Content marketing needs to change from a limited one-way communication tool into an interactive vehicle that delivers value to the consumer and the brand.

Not all content is created equal

Some films are better than others. As some content is better than other content. The bleeding obvious seems to get lost in the frenzied content marketing debate.

Blogs are supposedly a good content marketing tool. A Hubspot survey in 2011 reported that, of businesses that blog, 60 per cent acquire more customers. Yet most blogs make no money – a 2012 survey by blogging.com found that 81 per cent of serious bloggers fail to make $100 ever.

So what can we do to understand what content adds most value? The answer is in understanding the role of different types of content, both for the end user and organisations.

Our philosophy is that good content helps customers achieve a personal goal and helps an organisation achieve a business objective. Helping customers achieve goals drives engagement and relationship building. In other words, good content adds material value to both sides.

All content can contribute to this, but to repeat the point, some content does it better. Take for example weight loss or weight management content. There are different content formats that could be used:

- Statistics about how many people are overweight
- A testimonial about how someone lost three stone in two months and now feels amazing
- An expert review of weight-loss programmes
- An article about how to lose weight
- A video comparing the eating experiences of different types of diet
- A book about the latest diet
- A weight loss event
- An interview on daytime TV about how someone lost a lot of weight
- An online service to help you lose weight with your peers.

Each format can be entertaining, inspiring or educational or a combination of all three. But if a brand only publishes statistics and testimonials, its customer or prospect is unlikely to engage with it, even if these are very interesting facts. Conversely, if a brand sets up a service with peers or experts that makes a difference to their daily life, it is guaranteed to get engagement.

As a marketer and business person, what interests me is how content drives long-term engagement. Driving peaks of interest from consumers may increase short-term targets, but ultimately it is not a sustainable strategy.

There is considerable comment in the marketing press about the importance of a big long-term idea to success. Red Bull’s focus on extreme sports is often cited. This is, of course, highly successful and built off the product’s inherent characteristics. It does drive long-term engagement.

But the debate is in many ways built around campaign marketing or old-fashioned ‘push’ communications. It needs to evolve, to focus more on how brands can deploy content to build and maintain genuine, two-way, long-term relationships. This means that the analysis and usage models should help marketers make choices about what content to use and when.

So where should a marketer start? Content can be broken down into four types: data, information, tools and services.

1. **Data** can be stats, benchmarks, testimonials, press releases – reporting raw material without interpretation.
2. **Information** has a level of interpretation or message, including expert reviews, best practice,
checklists, templates, frameworks, trends and glossaries.

3. Tools bundle information and data into an interactive format that individuals can use to assist with tasks or understanding, for example monitoring, planning and learning.

4. Services provide a level of continual support, such as updates, advice and encouragement.

Data content has no long-term engagement value. It creates no emotional bond or shared value with the user. It reports certain things, no more, no less. It has a singular role.

Information content has more value to the user than a brand’s data, because it is more focused and reduces effort. However, only interactive tools and services can provide the regular emotional linkage required for relationships.

To establish the strongest relationships, a brand can add access to people, whether experts or peers, on top of the tools and content, to create a more immersive and personalised experience – the ultimate destination for content marketing (see main picture).

When we created the writers and artists online service for Bloomsbury (www.writersandartists.co.uk), we wanted to help writers and artists achieve a goal – to get published – and in turn help the organisation to create more sales from their expertise in publishing.

This offering combines valuable articles and blogs with unique editorial services such as “How strong is your book idea” and “Beat the rejection clinic”, adding a peer-to-peer community for sharing book ideas and even a self-publishing provider comparison engine. This collection of ‘content’ helps writers navigate their way towards their goals and creates new value for Bloomsbury.

Valuable lessons

We created our Squeezy product (www.squeezyp.com) with the NHS to help the one in three women who suffer from incontinence and wait an average of 6.5 years to speak with their doctor because they feel embarrassed, according to the National Association for Continence. It provides ‘information and support’ to help them manage their condition better. Content is presented as a tool with expert back up.

We want to change content marketing from a short-term, one-way communications device into a two-way engagement vehicle delivering value to all sides: to do this, we built a flexible platform empowering organisations to share content, tools and access to experts with their customers.

So, what are the lessons for superior content? We believe every holistic content marketing strategy needs to ask five questions:

- Does my content serve a clearly defined purpose, helping each individual customer?
- Will my customer engage with it more than once? If not, why not?
- Does it prompt my target customer to engage with my company directly?
-Could my business sustain this across more than one year? It needs to.
-Does it use a range of formats and do the component parts add up to more than the whole? Content on its own is less valuable than something interactive. In 10 years, best practice content marketing will be based on tools rather than only information, aligned with consumer goals. Integrating content with services will be the norm.

Writers & Artists and Squeezy both use content that has an element of peer-to-peer and expert help in order to build strong relations with users