Agile Demand Creation, Social Marketing Strategy and Thought Leadership

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**Introduction**

The words used to discuss or describe marketing, are like any fashion business, constantly changing. Today, many companies regularly use terms such as *thought leadership*, *content strategies*, *social marketing* and *demand creation*, to describe some of their marketing activities. However, as with traditional advertising where the rubric is that “half of all spending is wasted; if only we knew which half”, these areas can vary widely in how they are deployed and their resulting effectiveness. One simple insight still holds: speed and measurement matter. Fine tuning results through being more *agile (going through rapid revisions)* is critical to obtaining sales and influencing customers in a cost effective way.

**Definitions:**

**Thought leadership:** a piece of content designed to communicate to prospects and customers information about a leading edge product/service and its implications.

**Content strategies:** the design, production and measurement of multiple pieces of content that a company makes available to prospects and customers directly though web sites and downloadable documents, though physical brochures, through press releases and resulting articles, and through blogging/newsletter strategies.

**Social marketing:** the identification of and use of word of mouth marketing, ratings and reviews as an alternate channel for influencing the attitudes and actions of prospects and customers.

**Demand creation:** activities that change the way that customers and prospects perceive a product or service and change the probability of their purchasing.

**Agile:** the idea of rapid learning through iterative development and improvement for both content and software.

Clearly, marketing problems come in many varieties, but common content mistakes include the following:

**Failing to have a messaging strategy.** Many content development projects take too long and cost too much. And worse, they fail to produce attitude change or revenues. An initial mistake that causes these problems is a failure to agree on a messaging strategy.

**Boring the customer to death.** Many thought leadership pieces are so dull and have so little impact that their readers are reluctant to come back at another time and download a different document. In effect, low quality thought leadership pieces negatively brand a company when they are “content light”, self serving, or poorly disguised sales brochures.

**The vanity of the writer.** Many internal writers within companies and consulting firms seem to write for themselves with little consideration of the needs of prospects and customers. Vanity writers are happy if they can point to a publication with their name on it and miss the need to have the content trigger some action by the reader or have some measurable attitudinal impact. They also forget the need for differentiation, which often means high quality content that takes into account what others are writing and saying. They forget that all marketing must be based upon measurement that may include the satisfaction of the reader or the outcomes triggered.

**Not tracking the full ecosystem.** Traditionally, when a consumer purchased a product in a store, or a business user used a product within their own organization, information about the buying process, problems, successes, referral, and evolving usage patterns were hard and expensive to obtain. Today, such usage information, while complex to track, is extremely inexpensive. For example, second hand sales of some products are relatively easy to track on eBay and provide a measure of the changing value of a product over its life cycle. Tracking Twitter activity and the content of the Tweets can provide a finger on the pulse of usage. Amazon reviews are often extremely useful as is information in customer relationship management and support systems.

**Not being agile.** It’s more obvious in small companies. Often, their budget is spent at the front end of projects when less is known about customers and prospects. Little budget is left over and available for ongoing improvement. The lessons of agile development in software parallel those of content development: learning occurs over a project, so delivering quickly and revising quickly leads to superior performance, both in terms of project cost and business outcomes. In larger companies, organizational inertia, a reluctance to admit that a project is always imperfect, and lengthy cycles of approval cause expenditures to be less effective. What both large and small companies forget is that it’s important to do things quickly and iterate frequently.

**Why Strategic Marketing Matters**

Content development, thought leadership and social marketing are often thought of as being the domain of marketing. But taking a more *strategic marketing perspective* also matters. For example, content development strategies can be focused upon improving results with search engines, increasing the dwell time of visitors at a web site, increasing the number of visits to a site, changing perceptions or understanding of a product or service, obtaining trial or purchase, generating referral and reviews, or providing post purchase support, to name just a few potential objectives. Content development strategies often fail if the initial objectives and target audience are not well specified.

A key approach to minimizing these strategic marketing problems when designing content is to take a “Persona” or task-based approach to content development. The idea behind a Persona, made popular by Alan Cooper, is that the interaction with the Persona should be based upon (1) defining a prototypical user or reader, defining what they are likely to know, their temperament, skills and expectations, (2) defining their objectives or goal in approaching the content, (3) defining the fastest way of delivering to their objective, given their skills, interest level and expectations. Many web sites, for example, demand a high level of involvement, many page traverses and extensive reading or video viewing time for a visitor to achieve his goal. And worse, logs of visitor visits are insufficient to help define how paths can be shortened to make the visit faster and more productive for a particular Persona.

A best practice, as a result, is to develop a “messaging strategy” that can guide the rapid development of the content. As a general rule, content developed with an agreed to messaging strategy for a Persona can be developed anywhere from 3-10X faster. Different packaging of content will typically be required for different Personas, e.g. for a senior economic decision maker, a consultant looking to advise a client, an engineer trying to identify the advantages of different competitors, a hobbyist vs. a professional user, or a consumer trying to understand specific problems.

What complicates the use of Persona content development is the *search and evaluation* strategy of prospects and buyers. They may seek out multiple sources of information, some controlled by the vendor, some from well reputed web sites, and some from a wide collection of confused users with varying degrees of knowledge, skills, experience and competence. As a result, a messaging strategy exists for the particular piece of content, e.g. a white paper or thought leadership article, and also for the surrounding campaign to bring attention to the content.

But it’s also important to remember that different companies have different competitive positions and different messaging needs and strategies. Take for example, the difference between two leading companies, Apple and Microsoft. Apple competitors are often annoyed by the success of Apple in obtaining massive amount of free publicity in business, general and technology publications. They complain that the media is filled with content from Apple “fan-boys”. They wish that their social marketing via reviews, publicity and comments from users could match that of Apple.

Microsoft, in contrast, is rarely praised (currently) for one of its most successful strategies: owning and developing one of the great ecosystems of all time. People take for granted the number of pieces of software that will run on Microsoft operating systems or the supporting ecosystem of developers, skilled users, magazines and software providers. It’s the kind of strategy that is immensely difficult to execute and takes years to create. Microsoft has a consumer, business partner and business strategy, making its content strategy much more complex to execute, requiring different messaging and content strategies for different players in the ecosystem.

From a narrowly defined content perspective, Apple appears to have a major head start in social marketing over Microsoft, at least in the consumer space. But from a platform and business perspective, Microsoft’s ecosystem is very hard to match. Apple has traditionally not been successful in the business environment. Its success with smart phones and tablets provide narrow solutions relative to Microsoft’s offerings to business, which include groupware, databases, enterprise requirements planning (ERP), development tools, cloud-based tools and services, and productivity suites. What these two companies demonstrate is that strategic marketing is multi-dimensional. Microsoft is executing a different and perhaps more complex set of content strategies than Apple, with different leads and lags.

**How Thought Leadership Matters**

Consulting firms, high tech firms and firms must often demonstrate thought leadership and educate their users and prospects about novel and often complex ideas and their implications. The idea may be new; the discovered benefits may be new; the technology advantages may require elucidation; or, the economics of purchase and use may be novel.

* *Cushman & Wakefield* has written about the economic advantages of LEED or green certified buildings for both owners and renters. The challenge was to change perceptions of the importance of green certification in leasing or buying a building.
* *Deloitte Consulting* has written about pricing strategy and execution. Its objective is to sell their knowledge about pricing execution software and pricing assignments.
* *AT Kearney* has written about business strategies that area based upon acting on behalf of the customer. Their objective is educate consulting clients about the changing needs of customers with less disposable income and identify a potential gap in the offerings of companies that have focused more on increasing sales than changing value offerings.
* *Cisco* has written white papers about the evolving patterns of use in fixed and mobile communications. Their objective is to encourage service providers to purchase Cisco products and services and more generally move to an IP based architecture.
* *Linksys* has developed customer success stories that illustrate the benefits of product use. Their objective is to educated potential customers about their success with carriers and characteristics of projects that they might undertake.
* Smaller firms such as *Tweettronics* have written about the value of tracking Twitter activity. Their objective has been to help prospects understand the value social network tracking.

In every case, there is a product or service associated directly or indirectly with the content. The hope that if a customer reads the content, it will predispose them to do business with the authoring company.

But not all thought leadership is equally effective.

1. Bad thought leadership tends to be overly technical in nature or exclusively features oriented, when perhaps the Personas that should be targeted are interested in other topics and goals, e.g. the business impact of the product, service or technology. It focuses upon educating buyers about the idea or technology *without* being an “easy” or memorable read.
2. Better thought leadership will often help the potential or actual purchaser understand the personal and business consequences of the new idea or technology.
3. *But the best thought leadership is communicated in such a way that the reader will not only be excited by the new idea but be empowered or programmed with a useful story or metaphor, a set of concepts, a key number and perhaps a reproducible graphic that he or she can use to influence others.*

While thought leadership can be used to change attitudes, the best thought leadership content often presents an implicit *call to action*. One can loosely speaking divide calls to action as being *fear* or *opportunity* driven. The content may raise a concern or identify a need. It may identify an opportunity. Whether targeting attitudes or calls to action, fear or opportunities, measurement is critical to understanding the effectiveness of the content and how both the content and outcomes can be improved.

**Why Demand Creation Matters**

In traditional marketing models, marketers think about different stages of marketing goals: (1) awareness, (2) interest, (3) trial, (4) recognition of benefits leading to referral, widespread organizational adoption or repeat purchase. Demand creation fits squarely within this traditional model often using well established methods of awareness and interest building.

But demand creation in the 21st century adds some new tricks to the equation.

Many engineered products are both expensive and difficult to evaluate without a hands-on *experience* or a third party *endorsement* (by an individual, group or knowledgeable reviewer and evaluator). As a result, demand creation stretches all the way from informational (letting a prospect know about a service and its benefits), to making it easy to obtain information from third parties, reviewers and evaluators, to creating opportunities for hands on experiences.

For example, high-end large-format cameras are exceptionally expensive, costing in the range of middle five figures. Medium format camera maker, Phase One participates in photographic tours with well-off photographers and makes access to their equipment with its higher resolution photography part of the experience. Prospects get to use equipment they might normally have difficulty obtaining access to, let alone have a positive experience with in spectacular locations. The benefit sold is a great vacation in an attractive location, the experience of using high end equipment and the possibility of exceptional photographs. It’s the equivalent of renting a car before you buy it. A car rental provides an extended period of evaluation that is superior to a test drive.

The same issue is often true with consulting firms. Hiring a consulting firm is often perceived as a high risk endeavor. Projects are often driven by difficult to evaluate changes or a crisis. The staffing of the consulting team poses a potential risk for the hiring manager or firm. It’s not surprising as a result, that many consulting relationships begin in a contingent way in order to reduce risk. An initial smaller project is used to build trust and a working relationship. The small project helps define the boundaries of the phase two project so that the hiring organization is comfortable with the risk level of engaging outsiders.

For these types of experiential demand creation, measurement can be tackled at various levels. For example, with the Phase One Photography Tourism approach, one might measure at four different levels:

**Level 1:** **Did the customer enjoy the experience of the trip and the use of the camera?** (The social marketing implication is: “Did they write about their experience or rate it on the company web site?)

**Level 2:** **Did the customer master usage of the more advanced camera?** (Measurement of this level may be observational, measured with questionnaires and interviews, tracked through visits to help systems, or by user comments in social media.)

**Level 3: Did the customer produce noticeably improved photographs that he/she is proud of?** (Techniques for measurement might include interviews, comments on the Internet, or actual pictures put on a corporate owned or popular web site.)

**Level 4: Did the customer decide to buy the camera?** (Measurement requires having an ongoing relationship with the customers, e.g. through direct purchases or via product registration.)

A similar measurement approach can often be taken with content development strategies. Did the customer download and read the material? Did the customer find the material interesting and useful? Did the customer’s attitude towards the topic change? Did some desired action occur?

**Why the Ecosystem Matters**

Demand creation often revolves around perceptions of a supplier’s momentum as a standard setter and likely future business success. Content development strategies need to anticipate the importance of obtaining user feedback and ratings, signing up of business partners, developers and resellers, and making it easy for experts to evaluate products. Often the content development strategies required for prospects, business partners, resellers and evaluators are quite different and require different content, access and pricing strategies.

One only has to look at the major efforts required for Nokia/Microsoft and RIM (now rebranded as Blackberry) to catch up with installed base of apps for the iPhone and Android. While many mobile apps are trivial and merely represent an easier way of accessing information than having to type in long URLs via a browser, the early stages of the smartphone market have often been based around the claimed number of apps available.

Blackberry, an exceptionally successful company in its first few generations of technology appears so far to have done a poor job (February 2013) of communicating that in the same way that Windows 3 could run MS-DOS programs (which made upgrading to Windows 3 perceived as low risk), the Blackberry 10 operating system (based upon QNX) will run Android apps (i.e. one variant of UNIX will run apps written for Android, another variant). Clearer messaging on this point (i.e. that Blackberry is taking advantage of existing apps) would have benefits with opinion leaders writing about mobile platforms and devices, application developers and mobile carriers.

**Summary**

In a simpler time, advertising and reputation tracking presented fewer choices. Today, the existence of more data about customer attitudes, usage, satisfaction and referral makes the development and measurement of content about a product or service more complex. Traditional content development strategies such as “one size fits all” brochures are likely to be less effective. In addition, traditional cycles of content development and tracking are likely to be too slow.

A more agile approach to content development must be based upon a clearer understanding of users and prospects and the willingness to move quickly. Ideally, it should be based upon rapid content development, a willingness to revise content quickly as data comes in and lessons are learned, and stratification of content for different Personas and on-going measurement.

**References and Further Reading:**

Cooper, Alan: **The Inmates Are Running the Asylum: Why High Tech Products Drive Us Crazy and How to Restore the Sanity**, 2004

* Why Persona based development is a key tool for improving the experience of users in software. (This article extrapolates the use of Personas from software to content development.)

**Example Thought Leadership Documents (co-)Developed by the Author**

Cisco**: Fixed Mobile Convergence for Cellular Service Providers,** [**http://www.linkedin.com/redir/redirect?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Ecisco%2Ecom%2Fen%2FUS%2Fsolutions%2Fcollateral%2Fns341%2Fns523%2Fns519%2Fwhite\_paper\_c11-480811%2Ehtml&urlhash=DVKC&trk=prof-publication-title-link**](http://www.linkedin.com/redir/redirect?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Ecisco%2Ecom%2Fen%2FUS%2Fsolutions%2Fcollateral%2Fns341%2Fns523%2Fns519%2Fwhite_paper_c11-480811%2Ehtml&urlhash=DVKC&trk=prof-publication-title-link)

* A thought leadership document that lays out the likely evolution of technology use for mobile carriers**.**

Cushman & Wakefield: **Sustainability Comes of Age**, <http://www.eclicktick.com/sustainability.pdf>

* An example of an educational piece that attempts to sensitize readers to the importance of the total life cycle cost of owning or renting real estate.

Moriarty, Mike and Davidson, Alistair: **The Soapholder Effect: Why Acting On Behalf of Your Customers Should Be Your Next Strategy**, <http://eclicktick.com/soapholdereffectversion5.pdf> or <http://www.atkearney.com/documents/10192/a41e80a4-8c31-4ffc-9038-9f61a8f1e645>

* Demand creation for a novel idea – acting on behalf of customers in an environment where customers have less purchasing power and are more concerned about value. The article uses a memorable metaphor to grab the attention of the reader.

Simonetto, Mike and Davidson, Alistair: **Pricing Strategy and Execution**, Deloitte Consulting, <http://eclicktick.com/soapholdereffectversion5.pdf>

- An example of an attempt to differentiate the service offering (in evaluating pricing execution software), while simultaneously selling strategic pricing and marketing.

Tweettronics: **Do Tweets Matter?**, <http://www.tweettronics.com/home/whitepaper>

* An educational piece that helps a prospect understand the value from a novel and often poorly understood approach to measuring customer attitudes.