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QUICK GUIDE TO BLOGGING AND CONTENT MARKETING

8 tips to start or improve your blogging strategy

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Quick Guide to Content Marketing

8 tips to start or improve your blogging strategy

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TACTICS YOU CAN LEARN OVER LUNCH

Welcome to *Quick Guide to Content Marketing* – a resource from MarketingSherpa featuring bite-sized tips for busy marketers.

In this report, we provide tips for starting or revitalizing your blogging strategy.

When we survey marketers, content creation consistently ranks at or near the top of their list of most effective SEO tactics. This is especially true now in the wake of Google's new Hummingbird algorithm, which places a strong value on high-value content that demonstrates authority and expertise.

Many businesses have already started a blog of some sort. However, many of those marketers will fall into the common trap of beginning like a blogging ball of fire, only to quickly lose momentum, at which point their blog just sits there, neglected and not very useful either to the company or potential readers.

Whether you don't yet have a blog, or you have one that's not doing as well as you had hoped (partly because you've lost enthusiasm for it and grown skeptical of the benefits it can provide), we can help you develop a thriving blog that provides valuable and sharable content for your audience.

In this report, we'll show you:

- Why a blog can be so valuable
- Tips for developing with good material
- How to work a blog into your larger content marketing strategy
- Ways to increase ROI from your current tactics

We know you're in a hurry, so let's begin. We're eager to share these tips on how you can start or improve your blog and share valuable content with your target audience.

Bobbi Dempsey
Editor, *Quick Guide to Content Marketing*

About *Quick Guide to Content Marketing*

MarketingSherpa's *Quick Guide to Content Marketing* is designed with you, the busy marketer, in mind. We provide quick, simple tips you can use right away. For each *Quick Guide*, we scour the vast MECLABS library of marketing research, from MarketingSherpa case studies and Benchmark Reports to MarketingExperiments optimization tests and analyses. We highlight tips to help improve your marketing performance right now ... or at least by the time you're done with lunch.

Tactic #1. Understand the value of a blog

If you aren't sure if it would be worthwhile to start or expand a blog as part of your content marketing plan, you can ask yourself a few basic questions. In the MarketingSherpa Blog post, "[Content Marketing: A process for evaluating content channels](#)," Daniel Burstein, Director of Editorial Content, MECLABS, said these are questions you should also address for each specific content channel you are considering.

Burstein stated you must first start with your value proposition, determining the value of your brand and product. Hopefully, those are things you have already done as part of your general marketing efforts.

Once you have that information, you then need to consider issues related to the specific channel. In this case, we're applying this approach to blogging, but you can actually use this same process when evaluating the value or effectiveness of any of your other channels.

Conduct preliminary research

Identify your target audience. At whom does this content aim? Decision makers? Influencers? How old are they? What is their income level? Where do they live? There are endless ways you can break down this information, but you're essentially trying to discover what type of information they are looking for and where they go for that information.

Identify channels for analysis. This step is crucial for overcoming "I hear Twitter is hot and I should use it" syndrome. *You* might love Twitter, but does your intended audience love it, too? You can start by looking at your analytics. Which content channels are already driving traffic to your website? One advantage of a blog is that unlike other means of how you share content, it really doesn't require any technical skills on the part of the reader, and is fairly comfortable and convenient even for those without a lot of tech or social media savvy. Anyone who is comfortable reading articles or information online should be able to enjoy your blog without too much trouble.

Discuss with your team. As with the value proposition above, not all of the wisdom resides within the marketing department. What has Customer Service learned about your customers – the information those customers are looking for, and where they find it? What about Sales?

Determine what the ideal channels look like for communicating content

This is where you can use your imagination and creativity to engage in some blue sky thinking. Ask yourself these questions:

- What would the ideal channel's value be to your potential audience? Why would hearing about this new channel stop them in their tracks and make them sign up right away? What element of that knowledge can you leverage using the current content channels that are at your disposal?
- How would you use the ideal channel(s)? What would these channels offer you, the content creator, that you are not able to utilize now? Is there any way to work within the confines of today's channels to make possible what you currently view as impossible?

Create a draft content infrastructure

At this point, you understand the value of your brand and its products, know how your target audience likes to get its information, and have pushed the limit on thinking about how you could possibly communicate better with your audience. Now it's time to create a draft content infrastructure.

For each channel in that content infrastructure, you should have the following information:

To whom does the channel speak? It doesn't have to be every member of your target audience either. You just have to ensure the channel is appropriate for at least one targeted persona in the audience. For example, it might appeal to influencers but not executive-level decision makers.

What content can we produce? You may need to do a little corporate soul-searching on this one. Can you create the type of content that is expected in this channel? Will you be able to have a blog as informative as other competitive sources of information? How is your company organized, and what is its culture? Is information easily accessible? Will subject-matter experts contribute to your content?

These are not "yes" or "no" questions. You're grading yourself on a scale and trying to prioritize which content channels to invest your resources. That said, even with infinite resources, you should not invest in infinite channels.

Can we support this channel for the indefinite future? How frequently will you add new content to this channel? How often will you read and respond to customer feedback? These are important questions, because that Google+ account you last updated eight months ago implies the message that you'll abandon your customers as well.

Does the channel support my brand and product value propositions? The channel itself communicates value. For example, should a serious B2B brand be on Facebook? How do the ads surrounding your YouTube videos affect the perception of your brand's value?

What is the value proposition of your content on this channel? Here's a template we often suggest for formulating a value proposition, this one is tailored to the blog channel: *Why should [prospect type] read your blog to [learn about fixing an appliance] instead of [get information to fix an appliance in any other way]?*

Even your free content needs an effective value proposition. That is the final litmus test. If you can't answer the above question, you're just wasting time and money investing in that content channel.

Tactic #2. Overcome some common objections

When first proposing the idea of a new or improved blog, you may run into some internal pushback from those who are skeptical that the blog would be worth the time, effort and resources you will need to devote to it.

In the MarketingSherpa Blog post, "[Content Marketing: 3 tips for how to get started](#)," Burstein shared some quick tips for overcoming these objections.

Objection #1. We don't want to give our content away for free. You need to adjust your way of thinking. You're not giving content away for free. You're gaining something very valuable in return. When you create quality content that really helps your customers and potential customers, your company receives attention (something you pay dearly for with paid media placements), trust (something you typically can earn only after a customer has purchased), and a lever to make your other marketing investments, such as email and social media marketing, more effective.

Objection #2. We don't have the time to produce content. Don't listen to anyone who tells you content marketing is free to produce. Like traditional marketing, it requires an investment. So if you decide to adopt content as part of your marketing strategy, you can't treat it as a "we'll get to it in our spare time." Spare time never comes. You must make time. You must dedicate resources to producing content. Once you do, you might learn that you end up saving time elsewhere that you can invest back in content marketing.

For example, Marcus Sheridan, Co-owner, River Pools and Spas, saw his closing rate quadruple when he invested in content because people were ready to make a decision when he showed up at their house, thus saving time that had been spent on sales.

Objection #3. We don't want to give away our secrets. If you can't give potential customers enough information about how you do what you do, whether that is fixing plumbing leaks or improving marketing performance, then why should they trust you with their business?

From social media to WikiLeaks to open-source software, the era of information totalitarianism is coming to an end, and organizations that embrace transparent marketing have far more to gain than they have to lose.

Tactic #3. Start with easy steps

One of the biggest challenges about starting a blog is just overcoming the mental hurdle of how tough you think it will be. In the *MarketingSherpa 2012 SEO Marketing Benchmark Report* survey, 60% of marketers said they felt creating blog-based content was either somewhat difficult, or very difficult.

However, as with many other strategies, the key here is to break it down into small, specific tasks and start with manageable steps before you tackle anything too ambitious.

In the MarketingSherpa Blog post from Tactic #2, Burstein grabbed a few minutes at Optimization Summit 2012 with Michael Aagaard, Online Copywriter and Landing Page Fanatic, ContentVerve, to learn some tips for launching a blog or any content project.

Here are Aagaard's three tips for getting your blog rolling quickly:

- **Put your focus on how you can help your audience.** Don't worry about how you're going to sell to them.
- **Find topics to write about.** Look at the things you're already talking about every day. Enlist input from your customer service teams or other departments that deal directly with customers or clients. Addressing common questions you hear from customers is a great way to begin. If you look at the top 50

questions you receive, that's already a plan for your first 50 blog posts. Note: Your IT staff may also be able to share the most common questions or phrases entered in your website's search function.

- **Remember, it's not a one-way monologue; it's a conversation.** Start a discussion and look at it as engaging with your community. Ask your readers for questions. Encourage them to share their feedback. Reader feedback is also a great form of testing, as it will give you some clear indications of what is working – and what readers feel need to be improved.

Tactic #4. Incorporate your blog into your overall content strategy

To use your resources most efficiently, and achieve the best return on your investment, you must ensure that all of the pieces of your marketing strategy work together. This way, you can strategize ways to utilize the same basic efforts and ideas to generate content you can use across various channels. You will also be able to plan ways in which specific channels can support and complement each other. An example of this is referring readers to visit another channel for more details or bonus material.

The MarketingSherpa article, "[Content Marketing: Mindjet's infographic strategy boosts blog traffic 420%, Facebook views 313.4%](#)," by David Kirkpatrick, Manager of Editorial Content, MECLABS, explains how the team at Mindjet, a collaborative work management software company, used infographics as the "hub" of its content strategy and found a way to spin that basic component into something that inspired content across all of its channels.

"The kind of content which has turned out to be not only 'snackable' but also sharable is infographics on a wide variety of subjects," said Parker Trewin, former Director of Global Communications, Mindjet.

He added, "These infographics are perfect for us because they are very visual and serve as a visual complement to our product which is very visual in nature."

Here are the steps Mindjet took in formulating an overall content strategy that relied upon infographics as its core.

Step #1. Create platform-appropriate and sharable content

Trewin said the goal is to create content that is easily shared, along with making sure it is appropriate for the distribution point. That means not using long-form text that might be found on the blog for a Facebook update, and not using 140 characters (a tweet) on the blog.

In one example, the team would present an infographic on the Facebook page to take advantage of the visual element of that platform, and then also use it as part of a longer, more text-heavy blog post. Mindjet uses StumbleUpon to create virality around the content piece, and engages Twitter to stimulate comments, broadcast the infographic and provide information about all of the content channels.

EXAMPLE: MINDJET BLOG WITH INFOGRAPHIC

The screenshot shows the Mindjet blog homepage. At the top is a red navigation bar with the Mindjet logo and links for Products, Solutions, Shop, Support, and About. Below this is a white header with the 'CONSPIRE' logo (A MINDJET PUBLICATION) and navigation menus for 'Articles' and 'Topics'. A search bar is also present. The main content area features a large infographic article titled 'The Evolution of Workplace Technology [Infographic]' dated June 1, 2012. The infographic depicts a modern office with people working at computers. Below the title is a 'READ ARTICLE' button and social media sharing icons for Facebook (0), Twitter (8), LinkedIn (7), and Google+ (0). Below the main article are two smaller article thumbnails: 'Agile Business' (showing a man surrounded by papers) and 'Visualization' (showing a person with a large red hand). To the right of these thumbnails are 'Recent' and 'Popular' tabs, with the 'Recent' tab selected, showing the same 'The Evolution of Workplace Technology' article as the most recent post.

The team reviews their strategy quarterly, and comes up with infographic ideas during these brainstorming sessions. The marketing team then produces the brainstormed [infographic](#) and rolls it out in three basic steps:

- Day 1 introduces the content on the Facebook page, where the audience can comment and make suggestions about the infographic.
- Day 2 is a blog post that elaborates on the infographic with additional text and commentary.
- Day 3 includes an additional infographic including suggestions from the Facebook commentary.

To facilitate infographic sharing on the blog, Mindjet provides a cut-and-paste embed code on the post so visitors can share the content on their own websites. Trewin said one way the marketing team makes that sharing searchable is by adding keywords to the embed code.

Step #2. Begin with the blog

Although posting to the blog is day 2 of an infographic campaign, the entire content marketing strategy involves more than just infographics and revolves around the company blog.

Trewin said the concept behind the company blog was to serve more as a news magazine to give its community informative and educational content. He added that the company hired a brand journalist dedicated solely to producing blog content. Along with the brand journalist, other internal contributors and external guest bloggers provide content.

Other steps in Mindjet's process include optimizing the Facebook News Feed and including calls-to-action in the content.

Using this strategy, Mindjet saw its blog really take off. Before the new content strategy went into practice, the blog typically received between 17,000 and 20,000 unique monthly visitors, but after this new strategy went into effect, unique page views in a given month topped 84,000 – an increase of 420%.

Tactic #5. Create a calendar for consistency in scheduling

One of worst things you can do with a blog is post content in spurts, with long droughts in between. This sort of stop-and-start flow is no fun for readers, who will likely grow annoyed after they impatiently stalk your blog for new content, only to be disappointed.

The actual schedule you follow is not as important as keeping it consistent. This helps readers get in the habit of looking for – and looking forward to – your content at specific times.

The key is planning and preparation. You should build up a stockpile of good content and then carefully plan when you will share it. In the MarketingSherpa Blog post, "[Content Marketing: An 8-point analysis for your blog](#)," Burstein said it's essential that you establish a blog posting routine – and stick to it.

To achieve both of your primary goals – content quality and reliability – you need to set up an editorial calendar you know you can consistently over-deliver on and build up a queue of content, he explained. In other words, if you're writing blog posts the same day they are posted, then you have a problem.

"That queue will wax and wane in size as you become busy with other duties, but it is your insurance and buffer against missing a scheduled deadline. You can still add some real-time posts to take advantage of general news or changes in your industry. Just make sure you have plenty of high-quality, evergreen posts in your queue to comfortably meet every date you are promising to your readers," Burstein said.

While content is the most critical part of a blog, you can't ignore the importance of other elements of the blog structure itself. In this blog post, Burstein also discussed ways to achieve the best results from the title, header and other parts of the blog layout.

Tactic #6. Don't obsess over blog post length

People may be wary of starting or managing a blog because they assume they'll need to crank out lengthy posts that take forever to write. The prospect of crafting these long articles can be intimidating and overwhelming.

In reality, you don't need to make each blog post a long, in-depth read. In fact, short posts that are a "quick hit" – addressing a basic topic or sharing a quick tip – can often be very effective.

These types of posts are also often very popular with readers. Remember, just as long, wordy posts are intimidating to write, they can also be intimidating to read. That doesn't mean you should avoid long posts completely. However, just consider ways to make those posts easier on readers.

In the MarketingSherpa Blog post, "[Content Marketing: Focus on value, not length](#)," Burstein points out that there's no such thing as the "perfect length" for a blog post. When it comes to managing our own blogs, his cardinal rule is: "I only care about value to the audience."

When asked how long a MarketingSherpa or MarketingExperiments Blog post should be, his answer was: as long as it needs to be.

He explained the post should be "however long it takes to deliver one salient point, one piece of actionable advice to our audience. Sure, that's not as neat and tidy as a word count, but it is a guideline that reflects the heart and soul of our blogs – our job is to help you do your job better. If the blog post delivers on that proposition, the writer has done his or her job."

Burstein continued, "Of course, I'm not saying length doesn't matter at all. That doesn't mean you can pour endless content onto the virtual page and expect your audience to care. You must still respect their time and, especially if the content is longer, make it as approachable and consumable as possible."

For example, for a long blog post, you can make it more scannable by:

- Using bullet points when appropriate
- Bolding key points, but not overdoing this emphasis because if you emphasize everything, you emphasize nothing
- Writing short paragraphs with quick sentences that aren't necessarily complete

Tactic #7. Repurpose your existing content

Maintaining a blog makes many people nervous because of the challenge of keeping it stocked with a steady stream of content. But who says you need to reinvent the wheel each time you write a new blog post? One of the easiest and most efficient ways to add useful material to your blog is to repurpose content you already have. After all, you invested a lot of time and work into creating that content, so why not share it with as many people using as many venues as possible?

In the MarketingSherpa Blog post, "[Content Marketing: 7 tips for content repurposing](#)," Courtney Eckerle, Manager of Editorial Content, MECLABS said many marketers have already caught on to this strategy and are searching for a consistent plan for repurposing content that will relieve both time and budget pain points.

She shared some tips from Muhammad Yasin, former Director of Marketing, HCC Medical Insurance Services, who has helped put together a successful and efficient repurposing system with his team.

Tip #1. Create a repurposing map

If you create content with the mindset of always making it rich for further content plundering, then it is easier to map out your repurposing intentions ahead of time. Yasin's team started out very serious about repurposing, and in the past two years, they have worked out a repurposing map that works well for them.

According to Yasin, knowing in advance what repurposing you might do with a piece of content allows you to do a few things. For instance, having a vision and goal in mind when you start to speak with designers about the concept for an infographic can save valuable time. It will also save those writing and creating content time to be able to move ahead and prepare future content. If everyone on your team is aware of the next step on the repurposing map, there is a significant reduction in time delays.

Tip #2. Don't rely on duplicating content

Yasin added a warning about the dangers of duplicating content, even though it may seem like the quickest and easiest way to repurpose. Repurposing doesn't mean regurgitating the exact same content on a different page. It is restyling or expanding on an original piece of content so that it is useful and valuable in a different way.

"You don't want to take a blog post and then also do the same blog post somewhere else. I am not a fan of that whatsoever," said Yasin, adding that he believes, from a search perspective, it will be damaging in the long term.

"What I am talking about more so is taking a concept, and then taking pieces of that ... to create new content in an easy and efficient manner," he said.

Tip #3. Start off with a robust piece of content

Yasin said his process usually starts with a webinar because "it is a big piece of content, and it is easier to start with something big and walk through all the different pieces of content you can create based off of that."

For him, the easiest piece of content to create from a webinar is the PowerPoint slide deck that would most likely be part of the presentation, and those slides can be uploaded to SlideShare. While broadcasting the webinar, they simultaneously stream it live on Google+, which creates a conversation on that platform that can be shared.

Once the webinar is complete, another asset is then in place: "We now have audio that we can add breaks into and we have a podcast that can be released," Yasin said.

Tip #4. Break up robust content into smaller topics

Yasin said his webinars are usually broken up into three different sections. Then, those can then be turned into three different topics that can be remarketed as an individual video on that specific topic. From just those relatively simple reworkings of webinar content, a wealth of useful content is created.

“I think right now ... we have a Google+ Hangout that we have done. We have a SlideShare presentation that we have posted. We have three videos that we have created, and we have a podcast – that is five pieces of content out of one webinar so far,” he said.

Transcripts from a webinar can also be cleaned up and published. From the original three topics, they will also occasionally shoot a more produced video “usually as a whiteboard video or perhaps in an interview style,” Yasin said.

Note: For more information about repurposing content, check out the MarketingSherpa article, [“Reformat, Reuse, Recycle: 5 Strategies to Stretch Your Marketing Content.”](#)

Tactic #8: Use subject-matter experts

Content is the essential ingredient for a blog – and the better the content, the greater the odds that your blog will be successful. Creating content that is valuable and interesting for readers can be a challenge, especially once your blog has been going for a while and you feel like you’ve run out of fresh ideas.

This is when you need to turn to interesting sources. You should develop a contact list of subject-matter experts (SMEs) that you can turn to when you need new content and fresh voices on your blog. These sources should be knowledgeable about a topic that relates to your blog or industry in some way, but you can be creative and think beyond the obvious high-profile people that seem to be everywhere. Of course, it helps if your SMEs are colorful characters and interesting personalities. At the very least, they should be able to talk in a friendly, likable way that educates readers while also making for a fun read.

In the MarketingSherpa Blog post, [“Content Marketing: 5 questions to ask subject-matter experts to get the ball rolling,”](#) Burstein suggested some basic questions you can use as a starting point when interviewing an SME, four of which are listed below:

Question #1. How will the [new product feature here] help [target customers here]?

In most organizations, SMEs have a role in product development. That means they’re usually quite excited about new features they helped create. Just make sure the end result of your conversation does not turn into an ad for their product, but use this as a spur for content based on the pain point that new product feature will solve.

Question #2. What challenges have you helped customers overcome recently?

SMEs are also often involved in either service delivery or customer support (depending on the size of the organization, it may be the same SME as above), so asking how they recently helped a customer could result in a helpful story. When it comes to content marketing for complex, difficult-to-understand products, stories resulting in actionable advice that helps your audience are gold. They're much easier to connect to than wordy, complicated text filled with a lot of jargon.

Question #3. How has [industry news here] affected [target audience here] and what should they do about it?

Timely information always makes for good content, and your SMEs likely follow the industry closely and have strong opinions on the latest news. Just make sure you have a thorough vetting process for your content marketing, so you don't inadvertently publish something controversial. Of course, if you advertently publish something controversial, that can be a great way to spark discussion with your community.

Question #4. A [job title here] in our LinkedIn Group wanted to know [question here]?

The end goal of your content is to help your audience. Sometimes, the best place to go for questions is straight to the source. Plus, by having the question come from a real person in the industry, the question has more credibility and your SME might have more passion in answering it. Hey, sometimes the smartest people in the room like showing off. It's human nature.

To learn some of the tips and lessons we've learned from managing our own blogs at MarketingSherpa and MarketingExperiments, check out the MarketingSherpa webinar replay, "[Content Marketing: How MarketingExperiments increased blog traffic by 232%.](#)"

Of course, you can also learn a lot by studying what your peers are doing. To see some examples of other successful blogs in the industry, check out the MarketingSherpa Blog post, "[Blog Awards: The 13 best marketing industry blogs \(according to you\).](#)"

Useful Links and Resources:

[MarketingSherpa Blog: Content Marketing: How to manage a change in content on your blog](#)

[MarketingSherpa Blog: 5 Tips for Wordpress Blogging](#)

[MarketingSherpa Blog: Find the Goldilocks zone in your blogging](#)

[MarketingSherpa Blog: Content Marketing: How McGladrey built a strategy around content development \[Video\]](#)

About MarketingSherpa LLC

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