

Strategy trumps trends

 By [Riaan Wolmarans](#), issued by [Metropolitan Republic](#)

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Twenty-seven million pieces of digital content shared on the internet in one day. That's one bit of content - a video, an article, a photograph, perhaps an infographic - for every second person in South Africa, every 24 hours. Over a year, that balloons to nearly 10 billion pieces of content, overtaking the number of people on Earth.



Image via Fotolia.com

What's more, content marketing provider [NewsCred](#) reported these numbers in 2013. By now they've easily doubled, even tripled, making it tougher than ever before for companies and traditional publishers alike to capture the attention of their bustling readers or consumers.

Quantity also doesn't mean quality. Online fact-checking services are flourishing for a reason, while old-world journalists are shuddering at the copy-and-paste journalism churned out by the truckload, not to mention the influx of low-quality digital content published by companies trying to attract new audiences to their products and services.

So, for all the ease of creating and consuming content via our multitude of digital devices, it's now become much harder to find the good stuff. Is our digital future nothing more than a stream of poorly spelled factoids, 10-second virtual-reality prank videos, and company press releases dressed up as news? What are the trends in digital content according to the experts?

People across the world are consuming more video and audio content as broadband access spirals and prices drop. Popular social media platforms have their own content format demands, which vary over time - Facebook might now love native video as it squares off with YouTube but that could easily change in a few months' time.

However, deciding between AVI and MP4 video formats or learning how to embed videos in tweets is not what it's really about; much more critical is the broader thinking around making digital content count.

Quality counts

"First, we should ask ourselves if we truly believe that compelling, engaging, useful and dynamic content-driven experiences ultimately will move the business forward," says the Content Marketing Institute's recent [The State of Enterprise Content](#)

[Marketing 2015](#) report. "If our answer is 'yes', then the strategic value lies in our ability to repeatedly and consistently evolve to create the valuable stories."

Companies across the world are seeing the results of even a small investment in content marketing, so the answer is indeed "yes". The tricky word in that statement is "valuable".

Traditional publishers have always known that poor or biased content annoys readers, so this lesson shouldn't come as a surprise to companies trying their hand at content marketing. Says the report: "A great content team **MUST** have the ability to go beyond marketing and possess a distinct point of view. The minute the team strays from its point of view because of corporate blowback, the content turns into just 'more marketing' rather than great content."

That takes a lot more commitment to the cause than just sticking a blog section onto a company website. The same quality checks that apply to editorial content in newspapers should apply to content marketing in any other industry. Appoint people who know how to create fantastic content: journalists, editors, writers. The existing marketing team cannot magically develop those skills overnight.

Also keep in mind that consumers, bewildered by the deluge of digital content in their lives, tend to turn to the brands they trust to find credible content. Don't let them down.

Do the research

Another lesson from the world of news: find the right audience. Once a company - no matter whether it's a newspaper or a brewery - has spent time and money to create great content, why let all that effort go to waste by showing it to the wrong people? Learn how to use content analytics tools and how to interpret the results to find the right kind of readers and hold their attention.

That also means no jumping on bandwagons. The CEO's teenage son might be on Snapchat all day long but that's no reason to rush the platform onto the list of channels the company uses for content marketing. Spreading rapidly to every new channel is a waste of time. Instead, have a sound reason for each channel that's included in the mix. Then consolidate those thoughts by compiling an in-depth content strategy: what goes where, why does it go there, and what difference will it make?

Don't forget, the content production for each of these channels must be sustainable. Be realistic about this - most CEOs simply don't have time to blog every week, despite their best intentions.

Ultimately, there can be no great content without a content strategy backed up by solid research and a commitment to quality. Don't make it up along the way.

Find the right format

While a solid strategy can work magic with just about any format of content, there are some emerging trends to keep in mind. Infographics are still a popular way of presenting complicated information concisely and attractively. Veer away from PowerPoint-style graphics - have a data journalist and graphic designer do it properly. The best infographics both educate and entertain, and they need enough visual punch to stand out on crowded social media feeds.

The prophets of doom among us have long feared a world in which all communication has been reduced to no more than 140 characters on a smartphone screen. Yet a [study in 2014](#) analysed social sharing of more than 100 million articles and reported that long-form content (articles of more than 1,000 words) stood its ground, in a finding backed up by the content team at *The New York Times*.

It's not easy to create such in-depth content, of course - it's much easier to rattle off a quick list of 10 funny tricks to teach

a cat. It's worth the investment, though.

On the other end of the spectrum is the obvious need for short-form content: tweets, 15-second videos on Instagram, BuzzFeed-style lists, infographics and the like. The competition is much more intense at this level, making it much harder to stand out without a content strategy to back up what's created and disseminated. The 2014 study concluded that "medium-sized content" - falling between the two extremes - was being "left to die out".

Personalise to perform

Consumers might still object to Google serving them targeted ads that flow from their recent browsing data, but it's much less intimidating to receive useful content in the same way.

"The future of content marketing is personalisation," says content management strategist [Scott Abel](#). "Without personalisation, we're just spraying content around the web and hoping it'll stick to someone - anyone, actually."

Time-pressed consumers are much more likely to pay attention to content that is personalised or targeted. To create such content, a company or publisher must collect useful data about each member of its current and potential audience and manage that data as responsibly and securely as possible. Don't become the next [Ashley Madison](#).

A time and a place for everything

Making all content mobile-friendly is neither a trend nor a recommendation. It's a fact of life. Today's consumers stumble across content anywhere and at any time. But capturing someone's attention early on a Saturday morning when they're home having breakfast and relaxing with their iPad can be much easier than doing so via an email newsletter at 3pm on a busy Monday at the office.

So, find the best time, location and delivery method for consumers to receive particular pieces of content. Also make sure the format of that content matches - someone on the go won't be likely to delve into a 2,000-word analysis, no matter how well it's written.

Use simple techniques such as A/B testing to see what works. For example, send an email newsletter in the morning to half of the database and in the evening to the rest to see which gets the best response. Don't be scared of experimenting in this way until the best options become clear.

Don't forget to tell the world

While you're mulling over the various ways of delivering your content to its potential consumers, always consider a paid media strategy. It's all very well to send an email newsletter or to post a link on Facebook, but there are ever more sneaky and clever ways to advertise your content to its intended audience, sometimes without them even realising what's happening.

The range of paid media and advertising options on platforms like Facebook is growing all the time - and they don't always require deep pockets. Massive campaigns need sizeable budgets, of course, but even a few thousand rand here and there can do wonders.

In the end, it's quite simple: remember that creating good content is a skill, but finding the right person for that job is only half the battle won. It's what you do with that content that matters.

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