

The Business Case for Agile Content Marketing

How to Get More Traffic and Leads from Your Online Marketing Efforts

If you're interested in marketing your business online (and who isn't at this point), you can't escape hearing about *content marketing*. It's everywhere you look, or listen.

- You hear that people don't want advertising when making purchasing decisions, they want valuable information.
- You hear that it's content that spreads via social networks, generating powerful word-of-mouth exposure for savvy content marketers.
- You hear that it's content that people desire and seek out, and it's great content that Google wants to rank well in the search results so those people can find your business.
- You hear that content is the best way to achieve what advertising is *supposed* to achieve, but doesn't do so well online — to get people to know, like, and trust your brand.

You hear all of that, and yet, perhaps you're thinking ...

So what?

What does any of that *actually* mean for my business?

The Power of Audience

The subtitle of this ebook refers to traffic and leads, because if you ask any business person charged with exploring effective online marketing tactics and strategies, they'll say that's they want. That's what ultimately leads to sales and profits, right?

Content marketing done correctly will get you traffic and leads. No doubt about that.

But the true allure of content marketing is in building an *audience*. Rather than the constant rat race of conventional online lead generation, an audience puts your business into an entirely different space within your industry.

Rather than buying access to an audience from the media, your company *becomes* the media. In the process, you build an owned media asset (your

content website) that gets more powerful and valuable each month and each year that you continue producing content.

Soon, you're enjoying benefits from your owned media asset that make the initial goals of traffic and lead generation seem almost quaint.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

What is it *exactly* about content marketing that leads to higher revenue and more profit? Why is this type of traffic, and these type of leads, better than others?

How Do People Decide to Buy?

The evidence is unmistakable — the Internet has completely upended the lead generation and sales process. Prospects are not waiting to be sold to — they're proactively gathering information, soliciting peer recommendations, and making decisions about you and your competitors ... before you realize anything is happening.

This means that prospective buyers have a preconceived frame of mind about your company *before* your traditional marketing machine even steps to the table. To say this may not be optimal is a massive understatement.

Even worse, they may not find any significant difference between you and your competition at all. At this point, it becomes all about getting the lowest price.

Again, not a great situation.

Let's face it — businesses large and small have a problem standing out in our modern competitive landscape. Products and services are largely undifferentiated to buyers, and trust is at rock bottom, especially for unfamiliar brands.

Sure, *you* understand the unique benefits that your offer enjoys compared to the competition. But odds are your prospects don't, and there's a good chance that they're not swayed, even when you have the opportunity to make those differences clear.

Here's what makes a true difference — the *sales experience* itself. In other words, in many cases *how* you sell is more important than *what* you sell.

That's not to say you can sell something that's sub par. It's quite the opposite — competition is fierce enough these days ... to the point where multiple high quality

solutions can come down to a virtual flip of a coin among prospects. You need something more to sway the decision by enhancing the sales experience.

Content marketing is your “*something more*”. It:

- Puts your brand out front by embracing how the information-driven sales experience now works;
- Positions you as the indispensable advisor on the buyer’s chosen purchasing journey; and
- Creates a natural affinity for your solution.

Content marketing is how the modern buyer comes to know, like, and trust you. In other words, it’s the new branding. But it’s also much more.

In many cases *how* you sell is more important than *what* you sell.

Because you’re *teaching* first instead of pitching, content has an additional powerful persuasive effect when it comes to communicating benefits and overcoming objections. That’s because an education-forward marketing approach gives you the influence that comes with *authority*.

Creating an Authoritative, Enjoyable Sales Experience

I often say that content marketing is all about educating prospects enough to do business with you. These days, people want to learn before they buy, be educated instead of pitched.

They don’t necessarily want to hear about your product or service, at least at first. They want a better understanding of the entire *arena of knowledge* that surrounds their problem or desire.

This is why content marketing works.

It provides prospective buyers with what they want (rather than interrupting them with what they don't care about), while making your brand the expert resource for that specific arena of knowledge.

People inherently want to do business with the foremost authority in the field. It makes them feel more confident about their choice, *because no one wants to be wrong*.

So, Solution A and Solution B are close on features and benefits, but the *experience of buying* from the authoritative Provider B has alleviated the risk of making a bad choice.

Authority rules. It's psychological influence at its finest — not based on manipulation — but rather on *service and value that's worth paying for in itself*.

Instead of paying for advertising, you create content that's worth paying for, and give it away for free. Counter-intuitive? Maybe, but that's what works when empowered prospects control their own path.

These days, people want to learn before they buy, be educated instead of pitched.

It's no coincidence that Google also uses authority as the gauge for which sites and pages to rank ahead of others. After Panda and Penguin, a tightly-focused level of demonstrated expertise with content is more crucial than ever.

Add to that the signals Google now factors in based on the authority of individual writers with AuthorRank, and you see how you can create a perfect storm of authority with search engines. But you have to cultivate strong content creators, and keep them on your team.

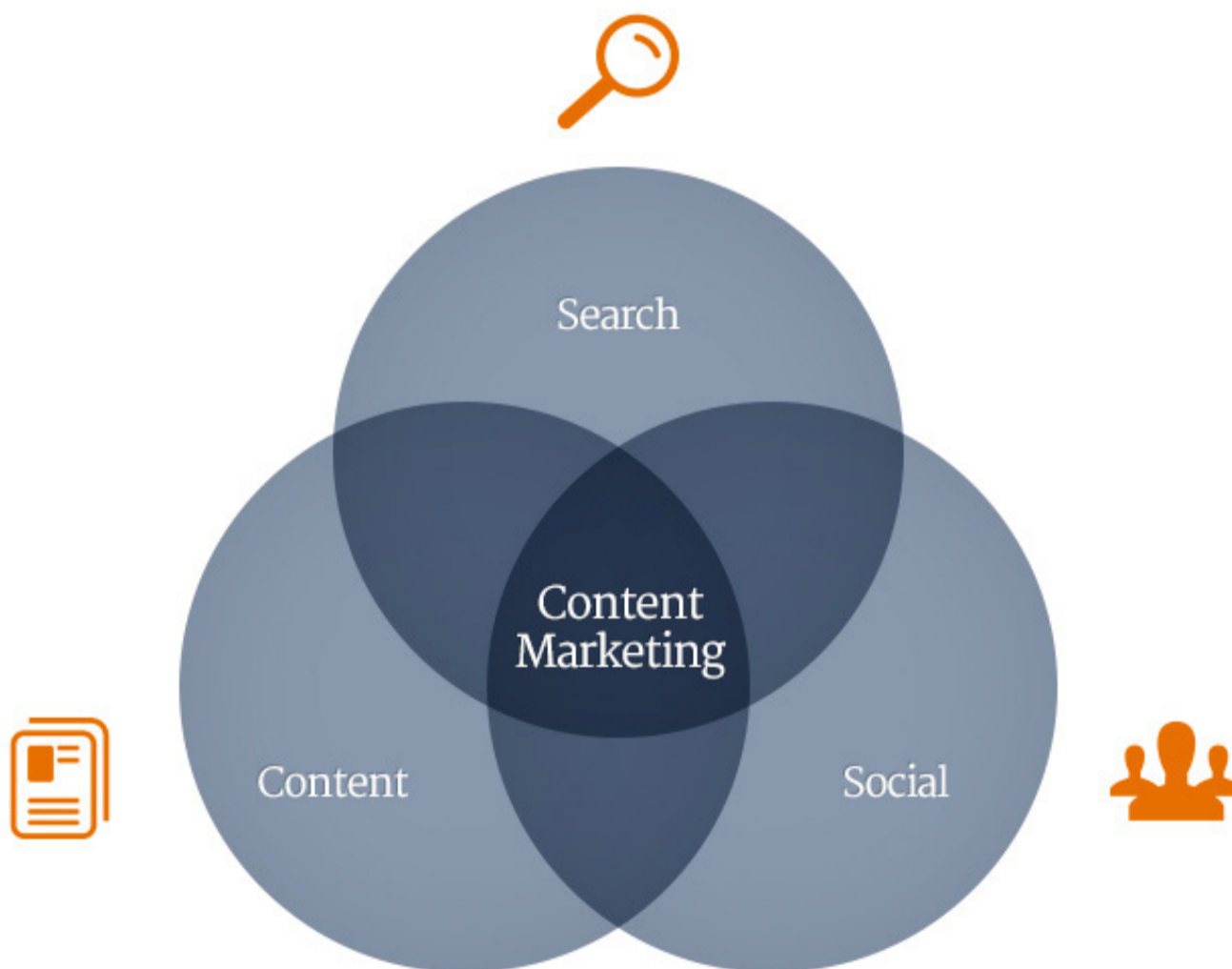
It's too early to discuss Google, though. We need to understand effective content marketing from a big picture perspective in order to see that desirable search engine rankings are simply a beneficial outcome of a larger process.

Content + Social + Search = Content Marketing

The struggle many face with marketing online is a misguided impulse to put various tactics into separate boxes, instead of seeing each as an aspect of one strategic process. The result is often a disjointed, ineffective mess that leads companies large and small to question the return on investment of online marketing in general.

To this day, I see people referring to content marketing, social media marketing, and search engine optimization (SEO) as three different things — as if each is a tactic that can get you there alone. The smart way to practice effective content marketing is to treat social media and search engine results as aspects of a holistic strategy necessarily centered around content.

In other words, content, social media, and SEO are the primary three aspects of the content marketing process (at least in ways that won't get you marked as spam or nuked by Google).



Let's look at each part, and how they relate to one another.

1. CONTENT

The foundational element is content. Not just any content, but valuable information uniquely tailored to speak the language of your intended audience, while simultaneously addressing the problems and desires that this audience expresses.

Content must answer their questions, alleviate their fears, encourage their desires, but most of all ... it must inspire and challenge them to transform their lives away from the ordinary to the new experience that your solution provides.

Your initial goal should be to create audience-focused content as if social media and search engines don't exist. Content marketers have done that successfully dating back to 1895, because they're giving people something they want that's also persuasive. At that point, realize that the very same content is what will get shared by the right people in social media.

2. SOCIAL

Effective social media marketing amounts to content distribution. Luckily, that's what the data shows social networks revolve around.

People want content. Sharing content has become one important aspect of social media status, and content curation has made select editorial voices into powerful conduits.

Social sharing provides some direct signals to Google that indicate your content is high quality (especially on Google+), but more than that, social media provides networked word-of-mouth *publicity*. Content curators — and those looking for authoritative citations — look to these social indicators for clues as to what to link to, and natural, authoritative links are the original signal Google looks for.

3. SEARCH

You create content that the people you're seeking to reach love. Those people prove it by sharing it on social networks and linking to it from their own blogs and content sites. Google picks up on those signals, and understands that you've created something that more of "the right people" might want to find when searching.

Google continues to get smarter at weeding out false signals that seek to boost unworthy content. Other than that, Google still isn't any smarter than your average 5-year-old at being able to determine content relevance for ranking purposes — not without a little help from you.

No matter how much people love your content, and provide natural signals to indicate that love, it's up to you to gently tweak your content so that Google knows *exactly* who the right people are that need to find that content.

The entire content marketing process is what SEO has become. The good news is, higher search engine rankings are just one of the benefits of an integrated content marketing strategy.

Wait ... Isn't SEO Dead?

That depends on what you call "SEO."

- Is it buying links to thin keyword-stuffed pages?
- Is it low-quality content enhanced by inorganic link building?
- Is it building a content "farm" based on brute site authority and weak value?

If so, then yes, SEO is pretty dead, or at least on life support. And the Panda and Penguin updates to the Google algorithm are not the end of the story ... the engineers at Google will continue to do everything they can to stick a stake in the heart of this type of search engine "optimization."

But that's not what I call "optimizing" for search engines, because eventually the search engines will sniff you out (and wipe out your rankings). On the other hand, some of the brightest minds in SEO have been taking a content and socially-driven approach since before Twitter and Facebook were around, and Panda and Penguin have not caused those folks one bit of distress.

The kind of SEO that actually works from a long-term perspective is alive and well:

- Creating high-value content that achieves business objectives as if search engines didn't exist.
- Using the power of social media to gain exposure for that content, which results in natural links and other signals of quality and relevance.
- Focusing on enhancing the natural authority of websites, pages, and individual writers, which creates industry influence and trust with Google.
- Doing smart on-page optimization using the language the audience uses when searching and socializing, so Google sees you as the most relevant option.

And guess what? Google absolutely encourages this approach, because it makes their algorithm smarter and their search results better.

Again, it's not just about search results. Smart content marketers derive benefit from audience-focused content and by social media exposure and sharing. This enables you to build a profitable audience in itself.

But if you do content + social correctly, you'd be crazy not to take advantage of better search rankings. Here's why ...

Search Engine Rankings are the Icing on the Content Marketing Cake

Targeted search traffic is still the holy grail of achieving your business objectives (you know, like sales), as opposed to scoring random traffic. Social media traffic is crucial, but mostly in the sense that it allows you to develop more valuable long-term traffic sources like opt-in email subscribers and high search rankings.

The average order value (AOV) of website traffic from search in Q2 2012 was \$90.40, ... more than 40% higher than traffic from social networks (\$64.19), [according to](#) an August report from Monetate.¹

¹ <http://pages.monetate.com/eq/?src=M-W-Web&ast=R-EQ>

The reason why is simple ... it comes down to *intent*. Marketers have known since way before the Internet that the frame of mind of the prospect makes all the difference (which is why expensive advertising is used to try to influence that frame).

Online, people who are searching for something specific are in a very different, and more valuable, frame of mind than when they are socializing on Facebook.

To use a nearly obsolete example, think of your state of mind when you used to reach for the Yellow Pages. Now think of your state of mind when your favorite TV show is interrupted by a commercial. Next, extrapolate that out to being pitched by a stranger while chatting with a friend at a cocktail party.

A new Forrester report titled “The Purchase Path of Online Buyers In 2012” shows that fewer than 1% of transactions could be traced back to social links.²

In other words, compared with social traffic, searchers are the most motivated people who hit a website. This is important.

If they're looking for a product or service, there's a good chance they're looking to buy it. If they're searching for information and your site provides it, you've got a great chance of converting that drive-by traffic into long-term attention (email subscriber anyone?) with your content.

Content paired with social media is not primarily a conversion-to-customer path, but instead an audience-building path. And if you follow that path successfully, you're able to add long-term, high-value search engine rankings, which in turn continue to grow the audience in a highly-targeted way over time.

In that sense, smart content optimization is more important than ever.

Is Content Optimization Still Required?

The most disturbing nonsense I've seen since the Google Panda and Penguin updates is this idea that content no longer needs to be optimized for search engines.

² <http://pages.monetate.com/eq/?src=M-W-Web&ast=R-EQ>

The thinking goes that Google will just magically know what you're talking about and rank you accordingly.

Sorry, that's not the way Google works.

Search engines have come a long way since the early days of the web, but they're not as sophisticated as you might think. It's not that Google is dumb; it's more like Google is a bright little toddler who needs information delivered in a way that works for him. He needs to be "spoon-fed" ...

Think of it this way. You wouldn't set a bone-in ribeye and steak knife in front of a 4-year-old and expect him to have at it. You'd present the food in easily chewable bite-sized chunks with appropriate utensils.

Likewise, you might write an article about "green widgets" using metaphors, entertaining analogies, and smart synonyms. You know you're writing about green widgets, and most reasonably intelligent people know it too.

But if you don't use the words "green widgets" in certain locations and frequencies along with other SEO copywriting best practices, both you and the search engines are out of luck. The toddler goes hungry, and you're frustrated and left dealing with a meltdown of sorts.

Google is a bright little toddler who needs
information delivered in a way that works for him.
He needs to be "spoon-fed" ...

That's not to say you want to serve up keyword stuffed crap with less appeal than mashed beets. That's a really bad idea.

On the contrary, you create ribeye content that engages people first and foremost, while also spoon-feeding the search engines exactly what they need. The end goal is always to let other people find you with the language they use when searching and discussing via social media.

And now, post-Panda, you also have to optimize your overall editorial strategy to make sure your site (as a whole) contains enough content about the topics you want to rank for. You can thank the content farms for that, but it makes sense regardless of

search — your content marketing focus has to be on the things your audience cares about.

And those are the topics you want to rank well for. They're the cornerstone content areas your site's foundation should be built upon.

It always comes back to the audience you're trying to reach, and the way they think about their problems and desires. This has always been what Google has aimed for with their search results, and their goal is actually tightly aligned with what you should be doing with content regardless of SEO.

So, keyword and on-page optimization is still required for search. Is this, however, something new?

All Smart Marketing is Optimized (And Always Has Been)

“There is your audience. There is the language. There are the words that they use.”

~ Eugene Schwartz

Surely these anti-optimization pundits are not suggesting you abandon targeted search traffic, given the dismal conversion rate of social traffic. The more likely answer is they hopped on the “social media expert” bandwagon without a clue about the history and evolution of advertising, branding, or direct marketing.

So, again ... let's pretend search engine rankings are out of the picture. Would “optimizing” your content still matter for marketing purposes?

The job of any smart marketer is to enter a conversation that's already taking place, and channel existing desire for solutions and benefits onto a specific solution. The key to intimately understanding that existing conversation is to first understand how the people you want to reach think, feel, and view the world.



This is not an “Internet” concept. It’s just that search engines and social media have given us the ability to glean this vital insight in ways that were impossible before.

Look back at the quote from the top of this section. If you’re not familiar with Eugene Schwartz, he’s not a social media or online marketing expert. He’s no longer even alive.

Schwartz was one of the most influential copywriters in the history of the craft. The quote above is an excerpt from a longer statement from the “Mad Men” era of the 1960s:

One hour a day, read. Read everything in the world except your business. Read junk. Very much junk. Read so that anything that interests you will stick in your memory. Just read, just read, just read... There is your audience. There is the language. There are the words that they use.

He’s making the very important point that in order to effectively communicate with an audience, you must learn how the audience speaks. This is vital in word choice, but also for understanding how they *think, feel, and view the world*.

Now, thanks to the Internet, we have unbelievable access to the language of our desired audience. Search engine data and social media listening tools make it all available ... *to anyone willing to do the necessary research.*

The job of any smart marketer is to enter a conversation that's already taking place.

So what's the problem?

Well, just like some self-proclaimed social media experts err on the side of becoming a Pollyanna due to a lack of real marketing expertise, the less-sharp end of the SEO industry has given keywords (among other things) an undeserved bad name. These people simply spent years focusing on gaming search results by creating poorly-crafted pages without any real regard for true conversion principles or long-term viability.

Don't let these bozos keep you from seeing the reality of keyword research, or diving deep into *the language of the audience.*

Keyword research, at its essence, is vital market research. It tells you what people are interested in when they search in Google and converse in social channels.

Better yet, it reveals the *actual language* people are using when they think and talk about those topics, which provides you with insight on how to frame your content.

That information is worth its weight in gold, if you know what to do with it.

Email Marketing Remains Central

The point of everything we've discussed so far is this — content optimization, social media optimization, and search engine optimization are *not* the point. They are all aspects of the broader goal of building a *real* audience, not transitory traffic.

The Internet is a direct marketing medium. You have the power to build an audience and speak to them directly at your discretion, without intermediaries.

This is huge.

The central contrast between traditional direct marketing and online marketing is *permission*. You don't buy a list, you *build* a list. People will *voluntarily* accept your offers only because of the independently valuable content your deliver.

Content so good it's worth paying for.

Reflect back on what you've read so far. You're producing great content, and giving it away for free. And it's less expensive and more effective than advertising. So, in reality, *you're not actually giving away anything*.

The money is in the list.

In terms of Q2 2012 conversion rates, email (4.25%) easily outperformed search (2.49%), with both far ahead of social (0.59%).³

The inbox is the most intimate audience channel, and if you get invited in, attention to your messages is at the highest point outside of the customer/client relationship. Most of all, email is a transactional medium, where business is handled. The inbox is the place not only to be, but to be *anticipated*.

So, you've got to build an email list, powered by permission, sparked by free content.

Is this what we mean by audience?

The Rise of Audience Optimization

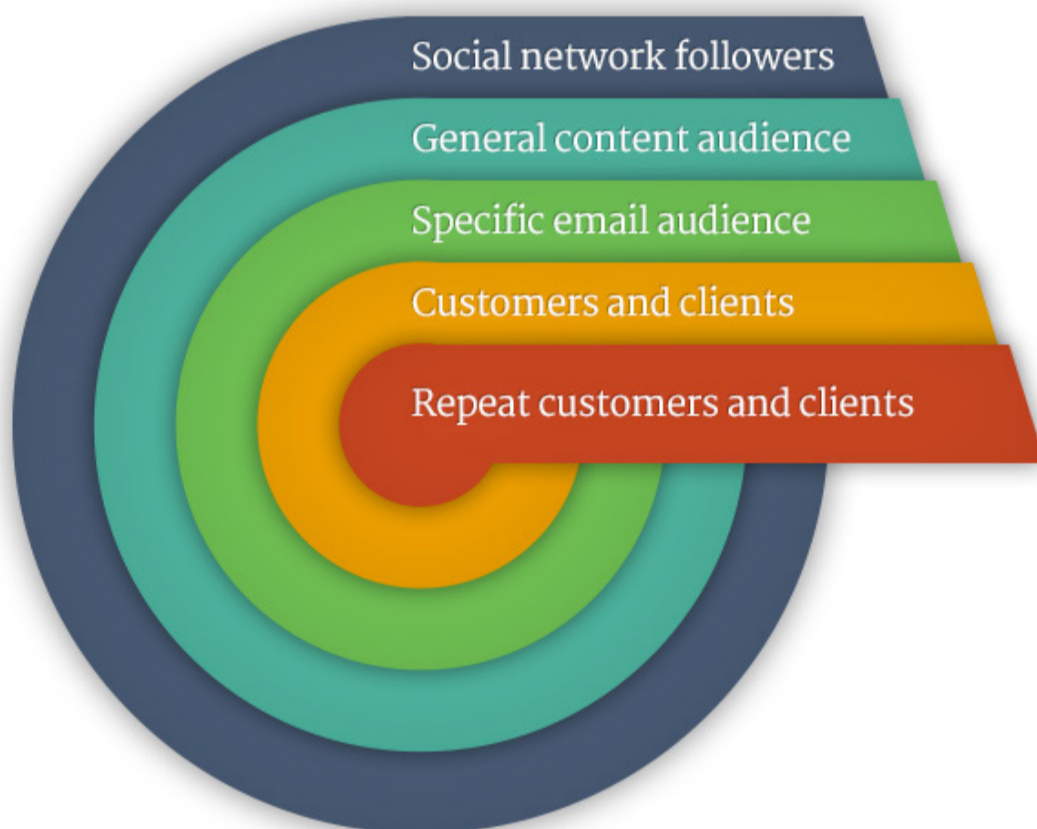
We started this ebook talking about the power of audience. About the "unfair advantage" you gain over your competitors when you develop an authoritative position in your industry thanks to great content, distributed in social media channels, resulting in targeted search traffic, all of which builds an email list.

³ <http://pages.monetate.com/eq/?src=M-W-Web&ast=R-EQ>

It's important to realize, however, what your audience will truly look like, and how it works. Because all the optimization you do with content, social, and search is really a process of *audience optimization*.

You have the power to build an audience and speak to them directly at your discretion, without intermediaries.

Take a look at the graphic below. I like to call this the content marketing “circles of trust,” with an obvious nod to De Niro in *Meet the Parents*. Except in this case, those outside the content marketing circle of trust don't trust you!



There is your audience. These are the people who have, in one fashion or another, established a relationship with you that entails trusting you enough to follow you over time.

The idea is to constantly optimize the level of trust the audience has in you. This, in turn, results in *conversion* optimization.

Social network fans and followers at Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and LinkedIn are definitely part of your audience, but your relationship with them is the relative weakest in the concentric circles of trust. They perform a vital function, however, even if they never become customers and clients — by sharing your content.

The goal is to continually move people into the audience at the point they want to enter, and then deeper into the stronger relationship circles. The focused email channel before conversion to customer/client is where an email autoresponder or other marketing automation will become your best friend.

And don't forget ... your existing customers and clients are not only part of the audience, they're *vital* members of the audience. Not only when it comes to repeat purchases and recurring lines of business, but also as sharers and evangelists.

You'll notice that search isn't included in the ring of circles. Targeted search engine traffic is the most likely to enter your audience at a deeper level, perhaps even directly into the customer/client rings. But unless you optimize your site to actually make the conversion, that search traffic is lost, likely never to return.

Interestingly, data shows⁴ that converting search engine traffic into the focused email ring first (rather than trying to sell to them directly), actually boosts ultimate sales conversion rates. Content wins again over initial pitches in just about every context, and the companies with just a slight degree of patience ultimately achieve dominance over time.

Great content that generates social media and search traffic are vital aspects of all viable content marketing strategies. But all of this "optimization" you're doing is really about building an audience that converts, shares, and evangelizes.

It's all about building an audience and constantly optimizing to make that audience more valuable to your business. And the key to audience optimization is to create content in an *agile* manner.

4 <http://blog.kissmetrics.com/triple-salespage-conversion-rates/>

An Agile Approach to Content Marketing

So far, you're up to speed on the need for smart content marketing. But the question remains ... how do you create a content marketing strategy that works?

The first step is to get your head right. In other words, you need to begin with the correct perspective to succeed with online content as a marketing tool.

Mainly, you need to begin with the end (the result you want) in mind. This is where content marketing strategy fails ... essentially when there isn't an executable strategy in place at all.

Agile content marketing is the answer. Because no matter how wrong you get it at first, you can always make it right — if you abide by this general philosophy.

Once again, we can borrow methods that have been proven to work by others. Some software companies have been using an agile methodology for quite a while.

The word *agile* used in this sense comes from the world of software development⁵, and is based on *iterative and incremental* development. Meaning, as with lean manufacturing⁶, you start with something simple, understand that it needs improvement, and quickly make those improvements based on feedback.

Sound strange to apply to content development? It's not, really.

This is the way stand-up comedians create content that cracks audiences up. Let's start with them.

How Stand-Up Comedians Develop Content

When applied to content marketing, agile development can be best understood by the way stand-up comedians write, test, and refine their acts.

Contrary to popular belief, it's not some isolated act of creative genius; it's a process of iterative and incremental *joke* development.

5 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agile_software_development

6 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lean_manufacturing

1. First, a comedian writes material. These jokes are based on what the comedian thinks is funny based on an educated guess of *what might be funny to the audience*.
2. The comedian knows the act needs to be tested and improved. So, she heads out to small comedy clubs and performs the initial jokes in front of a live audience.
3. Based on audience response (laughter, or lack thereof), after each performance the comedian cuts certain bits, tweaks others, writes new jokes, returns to the stage, and repeats. At some point, she arrives at a honed set of material that is then taken to larger venues, an HBO comedy special, or other important setting where a more polished performance is crucial.

Simple, but not easy. You've got to have the courage to just put it out there, and then objectively and progressively adapt.

How to Create Content that Isn't a Joke

Similarly, agile content marketing follows the same 3-step process:

1. Start with an educated guess for your content strategy
2. Create and release content knowing it's likely a bit flawed
3. Optimize constantly based on audience feedback

It's that rare approach that encourages disciplined execution and constant innovation at the same time. This ready, *fire*, aim methodology actually boils down to five distinct steps:

1. RESEARCH

This is the phase of the process where you're making your own educated guesses. Those guesses come primarily from general market research into who you're trying to reach, what they're currently buying, what they need to learn to solve their problems and/or satisfy their desires, and how that relates to a general class of products or services they want to buy.

2. RELEASE

Research is vital, but at some point you need to settle on the overall positioning of your website, and start putting content out. You don't need a theater or stadium-sized audience, just the equivalent of a small comedy club. Even then, you're going to have to work to get your content viewed and shared enough to generate meaningful feedback.

3. OPTIMIZE

The first three steps are repeated endlessly for the life of a project, just like the evolving editorial focus of a magazine, production cycle of a TV series, or career of a stand-up comedian. Mistakes are made and pivots performed. But you'll also discover the content that is fundamentally crucial to your website, which can be organized and optimized as a constant workhorse for your content marketing efforts.

4. CONNECT

In this sense, connection refers to the relationships, alliances, and networks you build in order to spread your content and grow your audience at an accelerated rate. From guest blogging for related sites, to content promotion partnerships, to the growth of your social networks, you must work constantly to get your content the maximum exposure it deserves.

5. REPEAT

Iteration is the act of repeating and refining a process in order to reach a certain result. In mathematics, it means taking the output of a function and using that result as the starting point of the next function. Likewise, with content, the results (comments, shares, links, etc.) you receive from a certain content topic or type fuels the approach you take with the content you produce next. Plus, your industry and audience will be constantly evolving, giving you an endless opportunity to express your fundamental audience-optimized topics in new and interesting ways.

Content marketing is a continual process, not a set-it and forget-it strategy. But so are traditional marketing and advertising, which carry the additional burdens of being expensive and ineffective.

Welcome to the vast opportunities of the world of real-time. Are you ready?

If you are ready (and especially if you aren't), go ahead and grab a copy of my second ebook in this ongoing series titled *A Content Marketing Strategy That Works*. Just login to [the Scribe Content Marketing Library](#), it's waiting there for you now ...

And be sure to keep an eye out for two more concise, high-impact ebooks in the coming weeks (we'll email you when they're ready)...

- **How to Create Content that Converts**

Available for download on Monday December 17th.

- **Effective Content Promotion**

Available for download on Monday January 7th.