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The Digital Engine Model: Lead Generation Through Applied DCM Strategies

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In today's digital world, marketing has become impossible without great content. Digital Content Marketing (DCM) is being used by leading brands like P&G, Microsoft, Cisco Systems, and John Deere, but also developed and executed by small business and one-person shops around the globe (Content Marketing Institute 2022). In review of Hubspot's 2020 State of Inbound Marketing Report, Digital22 (2020) highlights that 70% of marketers are actively investing in content marketing, 78% of companies have a team of one-to-three content specialists, and 24% of marketers plan on increasing their investment in content marketing that year.

Similarly, Statista (2017) indicates that global DCM revenue grew by almost $50M between 2009 to 2014 and is expected to more than double that same growth by 2022. This growth is perceived to be associated with consumer's dis-trust in traditional advertising, but also complemented by consumer's desire to want to learn about products through blog-based content (MGDA 2014). Recent academic research has demonstrated that DCM initiatives are important vehicles in fostering consumer awareness (Carranza 2014), engagement (Ashley and Tuten 2015; Raso 2016), sales lead conversions (Kakkar 2017), trust (Duhon 2015), and loyalty (Roggio 2017; Wang et al. 2017). While these connections have been discovered, there is a dearth of academic work on digital content marketing. Recently, Hollebeek and Macky (2019) introduces a framework for DCM that helps define the concept, develop a theoretical framework, and provide fundamental propositions to better understand its academic and managerial implications. Through their extensive review, an insightful definition is extended. "DCM denotes the creation and dissemination of relevant, valuable brand-related content to current or prospective customers on digital platforms to develop their favorable brand engagement, trust, and relationships (vs. directly persuading consumers to purchase" (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019, p. 30).

As part of their first fundamental proposition, there are four common observations about the strategic use of digital content marketing. First, DCM requires a firm to shift their paradigm from selling" to "helping consumers by offering them relevant, valuable content free-of-charge" (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Jefferson and Tanton 2015). Secondly, DCM is designed to build and maintain consumers' long-term engagement, trust, and relationships, rather than attempt to "directly" attempt to convince prospects to purchase the firm's offerings (Ahmad, Musa, and Harun 2016; Duhon 2015). Thirdly, DCM is a form of opt-in that is sought out and discovered by consumers when and where they choose to consume it (Deighton and Kornfield 2009; Godin

1999), which may be attained through company websites, blogs, vlogs, e-books, e-newsletters, social media, mobile apps, etc. Finally, DCM "earns" its audience by offering content that is of value to consumers, which increases engagement with both content and brand. Important to the understanding of value through DCM strategies, advertising is in direct contrast to DCM's earned audiences. Rented audiences associated with advertising come to the digital platform for a difference purpose and then are inadvertently exposed to the content on site (Shastry 2018). Consequently, advertising has a less voluntary audience that often times only tolerates the content rather than seeking it out for engagement (Banks and De Pelsmacker 2014). However, DCM is based on the genuine, and sincere desire to add value to the consumer's life in a relevant way (Hollebeek and Macky 2019), thereby facilitating consumer acquisition and retention through the marketing of content (Taylor 2012).

By their own admission and notwithstanding their significant contributions to the conceptualization of DCM, Hollebeek and Macky's research is purely theoretical in nature and renders the need for empirical investigation. To investigate content marketing, academic researchers will need access to digital analytics (e.g., Google Analytics) from websites implementing content marketing strategies in order to measure the impact of the content on web traffic, brand acquisition, and brand retention. Our research begins to fill these empirical gaps in academic research. Our contribution will demonstrate the impact of web design, content development, and goal-funnel creation on website traffic and lead generation through the strategic design of content marketing initiatives. This paper investigates an applied model, called The Digital Engine, which provides instruction on proper digital content marketing instruction and then measures the impact of this instruction through a live 8-week campaign across 221 active websites. Results indicate that the Digital Engine instruction not only provides applicable understanding but that the applied methodology provides significant impact in driving users through

various methods of brand acquisition and retention through to the website where created and curated content lead website users to complete call-to-action forms. Most importantly, completion of these online forms produces serviceable leads to the sales team, whereby supporting the overarching aim of all DCM strategies, lead generation.

Based on our findings, the Digital Engine model applies the theoretical underpinnings of DCM strategies but provides data to demonstrate the practical realities of digital content marketing. Here, our results demonstrate that the goal of digital content marketing strategy is to focus on the goal of lead generation. As a beginning stage of any sales cycle, lead generation is the key to discovering warm to hot leads for which your sales team can begin to nurture and move towards a closing sale. Without a pipeline or funnel of leads, sales will be limited to cold calls and an infinitely longer sales cycle. The Digital Engine allows the cycle to be shortened by providing a consistent flow of leads through this digital marketing model. More importantly, the Digital Engine model does this through an organic process, instead of in the paid digital marketing space. Like a test market, the creation and curation of an organic, inbound marketing campaign provides much higher ROI than deploying a digital marketing plan without the organic system in place.

For example, consider a company that doesn't have a functional inbound, organic content marketing system in place, but only relies on paid digital advertising. In this scenario, the company will be testing messages while paying to see whether or not those messages will be

successful. In essence, there is no test market. But with an inbound, organic DCM strategy in place, like with the Digital Engine model, this organic communication plan is performed all online within your website. It becomes the testing ground for various created and curated content. Upon analysis and identification of which messages resonate with your target audience, the message will already have proven successful. There is no more guesswork in the paid digital marketing space. At this point, if a message is successful in this organic space, then you can assume that it will also be successful in the paid marketing space, where you can reach consumers that may never heard of your brand before. Consulting in this space has proven time and time again that implementing an organic model before deploying a paid marketing model increases marketing ROI dramatically.

With the Digital Engine model, the organic content model requires certain digital assets, like a customizable website with blogging and content

creation/curation deployment capabilities that will allow customizable plugins to deploy and track the success of the content. The website must be able to be connected to Google Analytics to track brand awareness, brand acquisition, and brand retention. Brand acquisition comes to the website from deployed digital communication channels, including social media platforms like Facebook (Meta), Instagram, Twitter, and/or whatever social media platforms are used by your target market audience. Brand retention comes in the form of email newsletters, email promotions, and various activation and reactivation email campaigns. Using an email marketing service provider like MailChimp, Emma, Constant Contact, among many others is an important and legal consideration with this communication channel. But finally, we deploy Google Analytics to track and analyze goal funnels at the website. Positioned as destination goals, the Digital Engine model tracks the flow of consumers to the website, through the website, and to the call-to-action forms on site that provide the opportunity to gather personal data that serve to generate leads for any type of business.

References are available from the authors upon request.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kyle A. Huggins (Ph.D. University of Arkansas) Dr. Huggins examines research issues related to digital content marketing and cultural adaptation. His research has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, among others. Dr. Huggins's teaching interests include digital content marketing, social media marketing, and consumer behavior. As a graduate student at the University of Arkansas, he won the 2005 Walton College of Business Award for Excellence in Teaching and the campus wide 2005 Baum Teaching Award. In 2006, Dr. Huggins was selected as AMA Sheth Doctoral Consortium Fellow from the University of Arkansas.

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Dr. Hansen has had several articles published in refereed conference proceedings, and his submissions to the National Conference in Sales Management and Society for Marketing Advances annual conferences were recognized as best papers. Dr. Hansen is on the editorial review board for Journal of Services Marketing and has served as an ad hoc reviewer for *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Selling and Major Account Management*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, and *Psychology in Marketing*.