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Best Practices in Digital Content Marketing for Building University Brands

Julie M. Pharr

Tennessee Technological University

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Recommended Citation

Pharr, Julie M., "Best Practices in Digital Content Marketing for Building University Brands" (2019). *Association of Marketing Theory and Practice Proceedings 2019*. 8. https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/amtp-proceedings_2019/8

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Julie M. Pharr

Tennessee Tech University

ABSTRACT

This paper explores and proposes the use of digital content marketing as a means of brand-building for colleges and universities. The paper reviews and synthesizes literature on the state of the art in digital content marketing in order to identify best practices. Effective techniques, some based on empirical testing, are applied to the use of digital content marketing by higher education institutions.

INTRODUCTION

A recent headline in the AMA's *Marketing News*¹ announced "College Enrollment Is Stagnating and Only Marketing Can Help" while a white paper² from a leading higher education marketing agency claimed:

"The [higher-ed.] industry as a whole is undergoing significant change and university decision-makers have many challenges to address...ranging from unpredictable enrollment to lack of internal cohesion among departments and divisions to the inability to differentiate the brand in a crowded 'dot-edu' space."

The last of these challenges—the inability to differentiate a university's brand—represents a particular problem in an age where students rely on the internet and social media to engage with institutions. Students, like other consumers, seek out marketing content when and where they want it, signaling the time is quickly passing when universities could tightly control and promulgate a desired image via broadcast communication (Pharr 2018). According to well-known digital branding expert and best-selling trade author, David Meerman Scott, gone are the days when marketers can simply convince broad swaths of their target markets of the advantages and benefits of their offerings via paid-for, company-controlled, mass-media advertising (Scott 2015).

This new marketing reality has had a dramatic impact on the methods by which organizations seek to develop their brands (Murthy 2011, Boyle 2007). Mounting evidence indicates the process of brand-building has moved from one of monolog to one of dialog; from a world where outbound marketing increasingly gives way to inbound marketing. Nowadays organizations seek

¹ See Conick, H. (2017), "Can Marketing Save University Enrollment Rates?" in *Marketing News*, 51 (10), November/December 2017, pp. 56-63.

² See "The Two Forces behind Higher Ed Marketing" available at <http://pages.r2integrated.com> from R2i, retrieved November 2, 2017.

to ‘meaningfully engage’ and share information and ideas with customers and prospects in order to co-create the brand’s image, with outsize reliance on social media and the internet to achieve the desired results (Fournier & Avery 2011).

In concert with such trends, colleges and universities are increasingly participating in attempts at brand-building (Girard et. al. 2016). At the same time, complex external environmental factors have focused unprecedented attention on higher education marketing, in general, and university branding, in particular (Conick 2017). External forces such as the elevated profile of college rankings, rising tuition costs that draw attention to value and quality, and changing student expectations driven by rapid technological advances have contributed to a growing interest by many institutions in leveraging their institutional values to create competitive advantages as well as distinctive brand profiles (Girard 2016; Bunzel 2007).

Considering the extent to which today’s consumers use electronic media to interact with brands and the ever more pronounced tendency to choose the content with which they engage, colleges and universities need to warm to models of branding that rely upon valuable and engaging brand content. Experimentation with and research into newer, more consumer-oriented models of brand-building by higher education institutions are needed. This paper explores and proposes the use of digital content marketing as a means of brand-building for colleges and universities. The paper reviews and synthesizes literature on the state of the art in digital content marketing in order to identify best practices. Effective techniques, some based on empirical testing, are applied to the use of digital content marketing by higher education institutions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of university branding literature reveals two strategies by which university brand development has primarily been attempted: (1) internal branding and (2) consumer-based branding. Although the use of both is documented in literature, it would appear many if not most institutions have taken the traditional route of internal branding (Black 2008). Under a strategy of internal branding, university administrators choose the brand message and communicate it primarily through mass-media advertising and other forms of broadcast messaging or outbound marketing such as direct mail.

Research indicates the internal approach to college branding has produced limited success (Black 2008, Bunzel 2007, Jevons 2006). Bunzel (2007), for example, found universities that explicitly focused on brand-building via mass media and central message control produced no significant gains in third-party rankings or brand trust among students. A number of reasons have been offered in explanation for the lackluster results: universities do not understand what drives brand equity in their institutions (Ng & Forbes 2009); branding at complex non-profits such as universities should not take the same approach as that used in commercial organizations (Black 2008); and universities do not understand the brand "ecosystem" and fail to account for interdependencies between brand drivers (Pinar et. al. 2011).

Given that one of the biggest criticisms of internal branding has been that the brand message is created by administrators rather than based on the perceptions of students, alumni, and other external constituents, a second approach called consumer-based branding has been applied in

higher education institutions (Pinar et. al. 2011). Consumer-based branding gives the consumers (i.e. students and other university stakeholders) a voice in the brand-building process. Its proponents say that it ensures a university's positioning and messaging are grounded in the current reality rather than based merely on institutional aspirations or a "flavor-of-the-month" approach (Black 2008).

A preference for the consumer-based approach has led to research into student perceptions of the importance of various dimensions of university brand equity (Pinar et. al. 2011). A recent study subdivides the most important drivers of university brand equity into core versus supporting dimensions (Girard et. al. 2016). Included in the core dimensions are perceived quality, learning environment, brand trust, emotional environment, university reputation, brand associations, and brand awareness. The support dimensions include physical facilities, library services, dining services, and residence halls. The research uncovered a network of significant interdependencies among these dimensions (e.g. perceptions of library services affected perceptions of perceived quality which affected perceptions of learning environment, etc.) and they were found to vary in importance according to students' gender, class, and living arrangement (on versus off campus). Under the consumer-based approach, antecedents of core dimensions have also been identified. For example, components of the core dimensions of perceived quality and learning environment include such factors as faculty instructional quality, faculty expertise, state-of-the-art technology, faculty availability and empathy, accessible learning support services, and high academic standards (Girard et. al. 2016).

Although the perceptions of students are considered in the consumer-based approach, both it and internal branding emphasize *a priori* endogenous organization traits or dimensions as the key factors in building a brand. The major difference between the two approaches is that administrators' values and perceptions are emphasized in internal branding while student and stakeholder values and perceptions are emphasized in consumer-based branding.

Non- Traditional Branding Methods

Because the internet has revolutionized the way consumers search for, obtain, and process product- and brand-related information, organizations of all types have responded with new, more consumer-centric methods of marketing and branding. Two important but less-than-traditional methods of brand-building that have been applied in an increasingly wide variety of commercial and nonprofit organizations are open-source branding and content-rich branding. Open-source branding hinges on user-generated content (UGC). Krishnamurthy et al. (2008) define user-generated content as information about products, brands, ideas, organizations, and services, usually informed by personal experiences, that exists in consumer-generated postings on social media sites, internet discussion boards, forums, user groups, and blogs, and includes text, images, photos, videos, podcasts, and other forms of media. User-generated content exists because people no longer merely consume marketing content; they produce it themselves by creating, editing, organizing, and sharing information, reshaping the contributions of others, and engaging in peer-to-peer discussion.

Open-source branding is designed to take advantage of brand-related content that is produced by the consumers of a product or service and not by the marketer. Every day, millions of ordinary

people unwittingly publish their own brand-related content by posting to social media sites personal information, photos, videos, opinions, and knowledge that incorporate products or brands. As people include brands in their online behavior, one very important side effect is that the brand's message is increasingly shaped and delivered by the individuals and not the marketer. The term that has been coined to describe this phenomenon is "open-source branding" (Fournier & Avery 2011).

Researchers (Berry et. al. 2010) extoll the virtues of open-source branding especially to organizations that target millennials (those born between 1981 and 1999) because millennials prefer social media to more traditional methods of communication, are prolific creators of content (Bolton et. al. 2013), and prefer to engage with organizations and brands that allow them to express themselves by sharing or creating content. Pharr (2016) contends that open-source branding is a natural choice for universities, whose primary target market fits squarely into the millennial demographic, and offers a model for transitioning from consumer-based branding to open-source branding for universities. Among the caveats mentioned are that universities wanting to take full advantage of the open-source branding approach must change their institutional communications from broadcast-dominated to conversational through heavy reliance on social media platforms that permit and encourage user-generated content (Pharr 2016).

The pronounced change in buyer behavior away from outbound marketing has fostered the growth of an emergent method of brand building that involves a reliance on digital content marketing. The Content Marketing Institute (<https://contentmarketinginstitute.com>) defines digital content marketing as "a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action." Holliman and Rowley (2014) define digital content marketing as "an inbound marketing technique that involves creating, distributing and sharing relevant, compelling and timely content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying consideration processes."

Content marketing is designed to engage consumers who are actively searching for guidance and information before making a purchase decision by delivering to them relevant and valuable information at just the time they most desire it – during the information search phase. The focus of content marketing is not on pitching or selling an organization's offerings but on providing relevant and useful content in order to help people solve their problems or meet their needs. As the organization becomes a valuable resource and acknowledged expert in its product or service domain, over time it is able to win the trust of individuals and build a powerful brand image.

The implications for brand-building of the content-rich approach are becoming more widely acknowledged (see, e.g., Chapman 2017, Panda-Ved 2016). Baltes (2015) contends that, when used appropriately and done consistently, content marketing is useful for "positioning a brand within a space" and may succeed at either creating or reinforcing a desired brand message. Other advocates endorse content marketing as a preferred means of achieving and sustaining trusted brand status (Chapman 2017, Holliman & Rowley 2014). One survey found that over eighty percent (84%) of content marketers say the main objective of using a content-marketing approach is "brand lift" (Murthy 2011). It should be noted, however, that little systematic empirical research exists to determine the effects of digital marketing content on perceptions of

brand image, brand attitude, or purchase intentions. No studies were found that focus explicitly on the impact of digital content on the brand image of a college or university. The latter makes it necessary to rely on a review of industry trade practices, content marketer surveys, and a small number of empirical research studies to determine best practices for applying content-rich branding in a university setting.

BEST PRACTICES

A review of the academic literature and industry trade articles produces a number of routines that might be considered best practices in digital content marketing. These include:

- Establish the objective(s) of the content marketing program

Users believe digital content marketing is particularly suited to marketing communication goals such as enhanced brand positioning, brand lift, more and deeper customer engagement, and improved brand sentiment versus sales goals such as customer conversion (www.forrester.com). Traditional brand metrics such as brand attitude as well as the hierarchy of brand effects according to Fishbein's (1975) Theory of Reasoned Action (purchase behavior is based on intentions resulting from brand attitudes and beliefs) are in the nascent stages of exploration. Recent findings (Sinthamrong et. al. 2015) on the impact of branded digital content on the construct 'attitude toward the content' found digital content has the ability to significantly directly affect the 'attitude toward the content' and thereafter purchase intentions. In addition, 'attitude toward the content' was able to directly impact purchase intentions in the manner suggested by Fishbein's model. While this implies 'attitude toward the content' may serve as a powerful mediator on purchase intentions, it is important to note that the effects of digital content directly on brand attitude or through the construct 'attitude toward the content' have not been tested. Additional study is needed to determine the effect of digital content separately and in concert with 'attitude toward the content' on brand attitude in accordance with the Theory of Reasoned Action.

Trade practitioners are quick to point out there are dozens of metrics that may be used to track audience interest and response to marketing content. Recommended (Brenner 2017) are a handful that permit the marketer to track engagement at lower and higher-order levels (lower = number of shares, time on site, comments; higher = number of subscribers and contact-form submissions). Attitudinal metrics remain largely in the offline domain. Choi (2018) contends that content marketing represents a "diffused, undefined" discipline whose "responsibility and accountability are poorly understood, if at all." He goes on to say that few marketers today understand how their digital content is being used (by audiences) or, more importantly, whether the content is 'moving the needle for their brands.'

- Focus on content that meets the customers' needs

There is a disconnect between what consumers want to read online and the mountains of promotional content that firms are creating and posting (Hall 2015). What is clear is that today's consumers are increasingly indifferent to outbound marketing communications—statistics show 86 percent of people skip television advertisements, 44 percent of consumers ignore direct mail,

and 91 percent of email users unsubscribe from company emails (Pande-Ved 2016). Today's consumers are instead discriminately choosing the brand content with which they want to engage from the vast stores of information available online. Yet an industry white paper illuminates a burgeoning paradox: while digital content levels are spiking, engagement is taking a sharp downturn. According to *The Content Marketing Paradox Revisited*, from its highest to lowest points, the output of content per brand increased 35 percent across various online channels in 2015, but content engagement decreased by 17 percent. And, although content posting was up sharply across all social media (e.g. content output per brand increased on Twitter 60% year-over-year), content engagement across all major social networks has plummeted (Burney 2016).

Industry trade statistics may help to explain what is happening. Nearly half (43%) of respondents to an Ad Age survey said what they dislike most about content marketing is blatantly promotional content (Hall 2015). Yet another survey found that ending a blog post or newsletter with a product pitch reduced the content's credibility by 29 percent (Hall 2015). Practitioners stress digital content should center on the buyer or prospect and not on the seller. Digital content should be insightful, expert, and creative (Scott 2015); genuine and candid, not hyped or phony (Baltes 2015); and relevant, helpful, and assistive (Chapman 2017). Scott (2015) recommends organizations resist the tendency to mention even once their own companies or brands, warning that if prospects suspect you are trying to sell them something, the marketer's authenticity is compromised and the brand's integrity suffers (although this assumption has not been rigorously empirically tested). Hall (2015) contends that either the mention of the company's offerings or embedded links that direct readers to your firm's products/services harm credibility and "violate the social contract" between marketer and buyer by trying to push buyers to a firm's offerings at a time when they are seeking information. Altogether, such findings and warnings suggest marketers need to be better informed and more strategic about the digital content they create and share. Organizations cannot simply re-work their company print advertisements or marketing sales collateral to serve as digital marketing content.

- Mix branded and unbranded content for maximum brand impact

Practitioners and academics alike are focusing increased attention on the differences in branded and unbranded digital content as well as the behavioral effects and effectiveness of each (Cardona 2018; Tafesse & Wien 2018). Branded content is defined as any content linked to a brand, although the strength and overtness of the link may vary (Cardona 2018). Digital marketing content is ubiquitous online and may consist of firm-generated content (FGC), user-generated content (UGC), content about specific offerings, company-wide information, employee-generated content, sales content, customer service content, marketing and campaign content, FAQs content, or just about anything else marketers wish to publish. Content may take the form of articles, blogs, infographics, photos, videos, webcasts, podcasts, eBooks, white papers, case studies, newsletters, research reports, and the like. Furthermore, digital content marketing may encompass created (original), curated, and re-purposed syndicated content and include primary as well as secondary data. Forrester digital research company (www.forrester.com) defines branded content as "content developed or curated by a brand to provide added consumer value such as education" and acknowledges that it may or may not make mention of a firm's own brand. Experts in content marketing are careful to note that it is not a paid advertisement, sponsorship, or product placement (Cardona 2018).

Industry practitioners appear divided on whether and to what extent to explicitly feature branded content in digital content marketing programs. Cardona (2018), writing for the online marketing specialist Cyberclick, suggests there is room for both branded and unbranded content in a comprehensive digital content marketing strategy. Cyberclick takes the position that brand products may appear in or alongside what is otherwise unbranded content as long as the brands are not the main focus nor directly talked about or referenced in the content. The Content Marketing Institute corroborates with similar advice, suggesting that an effective content marketing strategy utilize unbranded content published to the organization's own website alongside other content containing some elements of the corporate brand. Marketers have responded by flooding the internet and social media with all manner of branded and unbranded digital content. The result has been that content marketing has given rise to conflicting findings concerning which message strategies are the most effective in stimulating consumer engagement.

In concert with the explosion in digital marketing content, academicians have attempted to categorize and typologize branded content as well as determine if types of content differ in consumer engagement or effectiveness. Borrowing from the advertising literature (Puto & Wells 1984), Tafesse et.al. (2018) developed and tested an exhaustive three-pronged typology that distinguishes informational, transactional, and interactional branded content. Informational content presents factual product and services information in clear and concrete terms; transformational message content associates the experience and identity of the focal brand with desirable psychological characteristics; and interactional content cultivates ongoing interactions with customers via information about current events, customer relations, and the brand community. With the exception of informational content, all the content types are expressly brand-oriented in nature. The study's findings showed that informational digital content was most effective on consumer brand engagement when complemented with transformational content, particularly transformational messages containing emotional elements and brand resonance cues (Tafesse & Wien 2018). Consumers were more apt to like and share content that combined elements of information and emotion, while either type of content alone was significantly less effective. Earlier studies confirmed the superiority of relevant or useful content, especially when paired with emotional content, above other types of branded content. Structural equation modeling found that content which combined perceived usefulness (related to content's relevance and assistance) and perceived playfulness (related to content's emotion and creativity) had the most significant positive effect on consumers' attitudes toward the content and purchase intentions (Sinthamrong et. al. 2015). Experimental data testing content differing in terms of relevance, informativeness, reliability, uniqueness, emotion, and intelligence revealed that messages high in relevance universally produced the greatest behavioral engagement among consumers. Alternatively, content with the most emotional and promotional information has the lowest consumer engagement (Repovienė 2017). Studies like these point to relevance (to the customer's need) as the most desired quality among consumers in branded content. They further indicate there is a place for branded content in a content marketing strategy but that any unbranded content should avoid elements that are overtly promotional.

- Incorporate visual content to increase consumer engagement

Industry statistics signal the gains in awareness and engagement that may be garnered by relying on visual content. Digital content marketing agency Smart Insights cites survey data showing respondents remembered 65 percent of information when presented in text and image format after three days compared to only 10 percent of information presented in text format alone (Chaffey 2018). The Content Marketing Institute (CMI) estimates that 60-70 percent of all content posted goes unused and that the “life” of the remaining branded content, particularly content distributed via social media, is markedly limited (Brenner 2017). The CMI found that half (50%) of all views of content posted on Twitter take place within three hours of posting and three-fourths (75%) of all views of content posted on Facebook take place within five hours of posting. With such a short window of opportunity for consumer engagement, content with the ability to maximize effects should be chosen. Visual content is the choice of many content marketing specialists and there is increasing empirical support for this option (Repoviene 2017; Sinthamrong et. al. 2015). In a study of buyer attitudes toward content marketing, Murthy (2011) found a large majority of prospective buyers (62%) felt audio and video included as part of online content had a more positive impact than text alone. Chaffey (2018) recommends the use of infographics as a form of visual content that excels at communicating complex information, telling stories, and presenting sequential information.

Finally, as an increasing number of consumers have moved to mobile devices as the predominant way in which they access the internet and social media, mobile content consumption has exploded (Burney 2016). Content should be presented in a way that is easily consumable for mobile users. Just a few years ago at mid-decade, American adults spent less than an hour per day on mobile devices. That usage rate had tripled by 2015 with the average U.S. smartphone user now spending 88 percent of his or her time on a mobile device within an app and the remaining 12 percent using the web browser. This growth in mobile internet usage underscores the necessity for brands to deliver content that is consumable on the go (Burney 2016). Content that is dominated by visual elements as opposed to text-heavy can be viewed with one touch and is more easily optimized to the mobile screen. Today’s armies of mobile users significantly prefer visual over textual marketing content (Chaffey 2018).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Today’s consumers are attached to their smartphones and seek out marketing content when and where they want it. This new reality has had a dramatic impact on the methods by which organizations seek to develop their brands. College students are no different and may even be more profoundly connected to and dependent upon technology than previous generations. Such profound change in student behavior signals the time is quickly passing when universities could tightly control and promulgate a desired image via outbound mass communication. This paper encourages and challenges colleges and universities to warm to and experiment with newer, more consumer-oriented models of brand-building that rely upon valuable and engaging digital marketing content.

The paper explores and proposes the use of digital content marketing as a means of brand-building for colleges and universities. A review of the academic literature and industry trade articles highlights a number of best practices which higher education institutions may adapt to implement digital content marketing. Among these are:

- Establish the objective(s) of the content marketing program
- Focus on content that meets the customers' needs
- Mix branded and unbranded content for maximum brand impact
- Incorporate visual content to increase consumer engagement

Recent studies show marketers are generating more content with less to show for it. The industry's best practices vetted by emergent empirical research offer guidance for how colleges and universities may implement a contextually-contemporary, content-rich branding approach that coincides with the altered behavior of modern students in the internet age.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Pharr is a Professor of Marketing in the College of Business at Tennessee Tech University in Cookeville, TN. Her doctorate in marketing is from Mississippi State University (1987). Dr. Pharr has published numerous papers in journals and conference proceedings over the years, including works in the *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, and *Journal of Small Business Management*.