Read all about it

Content marketing may sound like an on-trend industry buzzword, but those in the know understand the power content has to grab consumers, hold their attention and encourage them to buy. **Sarah Jordan** *finds out more*

For those brands and retailers that have spent years, and substantial amounts of money, developing a brand identity, getting online and committing to a mobile strategy, the idea that there is a new customer acquisition and engagement route to contend with may make you sigh in frustration. Sadly, the digital landscape rarely stays still for long, and it's the rise, and rise, of content marketing that has everyone talking right now.

As Toby Smeeton, managing director of content marketing agency Sunday, comments: "Content marketing is a bit 'buzz-wordy'; it feels as if it's the new kid on the block and that suddenly everyone's talking about it. The reality is that it has been around for decades."

So, why has content marketing boomed in 2016? The proliferation of print and digital brand messaging, the rise of video, the increasing use of ad blockers and the decline of engagement in print advertising have all pushed marketers towards more creative editorial solutions to get their brands noticed.

Shelley Hoppe, chief executive of creative content agency Southerly explains: "Advertising and marketing used to be very 'push', which meant that you'd have marketing and advertising messages shoved in your face – a 'look at our product, look at our product' approach. What content marketing does is changes the style to a 'call.'"

In practical terms, this means customers searching Google for what to buy will discover your content, relate to your brand story, perhaps read your content bank and then 'elect' you as their chosen supplier. Instead of being targeted, the customer is well and truly in the driving seat.

At luxury and fine jewellery etailer JewelStreet.com, content has become an essential and successful facet of its marketing strategy in recent months. Chief executive and co-founder Rob Passmore comments: "For JewelStreet, content marketing is what our brand is built on. In its simplest form, for us, it is creating editorial around the amazing jewellery that our designers create and then helping to get it out to as many people as possible around the world."

Content marketing is all about adding value for loyal customers and, at the same time, encouraging

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unsure customers to choose you over a competitor, rather than relying on the strength of your product alone.

Crucially, content marketing targets those customers in 'browse mode' – the tricky, undecided, 'on the cusp' customer who has maybe abandoned a handful of digital baskets in the past. As Smeeton remarks: "Marketers need to be clear about the 'mode' that their visitors are in when they're on their website if they're being very task-orientated and looking to transact, then content marketing needs to be dialled down. But if a user is in browse mode, then content marketing allows them to discover brand-reinforcing information about products and services."
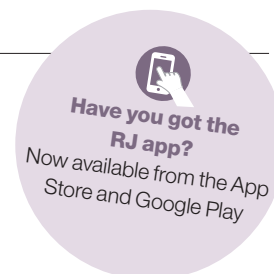
Of course, there are other benefits to creating a content strategy. In a report by computer software company Adobe titled *The State of Content: Rules of Engagement For 2016*, 63% of UK consumers said they share content they find interesting online. Combine this with the fact that 84% of UK consumers consider a product endorsed by an ordinary user as more trustworthy than one endorsed by a celebrity, and the power of content marketing is ▶

"Many sites now feel more like a magazine you can buy through rather than a shop. [People want to] read something interesting and then be able to act on it immediately"

Rob Passmore JewelStreet.com

◄ thrown into sharper focus. Not only will you grab customers, but they will actively help you with engaging others.

If you don't need convincing and you're ready to implement a content marketing strategy, there are a number of places to start. Hoppe says: "I would suggest being as authentic as possible, because today's consumers value this authenticity much more so than in the past."

For emerging brands, designer-makers and retailers, this means emphasising your origins, heritage, your values and your goals in clear, tailored pieces of content. Remember, 59% of consumers would rather engage with content that is beautifully designed, according to *The State of Content*, and 67% would stop engaging if a piece of content is too long. Adobe has dubbed this #TLDR – too long, didn't read.

"Customers now have more choice than ever before and creating a differentiating factor is so important for ecommerce websites," Passmore explains. "We are seeing a significant crossover or merging of editorial content and commerce. Many sites now feel more like a magazine you can buy through rather than a shop. This is the way people want to consume information online: read something interesting and then be able to act on it immediately."

As content marketing is an audience-centric strategy, you'll have to get real about who is actually buying your product or shopping in your store. Smeeton advises: "Walk in the shoes of your audience and be brutal about what they will find useful and engaging, not what you think they will."

Hoppe says: "We ask [clients] to imagine what their top target personas are, and then we

(Clockwise from above left) Innocent, JewelStreet and Asos are all examples of brands with strong content on their websites

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imagine what age each persona is, what their name is, what their gender is, where they're based and what their lifestyle is like – then we produce the content that we think will entice that persona to take the action we want them to take; whether that's to find out more or buy something."

Of course, this can result in a brand or retailer producing content for an idealised rather than an actual customer. Therefore, it is always worth mining data from Google Analytics or your EPoS system to form a more accurate and complete picture of your customer. "Sometimes, you need to do a bit of a hybrid," Hoppe notes. "Define your personas and talk to them for a couple of months with blogs you think will work for them. Then analyse the data: are the blogs that you thought would be the most popular actually the most popular? See if your assumptions are correct and then just keep fine-tuning what you're doing."

Once you've decided whom you're writing for, it is important to focus on quality, purpose and consistency. Adobe highlights that 89% of consumers would simply stop viewing a piece of content if it didn't meet their expectations, so it is critical to get it right first time. Hoppe notes: "Have a go at being really direct, have a go at being indirect and see what gets you the best results and the best reactions from your tribe."

Couple this sense of experimentation with regular updates, starting at once a week and possibly working up from there. After all, even a simple image and line of text once a week is better than a content stream that has been left dormant and underused for

six months – the impression this gives on the consumer is far stronger.

Passmore notes: "In my experience there are two main pitfalls with content marketing. The first is creating content that doesn't connect with its readers because you haven't understood what they want. For example, putting 'Fashion Week trends' information up in front of a man looking to buy an eternity ring for his wife; you need to engage with the reader's underlying motive and aspirations. Secondly, it's creating content in a vacuum; content needs to be seen and read, so it's no use just creating the content; you need to engage with your audience and ensure that it is marketed out to them so it reaches the widest possible readership. The line between content and social is very blurred.

For all marketeers, measuring the effectiveness of content is the next step. The most obvious measure may seem like an increase in sales, but what if this isn't achieved? Does this mean the content you have painstakingly produced isn't working? And what about the engagement you can't see, like booming brand awareness and a stronger presence in search rankings? As Smeeton explains: "Increasingly, we're seeing content marketing closer to the conversion/transaction point – think how Amazon or TripAdvisor reviews benefit the sales process at the final decision point, for example."

This certainly suggests that content can tip people over the hurdle towards a sale, something that Passmore has experienced first-hand. He says: "We see multiple daily sales as a direct result of our content marketing. We also see higher levels of engagement with our brand and repeat custom."

Hoppe concludes: "It is never wasted energy, and it's often evergreen as well. So whereas advertising has a shelf life, content can sit there and be relevant for a very, very long time." ●