BUSINESS BOOK Summaries

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Content Rules

How to Create Killer Blogs, Podcasts, Videos, Ebooks, Webinars (and More) that Engage Customers and Ignite Your Business

Ann Handley and C.C. Chapman

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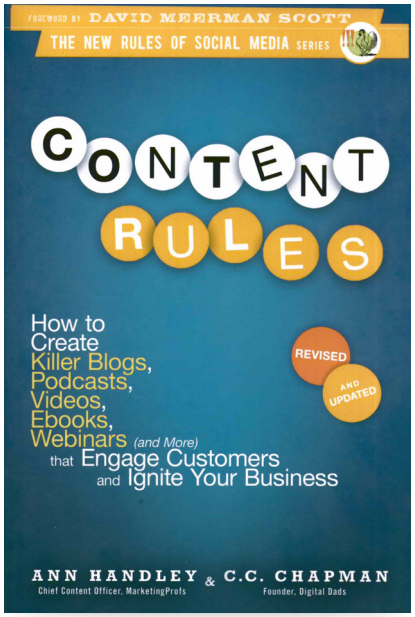

Introduction

Today's online platforms give organizations powerful and low-cost ways to connect with their customers and create awareness of their offerings. In fact, as people rely increasingly on web-based information and recommendations, it is increasingly difficult to do business without these tools. But web publishing is only effective when its content has meaning and value. Too many organizations overload their platforms with marketing jargon, sales pitches, or other material that fails to engage its target audience. In **Content Rules**, social media experts Ann Handley and C.C. Chapman argue that quality content must be based on a clear understanding of the organization as well as its customers. They aim to explain how to build an online presence that stands out, generates sales, builds brands, and creates relationships.

The Case for Content

It is no longer optional for organizations to create online content as the cornerstone of their marketing efforts. There are three reasons for this shift:

1. *The rules have changed*. In the past, organizations could rely solely on advertising and public relations to gain attention. In today's web-driven marketplace, these tools will inevitably fall short.
2. *Customer behavior and expectations are shifting*. People are increasingly dependent on search engines and social media to obtain the information and evaluations that drive their decisions.
3. *Everyone is the media, and everyone is a publisher*. Technology has removed virtually all barriers to publishing high-quality, high-impact content.

The authors define "content" as anything created and uploaded to a website, including words, images, and other interactive materials. The key to unlocking the power of content is to see it as the basis for building relationships. When people are engaged with content, they will share it, care about it, seek more of it, and most importantly feel connected to the organization behind it. Across industries, quality content not only attracts customers, but also establishes credibility and creates a competitive edge.

The Content Rules

Handley and Chapman offer eleven "Content Rules" that summarize the objectives and conventions that set good content apart from great content:

1. *Rule 1: Embrace being a publisher*. To publish well, organizations must view it as a serious, high-priority task.
2. *Rule 2: Insight inspires originality*. The path to great content begins with understanding the organization's mission and attributes, as well as its customer's needs and concerns.
3. *Rule 3: Build momentum*. Effective content is purposeful and includes calls to action.
4. *Rule 4: Speak human*. Corporate-speak is neither engaging nor motivating. People respond to content that is conversational and authentic.
5. *Rule 5: Don't recycle*. While it is possible to reuse existing material, the goal is to re-imagine it for the web.
6. *Rule 6: Share or solve, don't shill*. Good content is much more than a sales pitch. It should solve a problem, share a resource, disseminate information, or otherwise improve people's lives.
7. *Rule 7: Show, don't just tell*. Content can be greatly enhanced by case studies, customer narratives, or other approaches that showcase real-world experiences with a product or service.
8. *Rule 8: Do something unexpected*. Adding an element of surprise to content promotes interest and drives sharing.
9. *Rule 9: Stoke the campfire*. Like sparks in a fire, good content will ignite social media conversations.

Key Concepts

Embrace being a publisher. Organizations must view it as a serious, high-priority task.

Insight inspires originality. Great content begins with the organization's mission and attributes, as well as its customer's needs and concerns.

Build momentum. Effective content is purposeful and includes calls to action.

Speak human. Corporate-speak is neither engaging nor motivating. People respond to content that is conversational and authentic.

Don't recycle. While it is possible to reuse material, the goal is to reimagine it for the web.

Share or solve, don't shill. Good content should solve a problem, share a resource, or otherwise improve people's lives.

Show, don't just tell. Content can be enhanced by case studies, or other aproaches that showcase real-world experiences with a product.

Do something unexpected. Adding an element of surprise to content promotes interest.

Stoke the campfire. Like sparks in a fire, good content will ignite social media conversations.

Create wings and roots. Content should be firmly rooted in organizational goals, but have the potential to soar across platforms.

Play to your strengths. Every organization should strive to be the best on whatever platform serves its purposes.

Information about the author and subject:
www.contentrulesbook.com

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10. *Rule 10: Create wings and roots*. Content should be firmly rooted in organizational goals, but have the potential to soar across platforms.

11. *Rule 11: Play to your strengths*. No organization can do everything well, but should strive to be the best on whatever platform serves its purposes.

Insight Inspires Originality

Good content strategy begins with a focus on its audience. Creators can use paid services like QuantCast.com or design their own simple surveys to learn about their targets' demographic characteristics, how and where they spend time online, and what they want from the web. The more content is in sync with its audience's behaviors and needs, the greater the potential for engagement. For example, people who regularly use laptops are better YouTube targets than those who rely on smart phones and might have trouble accessing video while on the go.

You might have grand visions of slickly designed gorgeousness that will bring customers racing to your door, money in hand. But the truth is that without a strategic plan (also known as big-picture thinking), you are doomed to fail (or, at the very least, underperform).

It is equally important to think about the purpose of the content. Stimulating sales might require a different approach than building interest in a webinar. Also, whatever the goal, there must be a quantifiable measure of success. Examples of useful metrics associated with major platforms include:

- Blogs: Number of subscribers, inbound links, or comments
- Photos and video: Number of views, likes, thumbs-ups, or favorites
- Webinars: Number of sign-ups and attendees
- E-books or white papers: Number of downloads

To get noticed and remembered in today's hypercompetitive marketplace, every organization needs to forge a distinct identity. While graphics and website design are key parts of this effort, words are equally important—sometimes even more so. All audiences are human, and they are far more likely to be engaged by friendly, natural language than by boring corporate-speak.

The most effective content creators write the way they talk. Their online tone is relaxed, conversational, and free of marketing jargon. Whenever possible, it is also lighthearted and conveys a sense of fun or whimsy. At the same time, all content must reflect the organization's brand and its attributes. For example, one clothing brand may be edgy and youthful while another is traditional and adult. To stimulate interest, it can also be helpful for content to convey a position or attitude about a subject important to the audience.

Because the overall purpose of content is to build relationships, it should use words that its audience uses. Some ways to learn how an audience communicates online include reading the blogs they read, participating in their Facebook and Twitter conversations, or using keyword research tools like Google AdWords or Wordtracker. Importantly, content must also sound authentic. This means that it should bear the stamp of a real person who is able to relate to the audience and not of a mass produced slogan being posted everywhere.

Reimagine: Don't Recycle

While an organization can publish single items of content on one platform at a time, it is far more efficient

About the Authors

Ann Handley is the Chief Content Officer of MarketingProfs, a rich and trusted resource that offers actionable know-how to its 442,000 subscribers. As a thought leader and writer with a passion for good content, she writes and blogs extensively about online business, marketing, and sometimes just life.

C.C. Chapman is a media creator, entrepreneur, keynote speaker, and online marketing consultant. He is the founder of DigitalDads.com and the host of PassionHit.tv.

to take a broader view. This means creating a system, based on a publishing schedule, to regularly create content that can be used across many platforms.

Handley and Chapman call this the "Content Food Chain," a kind of ecosystem where a primary energy source fuels a cycle of re-creation and rebirth. The energy source is a core message, or the "Big Idea" that seeds content in many different forms for a range of audiences. For example, the Big Idea behind a swim school might be pool safety. The owner could write a series of blog posts on how to avoid pool accidents, offer a video demonstrating safe swimming, and post Flickr photos of rescue techniques.

In the Content Food Chain, your content is not literally feasting on other content; rather, you are creating an overall content plan fueled by a single Big Idea, or core message, which is a rich and robust source that can act as the energy source for feeding and sustaining the rest of the stuff you reimagine.

Publishing schedules, also known as editorial calendars, foster consistency in the content development process and make it easier to manage. There can be daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and/or longer-term tasks. A sample schedule could include:

- Daily: Post Twitter updates.
- Weekly: Write 1-3 new blog posts.
- Monthly: Create and send an email newsletter.
- Quarterly: Publish a white paper.
- Biannually: Produce a best-practices guide.

Some organizations kick off their publishing schedule by developing a large piece of content, like an e-book, which can then be atomized into many smaller chunks like blog posts or Twitter feeds. But beginners may prefer to start small as writing short pieces can be less intimidating, and allows creators to test their ideas before taking on a big project that may fail to resonate with their audience. The key is to aim for variety in formats, lengths, and media, and to choose keywords that will help optimize all content for search engines.

Share or Solve; Don't Shill

Good content is not a sales pitch. It creates value by positioning its creator as a reliable source of information that improves people's lives. According to the authors, it can be described as:

- *True*. It provides facts and features real people, situations, and emotions.
- *Relevant*. Its message has purpose and gives the reader a takeaway.
- *Human*. People can relate to content that speaks to them on their level.
- *Passionate*. If the writer does not care about the content, neither will its audience.
- *Original*. It should give a new and fresh perspective on the subject.
- *Surprising*. Good stories arouse curiosity or include an element of surprise.

Beyond breaking news, there are many sources of good content. Ten of these sources include:

1. *Chatting with customers*. Informal conversations with customers or prospects can even be videotaped.
2. *Interviewing luminaries*. Question-and-answer interviews with thought leaders, inside or outside the organization, are easy to do via Skype.
3. *Share real-time photos*. Blogs can be configured to work with Flickr so photos can be immediately uploaded from events or gatherings.
4. *Ask customer service*. Regular content with a "questions from our customers" theme can be very effective.
5. *Monitor search keywords*. Monitoring people's search terms provides insight into their interests and needs.
6. *Monitor social media keywords, too*. Conversations, status updates, and trending keyword topics can offer a different window on what an audience cares about.
7. *Research online*. Tools like Google Predictive Search can generate content ideas by determining what people are looking for or what questions they post.
8. *Search industry news*. Content can get a boost

by linking to or commenting on new developments.

9. *Get inspired by personal passions*. Compelling content about business can sometimes come from unusual sources that interest the creator, such as the arts or religion.

10. *Go behind the scenes*. People enjoy getting an insider's view of an organization or a peek at new products to come.

While original content is usually the most powerful, many organizations choose to source content from elsewhere. To ensure consistency with overall communication goals, this outsourcing is best managed by the same individual or team with responsibility for in-house content creation. There are four major types of outsourced content:

1. *Curated content*. Content curators continually identify, select, and share online resources on a specific subject to match the needs of a particular audience. Some are automated, like Digg and StumbleUpon, while others use human editors who add their own judgment.

2. *Co-created content*. This is content obtained from established, often well known creators. Many have a built-in audience in their area of expertise.

3. *User-generated content*. This is content produced by customers or people who visit a site, like product reviews and ratings. It can be challenging to manage negative UGC.

4. *Licensed content*. This material is licensed from its creator in exchange for a fee or attribution, and can be especially useful when the goal is to develop an exhaustive library of resources about a subject.

Creating Campfires, Wings, and Roots

Much like campfires, good content brings people together and creates a strong sense of community—that is why it is important to keep the fire going. In other words, it is important to create a steady stream of material that invites sharing around the web. The authors point out that sharing does not mean plagiarizing. Rather, it means other people quoting or discussing good content, and usually linking to the original source.

Sharing is facilitated when content has "wings," characteristics that make it highly findable, accessible, and shareable. For example, content that is rich in popular keywords and posted on all leading social networks is easy to find. Its accessibility can be improved by making it available on many different browsers and mobile devices.

People will be motivated to share content when the topics are interesting, involving, or surprising, and when visitors are explicitly encouraged to share. In addition, the authors recommend using video, audio, and photography to add variety and break up the text. Services like ShareThis allow placement of one button that expands to offer buttons for multiple sharing services.

At the same time, all content should be rooted in the personality and vision of the organization it represents. While content creators cannot guarantee that their material will go viral, they can ensure that it is compelling and representative of a brand, product, or point of view.

Instead of viewing your story or content as a static and pristine object owned by your site, think of it as a social object that can be taken, retold, and shared by others.

A Blog as a Hub of Online Content

A blog is a logical place to start the content creation process because it can readily function as a central location, or hub, for both original and curated material. There are many popular blogging platforms, like WordPress and Blogger, though they are different enough to warrant careful evaluation. Regardless of platform, Handley and Chapman recommend twelve guidelines for creating and managing an effective blog:

1. *Define the purpose*. The creator needs a clear understanding of who the blog will address, what goals it is meant to achieve, and how its impact will be measured.

2. *Set a reliable schedule*. Blogging at least twice a week is optimal, though any schedule can work as long

as it is consistent.

3. *Mix it up*. For variety, a blog should include posts that differ in length, seriousness, and timeliness.
4. *Move beyond the written word*. Blogs are more interesting when they include graphics, photos, videos, and other embedded elements.

Ground your content solidly in your unique perspective, voice, and point of view, but give it wings to soar freely and be shared all across the web as a social object.

5. *Size matters*. Posts should be long enough to cover essential points, but short enough to be readable.
6. *Learn how to write killer headlines*. The headline is the most important part of a post, because it piques people's curiosity and encourages them to read on.
7. *Design is important*. Free blogging templates offer a good starting point for a design that is appealing and includes elements like an archive and social sharing icons.
8. *Create momentum*. Simply posting content is not enough. Blogs should also include relevant calls to action.
9. *Consider comment moderation*. Various settings and plug-ins are available to help block spam and place a hold on questionable comments.
10. *Categorize and tag everything*. Categories and tags allow readers to access multiple posts on similar topics, and also help search engines find specific content.
11. *Write the way you speak*. Effective blogs are conversational and friendly.
12. *Don't overthink*. Blogs should not come across as the last word on a subject. Instead, they should leave room for readers to add their voices and opinions.

Creating Awesome Webinars

Webinars are web-based seminars experienced remotely by each participant. But despite their growing popularity, they are often executed poorly. In particular, they are focused more on generating leads than delivering value, use speakers with little online experience, and are not sufficiently tested and rehearsed.

The authors offer a variety of recommendations for creating and hosting webinars, including:

- Ask what customers and prospects need from the webinar.
- Create momentum by choosing subjects that will spark conversation and begin relationships.
- Choose either a how-to, tactical webinar, or an inspirational, strategic webinar that may feature a high profile speaker.
- Create a registration form that will capture enough information without overwhelming people.
- Start by writing an outline and key points, instead of jumping immediately into PowerPoint.
- Use case studies, client stories, or colorful anecdotes to make the webinar come alive.
- To be visually compelling, PowerPoint slides should be streamlined, deal with one idea at a time, and include authentic photos or video instead of stock images.
- Give the webinar a compelling title that will entice people to participate.
- Find a compelling speaker.
- Choose a responsive moderator.

Using E-books, White Papers, and Case Studies

Both e-books and white papers can be long and extensively researched, but e-books are casual and collegial in tone while white papers are intended to serve as authoritative reports or guides. Both are good choices for organizations that need to educate people, have a product that requires thoughtful consideration, or want to transform an intangible quality like expertise into a tangible value. On the other hand, these types of content are inappropriate for selling low-involvement products or for organizations that compete primarily on price or convenience.

Guidelines for creating great e-books or white papers include:

- As with other types of content, don't shill. These approaches work only when they offer meaningful information.
- Have a little fun. Especially with e-books, it is helpful to break up text with graphics and other elements.
- Show; don't just tell. Wherever possible, include stories about real people who readers can identify with.
- Give it an intriguing title.
- Design matters. The best e-books orient horizontally, while effective white papers orient vertically. In both cases, reader interest is heightened by visual elements like call-outs, bullets, headers, or sidebars.
- Encourage sharing with social "bling." Including various social media icons on e-book or white paper PDFs reminds readers to readily share.
- Create a landing page. Include compelling copy and other visual elements on the landing page from which people can download the material.
- Promote like mad. E-books and white papers can be blogged about, tweeted, and talked up on Facebook and LinkedIn.
- Consider requiring registration. The advantage is that marketers can collect names and contact information; the disadvantage is that registration requirements impede sharing.

A case study is an in-depth examination of a single instance or event, used to promote understanding of a particular concept or idea. The most effective case studies make the organization a hero, telling a story of how their product or service helped people or made a difference. Case studies can be improved by:

- The setup: Give fundamental facts in easy-to-scan, bulleted lists.
- The challenge: Focus on the human story that will be relevant to readers.
- The solution: Be the superhero. For example, a case study could describe how the organization's expertise solved a formerly unsolveable problem and saved the day for one of its customers.
- The results: Live happily ever after. Give the reader a sense of how people's lives improved after the event.
- Imagine the story in other media, instead of or in addition to text. Video is a particularly engaging way to convey drama and emotion.

Enhancing FAQs and Videos

Frequently Asked Questions pages are undervalued, but can play an important role. Since visitors are already reading the questions and looking for answers, there is an opportunity to use the FAQ page to build trust, educate people, and further customer relationships.

The page should offer direct, simple information organized into sections, instead of long-winded descriptions. It should not shy away from tough questions, like those about competitive products. Language should be straightforward, avoid corporate-speak, and should also avoid fluff, claims, or opinions.

Ground your content solidly in your unique perspective, voice, and point of view, but give it wings to soar freely and be shared all across the web as a social object.

It is helpful to show some personality on FAQ pages, as long as the tone suits the organization. Also, the pages should be searchable, include graphics, enable printing, encourage sharing, and be linked to customer service. Handley and Chapman recommend treating a FAQ page as a doorway, allowing people to suggest additional questions and monitoring activity to learn what readers want. Blog, video, or other content developed to respond to FAQ activity can also be posted elsewhere.

According to studies, video content is 50 times more likely to appear on the first page of search results than standard text-based content. It is an effective tool for both entertaining and educating people. Video is particularly engaging when it features a real story, stars real people, and includes outside sources to enhance credibility.

There are many video-sharing sites, and it is worth

creating accounts on as many as possible. But to maximize sharing by any of the services, the video will need a title, a content-rich description, a tag including every applicable word and phrase, and a thumbnail image that people see before hitting the play button.

The authors offer a range of ideas for video content, including:

- Diary-style videos of people or groups talking to the camera
- Interviews with staff, customers, or industry leaders
- Product tours highlighting product features
- Behind-the-scenes videos
- Event videos
- A streaming web show, also called a video podcast

Mastering Podcasts and Photographs

A podcast is defined as an audio program in a digital format that is delivered over the Internet and designed for playback. Unlike video, this delivery mechanism enables the content to be accessed by people while they work, exercise, or drive. For an organization, it is akin to a custom radio show. Five of the authors' recommendations for producing podcasts include:

1. Instead of buying new equipment, start with equipment that is already available, like a laptop with a built-in microphone.
2. Export audio from videos.
3. Listen to others' podcasts before recording to get a sense of varying approaches.
4. Be mindful of length; under 30 minutes is a good rule of thumb.
5. Publish podcast files on blogs, which is easy on most platforms.

Photography is a great way to show people the human side of a business. Headshots of staff can be used along with photos of meetings, events, and social occasions, not only online but also in print brochures and other marketing materials.

Major photo-sharing sites offer a person-tagging feature which can accelerate sharing. Each time a name tag is added to a photo, the people named are notified and, in most systems, the photo is automatically posted to their friends' sites. Also, adding words or phrases to a photo's tag enhances the likelihood that it will come up in a related search.

Almost anyone who takes lots of photographs can get good shots, especially with a high-quality digital camera. But Handley and Chapman suggest hiring a professional for headshots, product glamour shots, and special situations like trade shows and big events.

One of the biggest challenges in marketing is that while organizations want to talk about themselves, consumers are only interested in how they can benefit from the organization's products or services. Content creators resolve this tension. They open windows into their customers' wants, hopes, and dreams, developing the ability to connect deeply with them. Ultimately, it is those connections that engage people and build the long-term relationships that are the foundation of today's successful organizations.

Features of the Book

Estimated reading time: 3-4 hours, 293 pages

Content Rules is a unique, practical, and compelling guide to utilizing stories, games, videos, and blog posts to ignite any marketing campaign. Content experts and consultants Ann Handley and C.C. Chapman provide not only a thorough explanation of the major types of content, but also clear, easy-to-follow instructions and inspiration. The book will be extremely helpful to marketers in any kind of business or organization, regardless of their level of past experience with content creation. It also includes a chapter with applications of the main ideas to B2B companies.

The first part of **Content Rules** offers a set of rules for creating great content. The second part provides specific lessons in how to develop blogs, webinars, e-books, white papers, case studies, FAQ pages, videos, podcasts, and photographs. The third part is a set of real-world examples of highly effective content, while the fourth part is a content development checklist. By the authors' design, the four parts need not be read cover to cover but instead can be studied

and applied in any combination. The material is enlivened with illustrations, anecdotes, and down-to-earth advice.

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About the Illustrator: Sean Tubridy

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