DATA-DRIVEN CONTENT STRATEGY FOR PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

A Greentarget White Paper

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INTRODUCTION

The Challenge with Creating Thought Leadership Today

Most professional services marketers use a tried-and-true process for creating thought leadership. We rely heavily on subject-matter experts – the thought leaders – not only to provide insights, but to tell us what their clients and prospects – the audience – need to know, what they care about and maybe even where they go to get their information.

That has worked fine for years, but there's a problem. Basing an entire campaign, or even a single piece, on a lone expert's perspective puts that thought leadership at risk of being tainted by that individual's bias, experience and self-interest. Maybe they're trying to steer the thought leadership toward whatever they're trying to sell. Maybe they're being unduly influenced by their most recent conversation with a client.

For the big projects, we often supplement our thought leader's perspective with some market research. We might even do a quick survey to try and find out what the audience really wants and cares about. But those big, expensive undertakings just aren't feasible for every article, newsletter or blog post.

There's a better way to build out a compelling and effective thought leadership platform. By marshaling and analyzing audience and industry data you can uncover insights that not only produce a more credible point of view, but also ensure you're creating true thought leadership – content that drives client development and business growth.

The idea behind data-driven storytelling is not to blow up the traditional editorial process but to improve it. Technology doesn't supplant editorial judgment, but supplements it. By combining our experts' insights and knowledge and our marketing and editorial expertise with the latest technology and tools, we can supercharge the thought leadership we produce.

THE EDITORIAL PROCESS

1
Empathize with Your Audience

2
Conduct Market Intelligence

3
Shape the Narrative

4
Report with Journalistic Principles and Discipline

5
Distribute Across Owned, Earned and Shared Channels

6
Analytics to Inform Strategy

The Empathy Step: Using Data to Understand Your Audience

Developing compelling content starts with the empathy step: understanding our audience. Traditionally we rely on our expert, asking her what she's hearing from her clients – what questions they're asking, what imminent rule changes or rulings are they nervous about. We might even ask her where clients go for information – email, LinkedIn, industry trades.

Her answers will have value. But what if we could quickly, inexpensively supplement her observations and beliefs with a data set that gives us more definitive answers?

We often do that by creating audience personas. Personas can be an important step to developing a content strategy because they allow us to better understand our readers' needs, motivations, and content consumption habits. We try to create them at the front end of any new campaign – and use them to calibrate every piece of content we produce in that campaign.

Personas can be created from a number of data sources: CRM tools like Salesforce.com or website-reporting tools like Google Analytics. That data should then be supplemented with qualitative insights from interviews with representative audience members (clients and prospects). If structured and planned properly, those interviews can (and should) take as little as 15 minutes; we approach them like sprints where we're seeking three to four critical data points about the issues and challenges our audience wants to read about and where they go to get their insights.

Looking at data helps us understand how to bucket audiences: It gives us a better idea of what insights are important and how to package them. Most importantly, data-driven personas give us the foundation to create compelling stories that will resonate for those audiences.

Real World Example:

Greentarget uses an SEO tool to create content for clients. This provides insight into not only which keywords to include in the copy, but also into what information audiences are looking for. For a branded magazine, our client's experts pitch us ideas and we run them through an SEO tool to help determine whether they're worth putting in the magazine. Going to an expert and telling them their idea won't cut it is never easy – but if you've got data to back it you're MUCH more likely to prevail with that argument.

Using Data to Craft a Story Angle

Once we understand our audience, we need a better understanding of what conversations are already happening. As we'll discuss in a minute, we need to make sure we're providing audiences with something they haven't heard before. So we need to know what's out there already.

There are a number of tools that can help us figure that out:

SOCIAL LISTENING

Media monitoring and social listening platforms like Sysomos help us discover commonly used terms around topics and how they intersect.

KEYWORD RESEARCH

Using tools like Moz, we can use keyword volumes to see which subtopics are getting hotter or colder.

MEDIA MONITORING

PR practitioners can pull all of the coverage from specific media outlets to see what kind of stories they're running and which narratives they're following.

INFLUENCER CONVERSATIONS

By carefully examining the influencer community, we can get a sense of what people are saying around a topic; this can be done by mining Twitter feeds to find the most recent topics and concepts they're talking about.

Using Data to Craft the Narrative and the Content

Next we have to shape our narrative. To do that, we're of course going to lean on our experts for the insights and perspective – those are, now and forever, the most fundamental components of any thought leadership. But we all know that not every insight is thought leadership – especially if we can agree that our goal is to produce content that causes readers to move from interested but passive reader to engaged client prospect. The problem is, our experts don't all know that.

That's why we use this framework to guide our subject-matter experts, to ensure what they're giving us is actual thought leadership. We believe that true thought leadership meets each of these four criteria. Some of the content we produce won't meet all four criteria and there might be good reasons for producing it. It might even be good content. But it's not thought leadership.

RELEVANCE

• **Applicable** • **Material**

This has a direct impact on my business.

UTILITY

• **Useful** • **Actionable**

This helps me do my job.

URGENCY

• **Important Now** • **Time-Sensitive**

I can't afford to ignore this.

NOVELTY

• **New information** • **Revelatory insights**

I haven't heard anything like this before.

How did we arrive at these four qualities?
WITH DATA

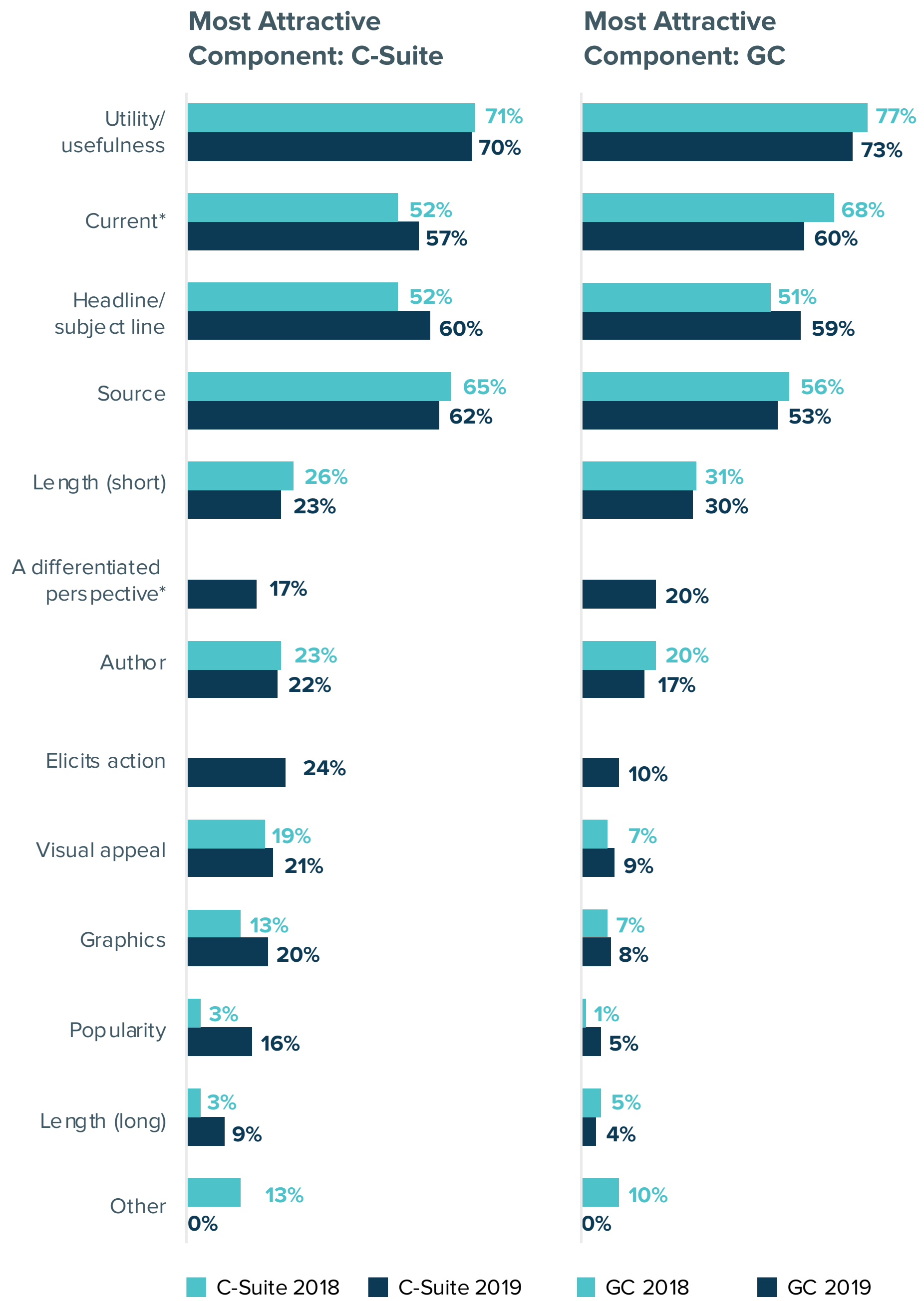
In Greentarget's annual State of Digital & Content Marketing Survey report, professional services decision-makers have been telling us what they read, where they read it and, most importantly, what they value, for nearly a decade.

Our data tells us that C-suite decision-makers want content that's relevant, timely (urgent), educational (novel: you can't learn something you already know) and useful.

DATA FROM 2019 STATE OF DIGITAL AND CONTENT MARKETING SURVEY

Utility attracts 70%+ to most frequently consumed content

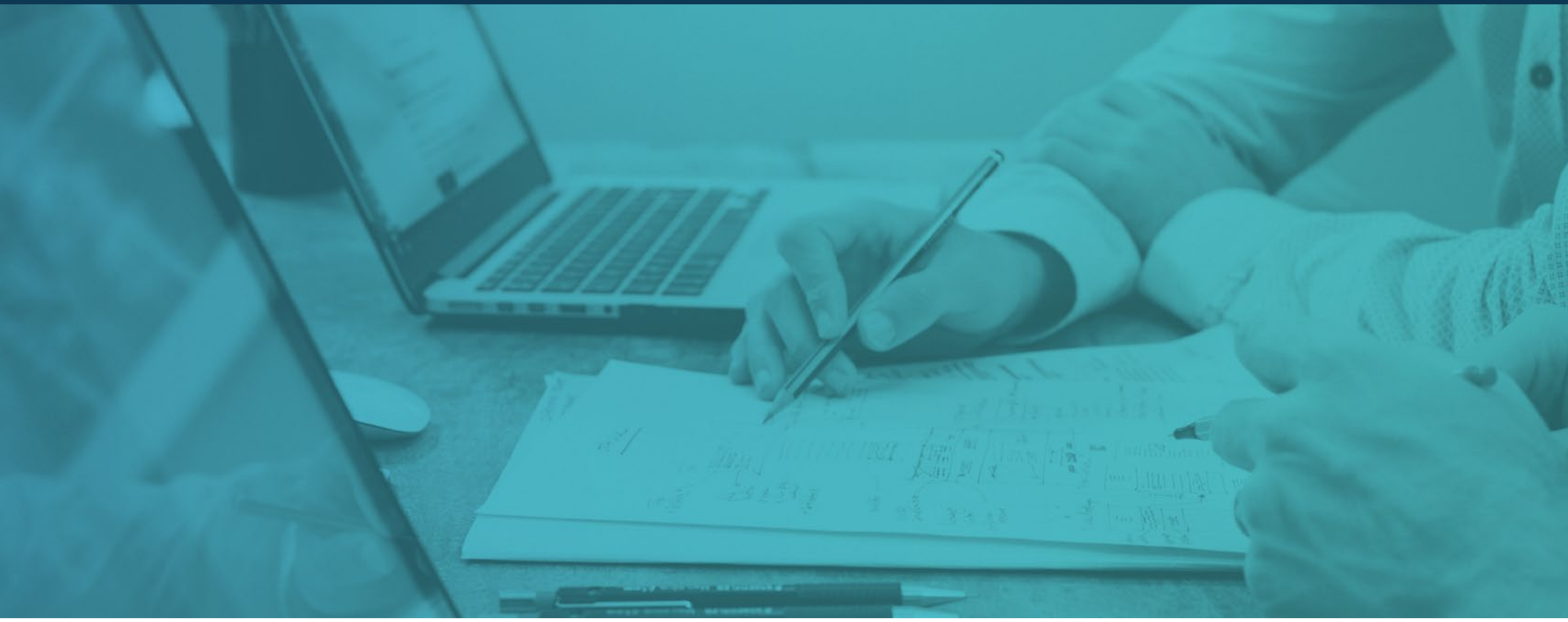
*Current was "timely" in 2018. We replaced "a differentiated perspective" with "impartial" in 2018, which is a different description and thus is not compared to 2018 data.



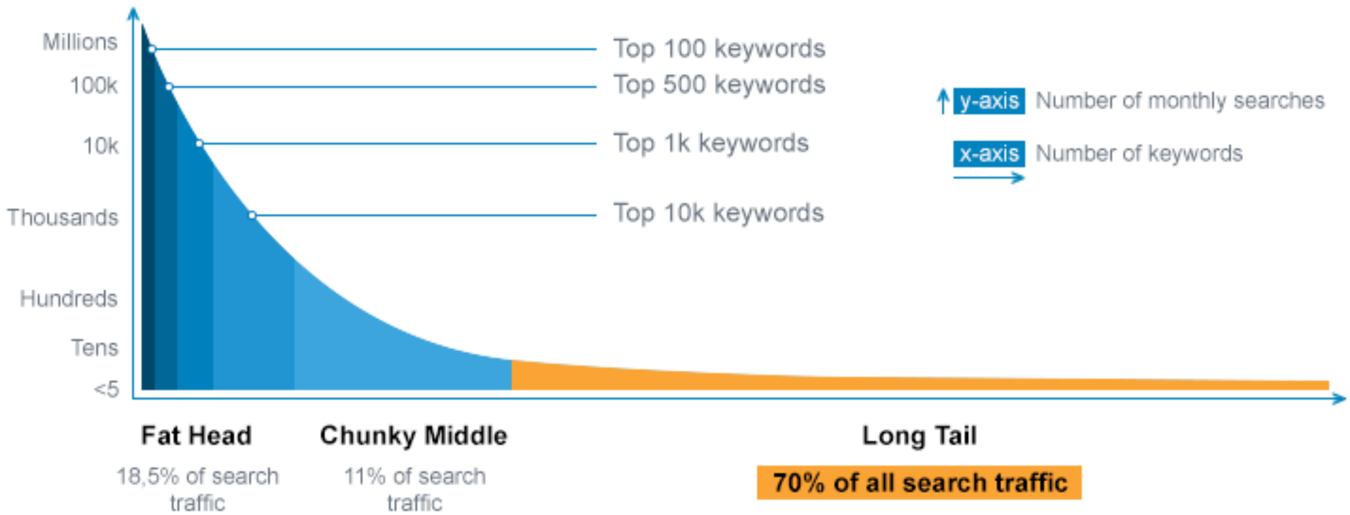
Utility: What Compels Action

That last quality is the most important – because our C-suite respondents tell us what they want most of all in business content is utility. Utility means going beyond content that's merely relevant and informative. A description of a new court ruling or regulation might be relevant. Analysis that puts it in context of other decisions or rules and tells me how it might impact my business might be informative. But an article, client alert or blog post that tells me what I should do about it – that has utility. Now I'm far more likely to call the author to ask for her help.

We can use data to hone in on utility, too. One method that's important and perhaps surprising: search engine optimization (SEO) analysis. To understand why, you have to think about SEO not merely as a tool for drawing eyeballs to your content and website, but also as a proxy for what audiences want. Search terms give us a window into the utility clients and prospects are seeking.



The graph below depicts typical trends of search volume by query. For any topic, there's going to be a small group of keywords that individually have really high search volume – usually pretty general terms – and then there are going to be lots more keywords that individually have very low search volume, but collectively make up about 70% of queries. This is called the long tail; these queries are usually specific, frequently multi-word, and they're pretty good at showing user intent, which gives a clue for how content can be structured to meet user needs.



Since the composite search volume of those queries is spread across a massive amount of terms, marketers have to start looking for patterns that represent a specific use case or informational need.

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Real World Example:

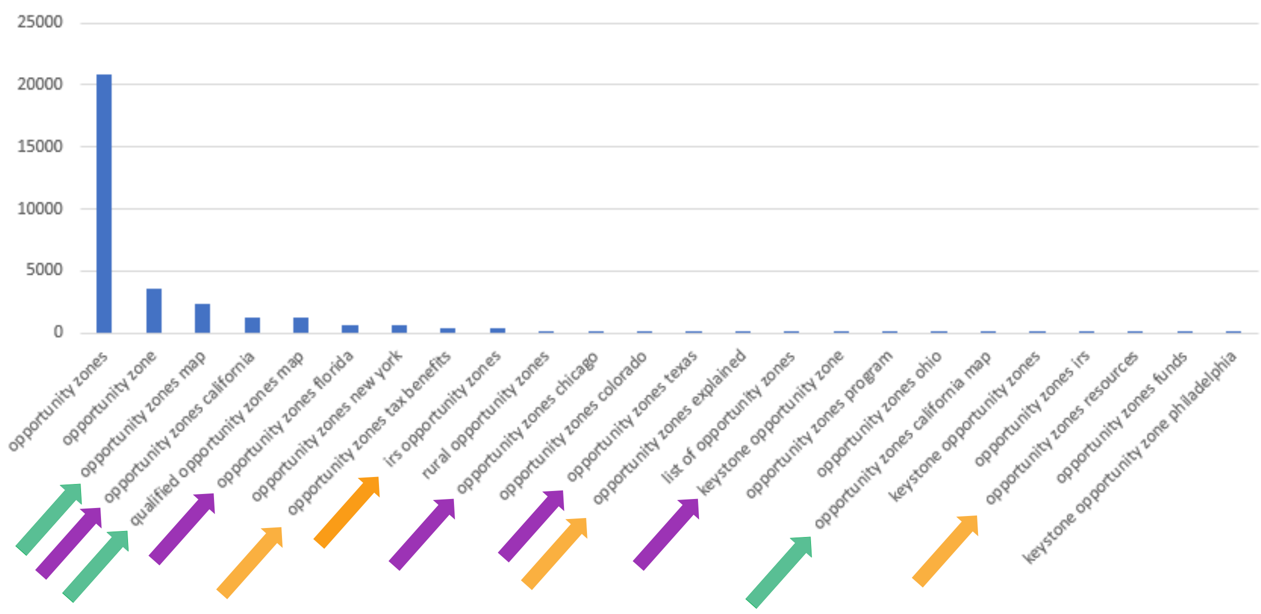
Keyword research was conducted on a timely topic – opportunity zones – and it was illustrative of how people are approaching this topic, with multiple key themes emerging:

User queries reveal three key needs for thought leadership on this topic:

FAQs – explainers for opportunity zones

Region-specific content

Include maps



1

People are searching for educational resources – "what is" content or FAQs – which is shown through queries like "opportunity zone tax benefits," "IRS opportunity zones," and "opportunity zone resources".

2

People are searching by geography — people want to know about opportunity zones within specific geographies at two levels: state (California, Texas, Colorado) and regional (New York, Chicago, Keystone area which is in Pennsylvania).

3

People are searching for maps – It's a lot more interesting to have a heatmap of investment in an opportunity zone (and how it's changed) than it is to just talk about it with words; visualizations are a great way to make complex data seem simple, so a great way to add utility to content.

Data-Driven Distribution

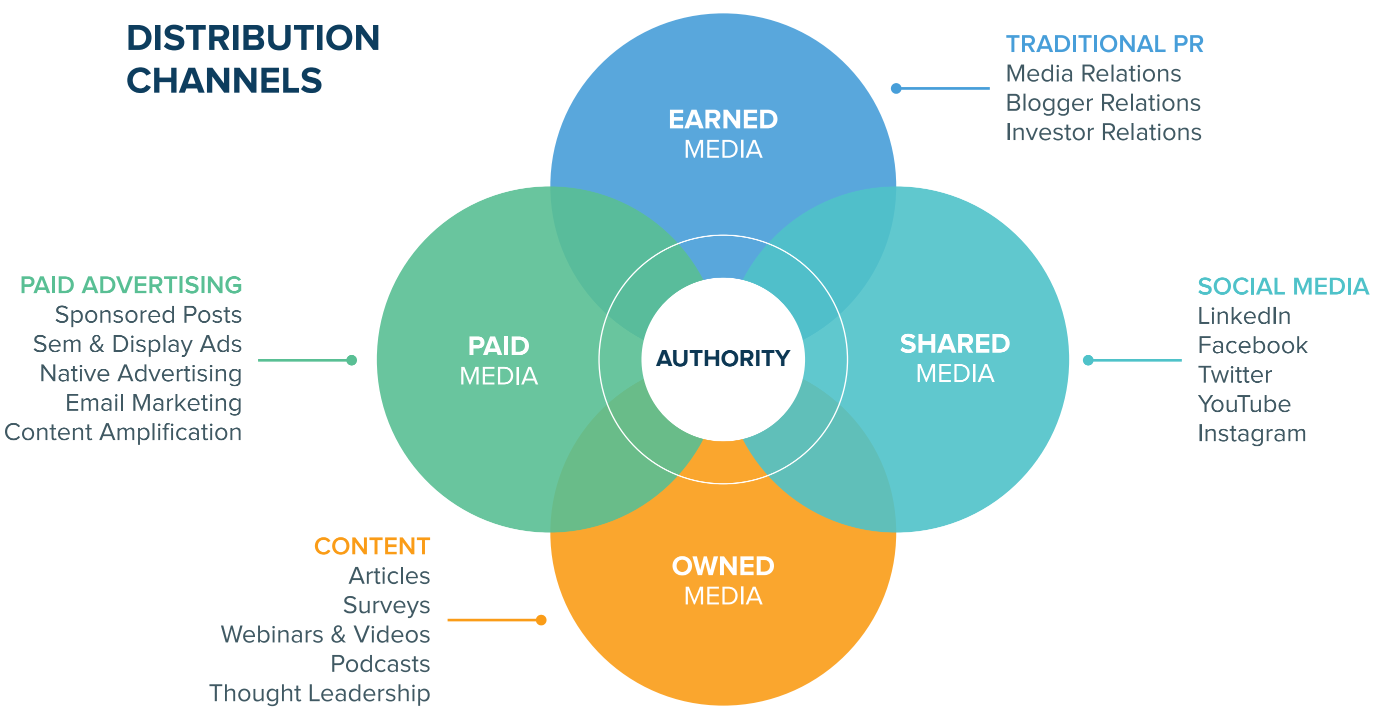
Conventional wisdom around content distribution holds that we should flood the zone, publishing each piece of content wherever we can – on blogs, social channels, aggregators, media properties and anywhere else we can think of. This model is often called COPE: Create Once, Publish Everywhere.

But marketers have to be more strategic than that. COPE isn't nearly precise enough for today's discerning, inundated audiences. The audience on each of these channels has its own language, its own preferences and expectations. And every one of them is drowning in an ocean of content.

Our goal should not be to publish everywhere, but to put the right content in front of the right audience at the right place and time. That means marketers must customize the stories we tell by channel, so it's more important than ever to develop strong sources of data and measure results.

In the PESO model, each channel has unique strengths and weaknesses, which means there's no one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, marketers have to customize metrics and measures based on the goals of each campaign, whether it's thought leadership or something else.

DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS



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Each channel has a different purpose with different metrics to qualify success.

Paid advertising is great for reach – for getting in front of customers that wouldn't otherwise find you and for targeting specific audiences with specific messages. LinkedIn is a great platform for this in the professional-services space, and it delivers valuable ROI data. It's the clickthrough rate and leads metrics that are especially valuable, because paid campaigns are usually conversion-oriented – so you want to focus on the return.

Earned media remains incredibly valuable – our research shows that the C-suite still trusts traditional media above all other sources – for credentialing, for establishing brand awareness and for creating a positive impression of your company in strategic areas. Impressions, placements and topic prominence are all useful earned-media metrics.

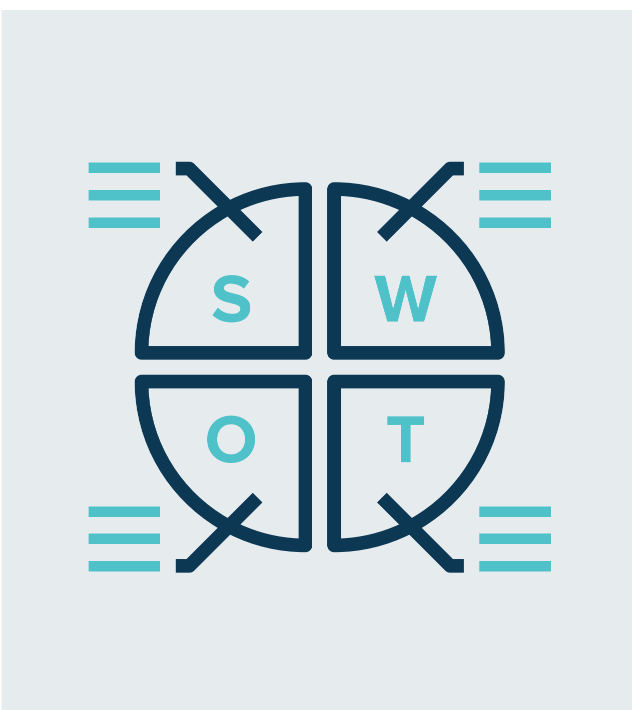
Social is great for extending the reach of your brand and your content; it's also great for interacting directly with users. The key metrics for social are interactions, amplification rate and downstream traffic to your owned properties.

Owned is great for providing detailed information to your customers and clients and establishing yourself as a leader in the space; you control the conversation because you create and publish the content. We like organic traffic and sessions/users data here because they indicate whether you're a destination for content.

Using Data to Measure Success and Iterate

Tracking data across different channels is only valuable if you put it to work in your own iterative design cycle. There are a number of techniques that can be used to drive this cycle and analyze success in a thought leadership context.

A/B testing is the most common. This is where you create two different versions of a piece of content – a tweet, a web page, an email – to see which one performs better, and then use that knowledge to optimize your next piece. A simple way to incorporate A/B testing is in email subject lines, to see which one produces the best open and clickthrough rates. That's a native feature for most email platforms these days and an easy one to implement.



Another technique is the matrix approach; the SWOT analysis – a grid listing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats – is a common example. By mapping out a grid showing impact vs. level of effort, marketers can prioritize actions on a roadmap.

Marketers should also consider a pre-post test, which is when you change something within a campaign and then measure performance before and after the change. It's quite similar to an A/B test but requires less overhead because it requires no test setup. This type of test is recommended when there is a change that is necessary because it's something that follows best practices, while A/B tests are a little more experimental: e.g., "I wonder if this would work?"

GETTING STARTED

There are a number of simple ways to incorporate data-driven storytelling into a content marketing and thought leadership process.

1

First: marketers should take a long critical look at the type of data being collected versus the type of data they actually need for a campaign. The last thing a marketer wants to do is make decisions based on bad data.

2

The second step: examine existing editorial processes. Not with an eye toward blowing them up, but toward finding ways to use data and technology to strengthen the overall process.

3

Finally: start small; the great thing about data is that a little bit goes a long way, and doing some keyword research or A/B testing the subject lines of an email is a low-barrier method to start getting acclimated to using data in your own iterative design process without a huge initial investment of time or money.

The first steps should be simple. For the most part, the technology is too. One of the beauties of data-driven storytelling – in addition to the improved content and superior results – is how easy it is to incorporate. Using tools that are readily available (in some cases free) and some basic techniques, marketers can take the early steps toward turning content into thought leadership – and thought leadership into new revenue.

ABOUT GREENTARGET

Greentarget is a strategic public relations firm focused exclusively on business-to-business organizations.

We direct conversations that drive business objectives, enhance reputations and build meaningful relationships.

We are a destination for talented individuals whose intellectual curiosity and commitment to our proven process drive an unparalleled level of service, results and value for our clients.

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