The Digital Engine Model: Lead Generation Through Applied DCM Strategies

Kyle A. Huggins
Belmont University, kyle.huggins@belmont.edu

John D. Hansen
University of Alabama Birmingham, jdhansen@uab.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/jamt

Part of the Marketing Commons, Social Media Commons, and the Technology and Innovation Commons

Recommended Citation
The Digital Engine Model: Generating Leads Through the Application of DCM and Inbound Marketing

Kyle Huggins
John D. Hansen

ABSTRACT

Digital Content Marketing (DCM) has become a primary tool for marketers in driving lead generation in today’s digital marketing world. Leading brands are creating and curating content trying to build brand equity and trust, connecting content to consumer action through brand story. And while strong theoretical models of content marketing have been discussed in the marketing literature, like Hollebeek and Macky (2019), there is a dearth of understanding about the application and direct impact of organic digital content strategies on marketing directives. This paper investigates an applied model, called The Digital Engine, which provides instruction on proper inbound marketing techniques and then measures the impact of this instruction through a live 8-week campaign across 358 active websites. Results indicate that the Digital Engine instruction not only provides applicable understanding to the learner, but the applied methodology provides significant impact in driving lead generation by using active website goal funnels. Users of the Digital Engine curriculum learn how to create and curate content that drive readers to the appropriate call to actions, which generate live responses and builds a dynamic customer relationship management (CRM) database. The completion of these online forms produces serviceable leads to the sales team, whereby supporting the overarching aim of all DCM strategies, lead generation.

Keywords: Digital content marketing, Inbound marketing, Organic, Online, Lead generation, Call-to-actions, Brand awareness, Brand acquisition, Brand retention

INTRODUCTION

In today’s digital world, marketing online has become impossible without great content. Not only are leading brands like P&G, Microsoft, Cisco Systems, and John Deere creating, curating, and distributing content through digital marketing channels, but small businesses and one-person shops around the globe are also turning to new content marketing approaches to augment low returns from traditional marketing (Content Marketing Institute 2022). In review of Hubspot’s 2020 State of Inbound Marketing Report, the digital agency Digital22 (2020) highlights that 70% of marketers are actively investing in writing content, 78% of companies have a team of at least one-to-three content specialists, and 24% of marketers plan on increasing their investment in content strategies in the next year.
Similarly, Statista (2017) indicates that global revenue grew by almost $50M between 2009 to 2014 due to content-related marketing strategies and is expected to more than double that same growth by 2023. This growth is perceived to be associated with consumer’s dis-trust in traditional advertising, but also complemented by consumers’ desires to want to learn more about products through blog-based content (MGDA 2014). Recent academic research has demonstrated that digital content marketing initiatives are important vehicles in fostering consumer awareness (Carranza 2014), engagement (Ashley and Tuten 2015; Raso 2016), sales lead conversions (Kakkar 2017), trust (Duohon 2015), and loyalty (Roggio 2017; Wang et al. 2017). While these connections have been discovered, there is a dearth of academic work in connecting these results to the prescribed application of a content marketing approach. In other words, little theory and application have been examined to explain to practitioners exactly what prescriptions should be deployed to initiate returns on investment within this domain.

Compounding this issue, there is confusion amongst marketing practitioners around the difference between digital content marketing and inbound marketing approaches. To try and clear up this ambiguity, as part of their annual State of Inbound survey, HubSpot asked this specific question to more than 3,500 marketing and sales professionals: “Which of the following best describes the relationship between ‘content marketing’ and ‘inbound marketing’?” (2022) Respondents were allowed to choose between five responses including 1) if they thought they were synonyms, 2) if content marketing was perceived as a subset of inbound marketing, 3) if inbound marketing was perceived as a subset of content marketing, 4) if the two were fundamentally different, or 5) if they didn’t know the difference. Overwhelmingly, front office (marketing, sales, and service) professionals agree that content marketing is a subset of inbound marketing. Marketers were particularly united in this perspective (60%) verses the other options of synonymous (16%), and all other options at less than 10%. However, because HubSpot coined the term “Inbound Marketing” they also wanted to test this question outside of their own subscribers by conducting a complimentary survey on Facebook. While results were not as robust, Facebook respondents were still three times as likely to consider content marketing as a subset of inbound marketing verses the other way around.

Recently, Hollebeek and Macky (2019) introduced a framework for digital content marketing (DCM) that helps define the concept, develop a theoretical framework, and provide fundamental propositions to better understand content marketing and its proposed 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, p. 30). On the opposing side of this argument, HubSpot (2023) has operationalized inbound marketing as “a business methodology that attracts customers by creating valuable content and experiences tailored to them.” While outbound forms of marketing are “pushed” into traditional marketing channels, inbound marketing is described as a “pull” method that forms connections within users in digital marketing channels in which they are already engaged looking to solve problems they already have (HubSpot 2023). Therefore, due to the requirement of content to fulfill this goal, when considering the causality dilemma of which comes first, content marketing or inbound marketing, HubSpot found most marketers consider content marketing to be a subset of inbound marketing. However, the reality is more complex. You can’t have one without the other.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth in academic literature on the applied nature of inbound marketing approaches verses content marketing. Likewise, while content marketing has been more thoroughly investigated in the marketing literature, 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 this interaction of digital content and inbound marketing approaches to gain a practical understanding of their application in the marketplace, academic researchers will need access to digital analytics from websites implementing content through inbound marketing strategies. This data is required to measure the impact of web content on website traffic, user acquisition, and consumer retention. Our research begins to fill these empirical gaps in the practical application of content and inbound marketing methodologies. As a primary aim of this journal, we aim to present a clear transition from research propositions to implementation approaches for marketing professionals. Our practical contribution will demonstrate the impact of deployed digital content combined with inbound marketing approaches as they lead to increase lead generation. Our combined model, coined here as the Digital Engine, will link together the use of content marketing with inbound “pull” methods to provide practitioners with the tools needed to
increase indirect long-term sales goals by increasing web user engagement, trust, and relationships through consistent and valuable content production.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, we will review Hollebeek and Macky’s DCM model and compare it with our alternative applied-based inbound model, the Digital Engine. Here, we will highlight the theoretical tenants of their DCM model while also demonstrating the instructional methodology used to guide marketers the process of inbound marketing methodology. Within this discussion, we will present research hypotheses, which will then test on 358 websites who have used the Digital Engine instruction model. Next, results will be presented to support the instructional model by providing empirical evidence of combining content and inbound marketing strategies to significantly increase the generation of sales leads. Lastly, we will discuss current contributions to the marketing literature, research limitations, and provide conclusionary remarks on the implementation of our practical inbound approach for marketing professionals.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

It is our goal in this section to clear up ambiguities surrounding the differences between digital content marketing and inbound marketing. While they are similar, even to the point of some marketing professionals calling them synonymous; however, they are in fact different. We will begin with a review of content marketing, specifically Hollebeek and Macky’s conceptual framework of DCM and then zoom out to discuss DCM’s role in deploying a larger, more applicable inbound marketing strategy. We will conclude with a precise discussion of similarities and differences of these two domains.

**Hollebeek and Macky’s DCM Conceptual Framework**

In a broad context, DCM represents activities executed through digital online platforms that include but are not limited to websites, virtual online communities, blogs, vlogs, social media, mobile apps, etc. (Breidbach, Brodie, and Hollebeek 2014; Gensler et al. 2013, Rowley 2008). Content created for these platforms can include email newsletters, electronic magazines, podcasts, live streaming, video, quizzes, whitepapers, infographics, how-to guides, topical checklists, case studies, virtual conferences, webinars, and free longform content (Harris 2017; Taylor 2012, Viswanathan et al. 2017). Consequently, Hollebeek and Macky’s first fundamental proposition DCM denotes that creation and dissemination of relevant and valuable brand-related content to current or prospective customers on digital platforms should develop favorable brand engagement, trust, and relationships (versus directly persuading customers to purchase). Given these final goals, listed as third tier consequences in their model (see Figure 1), we will start our discussion on the periphery and then work our way back into the center of the model to discuss the consumer-based antecedents that lead to these end goals. Experience in instruction of these models has demonstrated that it is better to start with a vision of the end goal to demonstrate the final product, then walk backwards into the process to demonstrate the connection between each level of antecedent and the end goal.

**Third Tier Consequences of Digital Content Marketing**

In their model, the true end goal for digital content marketing is to create both consumer-based and firm-based brand equity. First, consumer-based brand equity is defined as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to… a brand” (Keller 1993, p. 8). This implies higher perceived values of deployed content will lead consumers to have a more favorable response to the brand and its communications. More specifically, high equity brands reduce perceived purchase risk whereby facilitating decision-making. This perceived value (verses realized financial value associated with firm-based brand equity) is predominantly evaluated using cognitive and emotional criteria for decision making, as highlighted in the model.

Next, firm-based brand equity is operationalized as “the assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm” (Aaker 1991, p. 7). In other words, it is the incremental or marginal value attributed to a branded (versus unbranded) product which reflects financial value inherent in tangible (or intangible) brand assets leading to its capacity to build or maintain customer relationships (Yoo and Donthu 2001; Doyle 2000). Most importantly however, for the financial value of firm-based brand equity
to be realized, brand sales are required and must be facilitated through digital content that develops high brand engagement and attitudes, which are second tier consequences.

**Figure 1. Hollebeek and Macky’s Conceptual Framework of Digital Content Marketing**

![Conceptual Framework Image](image_url)

*Fig. 1. Conceptual framework. Notes — DCM: digital content marketing; Br. Sense-making: brand-related sense-making; Br. Identification: brand identification; Br. Citizenship Behaviors: brand-related citizenship behaviors; Br. Trust: brand trust; Br. Att.: brand attitude*

**Second Tier Consequences of Digital Content Marketing**

Before either consumer-based or firm-based brand equity can be obtained, consumers must first develop brand trust and brand attitude. Research has demonstrated that brand trust is comprised of two dimensions, including a) credibility and b) benevolence. Credibility results from a consumer’s expectancy that they can rely on a firm’s brand promise, while benevolence refers to a consumer’s belief that the firm’s motives are genuine and that the firm has the consumer’s best interest in mind (Ganesan and Hess 1997). As demonstrated in Figure 1, while credibility most often arises from cognitive engagement, benevolence derives from more emotional engagement with a brand’s content (Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg 2009; Morgan and Hunt 1994).

Brand Attitude is a consumer’s “psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluation a brand with some degree of favor (vs. disfavor)” (Dimara and Skuras 2003, p. 693; Eagly and Chaiken 1993). As research has long identified, there are three dimensions of brand attitude including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that help denote it as “relatively lasting clusters of feelings, beliefs, and behavioral tendencies directed towards specific persons, ideas, objects or groups” (Baron and Byrne 1994). In this context, Hollebeek and Macky theorize these three required dimensional antecedents build different types of brand attitude, induced by brand-related sense-making (cognitive), brand identification (emotional), and brand citizenship (behavioral) which assist in building the subsequent consumer and firm-based brand equity previously discussed.

**First Tier Consequences of Digital Content Marketing**
Before a firm can build brand trust and attitude, consumers must experience three different levels of engagement with digital content marketing. As revealed in the previous section, these include cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of engagement (Harmeling et al. 2017). In this landscape, engagement is seen as a consumer’s investment in DCM interactions, especially as it centers on their focal object interactions (Kumar et al. 2017; Hsieh and Chang 2016; Kumar and Pansari 2016). When consumers experience cognitive engagement, users of digital content are focusing on brand-related thought and mental elaboration. This dimension of engagement emanates from the different consumer-based antecedents of functional and authenticity motives. Hence, consumers’ need to acquire brand information, a functional motive, is combined with their desire for the brand information to be genuine, an authenticity motive. As we will see in the next section, these motives act as antecedents and provide perspective on why individual users of digital content select and interact with particular media to satisfy their needs.

Next, when consumers experience emotional engagement, users of digital content experience brand-related affect. In this model, consumer’s emotional engagement arises from hedonic and authenticity motives, that is, when emotional engagement occurs, individuals combine a desire for affective gratification (e.g., satisfied) with their need for obtaining genuine brand-related information. Finally, consumers’ behavioral engagement experiences occur when their level of energy, effort, and time is spent on branded digital content. In this framework, behavioral engagement is a result of consumers’ functional and/or hedonic motives. In this case, a consumer’s functional motive to acquire brand information and a consumer’s desire for affective gratification will work together, or in some cases independently, to elicit behavioral engagement towards digital content. Of particular note, consumer research has demonstrated that even though cognitive and emotional engagement can occur, this does not necessarily mean that behavioral engagement will follow (Alexander, Haakola, and Hollebeek 2018; Gruen 1995). Therefore, even though digital content can inform both cognitive meaning and affective feelings to drive consumer-based equity, it does not always result in financial value for the firm or brand. There can be many factors that prohibit behavioral engagement (e.g., price or lack of availability) that inhibit resulting behaviors. This is why Hollebeek and Macky’s model pictures a dotted line in the behavioral engagement model, that is, to symbolize this frequent like of incongruity across the antecedents.

**Digital Content Marketing Antecedents**

In developing their framework, Hollebeek and Macky (2019) base their model on a uses-and-gratifications (U&G) perspective. Previous research has demonstrated that consumers use functional, hedonic, and authenticity-based motives to drive consumer decision-making (Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel 2009; Ruggerio 2000). More specifically here, even before a decision is made, the authors theorize that this same perspective also seeks to explain individuals’ motives for selecting or interacting with DCM communications. Therefore, these three motives are identified as antecedents to DCM behavior. Consumers seeking utilitarian or informative content operate under the functional motive, while those seeking emotively-driven, experiential needs use a hedonic motive. Additionally, when consumers seek brand-related continuity or credibility through DCM communications, they are exhibiting an authenticity motive.

However, as discussed in the previous section, these motives are not mutually exclusive and do not independently occur in a vacuum. Combinations of these motives being acted upon at the same time can drive decision making as hybrid motives. Functional and authenticity motives combine to create cognitive engagement and brand-related sense making. Authenticity and hedonic motives combine to create emotional engagement and brand-related identification. Finally, functional and hedonic motives combine to create behavioral engagement and brand-related citizenship behaviors. Consumers’ brand-related sense-making, identification, and citizenship behaviors are developed using DCM communications. It is this created and curated content, intentionally published by firms, that serves as the ignition to the entire pull, inbound marketing process, which we will subsequently discuss in the sections below.

**Important Observations About a DCM Strategy**

Lastly, there are four important 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 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, ebooks, e-newsletters, social media, mobile apps, etc. Next, DCM “earns” its audience by offering content that is of value to consumers, which increases engagement with both content and brand.

Finally, 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 different purpose and then are inadvertently exposed to the content on site (Shastry 2018). Consequently, advertising has a less voluntary audience that often 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).

THE DIGITAL ENGINE MODEL: COMBINING DCM WITH INBOUND MARKETING

When reviewing Hollebeek and Macky’s conceptual framework and as highlighted in their strategic observations, digital content marketing focus on the “who” and “what” of digital communication effectiveness. Their theoretical approach combines significant marketing research around identifying customers (who) and the content they are looking for (what) to develop brand engagement, brand-related understanding, trust, and attitude, while seeking customer and brand-based brand equity as end goals. However, where their DCM model falls short in application is explaining the “where” and “how” of digital communication effectiveness. This is where inbound marketing approaches can assist in the practical application of their conceptual framework. While inbound marketing cannot be fully achieved without digital content, inbound marketing provides the process methodology that turns valuable consumer content into lead generation. It designates the channels (where) and the mechanisms (how) for delivering content to the appropriate locations and directing those users to the branded website where data collection can occur through established goal funnels via online web forms. It is the process methodology of inbound marketing that creates a clear transition from research propositions to implementation approaches for marketing professionals.

Inbound Marketing Methodology

Founded in 2005, HubSpot is a cloud-based CRM platform designed to help align sales and marketing teams to foster sales, boost ROI, and optimize a business’s inbound marketing strategy to generate more qualified leads. Inbound marketing was coined by HubSpot to define the methodological process that helps businesses grow stronger and faster by informing, educating, and delighting prospects with informational content and helpful service. The content attracts consumers to their branded website and the personalized service keeps them coming back to learn more until they are ready to purchase what you are selling. Inbound marketing is a large concept, with many facets and tactics that make it useful to relevant companies in the digital era; but it’s also a big shift from what most companies practice on a regular basis (evenbound.com 2023).

To begin understanding the process methodology of inbound marketing, we must first start with the tools needed to deploy an inbound marketing strategy. To begin, a firm must have a branded website with the ability to publish content on site. This content can be created as blogs, vlogs, podcasts, etc., but the firm must be able to deploy this content on a site that is fully customizable. Turnkey web products like WordPress.com, Wix, SquareSpace, among others are not typically suitable for inbound marketing because there are so many working mechanics, including additional plugins and API key connections. These turnkey products just are not robust enough to implement a full inbound marketing plan. Websites that use either WordPress.org (different than WordPress.com) with unlimited plugin capability or websites that have been created using html/css coding by a web design expert are much better suited for this methodology. With a website capable of full content delivery, inbound marketers then must determine to which platforms will their created and curated content be delivered. Like a hub-and-spoke model, the website serves as the hub for all previous and future content.

If the website is the hub, then each platform to which the created and curated content will be delivered are spokes. Specifically, the inbound methodology prescribes that the blog URL (or whichever type of content including vlog or
Depending on the educational needs, students can appear very differently. For example, for secondary education tailored to teach subscribers of all ages who want to learn the skill sets associated with online lead generation.

The Digital Engine Curriculum
The Digital Engine™ (https://thedigitalengine.net) is an online education curriculum and courseware that teaches lead generation through inbound marketing. It is built on a robust teaching model that delivers understanding around each area of inbound marketing methodology. Using a learning management system that is simple to navigate, the curriculum is designed in modules to function at both strategic and tactical levels of understanding. It is specifically tailored to teach subscribers of all ages who want to learn the skill sets associated with online lead generation.

Between Facebook Insights, Instagram Insights, X (previously known as Twitter) Analytics, and email marketing analytics provided by companies like MailChimp, inbound marketers have multiple analytic dashboards at their disposal to make future strategic decisions around content deployment.
students, leads could be college admission representatives who view application portfolios of creative works. For university students in higher education, the curriculum could be used to attract future employers or as a young entrepreneur, it could help sell products, services, or ideas. For non-matriculating students who might be working full time or trying to start a business on their own, the curriculum teaches how to pull more users into the company website for increased sales at an e-commerce storefront, promoting new product awareness, or simply generating more viable B2B leads into the firm’s customer relationship management (CRM) database.

The Digital Engine curriculum is specifically designed to help users generate leads in whatever form they need. What makes the curriculum unique is that it is taught fully online using inbound marketing tactics. This means that instead of paying for leads without testing keywords and creative content first, the curriculum teaches how to pull leads into a website through the deployment of created and curated content. While paid digital marketing strategies have proven to be successful, they can also be very costly to deploy, leaving firms with a small return-on-investment (ROI). This curriculum is designed to teach users how to test digital marketing campaigns in an organic space before you take on large amounts of digital spend (if you ever take on paid marketing). Therefore, whether the subscriber has a current website, or is ready to start building a brand new one, the curriculum can help transform most any website into a digital engine that sparks significant power in lead generation.

Figure 2. The Digital Engine Model

The teaching model deployed in the Digital Engine curriculum is provided in Figure 2 above. Reflecting the priorities of inbound marketing methodology, at the center, the model includes a hub of information that is created and curated at a branded website. Deploying WordPress.org, subscribers to the Digital Engine curriculum purchase a URL domain name and web hosting, if they don’t already own one previously. At their branded website, subscribers are taught how to use the AIDA communication model where they deploy the strategies highlighted by Hollebeek and Macky’s conceptual model of digital content marketing. Combining their content strategies with the tactical mechanics of the inbound marketing methodology, subscribers are then advised on how to set up their channels, or spokes, to which they will post a content hook and website URL to the content. Subscribers are advised on the advantages of most of the top social media platforms, platform demographics, and tactics for optimal post engagement. To help manage the timing and content posted in these acquisition channels, scheduling tools like CoSchedule or Hootsuite can be used to help maximize time and efficiency. Specifically, within the Digital Engine curriculum, it is advised to use as many free tools as possible. Therefore, CoSchedule is introduced as a beneficial scheduling tool that has a free introductory level for submitting content through a built-in widget deployed within the post creation screen at the website. Activating this free plugin on the website provides subscribers with new experiences and toolkits within this arena.

Likewise, subscribers are required to create an email marketing services account (currently at MailChimp) to establish a weekly email presence with their most important brand advocates. While social media content is viewed as traffic
acquisition, email traffic is conceived as brand retention. Within this methodology, to sign up for a branded email distribution list, the website visitor must fill out an email subscription form. Therefore, because that user has already completed a goal funnel and is interested enough in receiving weekly emails, then this subscriber has moved through the AIDA model, past the stages of awareness, interest, and desire, the user has performed an action on site. Completing this call-to-action email subscription form has now classified this user as a follower. Therefore, now, a second component to this model is retaining those followers and providing them content that will bring them back into the website. Hence, email marketing content should have a different focus that acquisition content. Email content can provide member-only content, promotional incentives, and other brand-centric content that builds relationship at levels much deeper than content targeting users at the other three stages of the AIDA communication model.

Finally, subscribers to the Digital Engine curriculum are taught how to connect their website to Google Analytics to provide consistent data on the movement of traffic into, through, and exiting the website. Several modules are used to teach subscribers how to read and interpret the analytical data, and most importantly, how to build strategy out of the reported data. Amalgamated data across both Google Analytics and MailChimp are combined into a curriculum specific dashboard, called InGen Analytics. Weekly InGen reports are created to provide each subscriber with feedback on how well their inbound marketing campaign is working compared to a relevant benchmarked case. Specifically, within the higher education modules, students in each section of class that are using the curriculum are benchmarked against the class mean and standard deviation. Each student is provided a weekly report that identifies areas of strength and weakness to help guide them for developing weekly strategies on how to improve their campaign. It is within this higher educational domain that we present the following analysis to support the Digital Engine model as an applied and acceptable transition from research propositions to implementation for marketing educators and professionals.

**CONSTRUCT AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT**

To maintain consistency across every website, a level of standardized metrics must be used. Fortunately, using Google Analytics, each website can be tracked across several different variables. Specifically, within our research, data from every website that deploys Google Analytics can be directly measured across brand awareness (website use), brand acquisition (social media) and brand retention (email), as well as lead generation (goal funnel conversions). Because our model specifically examines brand retention through the process of email campaigns, then standardized metrics for this construct need to be measured the same across email platforms. These metrics include number of emails sent, subscribers, email opens, and email click-throughs. For these metrics, almost all email platforms measure these identically. Therefore, the only requirement for data collection is that an email platform is being used to email subscribers that track these required variables. Specifically in this dataset, MailChimp was solely used to track brand retention.

*Brand Awareness: Website Use “at” the Branded Site*

Today, the Internet has become the most important public communication portal for humans worldwide. According to Statista (2023), there are 5.3 billion Internet users, which accounts for 65.7% of the global population. Because many business-to-consumer interactions now occur online, website design is critically necessary in engaging users and facilitating website use (Flavián, Guinalíu, & Gurrea 2006; Lee & Kozar 2012; Petre, Minocha, & Roberts 2006). When users experience poorly designed sites, higher bounce rates occur (Google.com 2015). However, well-designed websites with high usability have been found to positively impact both website retention rates and purchasing behavior (Avouris, Tselios, Fidas, & Papachristos 2003; Flavián et al, 2006, Lee & Kozar 2012). Website design elements that lead to increase website use include navigation, graphical representation, content organization, content utility, website purpose, web simplicity, and content readability (Garett, R. Chiu, J., Zhang, L., & Young S.D 2017).

Within Google Analytics, website use can be measured across several different variables including users, new users, sessions, and pageviews. Here, during any given time, users are the total number of people who have accessed the website. New users account for first-time users where specific personal IP address is recorded on site for the first time. A session is a group of user interactions with your website that take place within a given time frame. In other words, it is like a visit; it counts how many times any one person has opened a browser window to your website, and then closed it. By comparison, a single user could have multiple sessions or visits to your website on any given day;
however, they are recorded between 30-minute intervals. That is, if a user returns to your page within 30-minutes of the last session, then it is considered the same session. Once it is beyond 30-minutes, then a returning visitor starts a new session. Lastly, pageviews are the number of pages viewed by all website visitors to your page. Typically, a website will range from smallest to greatest in this fashion: new users, users, sessions, and pageviews. To measure the success of brand awareness, you must start by measuring the impact of your content and inbound marketing efforts on traffic at the website.

**Brand Acquisition: Website Use “to” the Branded Site**

Understanding how internet users find and access websites is critically valuable to inbound marketing strategy (Wymbs 2011). For example, one recent study found a significant impact of direct acquisition of web traffic on online purchases (Filippou, Georgiadis, and Jha 2023), suggesting that while organic search led to the initial discovery of the website, the purchase process came later through direct acquisition due to the consumer becoming familiar with the seller. While data suggests that 55% of website traffic accounts for online purchases globally (Bianchi 2022), the question has been posed of whether or not web use from direct acquisition sources will lead to higher conversion rates than other acquisition sources and across heterogeneous product categories (Holmes 2023). While digital analytic tools are being widely used in the business world today, there is still a level of uncertainty about how to optimize advertising spend across numerous acquisition channels, especially when data suggests a significant portion of web traffic comes via direct acquisition sources (Filippou, Georgiadis, and Jha 2023).

Acquisition sources within Google Analytics are measured across four different acquisition methods, which include direct, organic social, organic search, and referral acquisition. Direct acquisition measures the number of people who type the exact URL of a website into the search bar of the web browser redirecting them to the website. It can also include the number of people who click on a link in a non-web environment (i.e., not a website) redirecting the user to the website. For example, direct acquisition often includes direct links out of email campaigns as users click on a link that redirects the user back into the website. In contrast, organic social acquisition is the total number of people being delivered to a website from a social media platform. Google will track specifically how many users land on a website from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. tallying the total number from all social platforms as social acquisition.

Next, organic search acquisition includes all the visitors to a website that were redirected to the site from one of the major search engines, like Google, Yahoo, or Bing. This measure is a good representation of the success of the Search Engine Optimization (SEO) strategies being deployed on site. Finally, Google Analytics measures referral acquisition, which is the number of visitors that you have been “referred” from other websites. For example, if another website shares content from another site with a link back to that original content, and a visitor clicks on a hyperlink from that blog redirecting the visitor back to the referring website, then that would tally as a referral with Google Analytics. All these acquisition strategies if deployed correctly will lead to an increase in website use; therefore, we propose hypotheses H1a through H1d.

**H1:** Website Use is directly and positively influenced by (a) Direct Acquisition, (b) Social Acquisition, (c) Search Engine Acquisition, and (d) Referral Acquisition.

**Brand Retention: Website Traffic “Back” to the Branded Site**

Even though email was first utilized in 1971, email marketing is still a critical component to the normal business day. It is one of the most profitable marketing channels available to digital marketers, generating an average return of $36 for every dollar invested (Data and Marketing Association 2020). Data also suggest that it is the preferred channel for consumers to communicate with companies, two times more used than social media (Data and Marketing Association 2020). Being cost efficient, targeting your most loyal advocates, and having control over this owned media has made email marketing a powerful digital tool in a marketer’s arsenal. Furthermore, A/B testing and reviewing email platform analytics has helped marketing professionals better understand their target audiences, which has improved email performance especially in increasing open rates, click-through rates, and conversion rates (Defau, Zuaner, and Sycik 2023). While little research has been conducted on email marketing, the primary focus has been on how personalized subject lines (Sahni, Wheeler, and Chintagunta 2018; Munz, Jung, and Alter 2020), shortened subject lines
In our model, brand retention is measured through an email marketing platform, which include email service providers like EMMA, Constant Contact, and/or MailChimp. All these services have web plugins that will connect to most websites for which an email subscription form can be connected between website and platform. As web visitors complete these forms, their contact info and email are automatically transferred to the email distribution list, making them a recipient of the next email that would be sent. These platforms collect standardized analytics across the email distribution list, including number of email subscribers, emails sent, emails opened by receiver, and click-throughs on links included in the email. As these measures increase the impact of email retention on not only website use but also on direct acquisition, where the click-throughs are tabulated as a form of direct acquisition. Therefore, we suggest hypotheses H2a and H2b.

**H2**: Email Retention will have a positive, direct effect on a) Website Use and b) Direct Acquisition.

At the time of this writing, Google Analytics is exploring a metric called “Email Acquisition,” which will include email click-throughs rather than their current process of including them in direct acquisition. However, since this new metric has not been deployed at this time, we will run a mediation analysis to see if direct acquisition will fully mediate the relationship between direct acquisition and website use. If email retention has a significant impact on website use but is fully mediated through direct acquisition, then this would suggest the only impact email retention has on web-traffic is through email click-throughs, specifically at the point of contact within the email. However, if email retention significantly impacts website use but is not mediated, then this would suggest that a weekly email campaign increases website use through means other than just email click-throughs. This suggests that being a subscriber to the email campaign would build loyalty and instigate visits to the website through other acquisition forms, like typing the website into a search engine by memory, even after the subscriber may click on the link immediately available in the email. Hence, we suggest Hypothesis 3:

**H3**: Direct Acquisition will positively mediate the relationship between Email Retention and Website use.

*Lead Generation: Event Conversions through Completed Online Web Forms (Goal Completions)*

The true goal of any profitable marketing campaign is to sell their product or service. An important step in that process is for the company or individual to learn how to generate leads that result in a high probability for sales. Learning how to create, curate, and distribute digital content that will initiate traffic through goal funnels on a website to serve as warm leads is the desire for inbound marketing. These goal funnels are established within the new data stream of Google Analytics (GA4) through the creation of event conversions. For instance, a website owner can create a destination goal that tracks consumers as they hit specific URLs in sequence on their site. Therefore, if a company or individual has a subscription page, which automatically signs up a website visitor to subscribe to their email list, then a “subscribe” page (Destination A) can be created with a “subscribe thank you” page (Destination B) to which a new subscriber is redirected to upon completion of the web form. If within Google Analytics a destination goal has been created for all web visitors who move in the exact direction from Destination A to Destination B, then a goal funnel has been completed and recorded. Tracking these goal funnel completions in Google will not only allow someone to monitor goal completions within the daily/weekly/monthly audit of Google Analytics, but the form content itself can be stored in either the website architecture, or more directly, can be automatically directed into a CRM database for a sales lead follow-up. Therefore, the probability that an increase in goal completions should be highly correlated with increases in website use, which leads us to Hypothesis 4:

**H4**: Website use will have a positive, direct effect on Goal Completions.

**METHODOLOGY**

To test this applied model of DCM and inbound marketing, a local reseller of web products (such as domains and web hosting products) provided access for each subscriber of the Digital Engine curriculum. Each subscriber purchased a URL domain on a yearly lease and acquired monthly web hosting with a branded email address. The Digital Engine
provided each subscriber instruction sets on how to setup their website using specific inbound marketing strategies, both mechanically and aesthetically. That is, detailed instructions were provided on how to create their website using digital content marketing as the primary communication tool through the creation of a website blog page, social media channels of their choice, and an email channel using MailChimp as the email provider. Additionally, each subscriber was taught how to create a minimum of four goal funnels on site using event conversions (formally in the UA data stream known as destination goals) within Google Analytics. Over a period of eight weeks, subscribers were monitored by their weekly progress across their branded site and email campaign. This timeline was selected based on previous anecdotal evidence of marketing managers giving between 2-3 months for a new digital marketing strategy to begin to show evidence of working (i.e., generating usable leads). Using Google Analytics and MailChimp Campaign Reports, data were collected across 358 different websites.

As demonstrated in Figure 3 below, predictor variables included single item measures for each acquisition variable (i.e., direct, social, search, and referral) and one multi-item measure for email retention. As described previously, Google Analytics collects data on acquired traffic to a site through four independent measures, including direct, social, search, and referral acquisition. When checked for multicollinearity, each variable measured independent of one another and none of the items would load statistically on a factor analysis. Therefore, we treated them independently as four separate predictor variables. Email retention (3 items, $\alpha = .85$) was assessed based on the number of subscribers, opens, and click-throughs across the total number of emails sent out in the eight-week period.

![Figure 3. The Digital Engine Curriculum Model](image)

Primary dependent measures include a multi-item measure for website use and a single item measure for lead generation as the number of event conversions (i.e., goal completions) during the eight-week period. Website use originally included four items: users, new users, sessions, and pageviews. However, because these were all new sites, there was a high degree of multicollinearity between users, new users, and sessions. Therefore, we chose to only include the variables users and pageviews ($\alpha = .91$) to reflect the variable website use.

RESULTS

Partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was utilized to analyze the data in SmartPLS 4.0 (Ringle et al., 2022). Our decision to take this approach over covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) was driven by the fact that PLS-SEM offers several advantages over CB-SEM. Specifically, PLS-SEM: (1) can accommodate smaller sample sizes and more complex models, (2) can analyze variables measured through a combination of reflective and formative indicators, (3) can analyze archival data, (4) can handle multicollinearity issues in predictor variables, (5) can analyze variables that are non-normally distributed, and (6) can analyze data generated from smaller samples (Hair et al., 2019). Related to this last point, common practice in PLS-SEM is for sample size to be the larger of 10 times the number of antecedent paths impacting any one construct or, if formative measures are utilized, 10 times the variable with the greatest number of formative indicator variables (Chin, 1998).
We focus on the former as five antecedent paths affect web traffic. As this indicates that a sample of 50 is sufficient, our sample of 358 responses is more than adequate.

**Measurement Model Analysis**

We assessed the adequacy of our measurement model prior to examining the structural model. As shown in Table 1, both multi-item measures exceeded the recommended thresholds of .60 or higher for composite reliability (CR) and .50 or higher for average variance extracted (AVE) (Chin, 1998). In support of convergent validity, all standardized individual item loadings were greater than .70 and significant at the .01 level (Hulland, 1999). Further, in support of discriminant validity, the average variance extracted statistics were greater than the highest shared variance statistics for both constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Loadings</th>
<th>T-Values</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email Retention</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Click-thru</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>18.82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opens</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>83.88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscribers</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>74.60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website use</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page Views</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>102.70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Users</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>185.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CR = Composite reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted.

**Structural Model Analysis**

Table 2 presents the results from the structural model analysis. As evidence in support of model fit (Barclay, 1991), the model accounted for 35% of the variance in direct acquisition, 39% of the variance in goal completions, and 94% of the variance in web traffic. While the $R^2$ for web traffic is extremely high, it is important to note that the five antecedent variables under examination should explain a very high percentage of the variance in web traffic (i.e., web traffic is an activity engaged in by the respondent that should be accurately predicted based on the presence, or lack thereof, of the antecedent variables).

The Stone-Geisser test of predictive accuracy (Geisser, 1975; Stone, 1974) was performed as an additional test of model fit. When utilizing this procedure, model fit is gauged through a $Q^2$ statistic which assesses “how well observed values are reconstructed by the model and its parameter estimates” (Chin, 1998, p. 318). $Q^2$ statistics greater than zero confirm model fit. As each of the dependent variables in our analysis achieved this standard (.31 for direct acquisition, .33 for goal completions, and .78 for web traffic), an adequate level of model fit was demonstrated. The chi-squared statistic for the saturated model was 2669.44.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From</th>
<th>To</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>T-Value</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1a  Direct Acquisition</td>
<td>Website Use</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1b  Social Acquisition</td>
<td>Website Use</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>14.05</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1c  Search Engine Acquisition</td>
<td>Website Use</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1d  Referral Acquisition</td>
<td>Website Use</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2a  Email Retention</td>
<td>Website Use</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2b  Email Retention</td>
<td>Direct Acquisition</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>9.32</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4   Website Use</td>
<td>Goal Completions</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>8.95</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In support of H1, the bootstrapping procedure recommended by Chin (1998) was utilized for hypotheses testing using a bootstrapping sample of 200. All hypotheses related to acquisition type were supported. Specifically, direct
acquisition (H1a, SDE = .47, p < .01), social acquisition (H1b, SDE = .61, p < .01), search engine acquisition (H1c, SDE = .09, p < .01), and referral acquisition (H1d, SDE = .08, p < .01) were all found to be significantly and positively related to website use (i.e., website use to the branded site).

In support of H2, only marginal support for H2a was found, as the relationship between the email retention measure (a multi-item measure including subscribers, opens, and click-throughs) and website use was significant only at the .10 level (H2a, SDE = .07, p = .07). However, H2b was completely supported as email retention was found to be significantly and positively related to direct acquisition (H2b, SDE = .08, p < .01).

Next, we argued for mediation in H3, hypothesizing that the relationship between email acquisition and website use would be positively mediated by direct acquisition. This would imply that email acquisition drives website use because direct acquisitions increase as email acquisitions increase. To establish mediation, we first removed the path from email retention to direct acquisition to ensure significance between email retention and website use when the effects of email retention were not also flowing through direct acquisition. However, we found that there was no difference in the relationship between email retention and website use when doing this (SDE = .07, p = .07). Hence, as the direct relationship between the two variables is not affected by the inclusion of direct acquisition as a mediating variable, mediation cannot be established. H3 is therefore not supported.

H4 is supported as the relationship between website use and goal completions is significant and positive (SDE = .63, p < .01). Thus, in all, six of the eight hypotheses were strongly supported (p < .01), while moderate support was found for only H2a (p < .10).

FINDINGS

Results indicate using the Digital Engine curriculum is an appropriate applied model for launching a successful inbound marketing campaign to generate leads. As demonstrated above, brand acquisition in the form of consumers being directed to a website through direct acquisition via email and any browser address bar (H1a), social acquisition via social media platforms (H1b), search engine acquisition via major search engines like Google, Bing, and Yahoo (H1c), and referral acquisition via backlinks from other websites (H1d) were all significant. In this dataset, social acquisition (SDE = 0.61) was the most important form of acquisition with a standard direct estimate almost 1.3 times that of direct acquisition (.47). These two forms of acquisition were then followed in importance by organic search (.09) and referral acquisition (.08). This suggests all current acquisition methods can and should be used to direct consumers of created and curated content back to the branded website.

Next, brand retention (H2b) was supported as being a significant contributor to direct acquisition, which was found as significant source of acquisition to the website. While the direct connection between email links and website use (H2a) was only significant at the .10 level (p = .07), we believe it was indirectly re-routed through direct acquisition. The current data suggests the number of users being directed to the website from each individual email was not strong enough to provide statistical support. Critically, this effect is most likely caused due to the instruction around email design and deployment did not effectively teach stronger enough email creation tactics whereby enticing more email readers to click on constructed content hooks and weblinks within the body of an email. Hence, the current curriculum should increase an emphasis on email effectiveness to help subscribers build a more effective strategy with branding retention. And while we believe that support for email retention is demonstrated through direct acquisition, this effect cannot currently be demonstrated empirically due to the confounding nature of how direct acquisition is collected within Google Analytics. We will discuss this issue more within the limitations below.

Finally, results demonstrated that website use significantly led to the completion of call-to-action forms on the website, known as goal completions. These call-to-action forms are where lead generation occurs as form submissions include users’ names, email addresses, phone numbers, etc. Using inbound marketing automation, contact information from the online web forms is automatically uploaded into a connected CRM database to assist sales in nurturing those leads toward a closed sale.
RESEARCH AND MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

While to date there have been numerous research articles that highlight the impact of digital activities on marketing results, the Hollebeek and Macky’s (2019) conceptual framework was the first attempt to propose the underlying antecedents and resulting consequences of digital content marketing. Their theory provided two end goals, both consumer-based and firm-based brand equity. However, while this framework provided direction in the form of propositions for future research on the impact of complimentary motives upon these forms of brand-equity, there were no practical applications of their research to help current practitioners capitalize on targeted digital content. The application of this framework is where the rubber meets the road. Digital marketing practitioners need to understand the mechanisms that work in conjunction with content to provide the process by which consumers can find content they are seeking, follow the content pack to the source website, and then use goal-directed initiatives on site that direct consumers to a firm’s goal completion desire. We contend that digital content is critically important to a firm’s success in lead generation, and we hold up Hollebeek and Macky’s (2019) conceptual framework as a critical starting point for thinking about how to create content that builds brand trust, attitude, and equity. This is required for a user to take the next step in a goal-directed behavior, but how to mechanically and aesthetically design a website to manufacture this behavior is also a critical component in the process. The application of their framework relies on practitioners connecting the links between the motives behind this behavior and providing the opportunity for website users to follow through on that behavior. This is where inbound marketing techniques connect the conceptual to the practical.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of academic research on inbound marketing techniques. There seems to be an implied understanding within the DCM framework that the behavioral engagement arm of the model automatically covers how consumers would act based on their cognitive and emotional engagement with the brand. Historically, however, research on attitude-behavioral consistency (Smith & Swinyard 1983) has demonstrated that even though cognition and emotion may be strongly correlated, it does not always lead to a goal directed behavior. While the DCM framework acknowledges this in the model with a broken dotted line around behavior to symbolize this lack of congruity, the model falls short of providing an application that fills this gap. Hence, the Digital Engine model here posits that the instruction of inbound marketing mechanics can fill this void. By using social media hooks and email messages imbedded with hyperlinks connected back to web-based content, like blogs, vlogs, podcasts, instructional video, etc., digital content creators and curators can pull consumers seeking this information back into the website. Once these consumers have digested the content, then additional content at the website can direct these users to engage with extra content in the same domain to continue building trust, attitude, and brand equity connections, whereby consumers will engage in online web forms. These web forms serve to build relationship and provide important personal and behavioral data generating warm sales leads for the firm. Our manuscript, as far as we know, is the first to connect the theoretical structure of Hollebeek and Macky’s (2019) digital content marketing with the applied techniques of inbound marketing.

LIMITATIONS

Within the framework of this study, data was provided by users who had completed an online course in how to deploy digital content through inbound marketing techniques. Specifically, over a series of semesters, this data was collected from undergraduate and graduate students who were taught the fundamentals of the Digital Engine curriculum and then deployed their website using the combination of digital content marketing and inbound marketing strategies in tandem on their individually designed websites. Therefore, while the data statistically supports the applied model of combining digital content and inbound marketing techniques, users were taught these strategic principles and then asked to deploy them within a live online environment. Even through results show the significance of digital content marketing and inbound marketing working together synchronously to generate leads, it was a skillset that was learned through instruction. Data was collected after 8-weeks of model deployment and then analyzed as support of the teaching pedagogy. Note, this could explain the lack of significance with the direct effect of email retention on website use. It is not that this direct effect does not occur, it cannot be determined currently whether it is a data collection issue, instruction issue, or some combination of both.

Furthermore, while marketplace data can frequently be hard to analyze due to the nature of the data being collected, this study is no exception. Here, the acquisition data for any website can only be collected at the website source. That is, Google Analytics, which is deployed in conjunction with each website, only measures the origination of the web
user as an acquisition source. Hence, it is inevitable that the directionality for all parts of H1 can only be positive and strongly correlated, which is why the r-squared measure for website use is high. However, this is a constraint for which there is no correction. There is no measurement source outside of “on-site” analytics to measure web traffic. Ideally, each acquisition source as a platform would provide how many posts and links have been created during a specific time frame and then report the number of clicks verses the potential number of clicks by each user. This would provide a more valid measure for technical inbound success leading to traffic to an individual website; but unfortunately, these measures do not exist at each social or email platform in a live environment. Google Analytics is the only way to record acquisition data into a website. Nevertheless, we contend that even though the acquisition measures only record people who have visited the website, it is still a valid measure for looking at the effectiveness of the combination of digital content and inbound mechanics to drive traffic to any individual website. By comparing the standardized direct effects (SDE) in the structural model results (Table 2), we can determine whether each acquisition method is impacting website use and compare which are the most impactful strategies for this data sample. Furthermore, in our model, website use is not only a function of users, but also of total pageviews. Here, website use not only accounts for the users that visit the site from the acquisition sources, but it also includes the number of pages to which the user navigates to after the first landing page. Therefore, website use is an applicable measure to demonstrate how each user navigates the website to enter the designed goal funnels strategically placed within the website framework.

CONCLUSION

Despite DCM’s growing adoption around the globe as an important digital marketing paradigm, best practices of DCM implementation, analysis, and audit within an organization is still debated. To begin to address these questions, Hollebeek and Macky (2019) first address the conceptualization of the terms “content” and “marketing.” When reviewing the concept of content, Halvorson and Rach (2012, p. 13) determine content to be “what the user came to read, learn, see, and experience” which propels the brand into the consumer’s consciousness as relevant. Relevant content denotes a communication’s information, words, images, graphics, which tell the brand story to maintain the audience’s attention (Holiman and Rowley 2014). Within the process of brand storytelling, DCM strategies’ value-creation is inherent in content creation and content curation (Taylor 2012) and therefore, combines the notions of content and marketing (Hollebeek and Macky 2019) to be a critical process in the digital marketing paradigm.

To augment their content approach with current inbound marketing tactics, the Digital Engine model applies the theoretical underpinnings of DCM strategies to an applied instructional approach that teaches lead generation through the combination of content and inbound marketing. Here, we suggest that firm-directed goal of any digital content marketing strategy should be to not only focus on brand equity outcomes, but most importantly, 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 sales 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.

Consider a company that does not have a functional inbound, organic content marketing system in place, but only relies on paid digital advertising. In this scenario, the company will test messages while paying to see whether those messages will be successful. In essence, there is no cost-efficient test market without an inbound, organic approach. But with an inbound strategy in place, like instructed by the Digital Engine model, this organic communication plan is performed all online within your website. It becomes the relatively inexpensive testing ground for various created and curated content. Upon analysis and identification of the messages that do 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 within the inbound approach, then you know it will also be successful in the paid marketing space, where you can reach consumers that may have never heard of your brand previously. For us, consulting in this space has proven time and time again that implementing an inbound 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. Unlike many turnkey website deployments like Shopify, SquareSpace, and Wix, the inbound designed website through customizable website platforms, like WordPress.org, must 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, deploying Google Analytics to track and analyze goal funnels at the website is critical to the auditing process of your campaign. Inbound marketers must be able to audit, evaluate, and change campaign content when needed to drive users to the online web forms. These forms, positioned as event conversions (previously destination goals), track 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. Without inbound marketing techniques that produce lead generation, researchers’ and practitioners’ current understanding of the impact of digital content marketing unfortunately will stay in the conceptual realm.

REFERENCES


What is content marketing?


Holmes K (2023) Average conversion rate by industry and marketing source. Ruler Analytics. https://www.ruleranalytics.com/blog/insight/conversion-rate-by-industry


**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Kyle 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.