long form posts is the blog section of their website. While ECHO does create multimedia marketing content, such as the successful viral video mentioned

previously, the most common content format on their blog is text- and image-based, magazine-style articles that cover and promote storytelling as a business strategy. More specifically, their blog features articles on the power of storytelling, examinations of how companies can utilize it within digital content marketing, and advocacy for celebrating corporate anniversaries.

After selecting their company blog as the primary publishing platform, ECHO's next web publishing based task was to finalize its design (Fig. 2.4). The blog and the entire



ECHOStories.com site were built with the user-friendly WordPress content management system, under the creative direction of ECHO art director, Cathy Smith. Although ECHO contracts out the technical aspects of web design work to other local companies, they offer consultation and art direction services related to web design, which are designed to help ECHO clients to better communicate their brand story visually online. Since ECHO offers such web design related services, it is important that their own website and blog are both visually appealing and clearly communicate ECHO's brand story. To this end, ECHO is currently redesigning their web presence, but their current site provides ample indication of ECHO's past brand storytelling efforts in that regard.

To begin, the site uses the shade of orange found in ECHO's logo as its featured colour to cement a strong sense of branding. To imply their editorial mandate, it features the heading "Stories About Stories" at the top. This is written over an old

photograph of elderly gentlemen performing in a brass band, which evokes ECHO's brand story by suggesting their love of history. Below that are large CTAs to subscribe to ECHO's newsletter, followed by three semi-permanent pinned posts, one of which is currently a CTA to sign up for ECHO's brand storytelling e-course. This is followed by



four rows of three blog articles, that appear as fairly large image tiles with corresponding headlines. At the bottom, there is a brief description of ECHO's services, along with contact information and links to their social media accounts. Overall, the site's design is clean and welcoming, with the bold typography, distinct content tiles, and extensive use of white space in line with many of today's most innovative content websites.<sup>78</sup>

To ensure consistency, ECHO sticks to a publishing schedule of approximately two articles per week. Publishing at this rate is important at ECHO because their monthly storytelling newsletters each contain links to four pieces of new ECHO blog content. As an especially effective way to reach interested readers, the newsletter is a priority within ECHO's overall content strategy. This means publishing one new article per week is the absolute minimum ECHO can afford without duplicating content within the newsletter, while just meeting that minimum would mean visitors to the site from newsletter links would find little else to browse upon arrival. Meeting this threshold two newly published storytelling articles per week is not without its challenges. Since the majority of ECHO blog content is created internally, it requires a significant time commitment from the staff. However, this effort is deemed worthwhile at ECHO since successfully employing their own storytelling approach to digital content marketing distinctly improves their ability to convince clients to purchase storytelling content services from ECHO.

Other reasons for maintaining a consistent publishing schedule at ECHO include the fact that having a large library of content on a given topic helps a website and company to become recognized as an industry leader on that topic. This occurs both by creating an appearance of expertise for visitors to the site, and because having a large amount of quality content on a given topic, as ECHO strives to have regarding storytelling marketing, increases a website's visibility within web search algorithms, such as Google's.<sup>79</sup> All of which is to say, search discoverability is partly a by-product of scale, meaning that adding new content regularly provides additional long-term returns beyond the new traffic an individual post might attain. Finally, maintaining a consistent publishing schedule is important given the relative unpredictability of content success for individual

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<sup>78</sup> Prokeš, Karel. "Web Design Trends 2017." *Web Integration*, 13 Feb. 2017, [webintegration.info/en/blog/web-design-trends-2017](http://webintegration.info/en/blog/web-design-trends-2017).

<sup>79</sup> Burton, Robin. "5 Reasons Why Fresh Content is Critical for Your Website and SEO." *Seo Site Checkup*, 24 Mar. 2016, [seositecheckup.com/articles/5-reasons-why-fresh-content-is-critical-for-your-website-and-seo](http://seositecheckup.com/articles/5-reasons-why-fresh-content-is-critical-for-your-website-and-seo).

posts. By publishing new posts on a set schedule, ECHO increases its chances of finding the rare hit that frequently makes up a large share of website visits. In publishing, the need to release content consistently to surface new hits is referred to as the relationship between blockbusters and the long tail of less effective products.<sup>80</sup>

At ECHO, the promotion of each new piece of published content is handled in-house. The task is completed collaboratively by several members of the staff, but it is overseen primarily by the audience development manager and community engagement manager. Working in tandem, these team members are responsible for maximizing public engagement from any piece of digital marketing content that ECHO publishes, either on ECHO's own platforms or for their clients. Increasing content discoverability begins at ECHO by ensuring any piece of blog content meets industry standard best publishing practices for search engine optimization (SEO), including optimal length, a highly searchable title, a set degree of keyword density, and the use of content meta tags. This is achieved at ECHO largely through the use of a back-end WordPress plug-in that automatically assesses each post's SEO and makes any needed suggestions to improve it, a fairly standard industry practice.<sup>81</sup>

However, the most time-consuming aspect of enhancing the discoverability of ECHO's publishing marketing content involves promoting it on ECHO's social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, and, to a lesser extent, Snapchat and the self-publishing website Medium. The two most effective platforms for ECHO are Twitter, on which ECHO has the most current followers, and Facebook, where ECHO spends the most money to directly promote their content and from which it acquires the most social traffic back to its blog, based on Google Analytics data. Each social media promotion platform has individual strengths, but none are used exclusively to promote ECHO's blog content. Rather, ECHO social media publishing platforms are best considered as microblogs in their own right. On each, ECHO publishes a carefully monitored mix of entirely original content, curated content, and links back to the ECHO blog, all while providing opportunities for potential new clients to interact with ECHO. As

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<sup>80</sup> McKenzie, Kate. "What is the Long Tail of Publishing?" *Publishing Trendsetter*, 10 Apr. 2013, [publishingtrendsetter.com/industryinsight/long-tail-publishing/](http://publishingtrendsetter.com/industryinsight/long-tail-publishing/).

<sup>81</sup> Linn, Michele. "SEO Basics: Content Marketing Success Tips." *Content Marketing Institute*, 14 June 2014, [contentmarketinginstitute.com/2014/06/seo-successful-content-marketing-basics/](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2014/06/seo-successful-content-marketing-basics/).

such, each social media platform must also adhere to its own publishing schedules to avoid appearing disused or forgotten. This need to regularly publish fresh content to all of its social media platforms is aided through the use of a content calendar web application, another fairly standard publishing practice within digital content marketing.<sup>82</sup> Maintaining a vibrant and engaged presence on social media is a key content publishing strategy used equally by B2B and B2C companies engaged in digital content marketing.<sup>83,84</sup> However, the need to display competence at the very services they offer to clients provides content studios like ECHO with additional impetus to dedicate resources in maintaining its social media presence and explains the significant investments that ECHO makes to this end.

Through their focus on web publishing competencies relating to platform selection, production design, maintaining regular publishing schedules, and maximizing the benefits of social media publishing, ECHO Storytelling Agency has successfully developed an audience of considerable size for its own digital marketing content on the topic of storytelling. That audience currently numbers over seven thousand unique visitors per month, based on Google Analytics data, and it has grown steadily from just under two thousand at the time of ECHO's expansion into digital marketing in 2014. Considering its target is a niche audience of company owners, content managers, and those interested in personal memoir publishing services, this is a significant accomplishment for which the entire ECHO content staff should be commended. In taking a thoughtful approach to blending journalism and marketing with web publishing within their own storytelling approach to digital content marketing, ECHO demonstrates the balance of competencies needed by a boutique content studio.

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<sup>82</sup> McPhillips, Cathy. "How to Build Social Media Into Your Content Marketing Processes." *Content Marketing Institute*, 20 June 2014, [contentmarketinginstitute.com/2014/06/build-social-media-content-marketing-processes/](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2014/06/build-social-media-content-marketing-processes/).

<sup>83</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2B Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 28 Sept. 2016, Pg. 29. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017\\_B2B\\_Research\\_FINAL.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/2017_B2B_Research_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>84</sup> Pulizzi, Joe, and Handley, Ann. *B2C Content Marketing: Benchmarks, Budgets, & Trends – North America*. 19 Oct. 2016. Pg. 28. [contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017\\_B2C\\_Research\\_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf](http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/10/2017_B2C_Research_Final-rev-10-26-16.pdf).

## Conclusion

The primary objective of this report was establishing the need to balance journalism, marketing, and publishing competencies within digital content marketing, and outlining how that balance is achieved within the unique brand storytelling-based approach of ECHO Storytelling Agency. These goals were accomplished in two sections. The first described digital content marketing as a business practice, including its history, recent rise, basic practices, and emerging challenges. The second explored in detail the specific journalism, marketing, and publishing-oriented practices of ECHO Storytelling Agency. This boutique print publisher based in Vancouver, BC, where the author completed an internship as a content marketing coordinator during the summer of 2016, expanded strategically into digital content marketing in 2014.

Though digital content marketing is at its core a marketing practice, this report has demonstrated how it incorporates journalism and web publishing competencies to a much greater degree than other marketing approaches. Largely, this is because, instead of presenting information about a company's products or services, content ads provide consumers with desired media experiences similar to those created by journalists and publishers on traditional media platforms. This practice has been adopted by digital advertisers to help advertisers reach audiences online that approximate their company's targeted demographic of current or potential customers. Once this audience has been developed, digital content marketing can begin generating return on investment by exposing the audience to subtle calls to action, by gathering data about the audience's preferences and behaviour, and by building trust and esteem for the company among the audience, alongside other strategic benefits.

Prior to the stark rise in digital content marketing activity since about 2008, journalism and publishing competencies were primarily in demand by traditional media companies. Today, demand for those skills within media industries, particularly in print media, is notably diminished, as an increasing number of magazines and newspapers continue to founder, shrink, and fold due to lagging subscriber numbers and decreased rates for

traditional ad sales.<sup>85,86</sup> This shift has resulted in major labour market destabilisation that traditional publishers and journalists continue to struggle to adapt to. In part, this has led to the rise of innovative new ad formats within traditional media companies, including native advertising. However, it seems likely that the traditional journalism and publishing business models will need to continue to adapt to the public's changing content preferences, and it is unclear if this will result in a return to growth in stable employment opportunities within those industries.

As such, the rise of content marketing and the resulting increased demand for labour capable of creating, distributing, and promoting high-quality content offers a needed source of potential supplementary income for those with journalism and publishing competencies. Indeed, this opportunity has been widely seized upon by individual content producers<sup>87</sup> and traditional publishers of all sizes,<sup>88</sup> including smaller custom publishing companies like the ECHO Storytelling Agency. The latter, which was the focus of section two of this report, notably hires predominantly former journalists and publishers to better provide ECHO's specialized storytelling marketing services. In many senses, ECHO's fundamental change following to their 2014 services expansion has been a philosophical broadening of the term storytelling beyond the traditional publishing and journalism industries, and toward meaning the creation of compelling narrative experiences in any medium and for any purpose, including marketing.

In part, content marketing's boon to labour demand for journalists and publishers is sustained by the practice's capacity to provide audiences with high-quality content without needing to ensure profit from the content itself. For businesses engaged in digital content marketing, unlike traditional web or print publishers, media content is not their core product. Rather, digital content marketing can be produced at a loss that is

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<sup>85</sup> Posadzki, Alexandra. "Rogers Stops the Presses on 4 Magazines, Cuts Back Others Due to Print Revenue Drop." *CityNews*, 30 Sept. 2016, [citynews.ca/2016/09/30/rogers-announces-magazine-overhaul-will-stop-printing-4-publications/](http://citynews.ca/2016/09/30/rogers-announces-magazine-overhaul-will-stop-printing-4-publications/).

<sup>86</sup> Lu, Vanessa. "Sun Media Closing 11 Papers, Cutting 360 Jobs | Toronto Star." *The Star*, 16 July 2013, [thestar.com/business/2013/07/16/sun\\_media\\_closing\\_11\\_papers\\_cutting\\_360\\_jobs.html](http://thestar.com/business/2013/07/16/sun_media_closing_11_papers_cutting_360_jobs.html).

<sup>87</sup> Owens, Simon. "Why Freelance Journalists Are Shifting Their Careers to Content Marketing." *MediaShift*, 2 Nov. 2015, [mediashift.org/2015/11/why-freelance-journalists-are-shifting-their-careers-to-content-marketing/](http://mediashift.org/2015/11/why-freelance-journalists-are-shifting-their-careers-to-content-marketing/).

<sup>88</sup> Mignon, Jeff. "Content Marketing Services are a Tangible Revenue Generating Opportunity for Publishers." *RevSquare*, 23 June 2014, [revsquare.com/en/strategy/content-marketing-services-are-tangible-revenue-generating-oppor/](http://revsquare.com/en/strategy/content-marketing-services-are-tangible-revenue-generating-oppor/).

considered a marketing expense. This means the business case for sustained engagement in digital content marketing does not typically depend on attaining paid subscribers, advertisers, or other forms of direct income from the content. This radical decoupling of web content designed for leisure consumption from the need to independently generate revenue from its audience is freeing to digital content marketers because it enables them to create, monetize, and promote work on extremely niche topics that often could not provide the revenues necessary to sustain a traditional publishing endeavour. For example, within their own digital content marketing, ECHO is able to dedicate significant resources to covering the niche topic of storytelling as an emerging a business strategy, and Casper is able to cover the topic of sleep for general-interest audiences. In this sense, digital content marketing benefits both its creators, who may find more stable employment opportunities than are available elsewhere, and its consumers, who enjoy professionally-produced content that meets their highly-specialized interests, while also typically eliminating the need for consumers to either pay for that content or be exposed to display ads while enjoying it.

However, this report would be remiss if it did not at least raise the question of the extent to which the ever-growing abundance of digital content marketing posts online may potentially be contributing to the struggles of the traditional journalism and publishing industries. That is to say, since these legacy approaches to content creation and distribution tend to rely on advertisers and subscribers, they may be significantly challenged to compete with digital content marketing efforts that have no need to generate profit independently. One must at least consider the potential ramifications of existence in a world in which an increasing proportion of all published web content is not paid for by advertisements or by consumers themselves, but is, itself, an advertisement. Speaking in greater detail on that question would involve a litany of complex factors that will need to be identified and addressed by later observers of and participants in the journalism, marketing, and publishing industries, as well as by content consumers.

Though generating a profit directly from digital marketing content is not typically an imperative, it must satisfy at least three other mandatory objectives. First, it must sufficiently benefit consumers, which could include providing entertainment, an emotional experience, or deeper understanding of a specific subject. Second, it must benefit the companies paying to have it published by generating some measurable

return on their investment. Third, it must be sufficiently visually appealing and discoverable in order for audiences to choose to consume it from among the many other online content options available today. Achieving all of this simultaneously requires maintenance of a fragile, almost alchemical balance that can only be achieved by bringing together the diverse skills of journalists, marketers, and publishers within the digital content marketing industry.

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