

Why doesn't anyone read my content? A three-step process to building audience insight

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Many content marketing campaigns fail for the simple reason that the target audience doesn't read or view the content. Ensuring your content is both relevant and valuable seems so obvious, yet many marketers generate the wrong material because they lack an understanding of their audience's needs and interests.

If content marketing is to be successful, deep insight is needed. Unfortunately, many companies generate content that seems to be written for an internal audience, rather than for prospective customers. This is particularly true in technology, where content is frequently produced by subject-matter experts, who tend to focus on the things that matter most to the engineers developing the product, rather than the features that benefit the users. This is often inevitable as these experts have invested so much of their time and effort into the long, complex development process, that they grossly overestimate the importance of the innovation, resulting in content that feels like a data sheet.

Creating great content requires a three-step process to build insight about the audience. You must: 1) determine the prospects' position in the sales cycle, 2) understand their needs and 3) profile their interests.

1. Firstly, content marketing needs to educate and add value, in order to meet the needs of the audience. To achieve this, however, marketers must produce a range of content appropriate for each stage of the sales cycle. Content designed for prospects at the top of the sales funnel will be very different from what is needed to help prospects move from desire to action, and decide which product to purchase.
2. Understanding the needs of the audience is perhaps the most challenging step. Their needs are not your needs, in fact it's unlikely that your prospective customers' needs will be the same as anyone in your organisation. You have to understand the customer, building deep insight into their situation, rather than project your prejudices onto their situation.

Customer needs are both hard and soft. Hard needs are often easier to understand ('I need a widget to improve the performance of my system by x per cent'), and should be met by the features of your product. As a result they are relatively easy to address in your content.

Soft needs, however, are very different, and often personal. They can range from managing project risk – choosing a solution that they feel confident will work – to building the customer's personal status in their organisation. In technology, soft needs are often conflicting: an engineer wants to use the latest, coolest innovation, yet also wants something that has been proven to work reliably so that risk is minimised. Building insight requires time to be invested in engaging customers, both with quantitative surveys and qualitative in-depth conversations.

3. To be successful in content marketing, your content must stand out from your competitors' and be interesting. Not all decisions about which product to use are exciting, and believe it or not, your audience won't wake up in the morning hoping to discuss the pros and cons of your company and its offerings. It's therefore important to use your research to understand what interests and excites your audience. If you can link your content to something that interests them, they're much more likely to read it. Be brave, step away from the dull corporate language, and give your content some personality.

Finally, letting prospective customers know about the content is also critical. While it's a bit of a cliché, if content is king, then distribution really is queen. Effectively reaching your audience also requires insight: understanding the channels they use and the best ways to grab their attention.

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