

# Organizational Goals and Performance Measurement Criteria for Content Marketing

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**Abstract:** This article explores the use of content marketing by organizations as a marketing approach aimed at attracting and retaining customers through compelling and relevant content. It identifies the top organizational goals for content marketing and common methods employed to measure its success. Cross-cultural perspectives and differences between North America and Europe are examined. The findings of this research indicate that organizations implement content marketing strategies primarily for lead generation. The results of the study also illustrate that organizations use a variety of methods to measure the effectiveness of content marketing programs e.g., by the amount of web traffic and the number of leads/sales being the most widely used marketing metrics. These results carry important implications for understanding the organizational drivers for content marketing campaigns and the criteria used to measure their performance.

**Key words:** Content marketing, custom publishing, branded content, audience engagement, brand awareness, sales generation, lead generation, web traffic, marketing metrics.

## 1. Introduction

Companies have traditionally relied on paid-media push marketing to drive brand awareness, customer engagement, and sales [1]. Today, successful marketing requires that organizations are able to connect with their customers in new and innovative ways [2]. Technological advancements and the internet have transformed the way marketers reach their target audience from a one-way to a two-way communication-type industry. Content marketing—the creation and distribution of compelling and relevant content to attract and retain customers [3]—is one approach that has helped organizations enter into conversations with their prospects and customers, and enhance buying behavior. After all, customers are the primary source of a company's cash flow, and those

companies that can maximize the return on their marketing investments can in turn maximize the firm's overall value through customer acquisitions [4].

Although a wide variety of articles on content marketing are available in industry publications and blogs, no significant academic research has been carried out to date.

The current study has four main objectives:

- To outline the importance of content-driven marketing;
- To identify the top organizational goals for content marketing;
- To identify the most widely used criteria to measure the effectiveness of content marketing;
- To explore cultural differences between North American and European respondents.

The findings of this research are expected to assist organizations in understanding the key organizational drivers and motivations for the use of content marketing as a marketing approach, and the methods

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commonly employed by organizations to measure its performance.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: first, a literature review and conceptual framework are presented. then, the research questions are introduced and data-gathering techniques discussed. next, the findings are summarized. This is followed by a discussion of the practical implications of the research, its limitations, and directions for further research. The paper concludes with our recommendations for successful content marketing initiatives.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Definition of Content Marketing

Although the term content marketing is only a few years old, it is not a new marketing discipline. It has gone by various other names such as custom publishing and branded content and describes a marketing approach that focuses on creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to a clearly defined and understood audience for the purpose of driving profitable action [3]. The words relevant and valuable are key to this definition; in the post-advertising age, where the balance of power has shifted from the advertiser to the consumer, delivering compelling content that is targeted to a specific audience and provides them with real value is a prerequisite to attracting and retaining customers.

The premise behind content marketing is creating and publishing unique and interesting content that focuses on prospects or customers. It educates them, helps them solve problems, and invites them to engage with a company's brand. Content can come in various forms: articles, blog posts, white papers, case studies, and videos, to name a few.

### 2.2 The Importance of Content

Time pressures and the multitude of marketing stimuli that people encounter every day lead to selective attention of only a small subset of marketing content [5]. In an era where consumers have learned to

tune out traditional marketing messaging, content marketing aims to deliver meaningful, original content to engage prospects and customers, and help them make well-informed decisions. By helping content-hungry consumers break through the marketing clutter, successful content marketing can yield long-term customer loyalty—impacting customer lifetime value and consequently the company's bottom line [6]. This occurs because content marketing is educational in nature, and focuses on communication rather than selling [7]. As a result, consumers are more willing to exchange their loyalty for knowledge, particularly when organizations are able to establish themselves as an authority in their respective fields.

Consumers are increasingly looking to the internet to learn about products and services before making a purchasing decision. Marketers that help them through the decision-making process have the opportunity to not only earn their trust, but also consequently drive awareness and sales [1]. Recent market research studies have shown that 89% of US-based internet users search online before they make a purchase [8] and that in 2011, 53.5% of daily US-based internet users read blogs [9]. As a result, there is a great need for marketers to focus their efforts on producing high-quality web content to engage prospects and customers, and address their needs and challenges.

### 2.3 Content Marketing Goals

Organizations adopt content marketing strategies for a number of reasons. While some companies see driving sales as the immediate goal, others look to content marketing as a long-term marketing strategy to build trust and a rapport with their target audience, explore their pain points, and improve loyalty and retention of existing customers [10]. Audience engagement is one approach that provides opportunities for prospects and customers to interact with organizations and enter into discussions. Brodie, et al. [11] reported that engaged consumers showcase enhanced consumer loyalty, satisfaction,

empowerment, connection, emotional bonding, trust and commitment. Organizations also employ content marketing to create awareness of their brands, demonstrate expert thought leadership to build brand recognition, and enhance brand recall through sustained exposure [2]. Moreover, marketing efforts that focus on building and establishing brands can significantly drive market performance and may provide opportunities for organizations to differentiate themselves and gain an advantage over competitors [12]. Whatever the goal, the content delivered should be able to capture the attention of the target audience and provide value that drives further contact or engagement.

#### *2.4 Measuring Content Marketing Performance*

Marketing must provide a return on investment (ROI) and elicit a purchase [13]. Stewart [14] argues that today's marketers need to be held accountable for their actions and that they must have specific measures in place to maximize their firm's value. However, measuring the performance of content marketing initiatives in particular can be difficult due to the multitude of measurement criteria that are available—such as web traffic, sales, lead quality and quantity, customer feedback, search engine optimization (SEO) ranking, and customer loyalty [15]. The easiest measure of content marketing effectiveness is the number of times the content is exposed to consumers. This metric however does not take into consideration the number of consumers that have actually read or understood the content, nor is it able to gauge the consumer's feedback or response to the content [2]. Marketers that gain such insight are better able to judge whether their investments are paying off and how their content marketing programs are impacting their company's bottom line.

#### *2.5 Cross-Cultural Influences on Content Marketing Strategies*

The cross-cultural differences of consumers in

different regions of the world have significant effects on marketing strategies due to differences in cultural values, attitudes, and perceptions [16]. There are four major cross-cultural perspectives. The first is Hofstede's [17] model which has been the most widely used and criticized. Related to this perspective is Project Globe [18] which followed a different approach in methodology and sampling, but with similar categories. Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner's [19] model represents a third approach which is based on executive participants in management development programs answering questions about value dilemmas. Finally, the fourth approach is the Schwartz Value Survey [20] which covers many countries based on respondents who are students and teachers. Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages. Typically, an approach is used as a method to characterize a particular culture's attributes, for example American, Chinese, Indian, or European. Marketers should implement marketing strategies that are not only in line with their organization's goals, but also cater to their target audience's cultural attributes. With respect to content marketing, this requires that organizations adapt their content in such a way that it resonates well with the cultures of the countries they deal with. To achieve this, an understanding of the customer's buying cycle is necessary in order to determine what content to develop (e.g., topic, language, tone, symbol, etc.) and when to deploy it during the buyer's decision-making process.

### **3. Research Questions and Framework**

The study aims to answer the following three research questions:

- What are the top organizational goals for content marketing?
- What criteria do organizations commonly use to measure the effectiveness of their content marketing initiatives?
- Do cross-cultural differences between North America and Europe impact content marketing

strategies?

Data for this study were collected over a three-week period in January/February 2012 with an online survey consisting of two core questions and two demographic profiling questions (primary job role and geography). Before conducting the survey, relevant LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)) discussion groups and targeted Twitter ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)) hash tags were identified. Professionals that were knowledgeable of their organization's content marketing strategies were invited to participate in the survey, which was distributed through these social media channels. The survey was open to organizations of all sizes, geographies, and industries. No incentives were provided to respondents to complete the questionnaire.

Despite the content or methods employed, all content marketing programs aim to attract customers (see Fig. 1). Analyzing the perception of companies, and what kind of content and methods are most suitable to achieving this goal is part of this research. Focus of this research was on content, not methods, and how companies define and measure effectiveness.

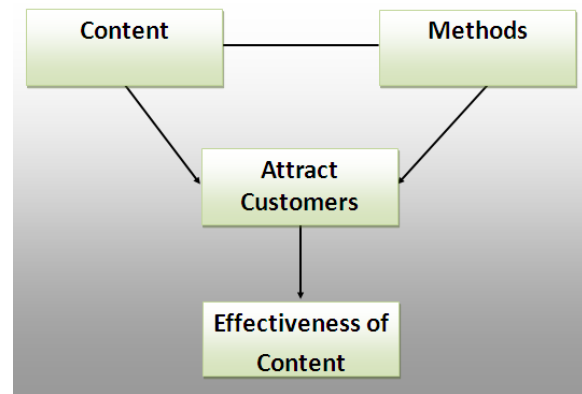
#### 4. Findings

A total of 171 respondents completed the survey. The majority of respondents indicated that they were situated in North America (70.8%) and Europe (22.2%). For the purposes of this research, only data for North American and European respondents were considered. The sample size for all other geographic regions is too small to accurately measure the impact of responses; their responses are therefore excluded from this study.

Table 1 below illustrates the breakdown of the North American and European respondents by primary job role.

**Table 1 Respondents by primary job role.**

Primary job role	North America (n=121)	Europe (n=38)
Marketing/communications	31.4%	36.8%
Content development/ publishing	20.7%	13.2%
Product management	20.7%	13.2%
Sales	7.4%	10.5%
Other	19.8%	26.3%



**Fig. 1 Research framework.**

Table 2 summarizes the responses to the first survey question. Both the North American and European respondents selected lead generation as their top content marketing goal, suggesting that their organizations use content marketing primarily to generate customer interest and develop a sales pipeline. The remaining results do not show any common patterns between the North American and European respondents.

Table 3 illustrates the responses to the second survey question, where multiple responses were accepted. Both the North American and European respondents selected web traffic and sales/lead generation as the methods their organizations use to measure the effectiveness of their content marketing initiatives. This suggests that both the amount of web traffic generated and the number of customer inquiries/sales received are the most widely used marketing metrics among respondents. The remaining results do not show any similarity between the North American and European respondents.

5.8% of North American respondents and 13.2% of European respondents indicated that their organizations do not measure the impact of their

**Table 2 Organizational goals for content marketing.**

Content Marketing Goal	North America (n=121)	Europe (n= 38)
Lead generation	33.9%	50.0%
Audience engagement	29.8%	10.5%
Brand awareness	14.0%	15.8%
Thought leadership	7.4%	7.9%
Customer retention	3.3%	13.2%
SEO/Web traffic	6.6%	2.6%
Customer feedback	5.0%	0.0%

**Table 3 Performance measurement criteria for content marketing.**

Performance Measurement Criterion	North America Only (n=114) <sup>1</sup>	Europe Only (n= 33) <sup>1</sup>
Web traffic (e.g., page views, downloads)	68.4%	60.6%
Sales/lead generation	61.4%	81.8%
Audience feedback	38.6%	33.3%
Content sharing (i.e., via social media)	36.8%	12.1%
Search engine rankings	34.2%	24.2%

<sup>1</sup> This sample includes only those respondents that indicated that their organization measures the impact of content marketing in one form or another.

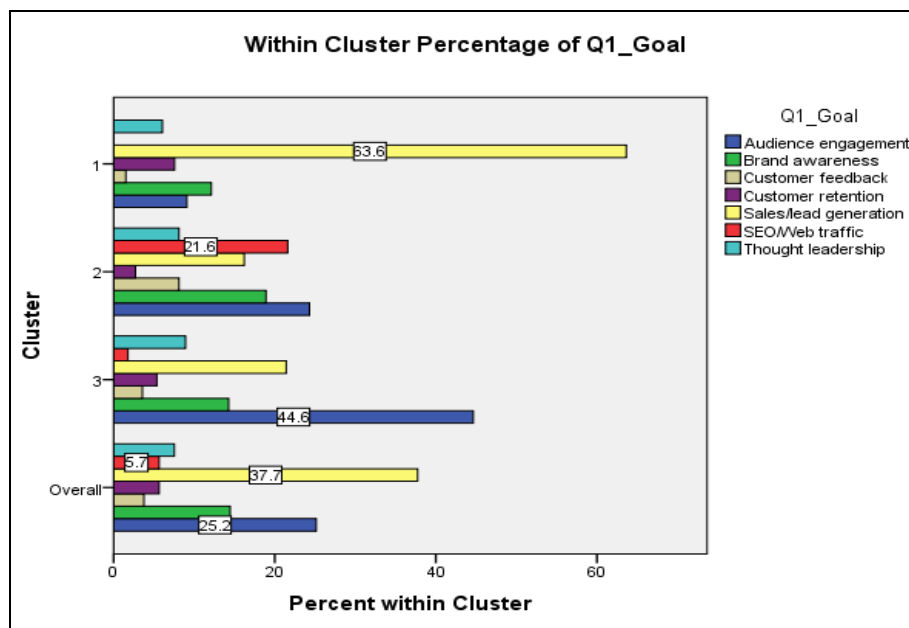
content marketing initiatives.

36.0% of the North American respondents and 42.4% of the European respondents indicated that their organizations only use one measurement criterion when determining the effectiveness of their content marketing programs.

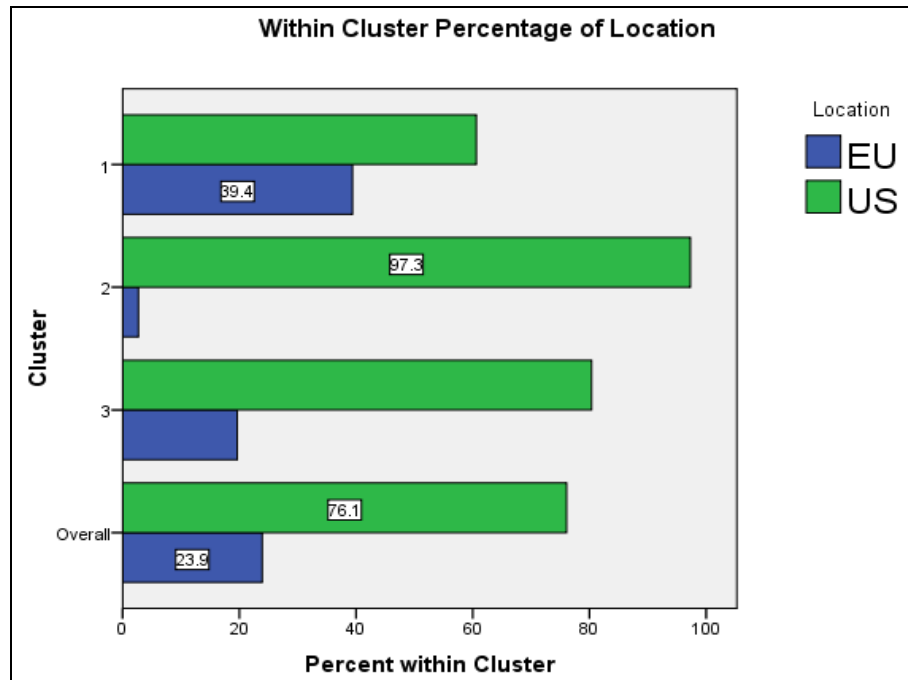
Comparing the results of Table 2 and Table 3 suggests that performance measurement and organizational goals are aligned and no major

differences between North America, namely the United States (US), and Europe exist. However, a multivariate analysis shows that there are three distinct different groups/clusters. For this analysis, the seven goals were taken as dimensions i.e., a cluster analysis in a 7-dimensional room was conducted.

In the first cluster, 53.6% of companies emphasized lead generation as their foremost goal (see Fig. 2), exceeding by far the average of 37.7%. This cluster had



**Fig. 2 Goals by group.**



**Fig. 3 Culture by group.**

significantly more Europeans than the other two clusters. Cluster 2, emphasizing web traffic, was by far dominated by US companies. The third cluster, emphasizing audience engagement, had a similar cultural mix as the sample i.e., no bias toward Europe or the US. One may argue that lead generation is a result of web traffic. Whereas Americans focus more on quantity (of visitors), Europeans are more concerned about quality and (lead) conversion rate. This difference may be explained by different cultural values [17], with Americans being more masculine (i.e., focus on numbers – the more the better), and Europeans being more feminine (i.e., putting things in perspective, relate things to each other). Using Trompenaars’ model, this difference can be explained by achievement (US) vs. ascription (Europe) cultures. Achievement refers to doing, such as generating hits on a web site; ascribed status refers to final results, such as sales. In an achievement culture, the first question from the superior would likely be, “How much more traffic did we generate through the content marketing campaign?”. In contrast, a question from a European manager would more likely be, “How good are the sales leads we received from the campaign?”.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Analysis of Findings

This study investigated the top organizational goals for content marketing and the measurement criteria commonly used to gauge its effectiveness among the North American and European respondents. An extensive search of leading electronic journal databases suggests that no academic research has examined this topic to date.

The results of this study indicate that lead generation and web traffic are key organizational drivers for content marketing in North America and Europe. This is not surprising, as an organization’s existence relies heavily on its ability to develop a strong customer base and generate revenue. Our belief is that organizations that deliver informative and non-promotional content can boost their lead generation efforts, and as a result, fill their sales pipeline to acquire new customers. Lead generation (cluster 1) and web traffic (cluster 2) was followed by audience engagement (cluster 3). Whereas Europeans (cluster 1) and North Americans (cluster 2) showed different preferences between lead generation and web traffic, they both see audience engagement as

an equally important content marketing goal. A greater emphasis on audience engagement in both North America and Europe suggests that organizations see more long-term value in acquiring customers through engaging content.

Like any marketing initiative, content marketing requires investment, and mandates that organizations analyze the performance of such efforts. Organizations measure the effectiveness of their content marketing initiatives in a number of ways. The North American and European survey respondents identified both web traffic and sales/lead generation as the most widely used performance measurement criteria. Moreover, approximately 36% of the North American respondents and 42% of the European respondents indicated that

they only use one measurement criterion to measure the success of their content marketing programs. Our belief is that in practice, a variety of metrics is needed to measure content marketing results and arrive at a true measure of ROI. Without a sound system in place to measure the effectiveness of content marketing, identifying areas of improvement becomes a challenge.

The findings of this survey were used to propose content marketing metrics in a more holistic way than the currently used one-criteria practice. Based on the assumption that there is wisdom in the crowd [21], the authors propose the following formula to measure the EC (effectiveness of content) based on the survey and our own assessment of the trend towards more audience engagement in future:

$$EC = 0.25 \text{ Web traffic} + 0.25 \text{ Sales/Lead generation} + 0.1 \text{ Blog Comments} + 0.1 \text{ Facebook (or own social network) interactions} + 0.1 \text{ Twitter} + 0.1 \text{ YouTube Video Interactions} + 0.1 \text{ Social Media Brand Mentions}$$

Whatever measurement criteria chosen, organizations that employ content marketing tactics have considerable opportunities for growth. Consumers constantly look to relevant, up-to-date information that can help them address daily challenges and solve major problems. Organizations that are able to deliver such information in a clear and effective way can begin a dialogue with potential customers, showcase their value proposition, and build long-lasting customer relationships—thereby increasing their revenues and profit margins.

### 5.2 Limitations and Further Research

Some limitations of this study should be highlighted. A larger European sample size would have led to a higher degree of data precision. In addition, a more targeted sample would have allowed us to gather data from professionals that are directly responsible for their organization's content marketing strategy, thus increasing data accuracy. Moreover, in practice, organizations may employ multiple concurrent content marketing programs and the goals for each may vary. This study focused solely on identifying the

respondents' overall top goal for content marketing, and not on the individual goals associated with each content marketing initiative—which may cover some or all of the options discussed in this paper.

Further research on organizations' budgetary allowances for content marketing, as well as a breakdown by company size (number of employees), geography, and industry would provide a broader understanding of the usage of and investment in content marketing. In addition, information about the systems used to measure and monitor the performance of content marketing programs would be helpful in identifying the most effective tools for supporting content marketing. Lastly, a cross-cultural study by country would provide further insight into cultural influences on content marketing strategy.

## 6. Conclusions

### 6.1 Focus on the Customer

Content is just content if it fails to address the needs of an organization's target audience. Organizations that implement content marketing strategies must ensure that their content is about their prospects and customers,

not about themselves. Understanding the customer and the related cultural influences, and being conscious of their pain points is paramount to delivering compelling content that offers solutions to the customers' day-to-day problems. Instead of focusing on creating a demand for products and services, organizations should focus on delivering content that provides information that can help consumers make well-informed buying decisions. Using key opinion leaders, for example, to showcase an organization's subject matter expertise can demonstrate thought leadership and an understanding of the target audience's needs and common challenges.

### *6.2 Understand the Customer's Decision-Making Process*

This research study points out that organizations implement content marketing strategies primarily for lead generation. To drive sales conversions however, organizations need a clear understanding of their ideal customer's persona. Knowledge of the customer's decision-making process—from identifying a problem to exploring possible solutions to making a purchase—is critical to the success of content marketing strategies. This process may vary in different parts of the world and therefore an understanding of cross-cultural differences is needed in order to develop relevant content that aligns with the consumer's decision-making process. Moreover, organizations need to be able to recognize the key interception points and develop content that addresses the consumer's pain points at these crucial moments in the buying cycle. In so doing, they can build trust and rapport that can be nurtured into an eventual sale.

### *6.3 Ensure Content Is Shareable*

This study identified the amount of web traffic as a widely used content marketing metric. This metric however focuses solely on identifying the number of times the content is exposed to consumers and does not gauge the consumer's understanding of and interest in

the content. Coupling web traffic with other metrics such as content sharing (i.e., via social media buttons) can help provide insight into consumer responsiveness to content marketing. Ensuring that content is shareable allows organizations to not only easily disseminate content to a larger audience at no additional cost, but also monitor which content resonates well with their audience. In addition, organizations that make their content easy to share enable their prospects and customers to spread the content on their behalf and essentially become an extension of the company's marketing distribution arm.

### *6.4 Tie Metrics to Objectives*

Selecting the right metrics is key to understanding and gauging the success of an organization's content marketing program. Metrics must be tied to the objectives of each content marketing program (i.e., increase downloads of white papers) and systems must be in place to effectively track them. This requires a basic understanding of what measurement methods are available and an indication of reasonable expected results. Once these are established, organizations will be in a position to monitor content uptake and determine whether they are meeting their pre-defined objectives. The proposed EC formula can serve as an overall assessment.

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