CONTENT MARKETING 2013: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM CHARLES DICKENS?

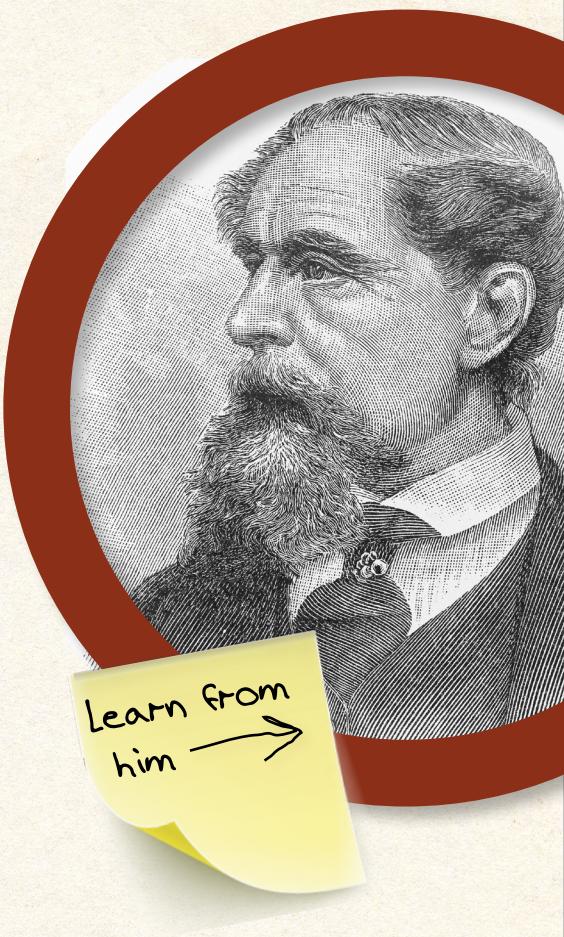
IDG CONNECT

The Content Marketing Report 2013 shows that 82% of organisations are planning on increasing their content production over the next 12 months, whilst Content Marketing is becoming one of the biggest buzz words today. But what does it all really mean for businesses and how can Charles Dickens help today's marketers tap into an escalating demand?

Put simply, Content Marketing is the art of using really good information to promote brands, products and services. Yet beneath this neat wrapper it is not so simple...

Content Marketing is truly disruptive, flying in the face of conventional smash 'n' grab advertising and demanding different skillsets and longer term nurturing techniques to prove successful. And the challenge is growing, because as escalating volumes of content floods online, it is becoming ever more difficult to produce premium quality content that stands out in a saturated space. Today, truly engaging an audience requires creative storytelling, journalistic fact checking, all coupled with the promotional wiles employed by most marketers.

With this in mind, Content Marketers could do a lot worse than turn back to the nineteenth century and take a leaf or two out of Charles Dickens' book. Because this severe looking chap with the 'door knocker beard' and Victorian costume, who died nearly 150 years ago, was utilising precisely the techniques that are needed today.



In 1837 Dickens wrote: "...One boy... hinted darkly to his companions, that unless he had another basin of gruel... he was afraid he might... happen to eat the boy who slept next him. He had a wild, hungry eye; and they implicitly believed him. A council was held; lots were cast who should walk up to the master after supper that evening, and ask for more; and it fell to Oliver Twist."

The scene which followed is probably one of the most famous in literature and has been turned into countless films, plays and musicals. It is the perfect example of the art of storytelling... yet when Charles Dickens serialised Oliver Twist in 20 instalments, his intention wasn't simply to entertain. Through this story he was offering the most scathing criticism of the New Poor Law of 1834; a law that made poverty a crime in all but name.

Throughout his lifetime Charles Dickens:

- ☑ Created compelling stories
- ☑ Serialised copy
- ☑ Released his manuscripts in multiple formats
- ☑ Built massive audience
- ☑ Employed his suburb storytelling to champion very real causes
- ☑ Developed social reading experiences
- ☑ Modified text based on audience feedback
- ☑ Always used graphics

Top 3 Goals of Content Marketing

Lead generation	71%
Thought leadership/ market education	50%
Customer acquisition	45%

Top 2 Ingredients of Successful Content

Audience relevance	71%
Engaging and compelling storytelling	56%

Content Marketing Report 2013; Sponsored by Spiceworks

Charles Dickens was the first Content Marketer

Through fantastic descriptions and mass distribution Charles Dickens successfully marketed his social message both within the UK and beyond. And as the majority of his novels were serialised, the story absolutely had to keep people interested, so like Eastenders, every instalment had to end on a cliff hanger. This had all the hallmarks of really good email marketing campaigns and meant that readers were treated to digestible pieces of creative content to whet their appetite... and keep them hooked.



Like marketing today, Dickens' books took a multi-format approach. And the completed novels were released in multiple versions to reach different audiences. Some came with rich embellishments, others were printed on ultra-thin white paper to cut costs. There was something for the Victorian equivalent of tablet users, smartphone enthusiasts and those who read via conventional blogs. But all had one thing in common... imagery. Dickens worked with the same illustrator for decades and the way in which he paired words with pictures, revolutionised the way people consumed stories from then onwards.

Dickens created social reading experiences in the way that social media sharing does today. People would congregate in homes for reading aloud sessions during which entrepreneurial types might sell tea. Communities were united by the stories, but above all Dickens created a two way dialogue with his audience and utilised their feedback to change his plots. Just like modern content marketers, he was under constant pressure to engage with consumers and respond to what they wanted.

Dickens covered harsh, often difficult topics, but he did it with humour. One of his fellow actors in a play described how "there was a positive sparkle... of holiday sunshine about him; he seemed to radiate brightness and enjoyment." And this is precisely what jumps out of his finest prose. The secret to really engaging an audience is to keep the tone, light and upbeat because this will make any message more manageable.

5 Charles Dickens' Content Marketing Tips

1. Tell an entertaining story
2. Keep the tone light and upbeat
3. Be aware of different distribution channels and modify your formats
4. Use imagery to strengthen your message
5. Create a two-way dialogue with audiences

This fantastic storytelling and targeted distribution generated serious results. The publications his content was serialised in overtook the conventional press, they attracted scores of advertisers – some editions containing as many as 48 adverts... and even resulted in character inspired memorabilia.

All this made him extremely popular and ensured that the wider social issues he promoted became part of people's conscious. And today, "Please, sir, I want some more" is one of the most famous lines in English.

3 Core Content Marketing Mistakes

Not focusing on quality – premium quality information is the single most important thing in a saturated space. You might be saying the same things as everyone else, but if you can say it better it will be more likely to stand out.

Failing to understand the two types of content – most information falls into one of two categories: light, engagement copy to draw people in and meatier, more in-depth content to really interest your niche. Don't get the two mixed up and don't feel that 'light' is simply an excuse for sub-standard.

Desperately chasing clicks – whilst a marketer's job is to draw in traffic, if you're pulling in the wrong audience it has no value. This means when you analyse the results pay attention to who is interacting, how long they are staying on the site for and what they are doing. Clicks are by no means the only thing.

Conclusion

Escalating volumes of online content and the growing interest in Content Marketing is causing a meteoric shift in the creation of information. In this world of long term engagement and slow nurturing there is less and less need for the quick-win, low quality marketing pieces of the past. But the truth is there are no short cuts for high-end, compelling writing. This type of information has to be crafted by hand and needs to employ a raft of creative and journalistic techniques that have never before fallen into the remit of marketers.

This means Content Marketing is truly transforming the marketing department. This is a crowded space, jostling with inexperienced newcomers and so, for those looking for inspiration perhaps the best place to start is the master of literature himself; a man who revolutionised 'content' in his own day and created some of the most enduring stories in English. Charles Dickens was the first Content Marketer and whilst few will be able to emulate him... he does offer a very good place to learn.

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