

# An Exploratory Analysis of Essential Elements of Content Marketing

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**Abstract:** The term “content marketing” has been used for many years and is still evolving. The idea of creating valuable, relevant and compelling brand content to share in online media, especially social media, as part of the marketing mix, is generally considered to be a pull strategy in branding and other related disciplines to attract consumer attention. In response to the rising interest in content marketing and lack of a theoretical foundation, an analysis of definitions and related explanations was done to delineate its elements by studying similarities and differences. The purpose of the study was to understand how content marketing is defined and explained in existing literature. Definitions are important and can serve as impetus for changing practices and for moving forward. In addition, a better academic understanding of this concept can also influence how it is practised. The study is guided by literature on content marketing that also included umbrella terms, which reflect conflict about the nature of the field. In order to capture a snapshot idea of definitions and explanations of content marketing which are varied, this study has set the intention to explore rather than to conclude. The attempt was thus made to document the area currently covered by content marketers to provide a better understanding of the concept. The research method applied for this study consisted of different steps. First, the researcher gathered definitions and explanations of content marketing and its various umbrella terms through a rigorous literature review. Second, elements were identified after a thematic inductive analysis using qualitative computer software. Based on this analysis an overview was obtained of how these definitions and explanations relate to the elements which was also triangulated with practitioners’ viewpoints. Six essential elements that encapsulate the field of content marketing became evident to support the proposal of an academic definition. The proposal of a more academic definition can help facilitate a better universal answer to what content marketing constitutes and how it should or could be applied by practitioners in various social media.

**Keywords:** content marketing, social media, user generated content, Web 2.0, qualitative research

## 1. Introduction

The Web 2.0 gave rise to numerous new social media platforms to enable multiple interactivity possibilities rendering social media into the mainstream (Smith, Fischer & Yongjian 2012). Terms such as interactivity and collaboration especially have become the foundations of Web 2.0 (Mamic & Almaraz 2013). New interactive possibilities also gave more opportunities to consumers to create and share user-generated content with others through media content. Much of this content is also in the form of information and opinions about brands providing consumers with more control over brand messages (Tang, Fang, & Wang 2014). Content about the brand has as a result also become the recent focus of marketers as part of the marketing mix which has emanated into various new marketing terms and perspectives, one of which is content marketing.

The term “content marketing” has not only raised the interest of marketing practitioners in recent years, but also of marketing scholars. Numerous definitions and explanations of content marketing abound but mostly from a practitioner’s point of view while there is still a general lack of a more scholarly definition. In addition to its many definitions and related perspectives, content marketing is also referred to under a number of umbrella terms, which impede a more universal understanding of what it entails as well as how it should be practised. However, not all sharing of content constitutes content marketing (Carragee 2014), which renders many of the existing definitions as potentially theoretically unsound adding to the current confusion.

According to Pulizzi (2012), content marketing is not new and has been practised for many years, and has also gained more prominence in recent years due to overcoming several barriers. These barriers include more technology becoming available to marketers, being able to produce content even as a non-media organisation as well as that any brand can produce content, not only the larger brands. The difference between producing content as a non-media organisation is that the non-media organisation will not profit directly but indirectly by pulling and retaining customers. Content marketing has generally been linked to sharing relevant and valuable brand content through storytelling by means of earned media in that the brand has also become a publisher (Pulizzi 2012; 2014 & Lieb 2012). Earned media is not controlled by the marketer but rather by means of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) through social media mentions, views, shares, reposts, reviews, comments and subscribers (Corcoran 2009). eWOM refers to consumers who share information about a product or service, mainly online and in social media, with family, friends, colleagues or acquaintances. Also, eWOM is often referred to as the online form of viral marketing (Kaplan & Haenlein 2011). Social media thus have become the

focus of marketers to share brand content in the hope that the content will spread virally and in doing so creating a buzz about the brand. Content marketing can thus play a key role in enhancing the brand's presence in social media by pulling relevant content to be shared with the target audience to which they can also add to the brand conversation (Fournier & Avery 2011).

This paper indicates the position that the Content Marketing Institute (CMI) adopted in 2014 by referring to the term as content marketing as coined by Pullizi (2010). The CMI (2014) also perceives the term as anchored in a methodical approach and not merely a new buzzword. However, because of the many perspectives of what content marketing constitutes how it should be referred to and practised in social media still remain unresolved.

This paper thus adds to the paucity of academic research on content marketing by qualitatively analysing 55 existing definitions and explanations to identify its essential elements and in adopting a pragmatic approach. Adopting a pragmatic approach to identify a more universal understanding of the term "content marketing" was deemed necessary due to the lack of academic research in the field and since mainly experience and practice have shaped its current meaning (see Hatch 2012 & Rotfeld 2014).

The paper starts with an explanation of conflicting viewpoints of the term "content marketing", its nature, the three research questions, the research method, an analysis of the data and a discussion of the findings. Lastly, based on the findings, a more academic definition is proposed to facilitate a better theoretical understanding of content marketing for better practices in that theory provides a foundation for marketing practitioners to guide their decisions (Rotfeld 2014).

## **2. Conflicting viewpoints of the term "content marketing"**

Various interest groups made numerous attempts to define and explain content marketing since they are faced with its challenges on a daily basis. Defining content marketing has been challenging because it is a term, means different things at different times, while its meaning also changes depending on the context.

Realising that pulling and sharing brand content is at the core of this new marketing paradigm, marketers and scholars started using various umbrella terms in an attempt to explain what it entails and how it should be practised. The term "content marketing" is interestingly also perceived by many marketers as an umbrella term for online marketing techniques (Steenburgh, Avery & Dahod 2011).

As early as 2009, Christodoulides (2009) refers to post-internet branding, meaning that branding occurs in various social media and applications over which marketers no longer have control. It is a form of branding that involves the consumer in the fundamental stages of the brand building process. Several authors refer to content marketing as a marketing technique that involves creative and active consumers. Consumers typically share and express their thoughts, opinions, and perceptions about a product by means of user-generated content using Web 2.0 technologies (Hyoryung & Kannan, 2014, Berthon, Pitt, Plangger & Danie, 2012 & Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden 2011). Other authors refer to marketing content as facilitating consumer engagement based on their willingness to participate. This can happen by means of sharing relevant content which is the most important aspect to establish a successful social media presence (Parent, Plangger & Anjali 2011). Brand journalism is another well-known umbrella term where the brand is perceived as a publisher creating and sharing brand content in the same way as journalists create and share news stories. This is usually done by following an information-driven approach to communication (Swan & Hobert 2013).

Fournier and Avery's (2011) arguments about open source branding similarly centre around participatory, collaborative, and socially-linked consumer behaviour whereby consumers serve as creators and disseminators of brand content, as also reiterated by Haarhoff and Klein (2012). Co-creating brands as put forward by Payne, Storbacka, Frow and Knox (2008), whereby the brand becomes the experience by emotionally engaging customers to solve their own problems, include the importance of providing relevant content in order for consumers to get engaged by the brand content. However, by referring to custom publishing for which marketers produce their own publications to convey their marketing messages (see Haeusermann 2013), does not make provision for the interactive co-creative nature of brand content. Content marketing is often confused with influencer marketing during which all marketing attempts are based on social media users' influence in social media usually indicated through social scoring metrics such as Klout or Kred (Kent 2013). Similarly a term such as native advertising, which consists of less conspicuous advertising integrating a combination of

advertising and entertainment into the brand strategy, add to the current confusion (Drell 2013). Content marketing is most similar to inbound marketing which uses a collection of marketing strategies and techniques to pull customers to the company's products and services by offering useful information and resources (Steenburgh et al 2011).

Perspectives of how to pull online content are, however, based on marketers' and scholars' own perspectives, backgrounds and epistemologies. But all these perspectives share some similarities such as being 'customer-centric and following an integrated approach within a broader marketing approach (Pullizi 2010). Because of all these diverse perspectives, different ways on how content marketing should be implemented also thrive through various umbrella terms. The surfacing of umbrella terms has its roots in various disciplines including advertising, branding, a broader view of marketing and journalism. This reiterates that content marketing is not practised consistently but rather as defined by the epistemologies of the respective interest groups.

### **3. The nature of content marketing**

Since content marketing is considered by some practitioners as a new branding technique to create brand awareness, visibility and credibility in social media to drive social media engagement, it can be argued that it falls within the marketing communication field. Social media engagement occurs when users, amongst others, often share, mention, comment on, click links to read and then like the brand content. Content marketing is thus a pull strategy in branding the company in social media by sharing brand stories that appeal to the target audience. The target audience is influenced in a subtle way by pulling them to the brand content which should be useful, relevant, interesting, sharable, free, visually appealing and linked to brand stories to add value to the lives of the target audience (see Lieb 2012 & Miller 2013).

Brand stories are typically shared in different social media channels to encourage social conversations and eWOM which is an indication of how engaged users are with the content. The company thus strategically identifies valuable brand content that could be created and shared through stories, for example, using blog posts, infographics, free eBooks, whitepapers, videos, podcasts, case studies, webinars, press releases, interviews and testimonials, to name but a few. The brand content is also optimised to boost search rankings, for example, using search engine optimisation (SEO) for more organic search engine traffic. In addition various analytics software to ascertain how and when the content is consumed as well as where and how writing of the content could be enhanced is also applied (see Pulizzi 2010; 2012 & 2014).

### **4. Research questions**

The study attempted to answer the following three research questions:

**Research question 1:** How is content marketing defined and explained in literature?

**Research question 2:** What are the essential elements of the term "content marketing" to enhance a more universal understanding for improved implementation?

**Research question 3:** How can content marketing be academically defined to reflect its essential elements?

### **5. Research methodology**

This study adopts an interpretivist worldview as research paradigm since it needed a deeper understanding to explain the phenomenon of content marketing as perceived by practitioners, authors and scholars (Shar & Corley 2006). Since the topic constitutes an under researched area, an inductive thematic analysis was used to identify specific patterns within a data set to accurately reflect its entire content (Braun & Clarke 2006).

To compile a data set, this qualitative, exploratory study commenced with a wide-ranging literature review to gather existing definitions and explanations of what content marketing is, and what it constitutes. This included practitioners' own definitions, as well as definitions and explanations using umbrella terms obtained from articles and WebPages during the period 2009 to 2014. During this process, 55 suitable data items were purposively identified and converted into electronic text format to make them ready for analysis. In order to have been selected for the data set, these definitions and explanations needed to refer to creating and sharing of content in an online environment to enhance awareness about the company, its products and/or services or its brand. A total of 55 data items were deemed enough to obtain an overview of what is presently written about content marketing in the literature when it has to be explained. After six themes were identified during the

analysis, six interview questions based on these themes were sent via email to three practitioners' practising content marketing to probe further with regard to their relevance when it comes to implementation.

## 6. Analysis

The six themes were identified from the data set based on word counts and careful reading of larger blocks of text using the most frequent words as indicated in table 1 below. Wordsmith 5, a program by Oxford University Press to study the use of language, was used to establish the frequency of words and facilitate the reading and analysis of the text for associated words. Wordsmith 5 was used for this study because of its feature of not only compiling a word list to identify the most frequent words but of also studying these words in their context by means of its concord tool. A concordance presents a selected word (node) in its context, by highlighting the word searched for (Scott 2010). Table 1 below depicts the most frequent words in the data set as well as its associated words as identified through the concord tool.

**Table 1:** Most frequent words in the data set and its associated words

Most frequent words	Associated words identified with the Concord tool
Publishing	Useful, content, self-publishing, information, distribute, develop, media
Consumers	Generate, telling, expect, creators, target stories, social media, value, engagement
Brand	Strategy, story, values, create, awareness, consistent, promote
Media	Publishing, participants, process, intrinsic, social, interactive, self-publishing, functional, earned, create, share
Information	Useful, entertaining, engages, strategy, needs, driven-approach, valuable, form, helpful, delivered
Storytelling	Narrative, approach, timeliness, forms
Valuable	Information, relevant, content, intrinsic, share, distribute
Relevant	Create, distribute, accessible, educational, helpful, high-quality, consistent, compelling
Strategy	Brand, pull, attraction, overall
Consistent	Content, integrated, continuous, relevant

After the most frequent words with their associated words were identified, they were used to categorise the main themes since they provide meaning to a text, for example main verbs, adverbs, nouns and adjectives (see Scott 2010). Consequently, six themes were identified, namely the nature of the platform of the content, strategic approach to develop the content, the construction of the content, natural occurrence of the content, the technique(s) used to convey the content and the anticipated outcome of the content. Definitions and explanations in the data set that referred to the same themes were grouped together. As a result main elements were identified from the themes and named to reflect the core of the content of the applicable phrases (see Table 2 below).

**Table 2:** Main elements identified for the term "content marketing"

Main elements	Theme	Example phrases
Medium element	The nature of the platform for the content	"interactive platform" "social media" "earned media"
Strategic element	Strategic approach to develop the content	"a strategic marketing approach" "consistent, integrated and continuous" "covertly promoting the organisation entity's brand, brand values or products"
Formation element	The construction of the content	"construct good stories"

Main elements	Theme	Example phrases
		"circulates stories that are directly tied to a product or organisational brand" "This narrative, storytelling approach"
Intrinsic element	Natural occurrence of the content	"starts conversations" "conversations that take place online" "cultural conversation"
Communication element	The technique(s) used to convey the content	"to educate, inform or entertain customers or prospects by creating attention" "the emotional engagement of customers"
Corollary element	The anticipated outcome of the content	"consumers serve as creators and disseminators of branded content" "people will want to consume and share it"

The above techniques to identify and analyse the main themes were informed by Ryan and Bernard (2003) who argue in favour of going beyond epistemological and disciplinary boundaries in order to obtain results. For this study, these techniques enabled the researcher to identify six essential elements of content marketing for its practice and which also informed the proposed academic definition. By following a widely accepted procedure to analyse qualitative data as put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006), the validity of the findings were enhanced.

## 7. Discussion of the findings

Content marketing is defined and explained in the literature in terms of the platform(s) it uses, the approaches used to develop and construct content, its innate nature, how it is communicated as well as how consumers should ideally react to it. This answers research questions 1 and 2 in terms of how content marketing is defined and explained in literature as well as its essential elements to improve implementation. The six main themes are now explained below.

### Theme 1: The nature of the platform for the content

This theme refers to careful consideration of the different platforms to be used to create and share content which should constitute mainly earned media such as social networking sites. This theme emerged from data referring to the platforms' interactivity, functionality as well as self-publishing abilities. This can be illustrated by the following quotations from the data set:

*This information can be delivered in several formats—eBooks, blog posts, videos, infographics, podcasts, images, interactive media, and more*

*Today, we see content marketing in many forms, including corporate magazines, newsletters, blog posts, videos, webinars, podcasts and even fully functional media sites*

Before marketers implement content marketing, they first need to consider the different platforms most suitable for creating and sharing the content to a wide audience (Tang et al 2014). Earned media are considered more credible than other media since the content is endorsed by consumers and not merely advertorial (Corcoran 2009). Since there are numerous social media sites available aspects such as opportunities for interactivity, collaboration and co-creation with the right target audience should be assessed. This is reiterated by practitioners confirming that the target audience is typically only active on certain social media platforms and content should therefore be tailored since each brand "has its own positioning". Brands typically have a multi social media presence but "one post fit all can no longer be doing well" because of some social media platforms' changing nature to favour more "visually appealing content".

## Theme 2: Strategic approach to develop the content

This theme refers to the strategic approach that should be followed when the organisation develop content. This theme emerged from data referring to the content's purpose, consistency, integration and pulling of consumers. This can be illustrated by the following quotations from the data set:

*Fusion of advertising and entertainment into one marketing communications product that is integrated into an organisation's overall brand strategy intended to be distributed as entertainment content with a highly branded quality.*

*Content marketing is a pull, rather than a push, strategy. Content doesn't interrupt, it attracts*

This theme demonstrates that content should be developed in an integrated manner which should be part of the organisation's overall brand strategy (Pullizi 2010; Pullizi 2012). The content should furthermore be purposeful, not intrusive and add value to the brand through consistency (Drell 2013). This is confirmed by practitioners stating that the success of the strategic approach could be "measured through engagement" with the audience and that a strategy "adds value for the target audience in terms of content that is developed".

## Theme 3: The construction of the content

This theme refers to how the content should be created and emerged from data that referred to its form, level of engagement and narrative elements. This can be illustrated by the following quotations from the data set:

*Yes...storytelling, in all its forms*

*This narrative, storytelling approach is effectively turning brands themselves into publishers*

This theme demonstrates that content about aspects of the brand, for example, what it stands for, or its values, should be communicated to an organisation's target audience in the form of engaging tailor-made stories. In this way conversations about the brand are enhanced by consumers co-creating the brand stories in the form of opinions or comments (Muñiz & Schau 2011) - see also theme 6 below. This is confirmed by practitioners that stories make the brand more human, but "also speaks to the value of the brand". More than one practitioner pointed out that creating a story is easier for the business to business (B2B) than the business to consumer (B2C) market.

## Theme 4: Natural occurrence of the content

This theme refers to the natural aspect of the content and emerged from data that referred to conversations about the brand. This can be illustrated by the following quotations from the data set:

*a brand is embedded in a cultural conversation*

*conversations among influencers, stakeholders and decision makers, giving them the confidence to take the next step.*

This theme demonstrates that content should be unobtrusive and be part of consumers' usual conversations online. In this way consumers experience the brand as part of their daily lives and are more receptive to subtle brand messages (Hanna et al 2011). This is reiterated by practitioners stating that natural messages should be shared in social media to add more warmth and to create a familiar "brand voice". Users should themselves decide to join the conversation based on "relevance to their lives and interest". This distinguish social media messages from the traditional intrusive push messages because "when brand content is shared, a private online space is entered".

## Theme 5: The technique(s) used to convey the content

This theme refers to the approach that should be used when the content is communicated to the target audience and emerged from data referring to its entertainment, educational, informational, usefulness and quality importance. This can be illustrated by the following quotations from the data set:

*focuses on giving you helpful information that you want to see online*

*relevant, educational, helpful, compelling and sometimes entertaining information*

This theme demonstrates that brand stories should be aimed at fulfilling the target audience's current information needs in a way that should be appealing and of value to them in their daily lives (see Payne et al 2008 & Horrigan 2009). This is reiterated by practitioners that brand stories should always add value to the target audience "bringing a smile to their face, making them feel a sense of urgency". Because of "all the noise in social media", it is important for brand content to be relevant to the target audience to drive social media engagement.

#### Theme 6: The anticipated outcome of the content

This theme refers to what consumers should ideally do with the content after they have consumed it and emerged from data referring to consumers becoming active by sharing, co-creating and changing behaviour towards the brand. This can be illustrated by the following quotations from the data set:

*people will want to consume and share it*

*to generate a positive behavior from a customer or prospect of the brand*

This theme also demonstrates the purpose of the content, namely by creating tailor-made brand stories, consumers should become brand advocates in the form of sharing and co-creating these stories with their followers or fans in social media (Hyoryung & Kannan 2014; Berthon et al 2012). Practitioners point out that social media could be used for "long-term brand awareness" and "having people engaging with your brand". The purpose of the content will, however, depend on the type of brand, the target audience and marketing objectives which could also include "driving traffic or call to action".

For answering research question 2 it was thus possible to identify six essential elements of content marketing since the above themes adequately document the areas currently covered by various interest groups. It is thus proposed by the researcher that all six elements should be considered when content marketing is planned and implemented which will enhance a more universal understanding of its implementation. These six elements are medium, strategic, formation, intrinsic, communication and corollary. By considering these six elements it was possible to answer research question 3 by proposing the following academic definition of the term content marketing:

*Content marketing is a strategic brand storytelling technique aimed at changing consumers' inactive behaviour through unobtrusive, engaging brand conversations in earned media.*

The above definition reflects the most prominent elements of content marketing as depicted in current literature which were also confirmed by practitioners. This definition is, however, by no means final as the discipline continues to evolve.

## 8. Conclusion

Due to the many perspectives of what the term content marketing entails contributing to the confusion of how it should be implemented, it was necessary to document and analyse current perspectives to come to a more universal understanding of its essential elements. This paper thus adds to the paucity of research through some added insight. The proposal of a more academic definition is, however, merely the starting point of more academic research as this socially constructed discipline is continuously evolving and could be contested. In addition, the proposed definition can assist content marketing practices as well as decision making while the discipline is growing. Future research could also specifically explore the differences between business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) content marketing while the six elements that were identified in this study need some further refinement through empirical studies with more practitioners.

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