

How to Create Content That Converts

How to Tell a Story Over Time that Transforms an Audience Into Customers and Clients

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In our last ebook in this series, we talked about content marketing strategy. Specifically, a 7-step framework that maps out who you want to reach and what business objectives you want to meet.

That strategy is centered around *authority*. In this sense, authority means becoming the likeable subject matter expert and thought leader who people listen to, and Google loves.

Based on that, many people still wonder: what kind of content should I create to execute on my strategy? What parameters do I have when sitting down to actually *create* that content?

From our agile approach to content marketing, you're creating content that your intended audience responds best to. But even then, you can't forget what you're ultimately trying to do – sell your products and services.

Content creation alone is not enough, no matter how much people like it. In other words, you need to create *content that works as marketing*.

What Kind of Online Content Works as Marketing?

There are three main types of content that you need to create over time in order to perform effective content marketing – cornerstone, connection, and conversion. *Copywriting* follows, because you've earned the right to make an offer to your audience.

First, however, you need to provide the initial, crucial "C" – context. Without it, none of the content "types" will be effective in meeting your business objectives.

Let's take a closer look at what I call the "5 Cs" of effective content marketing.

1. Context

The critical first step of any successful content marketing strategy is the context within which content is developed and delivered to the intended audience. Mess this up, and you're going to waste a lot of time and effort for not much, if any, return.

Sales and marketing 101 says that you focus on the problems and desires of the prospects, and match those up with your product or service. Content

marketing is no different, except you're delivering independent value with content *before* you attempt to make the sale.

The Internet has disrupted the traditional sales process, allowing the prospective customer or client to begin on their own terms via search and social media. This means savvy marketers must adapt to the information-empowered prospect in a fashion that more resembles courting than it does selling.

When someone has a problem or desire, what they're *really* contemplating is a journey of transformation, whether large or small in scope. The job of the content marketer is to mentor – or coach – the prospect through this journey, and at some point your product or service becomes a necessary and desirable way to complete the journey.

Thinking of the content you produce as coaching advice is especially apt. The word “coach” derives from *kocsi*, which is Hungarian for “carriage.” Your content is the vehicle which carries the prospect on their journey of transformation.

Content marketing starts the sales process in a way that doesn't leave the prospect with the feeling she's been sold to. Further, great content differentiates you from the competition in ways that traditional features and benefits fail to in a cluttered marketplace.

2. Cornerstone

As the name implies, cornerstone content is the foundational topic(s) of your website, as well as your overall content marketing strategy. A *cornerstone* is something that is basic, essential, indispensable, and the chief foundation upon which something is constructed or developed.

These topics are what people *need to know* to make use of your website and do business with you. Once developed, these beginner, or “101” level tutorials can be cross-referenced from your other content, which provides exceptional usability for your site visitors and new subscribers.

These are also the topics that you want to rank well in search engines for. And when approached in a strategic fashion, this content can do very *well* with Google, et al.

The key is creating compelling content *that’s worth linking to and sharing*, and then finding a way to get the word out. It also means aggregating lots of high-value content on one page that is both compelling to people and easily understood by Google.

For example, on Copyblogger we offer a 10-part tutorial on copywriting, a free ebook and 6-part tutorial on content marketing, a 9-part tutorial on landing pages, among several other core topics. Each is housed on a “content landing

page” that links out to each installment of the tutorial.

For McDonald’s Canada, cornerstone content naturally revolves around the food they serve. In keeping with the theme *what do people need to know to do business with you*, the fast food chain’s *Our Food, Your Questions* program has taken 10,000 questions from consumers about their fare and answered them all on the website. This kind of foundational content is golden for site visitors *and* search engines.

The benefit of cornerstone content is two-fold:

- Fantastic foundational content that site visitors and subscribers can learn from, refer to, share in social media, and link to from their own sites; and
- High search engine rankings resulting from real people “voting” on the quality of the resource thanks to social sharing and linking.

Cornerstone content demonstrates that SEO is not about tricking an algorithm. It’s about creating content resources so valuable that people want to share them and cite them as authoritative on the topic.

3. Connection

Connection content is all about teaching aspects of your cornerstone topics in a highly engaging way.

Instructional design experts will tell you that the key to higher comprehension and retention is engagement by the learner, and with content marketing, we're educating people so that they're able to do business with us.

What makes for engaging content? Think of connection content as a combination of meaning and *fascination*.

Meaning: This is the informational aspect of your content that your regular readers, listeners, or viewers look to you for. This is also a topic that matters to the prospective audience you're trying to reach through social media sharing.

Another way to think of this important aspect of your content is *relevance*. Content must be highly relevant to your existing and prospective audience, but I prefer *meaning*, as it implies an extra level of value that makes people treasure you.

Fascination: The fascinating element of your content is where your creativity shines. It's the fun, shocking, or entertaining aspect of your content that makes people pay attention and share with their friends and colleagues.

Often you're using an analogy, metaphor, or simile to make an associated

connection between something cool and an important topic that might otherwise be pretty boring. Not only does this attract and hold attention, it also aids in comprehension and retention for your audience, which in turn increases your subject-matter authority with them (because they actually learned something).

You can spot the mix from smart headlines alone (*meaning* in italics, **fascination** in bold) using musical, cinematic, and philosophical references among many other approaches:

- *5 Ways an Introvert Can Build a Thriving Online Audience*
- *Tyler Durden's 8 Rules of Innovation*
- *Stoicism for Modern Stresses: 5 Lessons from Cato*

Many marketers have trouble with connection content out of fear of indifference from a part of the audience who won't "get" or appreciate the angle. The result is content intended to appeal to everyone, which in turn appeals to no one.

The point of connection content is to bond strongly with *some* rather than *boring everyone*. You can please another segment of your audience with the next piece of content, and so on.

4. Conversion

When it comes to conversion content, we're not talking conversion in the traditional sales or lead generation context. Rather, it's more like in the *evangelical* sense.

What do people need to *believe* to do business with you?

You're not trying to alter people's larger worldview here – that shouldn't be necessary if you identified context correctly from the beginning. What you're doing is framing the problems and desires of your audience so they match up with your products and services.

One scenario is your direct competition in the marketplace. Most consumers report an inability to differentiate between various offerings, and immediately resort to price comparisons. Conversion content allows you to differentiate on philosophy, worldview, and belief in a way that product or service features and benefits cannot.

Whole Foods sets forth their Four Pillars of Healthy Eating on their blog as an example of conversion content. The article leads with "At Whole Foods Market, we believe ..." which indicates that *you also need to believe* in the four pillars of Whole Food, Plant Strong, Healthy Fats, and Nutrient Dense, or you're more likely headed to Safeway.

Often, your direct competitors are not the issue. The problem comes from those whose business models create cognitive dissonance among your prospective customers or clients.

For example, much of the Web 2.0 movement depends on people creating content on “property” owned by Silicon Valley companies, otherwise known as *digital sharecropping*. We not only passionately believe businesses should build only on web domains they own and control, we sell software tools to help those businesses build great websites easier than ever with WordPress.

You can satisfy desires and solve problems with your content day in and out. But if your audience doesn’t believe what’s necessary to do business with you, they’re not really prospects after all.

5. Copy

In the traditional advertising and direct marketing worlds, copywriting is what powers the entire message. In other words, an attempt to “push” products and services in a way that amounts to proposing marriage before the first date.

Content marketing, on the other hand, is more of a seduction. A strategy that courts and coaches prospects in a way that’s agreeable to *them*, much more like dating actually works.

The irony is that the subtle “pull” approach is much more persuasive than the in-your-face “push approach – again, much like dating.

Elements of direct response copywriting applied to content work exceptionally well for gaining attention, increasing engagement, and prompting action. That’s why great headlines, compelling openings, riveting storytelling, and well-formatted text are hallmarks of great online journalism, as well.

With content marketing, you’re accomplishing the bulk of the sales process without overtly “selling” – getting people to know, like, and trust you, and educating them so they can do business with you. By accomplishing that, you’ve effectively earned the right to “pop the question,” by making an offer.

At this point, traditional copywriting techniques are alive and well. You’ve got to craft an irresistible offer, communicate benefits, creatively overcome lingering objections, reverse risk, and other tried-and-true copy fundamentals.

Great copy still matters, but you don’t have to hit people over the head to get them to buy. That is, if your contextual content marketing strategy was on target to begin with.

Stated another way, your content is like a mentor who take the prospect on a buyer’s journey. What you’re really doing is *telling a story over time*, with the

prospect in the role of the hero.

This is important, so let me give you some background on why.

Let Me Tell You a Story

Back in the 1940s, psychologists Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel conducted an experiment. They showed study participants an animated film consisting of a rectangle with an opening, plus a circle and two triangles in motion.

The participants were then asked to simply describe what they saw in the film. Before you keep reading, [take a look at it yourself](#). I'll be here when you come back.

So, what did you see? Out of all the study participants, only one responded with "a rectangle with an opening, plus a circle and two triangles in motion." The rest developed elaborate stories about the simple geometric shapes.

Many participants concluded the circle and the little triangle were in love, and that the evil grey triangle was trying to harm or abduct the circle. Others went even further to conclude that the blue triangle fought back against the larger triangle, allowing his love to escape back inside, where they soon rendezvoused, embraced, and lived happily ever after.

That's pretty wild when you think about it.

You're Telling a Story with Content

The Heider-Simmel experiment became the initial basis of *attribution theory*, which describes how people explain the behavior of others, themselves, and also (apparently), geometric shapes on the go.

More importantly, people explain things in terms of *stories*. Even in situations where no story is being intentionally told, we're telling ourselves a tale as a way to explain our experience of reality.

Human beings are storytelling machines. Not only do we love to experience stories, our cognition is an amazing mix of stories we tell ourselves.

Think about it — our entire sense of self is based upon an ongoing narrative we tell ourselves, based on our memories and conditioning, mixed with our current experience of life. We also tell various parts of that story to others so that they know who “we” are.

We tell ourselves stories about the people we know and our relationships with them. We tell ourselves little stories about people we meet at parties, or pass on the street. We tell each other the stories we create about others, and they in

turn tell themselves (often very different) stories about us.

And yes, we tell ourselves stories about brands, products, and services. Whether or not your brand is consciously telling a story about itself, we're telling *ourselves* our own story about you.

Are you telling a story? And more importantly, does that story resonate with the story your prospective customers and clients are telling themselves?

Your prospect is the hero, or protagonist. Which means in turn that you need an antagonist for your content marketing story to work.

First ... Find the Enemy of Your Audience

Seriously, it's time to find a good enemy. Not sure why?

Effective marketing in a low-trust world means developing a bond with your prospects through your content marketing. One great way to do this is to share a perceived common enemy with your prospects.

Now, before you run off to write that rant about that blogger or industry "expert" you love to hate, let me explain. While the common enemy you share with your audience can be a person, most likely it won't be. It's likely a group,

thing, ailment, or conceptual fear.

The “enemy” is whatever is troubling your ideal prospect, because your solution happens to be the path to victory. Something is standing in the way of your prospective customer’s goals, and you’ve got the answer. But first you’ve got to establish that bond.

The key is not to rant, rave or bash the enemy, but to provide an underlying theme that shows you’re all in it together *against* the enemy. When framed that way, you’re not a salesperson; rather, you’re a comrade who can lend a hand. Establishing a thematic enemy allows you to focus on providing solutions without coming across like you’re hard selling, and is a perfect technique for white papers, tutorials and blogging in general.

Want a few examples?

- Let’s say you’re a financial services consultant. Your enemy is Wall Street greed and the perception that the investment game is rigged against the regular guy. It doesn’t matter that this isn’t necessarily true—it’s what your ideal prospects believe and want to avoid.
- Or maybe you’re a nutritionist or someone selling natural health products. Your enemy is obesity, diabetes, low self esteem, the FDA, and greedy corporations who peddle processed foods filled with empty calories.

- How about a search engine marketing specialist? Your enemy could be the snake-oil salesmen who give the industry a black eye, it could be other forms of ineffective advertising that businesses throw money away on, or it could be the search engines themselves.

The key is to find the prospect's pre-existing enemy and align against that common foe. It's possible to introduce a new enemy to an audience, but you'll have a much harder time of it than if you simply identified an adversary that's already troubling the mind of the prospect.

Here are a few things to look out for with this tactic:

- Don't make the wrong enemy. A misguided attack against someone or something the prospect is in favor of will leave you out in the cold.
- This strategy only works with problem and solution scenarios. You'll strike out trying to create an enemy, for example, when you're selling lifestyle products and some luxury items.
- Don't dwell on the enemy. Establish the underlying theme in your writing, and then focus on solutions in the form of benefits, satisfied customer stories, and applications.

Uniting against a common perceived enemy can be extremely effective at forming a bond with your readers, when used in moderation and your solution

is a good match. So, give it some thought—do you actually have an enemy (or two) after all?

Alright, back to the story.

What Kind of Story to Tell

You need to tell a *Star Wars* story. And by that, I mean you need to take your prospects along a content marketing version of the mythic hero's journey.

In [The Hero with a Thousand Faces](#), Joseph Campbell identifies a “monomyth” with a fundamental structure that is shared among myths that have survived for thousands of years. Campbell's identification of these enduring myths from disparate times and regions has inspired modern storytellers to consciously craft their work following the tenets of the monomyth, also known as *the hero's journey*.

Most notable among those inspired by the hero's journey is George Lucas, who acknowledged Campbell's work as the source of the plot for *Star Wars*. As a digital media producer, you can also consciously incorporate the monomyth into your marketing.



The image above shows the general elements of the hero's journey, which can be broken down into much more detail than presented here. It's important to note that not all monomythic stories contain every aspect, but the original *Star Wars* faithfully follows almost every element of the hero's journey.

Let's focus on the first two steps of the journey, in the "ordinary world" before the journey truly begins. Remember back with me to how these elements occurred in the original *Star Wars*.

- Luke is living life in the ordinary world of his home planet, working on the family farm.
- The "call to adventure" is R2D2's holograph message from Princess Leia, the classic princess in distress.
- Luke initially refuses the call due to his family obligations, until his aunt and uncle are killed.
- Luke meets his mentor and guide, Obi Wan Kenobi, who convinces Luke to proceed with his heroic journey.

How does this apply to content marketing? Simple.

Your Prospect is Luke. You are Obi Wan.

The mistake most often made in marketing is thinking of your business as the hero, resulting in egocentric messages that no one else cares about. The prospect is *always* the primary hero, because they are the one going on the

journey — whether big or small — to solve a problem or satisfy a desire.

- The prospect starts off in the ordinary world of their lives.
- The call to adventure is an unsolved problem or unfulfilled desire.
- There's resistance to solving that problem of satisfying the desire, until...
- A mentor (your content) appears that helps them proceed with the journey.

By making the prospect the hero, your brand also becomes a hero in the prospect's story. By accepting the role of mentor with your content, your business accomplishes its goals while helping the prospect do the same, which is how business is supposed to work, right?

The hero's journey is so powerful because it resonates with us at a fundamental level. Or, as [author Steven Pressfield puts it](#), we "are born with the hero's journey tattooed on our psyches."

Your prospects will tell themselves a story about your company no matter what, to the extent they are aware of you at all. Delivering content over time that intentionally places the prospect as the hero of their own journey works wonders when marketing with content.

As a story told over time with content marketing, the hero's journey approach accomplishes two critical things:

- It forces you to focus your content on the prospect. Anything that doesn't aid them on their personal journey is extraneous, and should be editorially eliminated.
- It helps you understand what *authority* truly means in the context of content marketing. You're striving to be a wise mentor who guides and challenges with your content, not a bossy know-it-all concerned only with your own benefit.

These two things alone will put you miles ahead of most, not only in content marketing, but business in general. Of course, there's more that can be gleaned from applying the hero's journey to your efforts to build a business with online content.

Apple and Subway: The Monomyth in Action

Your company and your solutions become heroes by making your customers and clients *the main hero*. And rather than starting with trying to sell our

ultimate products or services, we attract and mentor our prospects *with content first*.

Let's return briefly to the Star Wars analogy. When you put your prospect in the position of the main hero (Luke Skywalker), and your content as the mentor who guides or assists the hero on their journey of transformation (Obi Wan), it's extremely powerful. You allow people to identify themselves within the context of an enduring mythical structure that also makes a hero out of your brand.

Some of the most effective (and expensive) television advertising campaigns have tapped the power of the monomyth that *Star Wars* adopted thanks to Joseph Campbell. And while content marketing doesn't require Super Bowl ad spends and multi-millions in production costs, it's nonetheless useful to see a few examples of how the hero's journey has been used historically to grow revenue in a very real way.

Apple's "1984"

It's been called the greatest American television commercial of all time. And it almost didn't get made, because the Apple board of directors didn't understand what it had to do with selling computers.

Apple's 1984 Super Bowl ad, which introduced the Macintosh to the world, was selling much more than computers. It was channeling the monomyth — calling to action the creative souls of the world to rise up against the tyranny of corporate computing (symbolized by IBM) and empower themselves to take a journey of creative transformation.

The striking blond with the hammer represents those creative heroes (the “users” in today’s inelegant terms). Not until the very end of the commercial is there any mention of the mentor, the tool that will guide you on your creative journey. That would be the Mac, if there’s any confusion at this point.

Apple’s “Crazy Ones”

In my opinion, Apple’s initial *Think Different* television ad (dubbed the “Crazy Ones” commercial), beats 1984 hands down, despite being simpler and much cheaper to produce.

Again, the *call to adventure* to change the world is front and center, amplified by a powerful sense of identification with cultural icons such as Albert Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., plus business leaders like Richard Branson and Ted Turner.

The little girl in the final shot exemplifies the true main hero, who the rest of us

self-identify with. There's even less emphasis on the Macintosh as the mentor or crucial tool in this spot, but everyone gets the point.

People often liken Apple's customer base to a cult, and you have their brilliant marketing to thank for that, in addition to great products. Apple repeatedly taps into the hero's journey monomyth that's also dominant in the stories of Buddha, Moses, and Jesus.

By placing your prospective customers and clients in the role of the main hero, you can develop a serious form of hero worship for your company and solutions as well.

Jared and Subway

Let's bring things down to earth a bit so you can see how simple and practical a successful use of the hero's journey can be in a commercial context. One of my favorite examples is Jared from Subway.

By the end of the Jared campaign, Subway sales had more than doubled to \$8.2 billion. Following Jared's brief departure as Subway spokesman in 2005, sales immediately dropped 10 percent, prompting Subway to quickly bring him back.

Jared is the literal hero, and he goes on a journey of massive weight loss with his “mentor” Subway. Let’s map it out against the initial steps of the classic hero’s journey structure:

- Ordinary World – Jared is obese
- Call to Adventure – Jared wants to lose weight
- Refusal of Call – Losing weight is hard, especially food choices
- Meeting the Mentor – Jared turns to a diet of Subway sandwiches
- Crossing the Threshold – Jared enters the “world of transformation” as he begins to see results

The Jared campaign embodied many of the basic elements of good content marketing. It was useful. It was inspiring. It was educational. It was about benefits, not advertising awards.

People identified with Jared’s story and turned to Subway for help as well, because even if you didn’t need to lose the kind of weight Jared did, you tell yourself that eating at Subway can help you shed a few pounds. If Jared could do it, certainly you can, right?

That’s effective marketing, and it gets even better when you do it with content over time.

How to Perform Heroic Content Marketing

The content you create performs all the same tasks as that rare beast known as effective advertising. It just doesn't seem like advertising, and it doesn't cost you millions of dollars.

Way more effective, way less expensive ... what's not to like? So, let's track the critical steps of the hero's journey, and see how they fit within the 7A Content Marketing Framework:

1. Agile

Starting with an agile mindset means you're telling an interactive story over time. You start out knowing who you want to reach and an understanding of the problems and desires that have, but you adapt to the feedback you get from the audience in real time.

This does not mean you change course at the drop of a hat (unless you've really missed the boat with your initial research and strategy). It simply means you tweak what happens based on the valuable information you get from what the audience says and more importantly, does.

2. Authenticity

This is the research stage. This is where you immerse yourself in your hero's world, in order to make educated guesses about what kind of content will attract and retain a relevant, profitable audience.

You're trying to construct a model of your prospect's ordinary world. What is their day-to-day life like? What are their hopes, dreams, desires, frustrations, problems and pain?

When you've got a clear picture of that, you've got a handle on a potential Call to Adventure. In other words, what do they want to achieve that's not part of their current ordinary world? More importantly, what are the resistance points that causes them to Resist the Call?

What you're really doing is constructing audience personas. Same thing as buyer personas, because ultimately that's what you want them to transform into. But this approach allows you to discover what they actually want to buy.

3. Attention

In the attention phase, you are creating content to get them to "meet their mentor." Your initial content should be an expression of empathy for their ordinary world, an identification of their call to adventure in the form of problems, desires, and aspirations, and an overcoming of objections that

amount to a refusal of the call.

Your content becomes the catalyst for crossing the threshold in the world of transformation, and this is the motivation to subscribe and follow you over time. Your community starts to form, and individual audience members begin to bond with people who are on the same journey.

4. Audience

Ongoing challenges appear in the form of feedback, which fuels your interactive, agile content marketing process while you gain even more traction. You attain a [minimum viable audience](#), where your audience begins to grow itself, and reveals what else they need to complete their journey. You're now on the path to authority.

5. Authority

Authority is attained one person at time, during the attention and audience phases. This means authority in the larger sense, where you (or your company) become recognized as a subject matter expert results from the aggregation of each of those people viewing you as a valued guide or mentor.

In the authority stage, you're getting feedback about what's missing. In other

words, going into the “innermost cave” and facing “the supreme ordeal” will require something more than content. This is where your solution comes into play, and you’re now perfectly positioned to develop and offer it.

Whether you have an existing product or service or not, you’re now doing better than just guessing at what people want. You’ve metaphorically walked a mile in your market’s shoes.

You know what to do next based on serving the initial needs of real people, and you’ve earned the privilege of having your advice taken seriously. This is the best thing that’s ever happened to you, and it happened because you took care of others first.

6. Action

At this point, your audience knows, likes, and trusts you. They may even be begging you to sell them something, which is a happily strange situation in our current cynical environment.

The action phase is basically about copywriting. Except you don’t need a hard sales pitch, because *know, like, and trust* make up about 85% of the battle.

Now, you craft the perfect offer because you understand who you’re talking to and what they want. You tell the perfect closing story because you understand

what the *supreme ordeal* is for them. You know what is objectionable and what creates resistance, and how to coach them through it.

7. Acceleration

The acceleration phase is a gift that results from successfully taking people through the hero's journey. In essence, you've earned the right to take them further than they initially anticipated.

That means you take people through the journey again from a content standpoint, but it's compressed and easier. You have to make the audience realize that there's a higher level, and you can take them there.

Don't get arrogant here, because it's easy to fall from grace. In other words, don't succumb to the dark side.

Instead, be like Yoda. Become wealthy, you will.

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