

# Putting an end to download-and-go: The website's role in a content marketing ecosystem

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## Key points

- Publishers must think of their websites as marketing tools as well as content delivery systems.
- The five major strategies of content marketing are promotion, personalization, targeting, consumerization, and analysis and optimization.
- Publishers must treat readers as customers, not simply as end users.
- Content marketing is about the environment in which content exists, as well as the form that it takes.
- To compete with pirate sites, publishers need to provide a richer user experience.
- Content marketing benefits authors and readers *as well as* publishers.
- Readers want the same enjoyable user experience and tailored content on all sites they visit.
- Content marketing can increase site traffic, lengthen visits, boost revenues, thwart piracy, and heighten brand impact.

A scholarly publisher's website should not be just a place where researchers go to download content; it should be a venue for scientific communication and a place of knowledge and learning. It should also be an effective sales and marketing tool for the publisher's content.

When a publication website is treated like an article warehouse, it can impede the pursuit of knowledge. Such websites can also degenerate into PDF download stores, encouraging 'grab-and-go' user behaviour that does not support a viable long-term business strategy. Content marketing attempts to end that phenomenon.

Content marketing is using content as a marketing tool. It is a business strategy that benefits publishers – both for-profit and non-profit – by increasing readership, subscribership, membership, submissions, and revenues, and by advancing their brand. It also leverages a publisher's legacy content while increasing its value, along with that of any adjacent advertising real estate.

Content marketing is successful because it also serves researchers and authors. Authors benefit from content marketing because it promotes their work more aggressively and broadens its

reach. This is key for publishers who must keep their authors satisfied while continually attracting new ones. Researchers benefit from a smoother, more productive, personalized research process that streamlines scholarly inquiry and the pursuit of relevant academic content, ultimately increasing the value of their scholarship.

## THE CASE FOR CONTENT MARKETING IN SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING

If publishers are to thrive in an increasingly hostile landscape of open access mandates, decreasing research and library funding, ResearchGate, Sci-Hub and other pirate sites, and out-of-copyright usage, all while defending against everyday competitive pressures, they must distinguish their content and their brand from their competitors' and deepen their relationships with readers and subscribers. However, quality content is no longer enough to attract and retain online readers, who can too often find a publisher's paywall-protected content on another site where it is available for free or request it from colleagues.

For example, a study by the inventors of Unpaywall, a browser extension that locates (legally) free versions of articles, found that ~4.8% of all journal articles with DOIs – ~2.97 million articles – are behind a paywall on their publisher's site but have also been deposited in open access repositories by their authors; such articles account for over 9% of all searches via Unpaywall (Piowar *et al.*, 2017). As of August 2017, Unpaywall had about 80,000 users (Chawla, 2017).

Readers are also bombarded with other information that competes for their online attention and are quick to abandon sites that do not provide a rewarding experience on whatever device they are using. Therefore, it is critical for publishers to engage site visitors and give them a reason to return: maintaining and growing traffic is crucial to maintaining their subscriber base and growing ad revenues.

'Students and researchers tend to gather content for later use rather than read it in detail as soon as they find it' (Doshi, 2016). To counter that phenomenon, publishers must create a website that attracts *and holds* readers' attention by giving them the content they want *and* a superior research environment – that is, a website that supports intuitive, productive experiences. One solution to all of these challenges is content marketing.

The Content Marketing Institute (CMI) provides a thorough, if broad, definition: Content marketing creates and distributes valuable, relevant content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience – and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action (CMI, n.d.).

Because the term 'content marketing' has troubling undertones for some publishers, addressing what content marketing is *not* is also warranted. It is not about blurring the lines between scholarly content, editorial content, and advertising. It is not over-commercialization or aiming downmarket, and for publishers, it is not about writing content for content's sake. In other words, content marketing need not cheapen or degrade the integrity of scholarly content. Just the opposite is true: content marketing can enhance content, as well as the value and visibility of a brand.

In the context of scholarly publishing, content marketing is about improving the research experience with personalized content presented in a modern, personalized interface. It is this personalization that makes content more relevant and that yields reader engagement.

According to the CMI, in 2014, although 90% of B2C (business-to-consumer) companies employed content marketing, an average of 47% of all companies – and 61% of companies with over 1,000 employees – outsourced some, most, or all of their content creation (Pulizzi & Handley, 2014). Michele Linn, CMI's Vice President, Content, suspects that trend has likely continued as companies reach beyond their own organization for writers, journalists, and video makers with skills they cannot find among staffers (personal communication, June 27, 2017). Two other trends are even more expensive: building in-house 'brand newsrooms' to create content and acquiring content companies wholesale.

Even so, like any marketing initiative, content marketing strategies do not always pan out: 'We're seeing an increased amount of frustration because companies are putting the label

'content marketing' on the same types of content they've always published – product pitches', Linn says. 'But content marketing can't be content about the brand itself – it must be content of interest to the people who *purchase* your brand' (personal communication, June 28, 2017).

Scholarly publishers are one step ahead of other types of companies: they are already in the content business, making them natural content marketers. While other brands have to author content for the explicit purpose of using it as a marketing tool, publishers do not. And their content is about research, not about themselves.

'The content itself on our site is the content marketing for American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), and certainly for our scholarly publications', says Charlotte McNaughton, the Director of Publishing Technologies at the ASCE. 'We don't need to write about our content in order to get people to use our content' (personal communication, June 21–July 13, 2017).

## HOW CONTENT MARKETING WORKS

A publication website must be more than a place that scholars visit once a month when a new journal issue comes out. Content marketing can help publishers create the opposite: destination websites. Consumer retail giants are a good model for how to do this.

According to scholarly publishing industry analyst Jo McShea, 'All information industry segments feel the impact of wider consumer media and technology giants such as Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple, and Netflix. [U]sers do not park their consumer experiences at the door when they turn up to work, and [they] expect the same level of service provision from their professional information and solutions providers' (McShea, 2017a).

Facebook and Google have long known that it is people – not user sessions – who visit their sites; similarly, Amazon, Netflix, and Apple know they need to market to consumers, not IP addresses.

'With online retailing, there's no need to reinvent the wheel,' Jeff Oxford, a marketing consultant specializing in search engine optimization (SEO), wrote in *Forbes* in 2013. 'Massive eCommerce websites such as Amazon have paved the way for online success. By learning from Amazon, online retailers can take advantage of these strategies and tactics and be the 'Amazon' of their own industry' (Oxford, 2013).

Granted, scholarly journals are not typical consumer goods or similar to *New York Times* bestsellers, but by borrowing successful marketing strategies from consumer websites and carefully adapting them to scholarly content, publishers can go beyond passive content delivery to active content marketing without jeopardizing academic integrity or abandoning the professionalism that their websites must project (Atypson, 2016).

Amazon creates a personalized shopping experience by using intuitive search and automated content recommendations; A/B testing and actionable analytics inform the construction of a user interface and user experience that makes for an enjoyable

shopping experience. These content marketing strategies are not new, but they have never been fully explored or exploited by scholarly publishers, many of whom have only recently begun investigating B2C marketing techniques. The following discussion explains how the proven tactics and technologies of commercial retailers can be successfully translated for scholarly publishers looking for creative ways to leverage their existing content in order to attract, engage, and retain researchers and readers.

## Promotion

Traditional, or 'push' marketing, is based on the theory that if you tell people that your product exists, they will respond by looking for it, and this is how many organizations – and most scholarly publishers – market their content. Publishers employ push marketing techniques such as pop-up notifications, email and eTOC alerts, offers, and calibrated ads to promote their content to customers.

'Awareness is always the first step in content marketing', noted Kent Anderson, former publisher of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the CEO of RedLink. 'People have to know the content exists. eTOCs do a good job of routinely putting information in front of people' (personal communication, June 14–20, 26, 2017).

Indeed, 68% of people whose computer is their 'primary device' – and 55% of people who prefer smartphones – would still rather receive email notifications when something new is published on a website to which they subscribe (An, 2016). However, the volume of content on the web – and the volume of notifications about it – can overwhelm readers, causing the opposite of the intended effect: dulling awareness of the content and diminishing push marketing's effectiveness.

'It's a mistake to think marketing is 'push, push, push' all the time', added Anderson. 'Part of it is matching your audience's pace and finding a way to coexist so you're welcomed' (personal communication, June 14–20, 26, 2017).

Edith Holmes, Executive Director and Publisher of Movement Science Media, which publishes the *Journal of Sports and Orthopaedic Survey (JOSPT)*, concurred, cautioning, 'All content marketing possibilities and efforts must be evaluated with the audience in mind. People say content is king, but really it's *audience-specific* content that's king' (personal communication, June 14–20, 26, 2017).

Push marketing promotions can be personalized to some extent – for example, by planting links in social media feeds. Publishers can also give free access to traffic that originates from social media sites by creating 'toll-free links' that provide free, or temporarily free, access to otherwise paywalled articles without yielding access to the rest of the journal, a tactic employed by *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

Todd Reitzel, who has been the publishing director for several societies – most recently, the Association for Psychological Science – contends that content access via toll-free links is intrinsically a marketing tool. 'Bringing the community to content under a journal's or publisher's branding can serve as...a sample

of what the journal and publisher offer, and may lead to increased demand for content under that brand' (Reitzel, 2017). To that end, such links are often provided to authors, who use them to promote their own articles.

Personalization and other content marketing strategies are equally important for attracting authors, and email solicitations are more effective when personalized. 'Open and click-through rates are much higher when a call for papers highlights editorial board members in that research community and recently published papers on similar topics', according to an executive at one of the world's largest STM society publishers. 'Authors want to publish where they know their paper will be read by their peers, and this strategy resonates' (personal communication, August 16, 25, 2017).

Topic-based alerts that readers subscribe to or that are delivered based on their content usage patterns are another example of personalized push marketing.

## Targeting

'Pull' marketing – synonymous with content marketing for many marketers – relies most heavily on personalization tactics. By shaping content products, user experiences, and marketing offers to specific site visitors (or would-be site visitors), publishers use relevant content to attract new readers to their website rather than waiting for them to find it on their own.

To target content, publishers leverage data on readers' identities and site behaviour. Collaborative filtering, for example, segments readers with similar profiles into groups with similar interests and then targets them with the content, ads, and offers most likely to interest them. 'More like this' recommendations – like when YouTube suggests a string quartet to a user after he has listened to a piano trio by the same composer – are algorithms that predict what else a reader might want to read (or buy) based on what he or she has searched for or purchased previously. Showing readers the content they want *alongside* content they did not know existed is an opportunity to both cross-sell and extend site visits.

At the American Psychiatric Association (APA), for example, the incorporation of TrendMD, which employs collaborative filtering to recommend articles on a publisher's website, is having a quantifiable effect. 'Targeted suggestions entice readers to stay longer on PsychiatryOnline and expose them to the richness of the material available to them,' said Tim Marney, APA's Director of Digital Publishing. 'By continually offering suggestions, we make the reader curious. This has been reflected in the steady growth in traffic we have seen month over month since we began to employ content targeting' (personal communication, June 14–22, 27, 2017).

This is in keeping with studies conducted by the co-founders and owners of TrendMD Inc., which found that TrendMD can increase site traffic and page views significantly (Kudlow, Rutledge, Aviv, McIntyre, & Eysenbach, 2016; Kudlow, Rutledge, & Eysenbach, 2014). It is even possible to create 'segments of one'

– segmentation so granular it targets a single individual based on his specific online behaviour, wants, and needs (Halligan, 2011).

Content can also be targeted in other ways. 'Content marketing often means, or results in, product creation,' observes JOSPT's Holmes. For example, publishers can construct a microsite linked from their existing websites to bring together articles, books, videos, and the latest news and opinions related to a specific topic.

Elsevier, for example, created free-access microsites in response to the Zika outbreak in 2016, making their own content available alongside other important information about the epidemic (Zika Virus Resource Center, 2016); *The New England Journal of Medicine* added a similar curated landing page in response to the 2014–2016 Ebola epidemic (Ebola Outbreak, n.d.). (Both sites remain active.) The more current the topic, the more traffic the site is likely to generate, including traffic from visitors who would not have ordinarily made use of the site. Going one step further, products like content bundles – collections of disparate content types – can be licensed and targeted to readers who have expressed interest in their topics. Targeted sites are also more attractive to paying sponsors.

In 2015, the technology market research firm Gartner predicted that in three years, companies that had fully invested in all types of personalization – promotion and targeting – would out-sell companies that had not by 20% (Levy, 2015). Indeed, a Demand Metric study from 2016 found that 80% of marketers said personalized content is more effective than 'unpersonalized' content. Additional proof comes from B2C marketers: 'Retail and [consumer packaged goods] companies from Walmart...to Glossier have already made personalization a critical part of their present and future' (Baker, 2017; Tiku, 2016; VB Staff, 2016).

Like Amazon and Netflix, publishers must therefore treat their readers as customers, not 'end users,' and offer them something that is worth their while.

## Consumerization

'Sci-Hub is obviously illegal', said Stephen Curry, a structural biologist at Imperial College London, in a recent article about Elsevier's successful – if likely unenforceable – lawsuit win against the pirate site. 'But the fact that it is so immensely popular, inside and outside academia, is a symptom of many people's frustration with the status quo in academic publishing' (Schiermeier, 2017).

Sci-Hub has four main advantages over publishers' sites: articles are free, the site is fairly easy to use, it provides access to the content researchers most want, and it comprises content from many different publishers. Nearly 70% of all scholarly articles available online – and 86% of all paywall-protected articles – are available on Sci-Hub, which has pirated more than 99% of the articles in 3 of the 10 largest journals in the world: *The Lancet*, *The Journal of the American Chemical Society*, and *The New England Journal of Medicine*. (*Nature* and *Science* are fourth and fifth, with more than 96% and 91% of their articles available on the pirate platform, respectively.) (Himmelstein, Romero, McLaughlin, Tzvoaras, & Greene, 2017).

In fact, 'some critics of Sci-Hub have complained that many users can access the same papers through their libraries but turn to Sci-Hub instead – for convenience rather than necessity' (Bohannon, 2016). Indeed, Sci-Hub has been able to provide 99.3% of all articles that were requested by its users (Himmelstein *et al.*, 2017).

'A lawsuit isn't going to stop [Sci-Hub], nor is there any obvious technical means', noted Peter Suber, the Director of the Office of Scholarly Communications at Harvard University. 'Everyone should be thinking about the fact that [it] is here to stay' (Bohannon, 2016).

Content marketing is not just about the content itself: it is about the form that it takes and the environment in which it exists. Researchers may prefer sites like Sci-Hub and PubMed because publishers have not offered them a better alternative. If there is not much qualitative difference between the publisher's site and Sci-Hub, then readers are more likely to choose Sci-Hub. To compete with Sci-Hub, publishers not only have to provide a richer user experience, they have to match or exceed Sci-Hub's frictionless user interface.

This message is catching on: in the past year or so, some of the largest and most well-respected publishers in the world, including Taylor & Francis, SAE, and Cambridge University Press (McShea, 2016) – as well as SAGE, Annual Reviews, the Future Science Group, and the American Public Health Association – have all launched redesigned sites whose interfaces reflect user testing and other user input, and/or place a premium on user experience.

A discussion of user experience (UX) design theory is beyond the scope of this essay, but consumerization techniques that curtail the phenomenon of 'download and go' and mitigate the cognitive overload and visual fatigue that come with poor design can be summarized in five general principles:

- A distinctive visual language and straightforward design.
- A consumer-friendly experience via an intuitive interface.
- Frequently updated content.
- Targeted, personalized content and advertising.
- Responsive design for any screen size.

The new websites on Scitation.org – the American Institute of Physics' (AIP) publishing platform, which houses *Physics Today* magazine as well as 21 journals – follow many of these principles closely. 'The biggest benefits from our new design is that engagement has increased – and so has traffic', according to Paul Guinness, Manager of Digital Assets at AIP Publishing, which publishes *Physics Today* magazine. 'Readers like the clean design and the ease with which it can be read on mobile devices like tablets' (personal communication, June 14–20, 26–28, 2017).

## Frictionless eCommerce

If something is difficult to buy, it will be difficult to sell. Content marketing tactics, like delivering readers the content they searched for alongside content they did not know they wanted,

supported by an easy-to-navigate eCommerce journey, can increase the likelihood of completing a sale.

In its exhaustive study of the usability of eCommerce checkout, the Baymard Institute (2016) found that 68% of all shopping carts are abandoned. Users cited required registration (35%) and a complicated checkout process (27%) as the reasons why – only cost rated higher. (Respondents were able to choose more than one option.)

By offering features like guest checkout, persistent shopping carts, and abandoned cart notifications – and by consumerizing and modernizing site design – publishers can optimize conversion rates and increase revenue by making it easier – and more enjoyable – for readers to make purchases (Forbes Communications Council, 2017; KissMetrics, 2013). Combining these strategies properly can yield a content marketing ecosystem that increases traffic, lengthens visits, and boosts revenues.

## Enhanced discoverability

### Onsite

Readers cannot engage with content if they cannot find it. Intuitive navigation and augmented and interactive onsite search technologies like facets and filtering – two other consumerization techniques – let readers refine their search results easily. Predictive search anticipates what they are looking for now, and session-based search histories remind them of what they were looking for previously.

### Offsite

The more traffic a website gets, the higher Google ranks it – a circular, self-perpetuating phenomenon that underscores the need for skillful SEO strategies, which can not only increase a publisher's site traffic but also decrease the site traffic of its competitors.

Google's appetite tacks towards new content and diverse content types, and Google searches link directly to the richest format with the least barriers to entry. A site that consolidates varied content types that were previously housed on disparate domains is likely to be updated more frequently, boosting its organic rankings. Content like microsites, magazines, videos, and interactive exams is also a way to keep readers engaged, and by offering journal articles as rich content in addition to, or even rather than, PDFs, publishers can padlock their download store, extend site visits, and potentially diminish out-of-copyright content usage.

## Analysis and optimization

According to Outsell's McShea (2017b), if marketers 'focus on personalized content and ads specific to the customer stage... [t]hey can then immediately act upon their assembled firsthand knowledge of the person they are trying to influence and/or sell to their likes and dislikes as well as their immediate needs and wants as that person moves across the path to purchase'.

Monitoring users' characteristics and site behaviour can vastly improve the effectiveness of content marketing by yielding data that identifies which content is most relevant to each reader. Continuous optimization of a site's user interface and user experience, informed by real-time analytics and A/B testing, can also inform how content is presented and marketed, thereby promoting engagement; informing new product development; and increasing average conversion rate, average order value, and revenue per visitor (Harshman, 2017; Johnson, 2016).

'Our ability to capture user-level analytics and make changes to our site's interface and content enables us to respond to the changing needs of our users and to expand our content offerings', noted Elizabeth Keyes, COO of the American Pharmacists Association, which offers books, multimedia, learning tools, and exam review modules on its site (APharma, 2017).

Indeed, according to McShea (2017b), 'the ability to triangulate individual users, their personal and professional context, and their behaviours on the platform is the key to future revenue generation'.

Analytics can be used proactively as well. 'If the product team is already sold on the business need for a change', said Danielle Reisch, Director of Digital Products at Wiley, 'we delve into the data before they start designing or developing to validate their assumptions and to uncover insights that can influence development.' Those insights might be based on competitive analytics, audience profiling, and/or data-driven predictions about shaping a user journey that yields user engagement.

The lucrative potential of analytics notwithstanding, Reisch offered a note of caution. 'Analytics *can* help us identify where we need to apply more research, quantify an issue that needs attention, or propose a change, but we like to validate bigger, long-term decisions with other methods of customer research as well' (personal communication, July 6–12, 2017).

## PLATFORM AS PRODUCT

'We're a publisher', said Patrick Hansard, Director of Marketing and Sales at the APA during a panel discussion on content marketing at the 2017 Society for Scholarly Publishing conference in Boston. 'But our website is a *service*'.

The content marketing tactics discussed in this article will be most successful if used in combination. Together, they can bolster a publication website's marketing strategy and/or convert a website publishing platform into a productized service – or even a content product.

For example, one large international organization – for which publishing is secondary – offers an overlapping content set on two different sites. One site provides a vanilla version of the content – publication-level PDFs in a Spartan interface that is accessible through open access to comply with various mandates. The other, however, includes the kind of UX value-adds for researchers and students that make content marketing successful: enhanced search and navigation features, contextual information, direct links to social media, citation tools, personalized bookmarking,

customized alerts, and extra, non-embargoed content downloadable in a variety of formats. In short, it offers a fuller, more productive user experience that attracts readers to the paid site despite their having access to the same content for free.

In the end, readers want the same enjoyable user experience and tailored content across all of the websites that they visit – be it to read, research, or make a purchase – and across all of the devices that they use. Publishers under pressure to increase readership and revenues must therefore ensure that their website's content, design, and architecture support their desired user experience.

'Whether we're serving a targeted job ad or customizing the articles or headlines on the page, we're trying to improve our audience's experience and increase engagement', confirms one STM publishing executive with a half dozen well-known journals in his portfolio. 'Our future success is dependent on content marketing' (personal communication, August 25, 2017).

Indeed, content marketing informs the business strategy of forward-thinking publishers because it gives authors and readers what they want: fruitful research experiences, wider proliferation of their work, and the advancement of scientific communication as a whole. In turn, scholarly publishers get what they want: increased site traffic; extended site visits; new readers, subscribers, and authors; and elevated brand visibility, all of which can lead to more revenue, enabling them to fulfil their unique revenue- and mission-driven double bottom lines.

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