

# DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING: CONCEPTUAL REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

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## ABSTRACT

*The development of digital content marketing is increasingly a relevant and valuable task in digital marketing agencies in order to attract prospective consumers on digital platforms and develop engagement, trust and brand-friendly relationships to increase long-term sales. Despite its importance for practitioners, there is a dearth of knowledge about academic recommendations of effective content marketing practices, based on scientific research of their effectiveness and adequate use in the different touch points of the digital customer journey. With the purpose of guiding practitioners, this paper analyzes the conceptual framework of content marketing in the inbound marketing perspective, as a strategy to foster customer-brand engagement and loyalty. Based on the theoretical review of the topic, the paper presents recommendations of content marketing management strategy for digital marketers.*

**Keywords:** Content Marketing, Digital Contents, Inbound Marketing, Firm-Generated Content, Social Media Marketing.

## INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Content marketing is a technique of creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract, acquire, and relate to a well-defined and understood target audience, with the goal of generating customer profit and create customer-brand engagement and loyalty (Lou & Xie, 2021). This definition emphasizes the importance of creating and distributing relevant, interesting and valuable content, with the possibility of user participation. It aims at a long-term profitable relationship for both sides, and is not merely focused on increasing sales immediately (Pulizzi, 2014). By sharing relevant contents, brands can create value with high financial return from customer attraction, engagement, acquisition and retention (Rancati et al., 2015). By also considering consumer-generated content and the communications that consumers have with each other, the company is able to build trust and a long-term relationship with the audiences (Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

To begin a content marketing strategy, it is necessary to change the mindset of the communication process. Instead of delivering advertising messages, organizations adopt an inbound approach, where customers actively seek out the brand because it provides them with relevant and engaging content that educates and entertains them (Halligan & Shah, 2010; Holliman & Rowley, 2014). By surrounding the content with the soul of the brand, consumers are engaged and create a positive relationship with the brand, making them more likely to buy

products from the brand (Nosrati et al., 2013) and making interaction, collaboration and loyalty possible (Guadalupe, 2015).

This paper addresses the conceptual background of content marketing, guiding digital marketing practitioners with recommendations emerged from empirical research in order to build a content marketing strategy. The analysis of the literature was carried out according to the approach proposed by Centobelli et al. (2020) and Rasool et al. (2021).

## Content Marketing

Content marketing is a marketing format that involves creating and sharing publishing content in order to acquire customers (Nosrati et al., 2013). It began to be used to spread information about a brand and help build its reputation. Some examples of early content marketing practices are John Deere's *The Furrow* magazine, first published in 1895, which informed farmers on how to be more profitable by using the brand's farm tractors; Michelin, a tire brand, which developed Michelin guides in 1900, offering drivers information on maintenance, accommodations, and other travel tips; Jell-O, whose salesmen went door-to-door distributing their cookbooks for free, and thus taught consumers how to use their products (Nosrati et al., 2013) and, more recently, Lego, with its *Brick Kicks* magazine, which pairs the brand's toys with the pedagogical and educational sector, showing that toys can also be used to teach. These examples demonstrate how content marketing can be a tool to align company goals with customer needs and develop engagement, trust, and long-term relationships with consumers (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

The type of content published can vary, from blog posts, white papers, case studies, videos, photos or articles (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Pulizzi, 2014; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Opreana & Vinerean, 2015; Rancati et al., 2015). However, content marketing is not considered just a text or commentary that the company makes for consumers to see. Content must be interesting and interactive, and an important facet of developed content is to allow customers to interact and offer feedback through various channels in the content marketing funnel (Pulizzi, 2014). In this regard, Järvinen & Taiminen (2016) concluded that generating high-quality content is an ongoing learning process that involves constant evaluation of content that creates engagement with the target audience. First, content design should meet the needs of the customer. A core element related to high-quality content is that it creates value for customers rather than merely promoting the company's products and services. Good content never focuses on products, but rather focuses on helping customers solving their problems and offering advice on issues that customers may feel unsure about. In other words, the content produced by the company may not even mention the company or its products, focusing purely on a given topic in which the company is an expert. In this sense, a valuable and relevant content requires a company to be aware of its customers' informational needs, and this is accomplished through active listening, which in practice is done by collecting customer feedback and through social media monitoring. In short, a content marketing strategy is characterized by 6 elements (Du Plessis, 2017, 2015):

1. The medium element (the nature of the platform for the content);
2. The strategic element (the strategic approach one takes to develop the content);
3. The formation element (the building of the brand image through the content);
4. The intrinsic element (the natural occurrence of the content, for example, through conversations among consumers about the brand);

5. The communication element (the techniques applied to spread the content);
6. The corollary element (what are the desired consequences with the content).

Since there are many social media platforms, all opportunities for interaction and collaboration with all stakeholders should be grabbed. The strategic element refers to the purpose, consistency and integration of the content (Du Plessis, 2017, 2015), which should be developed in an integrated way and should be part of the company's entire brand strategy (Pulizzi, 2012). Du Plessis (2015) mentions that the success of the strategic content can be measured through the engagement it has created with the target audience. The formative element concerns the characteristics of the brand, purpose and values, and this should be communicated to the target audience through engaging stories. This strategy makes the brand more human and increases its value. Content should be unobtrusive and part of consumers' casual conversations online. Natural messages should be shared on social media to add warmth and create a familiar brand voice. Users should take the initiative to join conversations based on relevance to their lives and interests. The communication element refers to the approach used when content is communicated to the target audience, and has emerged due to its educational, entertainment, informational, usefulness and quality importance. Brand stories should focus on meeting the informational needs of their customers in a way that is appealing and of value to their daily lives (Payne et al., 2009; Pulizzi, 2012). Brand stories should make customers smile; make them feel important, and content needs to stand out in a relevant way amidst so much information to create customer engagement. Finally, the corollary element refers to what users are expected to do with the content after consuming it, such as sharing it, helping to create new content, and changing their perspective and behavior towards the brand, possibly becoming brand ambassadors (Du Plessis, 2015).

Ho et al. (2020) propose a strategic content marketing framework with the goal of providing guidance to companies just starting their content marketing strategies, guiding marketers through content marketing strategic elements vertically and content marketing growth and execution paths horizontally. This model provides the essential elements to a content marketing strategy, depending on the company's level of maturity with respect to content marketing practices overall (emerging, developing or maturing). This distinction was made based on the type of content the companies analyzed, the number of active social media platforms, their spend on content marketing, the extent to which the companies dropped their emphasis on sales-only content, the educational content in their strategy, and whether the content strategy was documented. Thus, it was concluded that as companies progressed in their content generation, they gained more knowledge in content marketing practices; increasing the number of content types helped take the emphasis off sales-only targeted content and educational content increased; and companies further along in the process spent more of their budget on content marketing, which culminated in the content strategy being articulated and documented. The model thus demonstrates a way to transition, streamline, optimize, and accelerate content marketing for companies (second column measurement).

After defining the content to be published, the company must decide where it will do it. According to Du Plessis (2017) content marketing practiced in social media gives greater proximity between the brand and the consumer, considering that it is a less formal environment. In agreement, Opreana & Vinerean (2015) argue that social media is an important tool in content marketing and inbound marketing because it amplifies the impact of an organization's content. Sharing content through social media makes it more authentic, while creating business pages

offers more opportunities to make its content known. For these authors, the most important aspect of social media and its impact is the ability to collaborate and help create products and campaigns with consumers. Thus, by reaching consumers who are engaged with the brand, marketers can significantly improve an organization's profitability, revenue streams, and increase the loyalty of customers, who can become brand ambassadors in the digital context.

Several authors agree that in content marketing, social media communication is essential for the strategy to be successful, due to a closer contact with potential customers' high level of engagement (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Buratti et al., 2018; Nunan et al., 2018; Raji et al., 2019).

## Content Marketing in Social Media

Managers and marketers use social media to promote the brand name in their communications to increase brand awareness and strengthen loyalty, and use various appeals to encourage the audience to interact with the posts and thus increase popularity (Swani et al., 2017). The importance of social media lies in the fact that consumers use it as part of the information search process, compare products and offers, and establish relationships with sellers. Thus, social media should be used to continuously inform consumers, throughout the sales process. Moreover, they extend the sales team's ability to help the customer by enhancing the circulation of information between the company and the consumer, which, in return, influences the latter's satisfaction (Agnihotri et al., 2016). These authors identify a list of social media practices that professionals can use, categorizing them into the relationship-building functions they serve:

1. Practices that help you approach customers: share news about testing a new product; share stories about community involvement; generate surveys on relevant topics
2. Practices that allow companies to discover customer needs: tweet about an application in development to get feedback and ideas; create polls to vote and comment on proposed changes
3. Practices that showcase company offerings: share success stories on Facebook; develop an informative Youtube channel; tweet about promotions and loyalty rewards
4. Practices that help complete sales: talk one-on-one with customers to work on business inhibitors; make blog posts to talk about exposed problems about products or services
5. Follow-up services and practices: analyze followers and identify prospects; ask for referrals; announce a new product.

Different platforms require contextualized contents, since customer profiles are different on different platforms and the same content will not be efficient in different content communities. Each form of content must have a purpose and a measurable goal to provide the necessary focus. Stories attract and retain customers, and each platform's story plan should ideally form part of a documented content marketing strategy, consisting of content pillars to meet consumer interest. It is essential that content is delivered at the right time and based on the consumer that is targeted by it. By focusing on quality content, value and engagement are created, not merely noise. For example, on LinkedIn, being a communication channel and not a sales channel, users should be treated as equal partners, and the brand should become another user of the network to gain the trust of its potential customers. This search for trust responds to the user relationship philosophy based on the principles of relational marketing, fostering activities aimed at establishing, developing and maintaining relationships with users. To be able to establish these relationships, it is necessary to pay attention to the profiles and interests of

users to identify their needs and be able to deliver value (Guadalupe, 2015). The company's own employees can be content creators on LinkedIn and act in this network as representatives of their company, since it is a professional network. In this way, they create personal relationships through the network and promote their products and services to appropriate audiences. LinkedIn becomes an important tool in the B2B context (Huotari et al., 2015).

Video production, particularly for the B2C context, has proven to be one of the most effective content marketing techniques (Lou et al., 2019). Marketers have used the YouTube platform to disseminate content and to, through it, create a content community and strengthen their relationship with users. Sharing content through YouTube positively affects consumer attitude toward the brand, loyalty, and purchase intentions, and that content that entertains helps build loyalty with the customer. Further, for brands with high-involvement products, what works best is informational content; for brands with low-involvement products (as is the case with the company under study) what works best is content that entertains - although informational content also helps to increase customer loyalty - because consumers, when dealing with low-involvement products, do not make as much effort to inform themselves about the product, compared to high-involvement products. Providing content that entertains promotes experiences with the brand that appeal to emotions, and thus is more likely to create a relationship with the customer than informational content.

Sharing content on blogs is also an excellent way to reach consumers and create a relationship with them (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Chen & Lin, 2015; Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

Users' satisfaction with brand blog content significantly and positively influences their loyalty and the sustainability of the social relationship. Users who are satisfied with the content have a pleasant experience when they visit the blog and tend to maintain an ongoing relationship with the brand, they create emotional bonds with the blog (and consequently, with the brand), and as this relationship continues, they bring new users to the blog and help maintain the loyalty of existing users (Chen & Lin, 2015). Thus, brands that wish to build lasting relationships with their customers through blogs should focus on the consumer's own experience and it is crucial to give them relevant, timely and useful content with the consumer's needs in mind (Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

The key criterion of social media is user interaction. On the one hand, the intensity of user interaction with a brand's post can be seen as a measurement of communication effectiveness, as it indicates the popularity of that post. User interaction significantly determines the distribution of the publication in the future, which is a prerequisite for brand success (Wagner et al., 2017). On Facebook, the actions that the user performs have different weights. The most basic action is "liking", followed by commenting and the action that generates the most engagement is sharing (Balio & Casais, 2021; Coelho et al., 2016; Kim & Yang, 2017; Swani et al., 2017; Wagner et al., 2017). On Instagram, the shares are mostly the "like" and the comment, with the comment suggesting more interaction with the publication.

Trying to understand what type of publications most attract and create interaction by consumers, Wagner et al. (2017) come to the conclusion that some publication appeals have positive effects, and others negative effects on user interaction. The appeal of the message that the publication conveys has a significant effect on the perception of that message, and as such, on the effectiveness of the communication. In social media, the appeal of a post can affect the user's attitude towards the post. A positive attitude can lead to users sharing the publication, such as interaction (like taking the action of "liking" the publication). On the other hand, the processing of the publication can be indirectly influenced by publication appeals that affect the

user's motivation to process the publication itself. Certain publication appeals probably correspond to situational or person-related gratifications, and thus may influence the motivation for processing. For example, users who aim to satisfy their entertainment needs on social media may have a higher motivation to process a publication from a brand when such a publication includes an entertainment component. Users with an information need may have higher motivation to process informational publications. The size of the post and the inclusion of photos or videos have positive effects on all publication popularity metrics (number of “likes,” comments, and reactions).

Other studies suggest that using corporate brand names, images, and videos generate fewer comments than likes; using emotional appeals in social media posts increased the number of “likes” and comments; using emotional appeals motivated consumers to share content more through comments than through “likes” and thus, conclude that the use of emotion induces greater engagement, motivating consumers to comment and share content (Swani et al., 2017; Swani & Milne, 2017). There is also evidence that on Facebook, the greatest influence on customer engagement is the video format, which relates significantly and positively to the number of likes, comments, reactions, and shares, and the image format, which relates positively to the number of likes, reactions, and shares, but negatively to the number of comments; interactivity has a positive relationship with the number of “likes”, but not with the number of comments - this can be explained because when the interaction is a yes/no question, the user responds with a “like”, to answer affirmatively. Also, on Instagram, the video format has a negative impact on the number of “likes” (Balio & Casais, 2021). Wagner et al. (2017) also found that users are more likely to comment on posts that solicit their interaction and have logical information. On the other hand, publications with photos are unlikely to receive comments. In addition, posts created with photos or videos using a rationality or sensory appeal strategy are more likely to get a person to share the post, while a strategy that refers to ego is less likely to be shared. Thus, social networks such as Facebook and Instagram are used more effectively when used as a means of promotion that brings some sort of hedonic benefit to the user, rather than commercial benefits by promoting products, services, or prices. The user is more likely to promote the brand in their own circle of contacts when they feel emotionally involved with the brand, which happens through, in general, appeals mentioning brand events and promotional (promotions or activities that require interaction from the user, such as quizzes or contests) (Coelho et al., 2016). This happens for example with e-commerce products purchased (Da Costa & Casais, 2020).

## **Content Marketing in B2B and B2C**

In an attempt to understand whether content differs from the B2B to B2C context, it was found that Huotari et al. (2015) and, in agreement, Andersson & Wikström (2017) distinguish social media users as internal and external. Insiders are those who are paid by the company and can be divided into corporate users and employee users. Corporate users serve as the voice of the company and are not limited to one person; they can be a department or even the company in general. Collaborative users are individual contributors who are connected to the company. These are involved in content creation and have the ability to communicate in a not so formal way on social platforms. External users are not connected to the company professionally and can be divided into corporate, customer, professional and civil. Corporate users are companies that use their voice to establish content. Client users are individuals who are employed by potential or

existing customers in the B2B market and are considered by the authors to be the most important users. Professional users are companies from different businesses, who may or may not become customers of the company in question. Finally, civil users are spectators of the company who show interest but have no professional relationship with the company. Different stakeholders can connect through social media, and thus the company's marketers can take advantage of the presence of a large number of stakeholders and create content on social media. In this context, content discussions that occur on social media are usually messages from credible sources, more so than in the B2C context where these comments may come from individuals who are strangers to the company and are not trusted.

Thus, credibility and trust are even more important in the B2B context (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Huotari et al., 2015). Holliman and Rowley (2014) say it is essential that B2B organizations adopt a helping rather than selling approach in their social media messages, and companies should always be concerned with tailoring their content and making it attractive, useful, and timely, whatever the context or platform. In the same vein, Cawsey & Rowley (2016) found that in the B2B context, there is less concern about customers compromising brand reputation or expecting that there would be difficulty controlling customer-generated content, in line with what Huotari et al. (2015) and Andersson & Wikström (2017) reported regarding content discussions on social media because the sources are more credible. Still, businesses saw social media as an opportunity to increase engagement with end consumers and, on the other hand, strengthen their relationships with other businesses that were already their customers.

These authors thus created a framework - B2B Social Media Strategy Framework - that should be extended to the B2B and B2C context at the same time, serving to contribute in practical and theoretical terms in the same company. Then, the key components for a successful social media strategy would be: monitoring and listening in the social space; empowering and engaging employees, and thus extending the social media strategy beyond the marketing department; creating compelling content, including giving a "face" to the company; stimulating eWom (electronic word of mouth), through influencers; evaluating and selecting channels, taking into account the characteristics of each channel and audience; and integrating social media marketing into other Marketing strategies. In this sense, the company may choose to complement its inbound marketing practices with traditional marketing practices (Bleoju et al., 2016).

### **Firm-Generated Content (FGC) versus User-Generated Content (UGC)**

As content marketing is successful on social media, brand ambassadors can increase e-WOM (electronic word of mouth) and thus engagement with the brand. A content community provides both users and the brand the opportunity to tell their story. The company can create content that humanizes it and connects it to its target audience by showing understanding for their needs and problems, and at the same time, users can help create a story that reinforces the favorable perception of the brand. Thus, it is understood that brand interaction with users on social media enables the creation of content along with the company, which leverages relationships for mutual benefits by creating and caring for an online community. Consumers can generate content and share it with other followers of the brand; meanwhile the company can create or distribute content, as well. Raji et al. (2019) define firm-generated content (FGC) as types of social media communication that are published by companies for consumers who are followers or fans of their social media pages, accounts, or channels. Thus, it is a marketing strategy to create brand awareness, brand recall or brand image on social media platforms, and

are created by the brand itself. On the other hand, user-generated content (UGC) refers to all types of communication that are generated by and between consumers on social media. Fundamentally, these are types of content that are created about the brand by consumers for consumption by other consumers. In their study, these authors concluded that the sharing function among consumers is one of the most significant features of this type of communication, as it makes the Marketing message spread more easily and with a higher reception rate with the help of consumers sharing the information among them. UGC is increasingly important as the consumer participates in the creation of information and makes it more credible, which helps the organization to strengthen its relationships with consumers, both those who create the content and those who then consume it (Huotari et al., 2015; Kee & Yazdanifard, 2015). Santiago et al. (2022) advocates the dying times of FGC, considering the increasing importance of UGC.

## Inbound Marketing

Inbound marketing is the digital marketing discipline in charge of attracting new customers in a natural way (Toledano & Begoña, 2015). The concept was born as a response to this public that searches on social networks and seeks valuable content, and to brands and companies that need a relationship of trust with their potential customers that they cannot reach through the usual channels (“*traditional*” marketing communication channels, such as television). Inbound marketing encompasses marketing techniques that try to change the brand-audience relationships, changing the meaning of the messages through tools such as SEO (Search Engine Optimization), content marketing or participation in social channels (networks, blogs, and other social platforms). Inbound marketing is thus based on the following pillars: content marketing, social media marketing, and SEO.

Patruti-Baltes (2016) says that among the advantages of inbound marketing are a direct and long-term relationship with the customer, define the profile of the persona quickly and accurately, allow better results in terms of cost/benefit when compared to traditional marketing and allow to develop a content strategy based on specific topics (keywords) identified with SEO and Google Ads, for which there is a real interest of prospects.

The term inbound marketing was first used by Halligan in 2005. According to the pioneers of inbound marketing, the need for this holistic approach came from the fact that marketing tactics that had been successful in the past were no longer working. According to these authors, telemarketing, television and radio advertising, and print advertising (what they classify as outbound marketing) are becoming less effective, and customers are located on the internet, and they buy and search for information through search engines such as Google and through blogs and social media. Thus, companies need to be present where their consumers are, and that is how they will generate leads and eventually sales for their business (Halligan & Shah, 2010).

The distinction between inbound and outbound marketing techniques is also made by other authors, and some (Castelló-Martínez, 2013; Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Nedaei et al., 2018; Nosrati et al., 2013; Rancati et al., 2015) claim that inbound is more effective because outbound has a more interruptive approach that annoys consumers, while inbound marketing uses methods of connecting and sharing with consumers, and the latter have the option to interact with the brand or company that is communicating with them. Holliman & Rowley (2014) say that not only does inbound marketing positively discourage an explicit advertising message and a brand-centric (rather than consumer-centric) approach, but it also actively encourages brands to

take a consumer-centric perspective on their propositions, and also nurtures high levels of trust from consumers and customers seeking the company. Rancati et al. (2015) add that inbound marketing is more successful than outbound marketing, but they caution that this only happens when its techniques are applied correctly. They explain that this happens because inbound marketing is considered permission-based marketing, since its messages are focused on an audience that has previously given its permission to communicate, while outbound marketing is interruption-based, perceived as a traditional product promotion model, in which people have to stop what they are doing to pay attention to the marketing message that the brand wants to transmit. These authors also add that an inbound marketing approach is more complex than outbound marketing, as it requires the use of multiple digital channels simultaneously, continuous website strengthening and maintenance, effective content development, and implementation of measurement tools, aligning all methods in order to achieve the desired results.

On the other hand, Bleoju et al. (2016) state that inbound and outbound marketing techniques can (and in some cases, should) be complementary, depending on the company that is implementing them and its business model. They even mention other views, where Marketing professionals say that this distinction is artificial and meaningless, and that no form of Marketing should obey artificial concepts and that some Marketing techniques are in what they call the gray zone, which belong to both types of Marketing. Human et al. (2018) note that indeed traditional advertising is still an important promotional strategy, but their study shows that the integration of storytelling into both strategies has become quite popular.

### **Sales Funnel and Inbound Marketing**

It is considered important to understand the customer's journey and what leads them to buy, in order to understand where the content can make a difference in the customer's buying decision. Thus, the online customer journey consists of five phases: entering the company's website, searching the catalog and discovering the products, presenting the product, managing the shopping cart and, finally, the checkout and payment process. Each phase has a number of factors that will determine the user experience and conversions (Mangiaracina et al., 2010). In practice, the concept of the customer journey is not much different from the concept of the sales funnel, a phased process that describes how a customer makes a purchase decision, from becoming aware of the need they have to buying the product or service to satisfy that need. Although there are some variations depending on the source, the sales funnel is typically described with four phases, where each phase corresponds to the cognitive stage in which the customer contemplates whether to make the purchase or not. The first phase is Awareness, in which the customer realizes that he has a need and that there is a product or service that can satisfy it. The customer then seeks knowledge about this type of product or service, entering the Research phase. The third phase is the Decision phase, in which the customer is deciding, among different brands, which product or service to buy. The final stage of the funnel is Purchase, in which the customer already knows which specific product and brand he wants to buy, and typically makes a last comparison of prices, ordering conveniences and other aspects before executing the purchase (Jansen & Schuster, 2011).

Following on from this, when analyzing inbound marketing processes it is noted that it is similar to the concept of a sales funnel, in which the customer moves (or not) from one stage to the next as they engage more with the brand (Bezhovski, 2015; Nosrati et al., 2013). Thus, the

sales funnel conceptualization describes the customer acquisition process by dividing it into several phases (D'Haen & Van Den Poel, 2013). Some authors disagree about these divisions, especially about where to place the prospect and the lead (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016).

According to D'Haen & Van Den Poel (2013), the funnel presents the suspects - which are all potential customers of the company; who become prospects - which are suspects that have certain characteristics; leads are prospects that will be contacted by the company, after being qualified as those who are likely to respond. The authors point out that this qualification is often done by instinct. Finally, the leads that become customers of the company are the customers. So users go from one stage to another, which taper off because the number of people is smaller. The authors also say that these phases are not completely static, but interactive. If the acquisition of the new customer is successful, the customer database will change and this new customer will be excluded from the funnel.

Halligan & Shah (2010), in building their Sales and Marketing funnel, have a slightly different view. The first stage of the funnel is prospects, then leads, opportunities and finally customers. The logic is basically the same as the other authors: the first stage of the funnel is any potential customer; the second are people that the company qualifies as being eligible to spend some time demonstrating the product or service; the opportunities refer to someone who already demonstrates some intention to buy, perhaps even by reference from other people. Finally, the customer is the customer who has already bought some product or service. The authors stress the importance of measuring each level of the funnel and analyzing the percentage of prospects that have become customers. This measurement can be done quarterly or monthly.

Järvinen & Taiminen (2016), based on the sales funnel of D'Haen & Van Den Poel (2013), built their model as a loop, saying that existing customers re-enter the funnel, as they may buy again, upsell or cross-sell. For this reason, the authors rename customers' deals, as customers can reoccupy any position in the funnel. In addition, these authors use content to keep customers coming back into the funnel, thus establishing a relationship with customers and maintaining their loyalty. With the help of a marketing automation system, marketing and sales departments are able to analyze data from potential and existing customers that can be used to distribute timely content tailored to their individual needs. The content distributed to potential customers is personalized based on their profile information and online behaviors and potentiate the process of value co-creation (Mattos et al., 2021).

The automation system also helps to make an existing customer buy again. Since this funnel does not end at customers (in this case, deals), these customers are considered leads again and receive content tailored to the purchases they have already made and their needs, which the company knows because the system has already analyzed them in previous purchases and in the interactions the customer has made with the company.

The authors comment that this is the first study to demonstrate how content marketing can be integrated into sales processes, through the use of Marketing Automation, in a way that creates business benefits. And they point out that, although this case is in the B2B context, this approach could be applied in the B2C context, especially in terms of behavioral targeting and content personalization.

Pulizzi (2014) says that the funnel starts with visitors, moves on to leads, opportunities, sales, and finally customers. However, the funnel takes into account the sales process before, during and after the life cycle of a customer. Thus, the funnel continues to satisfaction, retention, upsell and, at the end, evangelism. In this way, the author demonstrates, like Järvinen &

Taiminen (2016) that content can be used to create value and reinforce the customer's decision after.

First of all, it is relevant to emphasize that, although there is no agreement between the authors with the terms of the various phases of the funnel, this paper will align with the vision of Pulizzi (2014) and name as visitors the users of the website, leads those who have downloaded some content of the company, opportunities the potential customers who have had some interactions with the company and are close to making a purchase, sales the customers who have already bought and may buy again, and customers as being customers who are likely to continue to be customers because they are already engaged with the company.

The first stage of the funnel, in which the visitor can move to lead, is very important in terms of content, because it is the first interaction that the potential customer has with the company (Halligan & Shah, 2010; Pulizzi, 2014). Thus, call-to-action buttons, which encourage the customer to leave their contact to download some kind of content that the company provides - a white paper, an ebook, among others - are of vital importance (Halligan & Shah, 2010). When the user leaves his contact, he is giving permission to the company to interact with him, and in this way, the content can help the potential customer move forward in the buying process, because he will perceive that the company is an expert in its field by the content it produces (Pulizzi, 2014). On the other hand, Halligan & Shah (2010) emphasize that this database should not be limited to the email list that is gathered through call-to-action or landing pages that appear on the company's website. Social network followers should also be considered marketing contacts, and attention should be paid to them, because a user may not subscribe to any content and therefore not provide his contact information, but may even be someone who follows the company's social networks and blog, and makes comments, creating UGC content that can have a positive impact for the company.

Based on the information that the prospect has searched and what content they have shown interest in, the company can send personalized messages, with more content that may interest the user (Halligan & Shah, 2010; Pulizzi, 2014; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). At this stage, it matters to show the prospect that the company is the best in its domain, and therefore the content to send him can be testimonials from other customers, to prove the efficiency of the company's product and content (Pulizzi, 2014). It is important to emphasize that leads that are already engaged with the company (visited the website several times, downloaded different content, left comments on social media) deserve immediate attention. They should be nurtured until they buy, so they can be contacted by email or phone in order to facilitate their progress through the buying process (Halligan & Shah, 2010). This process - nurturing - consists of continuously nurturing a relationship with the potential customer, interacting with them in order to make the sale happen (Halligan & Shah, 2010; Pulizzi, 2014; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). This process can also happen with existing customers, as they may be inactive for some time and show interest by downloading some content or interacting on social media. Since the company already has some information about this customer, namely previous purchases and what is sparking interest now, personalized content can be sent taking into account their current needs. After a sale is made, the relationship with the customer should not end there, which is why the content marketing funnel continues after the customer phase. It is important to maintain interaction via email or social media. After-sales service should be more than receiving complaints; content should be used to create value and reinforce the customer's decision after the sale. This service can include creating a user manual or a section of frequently asked questions on the company's website, in addition to showing the customer how to get the most out of the

products they have purchased and how other products that the company provides can be extended to other problems or needs that the customer has (Pulizzi, 2014).

Already in the second part of the funnel, to reach the satisfaction stage, it is necessary to have an effective after-sales service that meets the customer's expectations. To reach the retention stage, it is necessary to have a customer retention strategy, and nurture the relationship, similar to what is done when you want to turn a prospect into a customer, by giving them content such as newsletters, invitations to events, or magazines. The upsell phase is about continuing the relationship with the customer with proposals for new products or services. Finally, the evangelism phase refers to the time when customers are continuously subscribing to company content and relating to the company in a systematic way (Pulizzi, 2014).

According to the same author, most of the revenue in the Content Marketing Institute comes from these subscriptions, which customers choose to receive content from the company, and in the last stage of the funnel, they also create content because they are satisfied customers.

It is also important to measure the results of this funnel by analyzing where customer contacts came from, and how many went through each stage of the funnel until they became customers. This way it is possible to determine the ROI of each channel - how much was spent on paid ads on Google and how many of those visitors went on to become customers, for example. In this way, it is possible to adjust the investment in each channel (Halligan & Shah, 2010).

### **Inbound and Content Marketing: The Fusion of Concepts**

The concept of inbound marketing is intertwined with that of content marketing. Järvinen & Taiminen (2016) say that content marketing is only one - fundamental - element of inbound marketing, while Pulizzi (2014) believes that a content marketing strategy can incorporate the principles of inbound marketing.

Holliman & Rowley (2014) found this same confusion with the interviews they conducted at the time of their study on digital content marketing in the B2B context. Many of the interviewees said that inbound marketing was increasingly important, and that the two concepts are intrinsically linked, if not interchangeable.

Inbound marketing is understood as all communicative techniques and actions that aim to reach the consumer in a non-intrusive way, discarding actions that cause annoyance to the consumer and cause unwanted interruption of their activity (Castelló-Martínez, 2013) attracting likely customers to a business before they have the intention to become customers (Nedaei et al., 2018) with content as a key component, and thus understanding how content can be used in marketing, specifically in creating engagement with customers (Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

Halligan & Shah (2010) and Opreana & Vinerean (2015) say that inbound marketing is about creating memorable content and that this type of Marketing has a multi-channel approach to sharing content. In this sense, Patrutiu-Baltes (2016) says that inbound marketing focuses on:

1. Creating and distributing content that meets customers' needs and interests;
2. Lifecycle marketing - getting strangers to become visitors, then contacts, then customers, and later brand ambassadors;
3. Personalization - the personalized interaction with each customer, as the relationship becomes closer and the individual needs of each customer become known;
4. Multi-channel communication, as different customers may prefer different communication channels;

5. Integration - the creation of content, its publication and subsequent analysis must work together, to be able to publish the right content, in the right place and at the right time.

Nedaei et al. (2018) consider this concept relevant because consumer behavior has been changing, and customers increasingly use web services to find products and services. Thus, there is significant competition between different websites to make their products more appealing to users. To gain the attention and trust of consumers, it is not enough to just talk to them, but it is necessary to interact with them, show them content that they may like, and above all, get to know them. Thus, inbound marketing not only generates sales, but informs, educates and/or entertains the consumer, and creates a relationship with them (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Opreana & Vinerean, 2015).

For inbound marketing practices to be effective, Nosrati et al. (2013) note that the biggest weakness of inbound marketing is related to the fact that the company's potential customer may not be able to find the company online, since there is a context of high competition for keywords. Waiting for potential customers to find the company online may cause the company to lose a sale to a competitor with a more aggressive traditional approach that exploits the traditional tools of the market (the outbound marketing techniques).

Thus, the inbound marketing process has four phases: attracting visitors; converting visitors into leads; closing sales; and, finally, turning those sales into long-term, loyal customers who are brand promoters (Bezhovski, 2015). The model of Nosrati et al. (2013) presents a last step: analyze the whole process, from website traffic, to sales and customer interactions, for continuous improvement, using, in the authors' model, marketing automation system that analyzes all this data. According to the authors, with inbound marketing practices companies will try to taper customers from various semantically related market segments, which neither know the product nor intend to buy it, and take the customer on a structured information path, which builds awareness and increases interest over time.

In the first phase the company attracts visitors to its website using inbound tactics, such as making blog posts, using SEO techniques social media posts, baiting links, and creating compelling content. This phase relies heavily on creating high quality content. The goal of the second phase is to convert website visitors into leads by gathering their contact information. For this to happen, the company must give something in return, such as an e-book, newsletter, free software, helpful tips, tutorials or other valuable content. Landing pages and sign-up forms must be optimized, and the data collected must be managed properly (Bezhovski, 2015).

The next phase refers to sales fulfillment, where leads are converted into customers. This is where email marketing comes in, as leads will usually not make a purchase immediately. They need to receive emails with relevant and useful content so that they gain trust in the company and become more likely to buy. Finally, the last phase is the most difficult: keeping the customer and gaining his loyalty. It is necessary for the company to continue to foster the relationship with the customer through interesting content, proper after-sales service, and listening to their feedback. Finally, Opreana & Vinerean (2015) in agreement with Nosrati et al. (2013) believe that measurement and analysis of inbound marketing practices is critical, as companies are able to gain a holistic understanding of their online performance by measuring every tactic, program, activity, and technique they implement at every step of their sales cycle. By then using this information, the company is able to make more informed decisions and is likely to be more successful.

It is thus possible to see that inbound marketing and content marketing are inseparable, and for a successful inbound marketing strategy, content marketing is a fundamental premise.

### **Practical Recommendations for Managers**

Generating quality content requires observing the customer and their behaviors to be able to meet their needs, because high-quality content is what creates value for customers, rather than merely promoting the company's products (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016). Thus, it is necessary to know these potential customers and to know who the organization's ideal customer is - its persona. Only in this way will it be possible to create relevant content that meets their needs (Pulizzi, 2014; Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016).

Next, you must choose what the general theme of the content will be, the formats in which it will be disseminated, and define the content calendar (when it will be disseminated). This content can be in the form of an article, to be disseminated on the blog and on social media; ebooks, entertainment videos, or with the organization's history. The content written for the newsletter should be more informative, with more content than just news. It should, over time, be customized according to what each customer searches for.

Content creation should be done by someone with deep knowledge about the company, and with a link to it, who feels the soul of the company as it is. Thus, freelancers who are being hired should be hired on a permanent basis. Content should be posted on the company's blog and website, and on the social networks Facebook and Instagram. Content in video format should be released on the brand's Youtube channel, and newsletter content will be distributed via email. To broaden the distribution of content and increase the number of fans of the page, and thus increase brand awareness (Coelho et al., 2016), partnerships should be sought with influencers who identify with the organization.

A key aspect in any strategy is to evaluate its efficiency and act accordingly (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Pulizzi, 2014). It is necessary to check, six months after this strategy is implemented, whether its objectives are being achieved or not. It should be observed if sales have gone up, if there are more interested partners and if people recognize the brand in the market.

Regarding digital platforms, especially the website, the following factors should be analyzed: impressions (how many times the content on the page is viewed); page views per user (how many pages the user visits when on the website); the bounce rate (the percentage of people who leave the site immediately when they visit) and the duration of each visit. Next, it is important to analyze whether the content viewed led the user to perform some action. Thus, it is necessary to analyze the click-through rate (the ratio between the number of clicks and the number of impressions) and the percentage of visitors, in general, who make a purchase. Finally, it should be checked if, on social media, people share and interact with the brand's content, which will be an indicator of the engagement they feel with the brand (Balio & Casais, 2021).

If the goals are not being met, it is important to consider changing the theme of the content, exploring ways to improve it, or improving the way it is distributed and amplified. Monitoring and correcting is essential for any content marketing strategy to work (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016). Finally, in order to get consistent feedback from customers, the organization should conduct interviews once a year with its randomly chosen customers and ask what they would like to see improved in the company. Their consumers can send short, closed-response, anonymous satisfaction surveys, and thus receive constant feedback and understand whether the

company is creating relevant and engaging content for their customers (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016), as it is through this confirmation that one can continue to improve their content marketing strategy.

## CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper organizes the academic knowledge on content marketing in the context of digital media and presents guidance to organize a strategic plan of inbound marketing, with the adequate digital media and contents in the right touchpoint of the customer journey to meet the audience with relevance. The managerial implications of this conceptual review are assured in the practical guidelines provided. The conceptual review follows a design science approach in order to serve a conceptualization serving practitioners. The methodology used for the review did not use a systematic method that guarantees replication and a systematic literature review might be useful for a future research.

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