THE 5 STAGES OF **DIGITAL CONTENT MATURITY**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Customer expectations of branded content have changed, and companies must evolve their strategies to meet them. Today's customers demand personalized, relevant content, and they want a consistent experience across all of a brand's digital content channels. In our research, we found that companies who were doing the best job of meeting these customer expectations shared six common traits:

- Leadership supported content efforts
- Content strategy that extended beyond marketing
- Content creation is based on customer data
- Multiple teams created content, but shared a common vision
- Content was personalized and delivered in real-time
- Content was expected to impact the business

To achieve these indicators of maturity, companies must go through a series of sequential changes across their entire content operation. We found that companies progress through five stages on their way to digital content maturity:

- Non-Strategic Stage: No expectations for digital content
- Testing Stage: Initial experiments begin
- Scaling Stage: Focus on scaling production and delivery
- Strategic Stage: Recognition of content beyond marketing
- Sophisticated Stage: Content serves customer needs across the organization

By identifying which stage most closely describes their current state, companies can prioritize the steps they need to take to reach the next stage of digital content maturity. Companies can use this maturity model to benchmark how far they have progressed across each pillar of the content-producing operation, including leadership, strategy, governance, creation, delivery and measurement.

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WHY BRANDS NEED A MATURE DIGITAL CONTENT STRATEGY

In the early uses of digital content, companies focused on creating engaging content that promoted brand awareness and brand health. Their marketing departments were tasked with producing and delivering content on a large scale to reach customers on an ever-increasing selection of digital channels. As a result, the success of content was measured in marketing metrics. Since then, customer expectations of branded content have changed, and companies must evolve their strategies to meet them. There are three major customer expectations driving the need for a change in content strategy.

- **Customers want more than promotional content.** A 2014 study by the Economist Intelligence Unit found that the most important elements of a great customer experience were related to sales and service functions.[1] These included fast response to inquiries or complaints, simple purchasing processes, ability to track orders in real-time and ability to communicate over multiple digital channels. This shows that although it looks more attractive, content that entertains or raises brand awareness is low on the list of customer needs. In most cases, customers would rather have content that provides support, or information that solves a problem. Hence, a mature content strategy must be customer-centric, not marketing-centric. It should consider a wide range of content types, not just content that promotes brand awareness or brand health.

- **Customers want personalized content.** Digitally savvy customers understand that brands collect their personal information. This includes behavioral, as well as demographical information. As a result, customers expect to be recognized as individuals with specific preferences and needs in their interactions with the brand. In fact, 74% of consumers expressed frustration after receiving online content that was irrelevant to their interests.[2] This means brands need to create content that is highly customized for their target audiences, and deliver it on channels where it is most likely to be consumed. Doing that requires the coordination of multiple departments, and the sharing of data across many platforms.

- **Customers want a seamless experience.** To a customer, there is only one brand. But within the brand, there can be multiple producers of content, often with disparate visions and competing goals for what they want content to achieve. Sales wants content that will convert, while marketing wants content that will promote, and the product team wants content that is purely informational. This can lead to a disjointed experience for the customer when they see the brand's content vary in tone and messaging across different digital channels. In addition, the presence of so much branded content might make it difficult for the customer to find the actual information they're looking for. A mature digital content strategy puts the customer's needs first, and aligns the rest of the organization around it.

To meet these new customer expectations, companies need to evolve from using content marketing plans to a mature, digital content strategy.

WHAT DOES DIGITAL CONTENT MATURITY LOOK LIKE?

We found that companies meeting the above-mentioned customer expectations shared six defining characteristics:

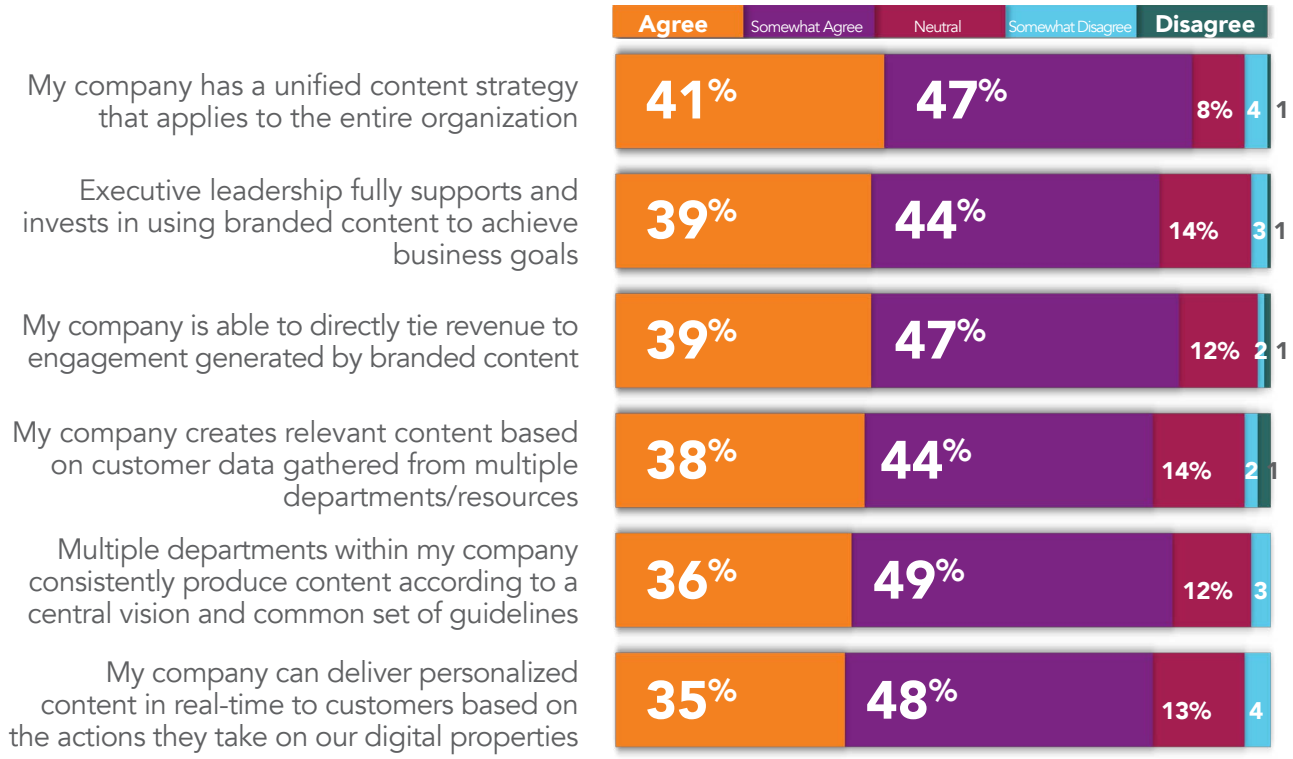
- **Leadership supports content efforts.** Companies that successfully made the transition from experimenting with content, to using it as a well-resourced strategic tool had crucial buy-in from the C-suite. This support means investment in skills and technology, but more importantly it elevates content to a strategy with multiple stakeholders. To get this buy-in, the content team should position itself as a revenue generator, and custodian of the customer experience, rather than its traditional image as a marketing cost center.
- **Content strategy extends beyond marketing.** A mature content strategy delivers value to departments other than marketing. This could include sales, service, product teams and more. Getting multiple teams to have a say in the content strategy ensures a unified approach to delivering a seamless, consistent face of the brand. It also allows content to do more than generate brand awareness, and deliver on other business goals such as generate sales and improve service.
- **Content creation is based on customer data.** Today's brands can't afford to publish content that is irrelevant or not tailored to their customers. For this, they need data on customer behavior, pain points and needs. Sources can include social analytics, web analytics, CRM records, call-center logs and customer surveys. Ninety-nine percent of companies used at least one of these data sources to create relevant content.[3] Mature brands are able to synthesize data from multiple sources to create a common truth about the customer, which helps align the goals of several teams.
- **Multiple teams create content, but share a common vision.** A company might come up with a unified content vision, but getting multiple departments to follow it is the hard part. Mature companies were able to coordinate the efforts of several content-producing teams within the organization, giving them enough autonomy to produce content on their own, but setting guidelines to ensure they are consistent with the overall content vision.

- **Content is personalized and delivered in real-time.** Although most companies use customer data to inform their content creation, mature companies were able to leverage technology that used this data for real-time personalization and delivery of content to customers. An example of this is a brand following up on a customer visiting its site with an automatic personalized email or social media post enticing them to return or consider a purchase.
- **Content is expected to impact the business.** Less mature companies tend to measure content success in marketing metrics, such as views, likes or shares. Mature companies have goals for content that impact the bottom line, such as cost saving, leads/sales generated, or customer loyalty and satisfaction scores. This points to the difference in how content is viewed. Mature companies see it as a strategic tool for customer engagement, while less mature companies see it purely as a marketing tactic for increasing brand awareness.

To determine how far companies progressed towards achieving each of these indicators of maturity, we conducted a survey of 518 content strategists across North America and Europe.[4] (Figure 1) Respondents were asked how far they agreed with a series of statements that described high maturity.

FIGURE 1.

INDICATORS OF MATURITY FOR PRODUCERS OF DIGITAL CONTENT



Source: 2016 Digital Content Survey, Altimeter, a Prophet Company n= 518

We found that most companies are well on their way to achieving these qualities. For each statement, 80% of respondents picked "agree" or "somewhat agree" as their response. These results indicate that most companies have made a lot of progress towards achieving digital content maturity. In the next section, we'll illuminate the different points in the path they took to get there.

THE FIVE STAGES OF DIGITAL CONTENT MATURITY

By using the six indicators of maturity as our end goal, we created a maturity map that describes five stages of increasing maturity for content producing organizations (Figure 2). Companies can use this model to benchmark their maturity across several aspects of their digital content operation. These include leadership, strategy, governance, content development and delivery, and measurement. At a high level, the different stages represent the progression of a company from not using content, to using it in a marketing-centric way, and finally using it in a customer-centric way, with two transition stages in between.

1 Non-Strategic Stage: No expectations for digital content

Companies in this stage don't consider digital content, (or non-advertising content) to be a priority. This could either mean the company's customers are not big consumers of digital content or that the company simply considers other means of customer engagement to be more effective. This could include companies where sales are done through personal relationships (real estate, advisory firms, etc.) As a result, the only digital content produced is purely functional, such as company information on a website or emails/social media posts that deliver company news. Even if any efforts are made towards engaging customers, they are usually on a one-off or promotional basis, with little strategy or planning. To progress from this stage, companies need to at least entertain the idea that content can be used in a more strategic way, even if it has minimal investment.

2 Testing Stage: Initial experiments begin

In this stage, employees in the marketing and communications departments experiment with content, which exists to simply engage or entertain customers. This content could take the form of an increased social media presence, blog posts, or a one off white-paper. However, these experiments are restricted to individual channels. Which means, the social, email, web and PR teams could all be creating their own content without input from anyone else. As a result, some planning and guidelines are created, but applied in silos. To get to the next stage, the company needs to make the shift from having individual channels creating their own content, to multiple channels operating off a central content marketing plan.

FIGURE 2.

FIVE STAGES OF DIGITAL CONTENT MATURITY

	Non-Strategic	Testing	Scaling	Strategic	Sophisticated
Leadership	No C-suite support, content is purely a communications initiative	Conditional support after seeing early results	Investment in content production for marketing	Vision for content as strategic initiative beyond marketing	Investment in content as revenue generator and CX initiative across organization
Strategy	No central strategy, content produced on an adhoc basis	No central strategy, but digital channels have individual plans	Steps taken to create unified content plan across marketing channels	Recognize need for content strategy with input and value for depts other than marketing	Strategy that serves customer and business needs is implemented across the org
Development	Scant, siloed customer data, usually demographical	Initial efforts to gather and unify more customer data from digital sources	Marketing channels are able to share relevant customer data points centrally	Initial steps taken to gather and unify customer data from all parts of the organization	Organization operates off holistic view of the customer, multiple departments share central data system
Governance	No playbook or criteria for self produced content	Channel owners establish own guidelines and processes	Content calendar enables multiple channel teams to coordinate efforts	Steps taken to develop criteria, guidelines and permissions for content production across the organization	Teams outside marketing department share the same production criteria and guidelines, and use a central calendar to independently produce content
Delivery	Content delivered on campaign basis, on few channels	Organic content is tested on growing number of channels	Focus is on delivering large amounts of content on many channels	More strategic choices about which content is delivered on which channel	Content deliver is coordinated across all channels, personalized and often real-time
Measurement	Content success metrics are not tracked	Short term success metrics on channels start to get tracked	Brand awareness and health are main indicators of success	Focus shifts from reach to strategic engagement, and revenue goals	Channel metrics add up to long-term success of content vision, revenue impact is tracked

3 Scaling Stage: Focus on scaling production and delivery

By now, companies have bought in to the value of content and are seeing positive results from its increased scale and delivery. Multiple channels are used to engage customers and metrics such as reach, likes, views and shares are used to quantify success. A lot of companies don't progress beyond this stage since their end goal is to scale content and hope that its steady delivery continues to promote the brand and its health. Getting to the next stage means recognizing content's value beyond marketing and bringing on other stakeholders in the company for a unified vision for what content should achieve.

4 Strategic Stage: Recognition of content beyond marketing

After achieving scale, company focus in this stage shifts to using content in a more strategic way. Leadership recognizes that content can do more than create brand awareness, and there is a shift in mindset towards fulfilling customer needs instead of just business objectives. There are initiatives for getting teams other than marketing to participate in the content strategy, and investment in better technology to track and unify customer data. Other actions in this stage include mapping customer pain points and journeys, steps to align the goals of multiple teams, data sharing, and strategic decisions about what content they will start or stop producing.

5 Sophisticated Stage: Content serves customer needs across the organization

At the highest level of maturity, the company is consistently producing content in a way that meets digital customer expectations. This includes a consistent brand experience across all digital channels; content that solves a data-proven customer pain point, and real-time, personalized delivery of content. Not only are these indicators of a mature content-producing organization, these traits are the sign of a company that excels at customer experience.

END NOTES

[1] Michael Kapoor, "Creating A Seamless Customer Experience," The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015 https://www.eiuperspectives.economist.com/sites/default/files/Creating%20a%20seamless%20customer%20experience.pdf

[2] 2013 Online Personal Experience Study, Janrain, July 31, 2014 http://www.janrain.com/about/newsroom/press-releases/online-consumers-fed-up-with-irrelevant-content-on-favorite-websites-according-to-janrain-study/

[3] Omar Akhtar, "The 2016 State of Digital Content," Altimeter, a Prophet Company, October 2016 http://www2.prophet.com/the-2016-state-of-digital-content

[4] Ibid.

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