



Expanding Content Scope to Drive Customer Information Needs

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Executive Summary

This paper deals with how the new value network in the content industry affects the production of corporate marketing and informational content—known in the North American market as technical content—in response to changing customer information needs. The focus of this white paper is on production of product- or service-related content within corporate environments, specifically on ways to leverage existing content sources to create new ways of surfacing content at the right time during the customer lifecycle.

Corporations can no longer ignore that they are part of the content industry.¹ Aside from the obvious industry of newspaper, magazine, and book publishing, where content is produced as a product for sale, content has become an industry undertaken by virtually every corporation. The immediate connotation may be marketing content produced to populate a website, but that layer of persuasive content is only a thin veneer over a much broader corpus of informational content that aims to instruct and explain rather than persuade.

What corporations should also note is that the content industry is going through a phase of significant disruptive innovation. The purpose of disruptive innovation, according to Clayton M Christensen, who coined the term,² is to create a new market and value network. In content production, disruptive innovation has been happening incrementally, though the markers for intangible value have been hard to detect by those outside of the content production industry, and unevenly recognized even within the industry.

¹ To build brand, companies produce slick content and their own media

² Disruptive innovation

The changing dynamics of marketing content

The expectation of consumers continues to evolve, and has become more complicated and fragmented. The sales funnel that neatly leads a customer from lead to prospect to a sale has become messier, less linear. A recent update to the funnel concept is the “purchase pretzel”, a term coined by Walt Doyle during his transition to PayPal,³ which recognizes that the customer journey may begin in one of many places, engage through a number of media and devices, researching several aspects of the product or service before even entering what was traditionally considered the top of the funnel. Replacing the linear sequence of Awareness → Consideration → Shopping → Purchase → Loyalty is a non-linear sequence that involves word-of-mouth marketing, social proof, value comparisons, and so on, eventually going past the acquisition point to use and renewal. (Figure 1) Each phase is interspersed with the consumer’s online research for varying depths of information, from features and benefits to pricing to issues related to Total Cost of Ownership, such as repairs and warranties.

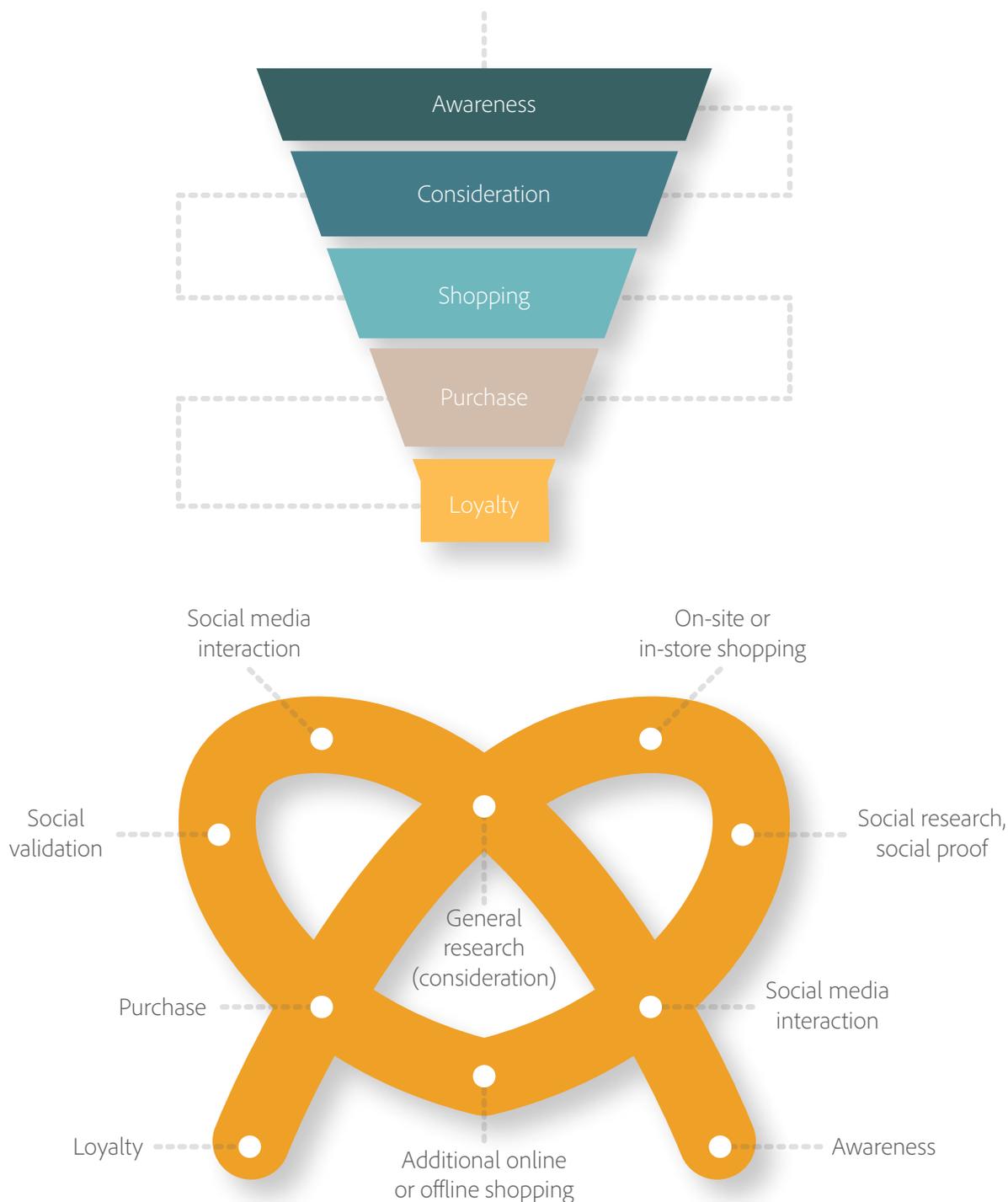


Figure 1: The marketing funnel replaced by the purchase pretzel

³ Adios Purchase Funnel, Hola 'Purchase Pretzel'

In an information-rich environment, all sorts of content are likely to contribute to non-linear decisions which eventually lead consumers to the larger decisions.⁴ New customer journeys mean thinking in new ways about the content that consumers will encounter along the way. Where consumers enter the funnel becomes less important, as the pretzel effect means they may follow different paths to get to their end point. A typical journey could start with awareness on a social channel, followed by research on long-term value through owned or earned media, such as looking at operating instructions or support content. Then, consumers could be served related content through paid media, and later double back to social media for trusted recommendations and social proof. Many of these steps will happen before consumers actually make contact with a brand.⁵



For corporations, that means ensuring content is available for all of the places along the customer journeys. In fact, the long-held POEM (Paid, Owned, Earned Media) model has been replaced by SCOPE (Social, Collaborative, Owned, Paid, Earned).⁶ This idea, coined by Nick Kellet of Listly, recognizes that social and collaborative aspects of creating and distributing content are important stepping stones toward treating content as a product with its own lifecycle. Taking that premise a step further, consider the omnichannel environment, in which the customer lifecycle needs to be coordinated with the product lifecycle and content lifecycle; this ensures that appropriate content is prepared and ready for delivery at the right phase of the customer journey and at the right time during the product lifecycle. (Figure 2)

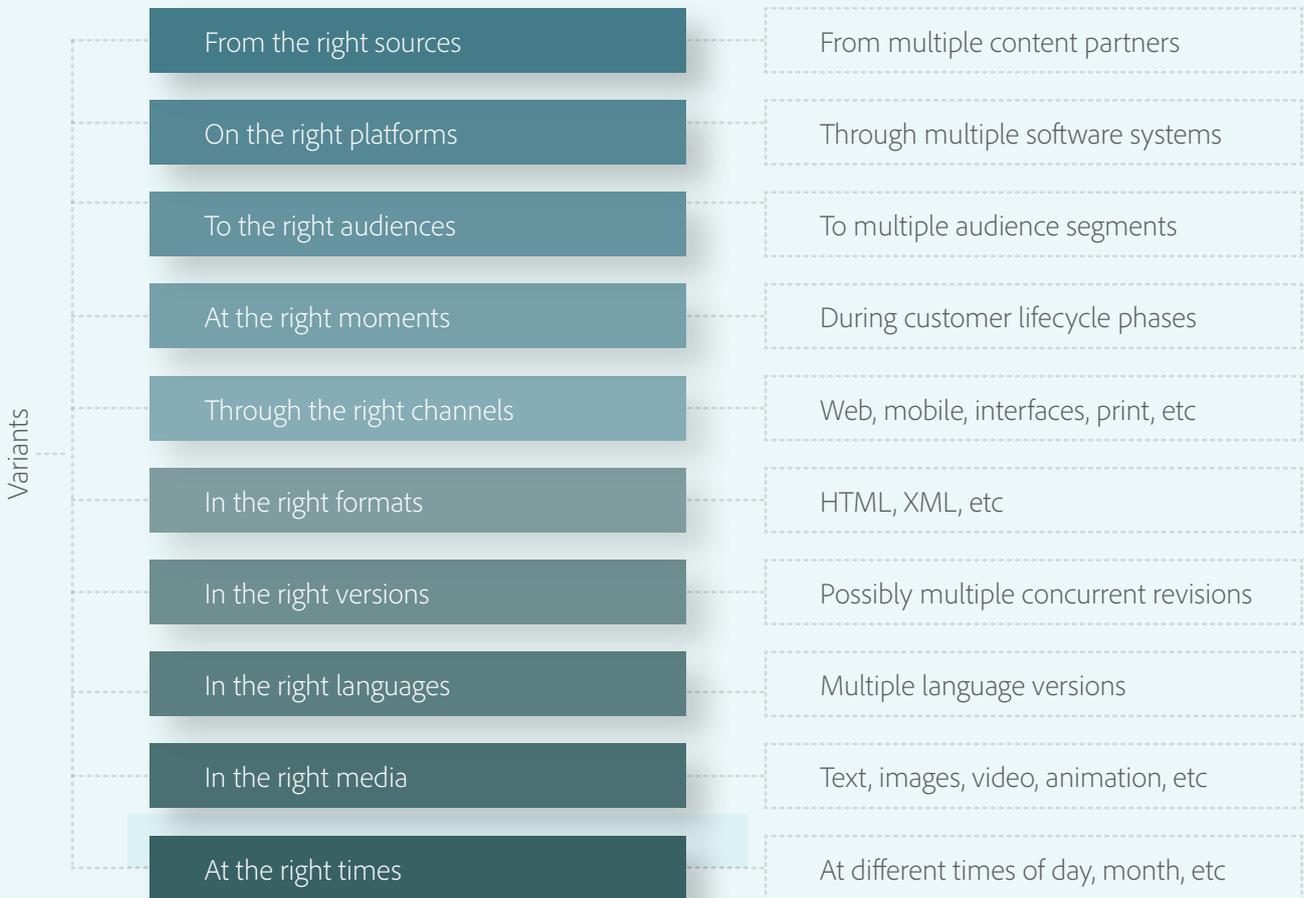


Figure 2: Considerations for variants in content delivery

⁴ The consumer decision journey

⁵ 3 out of 4 consumers consult social media before buying

⁶ SCOPE is the new POEM: Making Sense of the Emerging Digital Media Landscape

Delivering content into multiple channels as a way of keeping consumers engaged across the customer lifecycle is a worthy endeavor,⁷ and continues beyond the acquisition phase into the customer retention phase. This is especially important when McKinsey's "loyalty loop"⁸ factors heavily—for products or services that consumers regularly acquire. The content that makes the difference is more likely not to be marketing, or persuasive, content, but technical, or informational, content.

The emerging dynamics of informational content

Look at any of the marketing funnels described on the Web today, and you'll see the content that organizations consider ideal for each layer of the funnel. Look more closely, and you'll notice that a good portion of the content is not persuasive but technical. Technical content, perhaps by its very name, has traditionally been defined as post-sales content, and not of particular interest to the average consumer—or marketer. Ask the typical marketing professional what comprises technical content, and they'll provide connotations such as troubleshooting guides, release notes, and maintenance routines. This does a disservice to both technical communicators and marketers, in that there is a need for both types of content throughout the customer journey at multiple customer touchpoints.

Reframing technical content as informational content—from product features and explanations of their functions to product specifications, from quick-start guides to the micro-instructions found in app interfaces, from chatbot instructions to online tutorials—breaks down the artificial barriers between acquisition (sales) and retention (post-sales), and between brand awareness (marketing) and brand loyalty (customer retention).

Using the model of the purchase pretzel, we can see how customers move seamlessly between marketing and informational content. For example, consumers may be drawn to a particular automobile because of the persuasive material that emphasizes the vehicle's sportiness, safety record, or the social status it promises. The next step will be to get informed, and that may just as easily be to look at some informational material, such as the engine size or energy consumption. Consumers might then consult their friends on social media, looking for opinions that might influence them. Friends might refer them to knowledge bases that have information about the automobile's performance, or point to a customer service site that indicates how well the company responds to customer queries and complaints. Most of the content consumed pre-sale is informational. The persuasive and social content have been the lubricant to push consumers along the path, but the customer's end goal is to make an informed choice, which ultimately means informational content. The closer to the bottom of the content funnel, whether that funnel is from TrackMaven⁹ or Business2Community,¹⁰ the more factual they anticipate information to be.

More content for more contexts

Given the additional contexts, it would be natural to jump to the conclusion that marketers need to create content for each of these new contexts. In fact, much of this content may already exist, out of sight and in easy reach of the teams that could make good use of it. The problem is not so much a need for new content, but a purposeful re-use of existing content that can withstand the test of being used in multiple contexts.

Factual and informative doesn't need to mean dry or boring. In a series of interviews with marketing and communications managers, a number of them indicated that informational material was being rewritten to adopt a more engaging tone that works well with the brand voice. One interviewee, a communications professional who moved from documenting medical devices to working with a state service agency, reported that customer surveys and analytics show customer-requested material hovering between 90-95% informational content. Given that any product or service has a substantial amount of content created to explain its features, setup, configuration, use, optimization, troubleshooting and repairs, support, upgrades, transfers, warranties, training, administration, and so on, the per-item ratio is likely to be greatly weighted toward informational content. These materials are created to enable customer success, and in the long-term, promote retention and long-term brand loyalty.

⁷ The 5Ws of Adaptive Content: A New Look at Making Content Contextually Appropriate

⁸ The Traditional Marketing Funnel

⁹ How the Marketing Funnel Works from Top to Bottom

¹⁰ Optimizing the B2B Marketing Funnel, Turning Contacts into Clients

Rethinking content delivery for more agility

It's tempting to talk about the new reality of corporate publishing, when in actuality, corporate publishing has been on the increase for 20 years, with the Web becoming an easy way to disseminate content. As customer journeys started getting less linear and more information-rich, the delivery models for the content needed to evolve with them. The period of hand-editing web pages was relatively short; websites grew and the interactions on web pages became more complex. The need to update pages grew faster than the ability to do so, and the need to automate became apparent. Web content-management systems were developed. Automation meant websites could scale, and more complex delivery models could be implemented. Content could be filtered to be delivered by geography, by market, or by demographic. As the sophistication of software interactions grew, the demands on content grew. Products could be presented in multiple configurations to various audiences. Content could be shared between systems, enriched with external content and other media, and delivered in new ways. Content could be embedded in software interfaces and presented in systems such as self-guided customer support systems.

Omnichannel, a concept that began in retail around 2003,¹¹ soon spread to content delivery. It is the term used to describe an integrated way of responding to customer touchpoints, no matter where they occur. In the content production industry, omnichannel content is used to describe the delivery of content across multiple contexts. Reframing content delivery in this way creates a significant contribution to the validation of a brand's value proposition.¹²

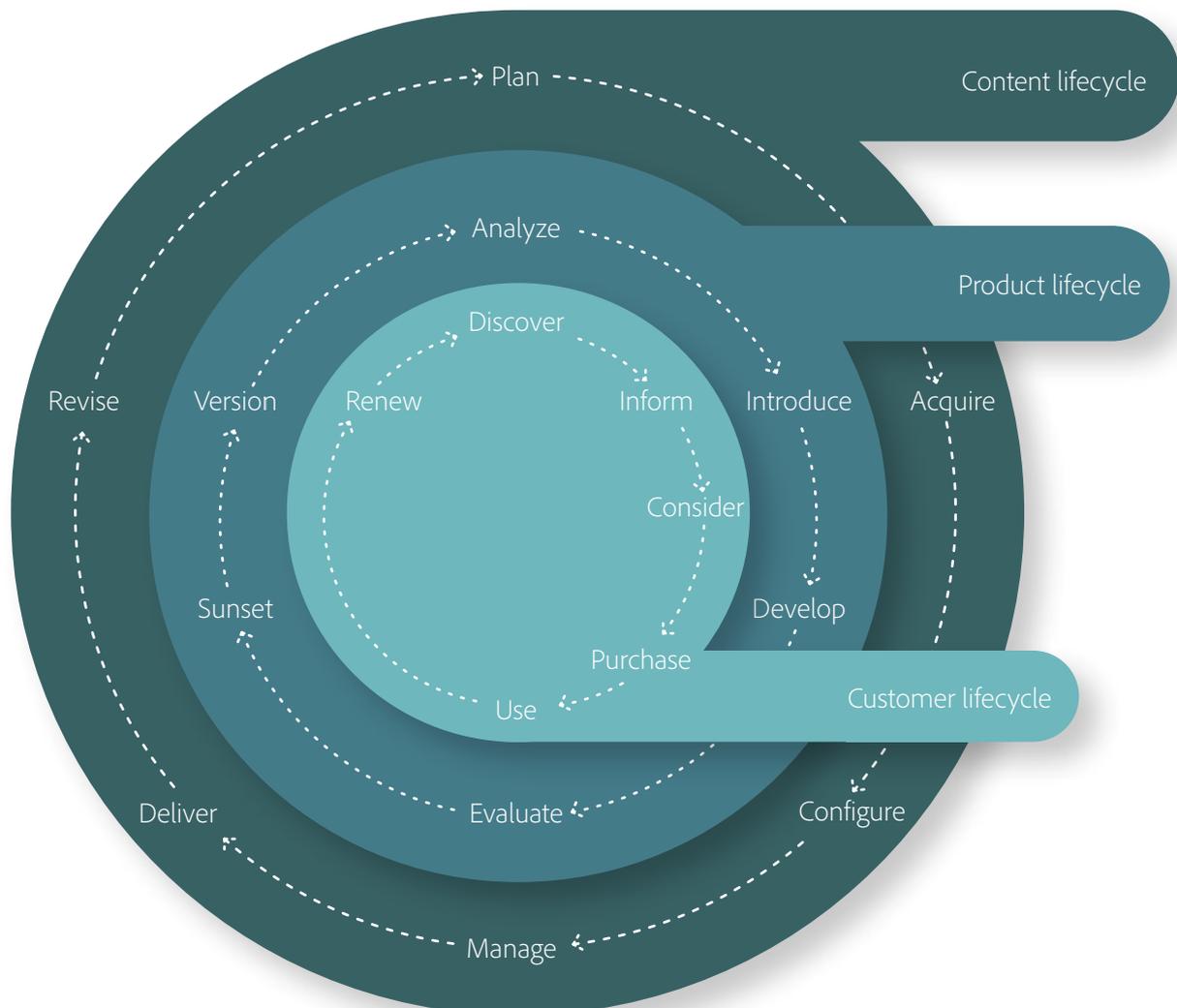


Figure 3: Omnichannel environment

Customers now expect to see the “right” content—in other words, content specific to them—that answers whatever question is top of mind at the time.¹³ The difference between marketing content and informational, or technical, content becomes an artificial distinction—at least from the customer’s perspective. Within a corporation, these two types of content may be created or acquired from many sources, managed in multiple silos, and published on separate platforms, in anticipation of a neat progression down the marketing funnel. But, as discussed earlier, the customer journey has become more unpredictable and complicated, and customer expectations about the range of information available to them have risen.¹⁴

A new model for content to keep customers engaged

This new reality poses a significant challenge for corporations that have traditionally followed the silo approach to producing and delivering content. To move beyond the artificial separation of persuasive- and technical content means rethinking how content is created, combined, and delivered to create a cohesive story backed up by credible evidence. What could a new content-delivery model look like, and what does this mean for content production?

There are three fundamental areas where corporations can evolve their content production:

- Creating a unified content library
- Understanding customer journeys
- Figuring out an integrated delivery system

Creating a unified content library

Weaving a good marketing story means weaving more types of content together to create a clear, cohesive message. In a new world where marketing and technical content co-mingle, this means ensuring that content messaging is consistent, accurate, and written in the same voice, despite being produced in different organizational silos. It is appropriate to vary the tone according to the purpose and audience, as long as the voice of the brand remains intact.

Customers do value brand-produced content, particularly when that content contributes to consumers’ research. In two studies commissioned by Nielsen and Taylor Nelson Sofres, consistently high-performing content is what consumers consider credible: unbiased, consistent, and accurate information.¹⁵ The strategy of creating a unified content library (Figure 4) means having a superset of content that can be used like Lego® blocks, to build new and different contexts. A simple example is combining a value proposition statement (persuasive) with the instructions on how to sign up (informational). The result ensures consistency and accuracy, and increases consumer confidence at the same time as it reduces the burden of creating duplicate content across marketing, informational, and perhaps microcopy channels.

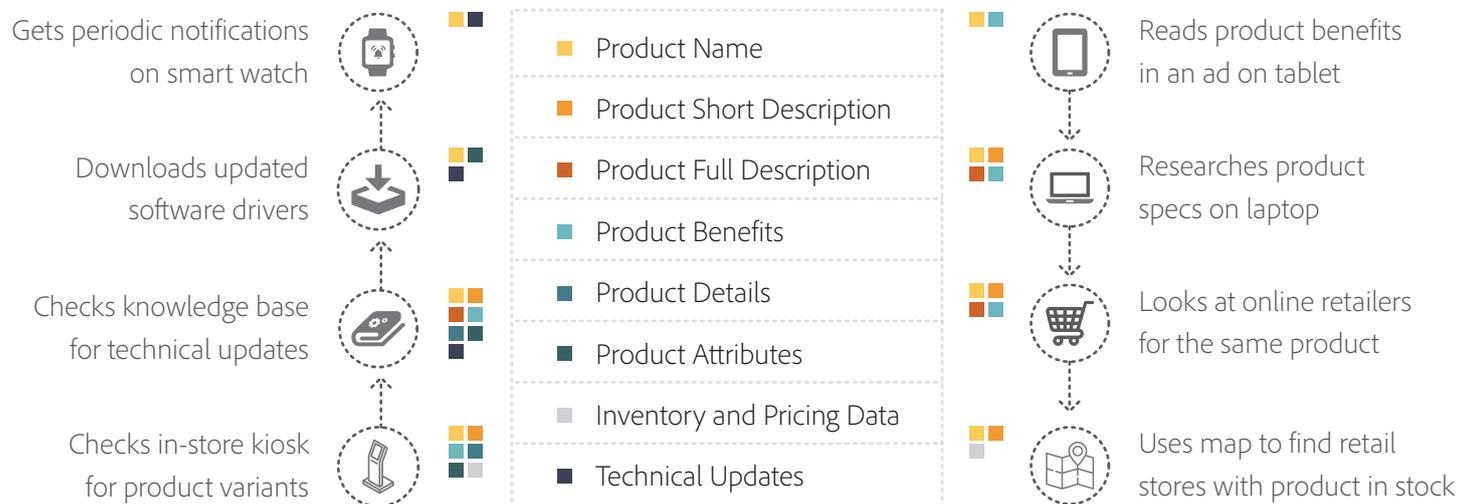


Figure 4: Unified content library

¹³ Do consumers want content from brands or trusted third parties?

¹⁴ How the 2015 B2B Purchase Decision Process Has Changed

¹⁵ Trusted content is key to consumer purchasing decisions

Understanding customer journeys

Knowing more about how customers go about their journeys is an important step toward knowing where and what type of content needs to be made available. A good customer journey will explore all of the touchpoints, from the initial phase of general awareness of a need to change the status quo—do something different, be more efficient, make life easier—through to buying a product or subscribing to a service, and beyond that to the use of the service of product, which then affects the renewal phase.¹⁶ In addition to the information gathered by marketers and user experience professionals, content professionals should be looking at what content should be made available at each touchpoint.

The focus needs to be on ensuring that the consumers can find the answers to their questions, and move ahead with confidence to the next stage in the journey. That content becomes part of the unified content library, ready to be used in multiple contexts along the way, to provide consistent, accurate, and informative messaging.

A company selling power inverters and battery chargers had focused on explaining their products and their benefits. The company discovered that the typical consumer—for example, a boat or recreational vehicle owner—came to the site only at purchase time, and then tended to search by voltage and output. That indicated that the site needed more searchable information about the technical specifications of their products, while content related to educating consumers about the existence of, and benefits of, their products needed to be more prominent in places where consumers discussed recreational vehicles.

¹⁶ From touchpoints to journeys: Seeing the world as customers do

Figuring out an integrated delivery system

Figuring out how to store, manage, and deliver content from a unified library takes a certain level of content management expertise. It's not enough to create solid editorial copy. Underpinning the editorial aspect is one or more sophisticated technical layers that help software systems understand the structure and intent of the content. This, in turn, allows for better findability, both for the content professionals looking for content within their own systems, as well as better content findability for consumers through targeted searches and search engines. An integrated delivery method also means having the ability to scale through automation.

Because computers can be taught to understand the underlying semantics and metadata, in a way that computers cannot understand the intent and nuance of natural language, the technical layer is an important aspect of turning copy into content. When computers understand what to do with content, they can be left to reliably deliver the content to the intended places without needing human intervention.

Many organizations try but fail to adopt a delivery system that allows them to manage content as a valuable business asset. To minimize the risk of failure, it helps to take a balanced approach. The main success factors are:

- Content developers—the marketing and technical writers, editors, visual designers, reviewers, and so on—who are willing to embrace both editorial excellence and technical excellence. These dual aspects may require using a more sophisticated tool set, giving up the desire to handcraft all content or manage the content in silos, and paying more attention to the digital aspects of content—such as the content's metadata. Change can be uncomfortable, but content developers soon become attached to the production efficiencies and other benefits that are associated with upping their skill sets.
- Technologists who understand the unique needs of content. Projects that involve changing content delivery systems are likely to have roles such as a solutions architect, and systems integrators. The team should involve an enterprise content strategist. To be effective, the professionals in all of these roles must be able to distinguish the nuance of managing content from the principles of managing data. Having a team of professionals who can work with content developers to determine the value to be derived from content, understand how to model content, and automate its delivery for consistency, accuracy, and scale can tremendously increase the chance of a project's success.
- A fit-for-purpose delivery system. Here, "system" means an organic set of principles and procedures, but by necessity, includes software systems. Many times, the systems in use are for the convenience of the technology team or because of a financial decision made by executives; the actual requirements needed to deliver content got lost in the process. There's no point in having great content that is well-structured and modelled, but ultimately created and stored in a system that is inadequate to manage content in a way that derives the desired benefits.

Adopting a CODA framework

The concept of CODA (Create Once, Deliver Anywhere) is an emerging framework to cope with an omnichannel environment.¹⁷ The basic premise is that an organization assembles a content library (Figure 5) where the content contains the following properties:

- Content is stored as objects. Each object should be usable, as a self-contained piece of content, or could be aggregated with other objects to create a new context.
- Each content object in the library is unique. Duplication is eliminated, so that there is a “single source of truth” for every topic.
- The content is semantically structured. This means that the structure itself contains enough meaning that computers know how to filter and use content across contexts.
- The content is metadata-rich. This provides the ability to efficiently store content that is adaptive for multiple contexts, and that can be discovered and filtered for re-use.

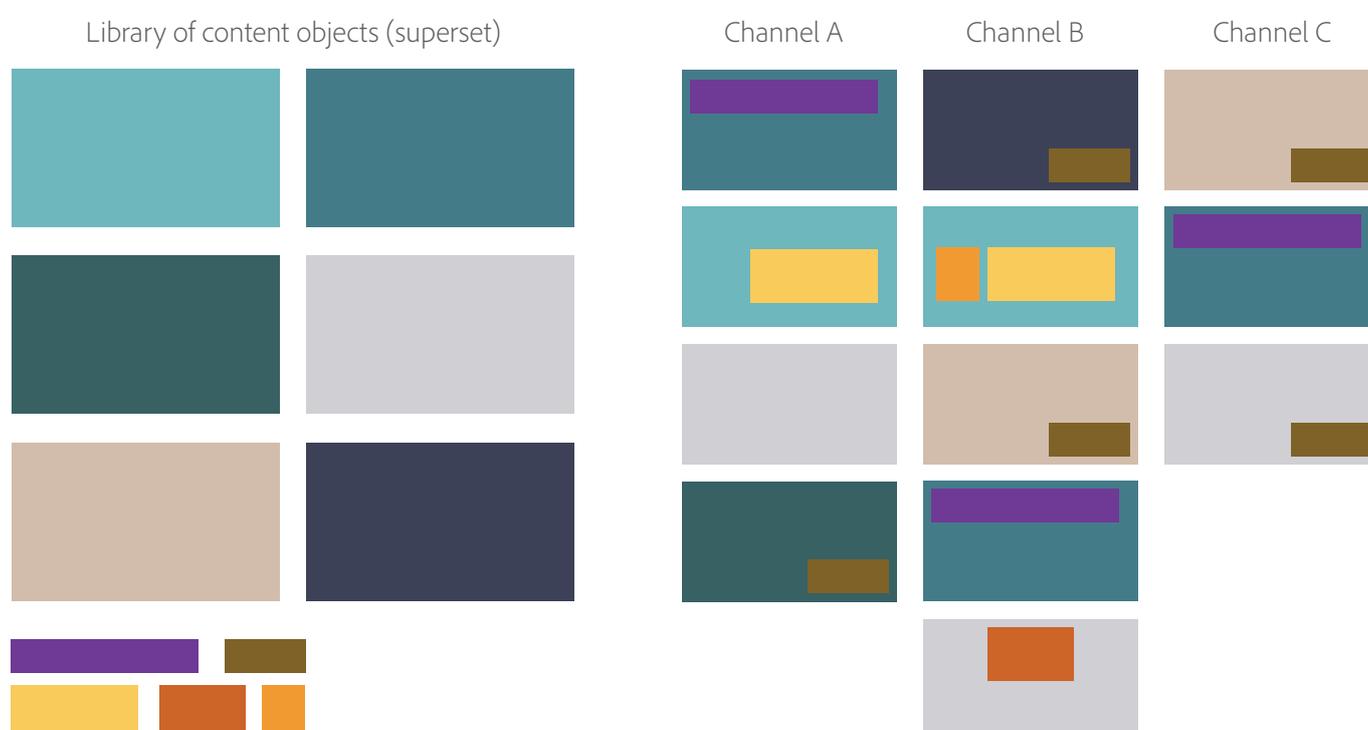


Figure 5: Visualisation of CODA principles

Having painted that vision, it should be said that, overwhelmingly, web developers and content developers alike have shown a reluctance to adopt new ways of working and new systems. Constructing content with all of the properties that enable delivery through a CODA framework could be rendered futile unless the systems used to create, manage, and store content, and the systems used to deliver and present content can handle the complexities of content. The idea of providing a power-editing environment for content developers must stop being a foreign notion. Web developers must be willing to push control of content upstream to the content developers. Content developers must be prepared to take control of the content process. They must be willing to work with technical content developers whose competencies lie in that area. Finally, all of these groups must be connected to fit for purpose systems that can track, assemble, and present content as a service.¹⁸ The concept of constructing “pages” diminishes in relevance as content developers need to chunk and tag content to be delivered in multiple contexts, and rely on sophisticated systems to store and serve up that content on-demand.

¹⁷ How to cope with the increased demands on content

¹⁸ Personalized, Contextually Relevant Content: CaaS (Content as a Service)

Taking a view to the future of content production

As technologies evolve, the number and complexity of delivery channels increases; the resourcing does not, and likely should not. A lot can be done with existing content, with some additional sophistication in the skill sets that content developers bring to the table, and with some additional sophistication in the tools in play. As content producers – digital content managers, content strategists, and content developers – look for efficiencies at the delivery end, they are also looking for the back-end power-editing environments that will allow them to keep pace with the complexities of the corporate need for omnichannel delivery. On the technology adoption curve¹⁹, the innovators have integrated semantically rich, structured content for omnichannel delivery, and the industry is now poised to bridge the chasm to bring early adopters on board. A definite shift is beginning, where marketers are no longer avoiding discussions that involve semantic enrichment of content, and have begun asking how this might be implemented.

On the tools side, the industry has been slower to respond. Instead of adding complexity, better integrations of existing tools should bear the burden of managing the content and routing it in all of its configurations. Yet the vast majority of technology platforms continue to operate in their silos, counting on consultants – the knowledge in any given consulting firm can vary wildly, with knowledge walking out the door as senior consultants move jobs – to integrate systems in a way that seamlessly allows for power editing, management, and delivery of content.

One of the pioneering and visionary companies in the digital experience space, Adobe, has taken on the challenge of making content available from the marketing side, created directly within its market-leading web content management system [Adobe Experience Manager \(AEM\)](#), and from the technical side, created in structured FrameMaker.²⁰ Recently, Adobe introduced a ground-breaking solution to this effect: [XML Documentation Add-on for Adobe Experience Manager](#).

By making Adobe Experience Manager DITA-aware, XML Documentation Add-on for AEM extends its capabilities and transforms it into a full-fledged enterprise-class DITA CCMS. The end-to-end solution allows both types of content developers to use the tools most appropriate for them, and manage all of the content in a single repository within AEM. This means that delivering the right content to the right consumers at the right time is possible without the inevitable hurdles and delays experienced by the average content developer. The integration of FrameMaker with AEM in XML Documentation Add-on for AEM signifies a huge step ahead for corporations wanting the power of omnichannel without extensive enterprise-level rework. With the convergence of marketing and technical content across enterprises, this new-age Adobe solution will empower teams to create valuable experiences that build the brand, drive demand, and extend the reach and ROI of customer-facing content, pre-sale and post-sale.

A large ecommerce site depended on their customer, in this case “store owners”, staying active on their site. The competitive advantage of the operation was a combination of the usage policies and the user experience of their site. Their marketing material carefully integrated informational content from the procedural side of their content library, presenting it in ways that showed store owners the advantages of doing business with them.

The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, said that the only constant is change, and the velocity of that evolution in the content production industry continues to increase over time – that has held true since the 1980s and shows no signs of slowing. As technologies change, consumers will continually be presented with new ways of consuming content: from mobile to wearables, from kiosks to chatbots, from IoT device interfaces to pervasive content, and beyond. It is encouraging to know that there are options already for corporations that wish to use content as part of their competitive advantage.

¹⁹ Technology adoption lifecycle

²⁰ Integration with Leading Content Management Systems

Biography



Rahel Anne Bailie blends techniques from multiple disciplines into content strategies with business impact. As Chief Knowledge Officer for Scroll (UK), she runs the content strategy practice, consulting for a wide range of clients who want to leverage their content as business assets. She also teaches in the Content Strategy Master's Program at FH-Joanneum, runs the Content, Seriously meetup, and is working on her third book on writing structured content. She is a Fellow of the Society for Technical Communication, a certified UX practitioner, co-author of Content Strategy: Connecting the dots between business, brand, and benefits, and co-editor of The Language of Content Strategy.

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