

copyblogger

A Content Marketing Strategy That Works

The 7-Step Process to
Building an Audience that
Builds Your Business



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Foreword:

What Makes Content Marketing Work?

It's a good question. And believe it or not, there is an answer.

We have a saying around Copyblogger Media: "Authority Rules."

Establishing yourself as an authority in your topic is a great way to build any business more quickly ...

- It pulls prospects into your orbit, instead of forcing you to go hunt them down,
- It engages prospects, rather than hitting them with hyped-up pitch after pitch,
- And it makes you the go-to resource when prospects need your type of product or service.

But where does authority come from in the first place?

Turning to web culture, take an example like Perez Hilton — or Paris Hilton or that matter. Perez isn't an authority, at least not in the sense we're talking about here. He (and Paris) get attention. He has a big audience. He gets lots of traffic.

But no one really wants Perez's advice on ... well ... anything.

Oprah Winfrey — whether you like her or not — is an authority. So is Martha Stewart.

And Richard Branson. And the Dalai Lama.

Their authority comes from the fact that they make people's lives better, in part by giving advice.

Authorities make someone's life better

- Oprah connects her audience with experts on resolving emotional and health issues.
- Martha Stewart gives advice about creating more beauty and harmony in the home.
- Richard Branson runs companies that are focused on giving great value in a fun way. He also dispenses business advice in his books and interviews.
- The Dalai Lama is a teacher (in fact, the word "guru" means teacher) before anything else. His goal is to teach all sentient beings to be at peace and free from suffering.

There are certainly more accomplished domestic goddesses than Martha Stewart. And Oprah Winfrey's track record for emotional and health issues is a little bumpy.

But Stewart and Winfrey have audiences. They're doing and teaching. And no, contrasted with what you may have heard, those who can't do usually can't teach either.

Authority comes from the audience

It's fine to "appoint yourself" at the beginning of your quest for authority, to have confidence in your abilities and in the value you can provide.

But it can't end there.

Authority comes from the people you help.

When you're just starting out, authority may come from free advice – like it does for Winfrey and Stewart, who use free broadcast media to build their platforms. As your business model evolves, you may shift to offering paid advice (coaching, paid education, or other models). Or you may continue to offer the advice for free, as marketing for your paid products or services.

Typically, you'll have a mix of paid and free ways you can help others. We'll be talking a lot more about that.

Authority also comes from you

If you lack the confidence to step forward and talk about what you know, you're not going to build authority.

If you give bad advice or have a lousy product or service, you're not going to build authority.

If you put your own ego before your audience, you're not going to build authority.

Authority comes from taking what you know best and sharing it with others for their benefit.

And, incidentally, to *your* benefit. Because the more you give, the more you'll find it benefits your business ... *if* you're strategic about converting your raving fans into customers (we'll be talking more about that, too).

Before you have authority-building content, you're going to need a content strategy.

Now it's time for you to jump into *A Content Marketing Strategy That Works*.

In other words, the kind of strategy that creates this very specific type of authority with your audience.

Keep reading to discover:

- The strange trick authority does to your prospect's brain
- How to become more important than the "experts"
- Why Google keeps getting better at mimicking offline authority
- What to focus on for better search engine rankings (it's not what you think)
- The 7-step process all effective content marketing follows
- What is a minimum viable audience (and how do you get one)?
- The "unfair advantage" that comes from content marketing

Sonia Simone

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A Content Marketing Strategy That Works The 7-Step Process to Building an Audience That Builds Your Business

by *Brian Clark*

au•thor•i•ty

noun

the power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior.

A television reporter dresses up in a security guard's uniform and sets up in front of a Las Vegas bank. He places a sign on the bank's ATM embellished with a big gold badge and the following message:

"OUT OF ORDER – GIVE DEPOSITS
TO GUARD ON DUTY."

Bank customers start showing up. Each time, the fake guard smiles and asks if the customer wants to make a deposit or withdrawal.

This whole scenario is ridiculous, right? No bank would conduct business this way.

And yet, customer after customer handed over their cash, checks, Social Security numbers, credit cards, account numbers, PIN codes ... you name it. Out of 10 people, only one hesitated, but even he complied seconds later.

When the reporter revealed the deception and asked the flabbergasted victims why they handed him money and private information, they all gave pretty much the same answer:

“Because of the uniform. Because of the sign.”

In other words, they complied because the man standing in front of the ATM was perceived as *authoritative* and therefore, trustworthy. Why?

Neuroscience reveals the somewhat frightening answer: brain scans show that the decision-making parts of our brains often shut down when we encounter authoritative advice or direction.

That's part of what makes authority so powerful. And why authority carries great responsibility.

When you're looking to influence people and build a powerful business online, authority is the way to go. People respect other people who have authority, expertise, and impressive credentials just like they respect people in lab coats and police uniforms.

And they respect authority even more when you *demonstrate* it rather than claim it.

Simply put, authority makes you more important in the eyes of others ...someone who should be listened to and treated better. And it's not just people who operate this way.

Google Loves Authority Too

"We believed we could build a better search. We had a simple idea, that not all pages are created equal. Some are more important." – Sergey Brin, Co-Founder, Google

The initial idea that set Google apart and made it the most popular search engine in the world was originally quite innovative. Rather than simply looking at the page itself, it looked at the links pointing to the page in order to determine which pages were more important, or authoritative.

Google's mission is to serve search results in a way that best reflects the way things work offline. Their algorithms have constantly evolved in line with this goal, especially in response to massive efforts to game those algorithms in an unnatural way that gives undeserving pages an advantage over more deserving content.

"It's quite complicated and sounds circular, but we've worked out a way of calculating a website's importance."

– Larry Page, Co-Founder, Google

As Google's algorithmic approach evolved, the emphasis on highly-linked pages online did as well. The overall authority of the site which the pages appeared on became important as well. The amount of content on a website and the overall number of links coming into it became a further indication of trust and overall authority.

Trusted, authoritative sites which had large amounts of content and copious amounts of links had a huge advantage at ranking. This led to the “content farm” model, where sites with huge authority got away with ranking for reams of search terms with low-quality content from unknown, unskilled authors.

The response was the Google Panda update. Low-quality content was no longer going to rank simply because of site authority. And for the first time, Google started to analyze the overall editorial focus of the website, meaning you’re only going to rank for terms that you focus on heavily.

“To rank well, build a site so fantastic that it makes you an authority in your niche.”

– Matt Cutts, Head of the Google Web Spam Team

Authority is central to any content marketing strategy. Now that we've made it clear, let's figure out how to make it work for you.

What Makes Online Authority Happen?

SEO is the art and science of ranking high in the search engines (most importantly Google) for the words people are actually using to find what you have to offer.

It boils down to this:

If people think you're important, so will Google.

This perplexes many webmasters and online marketers, since they wonder how people will consider them important when people use search engines to find things online in the first place. How are you important if you're invisible in the search engines to start with?

And how does Google know people think you're important anyway?

For one, they know because people link to you, and Google follows those links to index and rank web pages. Google knows who individual authors are, and how many people follow them on a topical basis.

Services such as the Google Toolbar, Analytics, Feedburner, Gmail, and others that keep you logged in to your Google account – the Big G has an enormous amount of usage data that shows what people actually spend time doing online.

So, there's that. But how do you kick it off?

To get people to link to you and generally pay attention in the first place, you have to start thinking about authority in a different sense. Luckily, any dictionary will get you on the right path with the *other* definition of authority.

Content and Citation: How to Build Online Authority

au•thor•i•ty

noun

- [1] A citation (e.g. from a book) used in defense or support;
- [2] the source from which the citation is drawn;
- [3] an individual cited or appealed to as an expert.

In order to get the power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior online, you need to become an authority that others cite (link to) in their online content. Which means, of course, you need a content-rich website that demonstrates your authority in the first place.

Your content actually demonstrates your expertise, compared with a website or bio page that *claims* expertise. This is a crucial distinction, because it truly levels the playing field and allows anyone to come along and build authority that outpaces even recognized and credentialed experts in a particular niche or field.

How is this possible? Well, it's due to the one essential truth about how both people and Google perceive authority:

What other people say about you is more important than what you say about yourself.

Authority is all about perception. Perceived authority can outrank actual authority, because both the general population and the most powerful search engine on the planet look to what others “vote” to be the most relevant expertise for any given topic, rather than some other method that might give a different result.

Let me give you an example.

Let’s say Professor X is the world’s foremost authority on green widgets. This guy really knows his stuff when it comes to green widgets, and he’s got the PhD in green widgetology to prove it. He’s also published several scholarly papers on the topic of green widgets, but unfortunately those demonstrations are deemed too valuable to publish freely online.

Bad move, Professor X.

Then there’s Ned Newbie. Ned is passionate about green widgets, even though he didn’t quite make it to graduate school. Ned is teaching himself everything there is to know about green widgets by doing his own research and reading everything he can get his hands on.

The scholarly journals won't touch Ned with a 10-foot pole. That's okay, though: Ned decides to blog about green widgets, then share what he's learned so far with anyone who's interested. It doesn't matter that Ned doesn't know as much about green widgets as Professor X (yet), because Ned figures his own understanding of the topic will increase by having to transform his research into content that can be viewed across the planet.

Ned's absolutely right. And here's the good part ... whenever someone needs to cite (link to) a web page when mentioning green widgets, they link to Ned.

Two years later, Brad Pitt confesses a fascination for green widgets during a Barbara Walters interview. Suddenly, everyone is hot to find out more about green widgets. Search traffic surges, reporters are digging for sources ... it's downright green widget mania.

Who will people find? Who will the media contact?

That's right ... it'll be Ned. Sorry, Professor X.

The key to becoming an authority in any area is to learn all you can, and share all you can. Then you make money by selling something related to your authority, and even by repackaging the content you've already created.

So ... how do you get there?

Authority Stems from a Minimum Viable Audience

Authority is central to a smart content marketing strategy. However, authority is earned from and granted by an audience. And there's plenty of work to do before you grow an audience size viable enough to make you and your brand into online authorities.

You're on the right track when you've achieved a minimum viable audience ("MVA"). This is the point when the true power of social media distribution and a direct relationship with your prospects kicks in.

How do you know when you've got one? You have a MVA when:

- You're receiving enough feedback from comments, emails, social networks, and social media news sites in order to adapt and evolve your content to better serve the audience.

- You're growing your audience organically at a faster rate thanks to social media sharing by existing audience members and resulting earned media.

- You're gaining insight into what the audience needs to solve their problems or satisfy their desires beyond the free education you're providing (i.e. products and services).

Now you know the goal (authority), and the catalyst that creates it (audience). Let's take a look at a comprehensive strategy framework for getting you there, so you can begin to reap the benefits.

The “7 A” Strategy Framework for Content Marketing Success

I have a confession to make.

When I started doing what we now call online content marketing (back in the ancient 1990s), I didn't have a nice tidy framework to guide me. Mostly, I screwed up a lot (and learned a little).

Even by 2005, when I felt I had a decent clue of what I was doing, the “process” was still a very improvisational mess. And I certainly didn't have a neat 7-step paradigm where each step conveniently starts with the letter A.

Agile content marketing really is a fluid process that can be incredibly lucrative:

- Research to find things that might work
- Try those things out in front of everyone
- Observe, adapt, and try slightly smarter things
- Let your winners ride, then do it all over again

That said, I've had a lot of time to think about my particularly messy process and turn it into something useable for others. And, naturally, the copywriter in me just loves that I came up with a neat paradigm where each step conveniently starts with the letter A.

The Amazing Benefits of Authority

If it makes you feel any better, I worked on this framework for close to five years. Not that it's so complicated, but rather because I wanted to make sure it was actually accurate and useful.

As you might have guessed by this point, it started with a single "A".

The center point of content marketing for me has always been authority, both in the sense of its powerful influence on human psychology and as a way to make Google love you without any of the black-hat tactics.

Based on that, my first attempt at a workable framework was *attention, authority, and action*. Those are the three core components from a tactical standpoint.

As things started to take off at a greater pace each year with

Copyblogger, I added *acceleration* as a final fourth phase, mainly because I was truly bowled over by the unfair advantage an audience brought me.

But important things were still missing. There was an “A” word to describe one of them, but that word was so overused and misconstrued, I fought against it long and hard before finally conceding that it was absolutely perfect, if understood properly.

A critical aspect is *authenticity*. It’s not about oversharing, or what you had for lunch, or even what you feel is real. It is, in the words of Seth Godin, the story the audience wants to hear, delivered in a likeable human voice.

An *authentic* story is how you develop an *audience* based on *agile* content development principles. Suddenly, we’ve arrived at a 7A strategy framework.

A Strategy Framework and a Checklist

After running it through the mental wringer, I believe this 7-step framework is applicable to any content topic, and works for building any viable audience.

How you apply this framework to your own content marketing will naturally be unique to your own situation. Take what you find useful, leave other things, but be careful not to dismiss anything outright, as there isn't any fluff included.

Make sure to follow the provided links for more information (concentrated in the crucial *authority* and *attention* phases). I'll also be elaborating on much of this in future articles and podcasts, but for now, let's get you started.

1. Agile

As emphasized in the predecessor to this ebook, *A Business Case for Agile Content Marketing* ([download it here if you haven't read it](#)), content marketing is an inherently agile process thanks to the real-time nature of the web and the ever-evolving nature of your

audience. Make smart guesses based on your initial research, but realize that you're involved in a constant iterative process based on continued research and constant audience feedback.

Checklist:

- Embrace an agile content marketing mindset

- Identify the "producer" (the person who directs strategy and the content creators)

- Build a team of content creators for text, audio, and video

- Adopt smart research tools

- Acquire a content optimization solution

- Obtain connection and relationship tools

2. Authentic

This isn't the trite buzzword served up from your friendly neighborhood social media guru. This is about doing intense research to find the authentic story a market segment wants to hear — but hasn't yet — and how you'll tell it over time in a way that results in a sustainable business model.

Checklist:

Research potential topics based on your expertise or business subject matter

Identify the people who would be drawn to what your topic covers

Do [keyword research](#) to discover the language the audience uses

Identify online and offline content resources that reach your intended audience

Do competitive research on those who are selling to your intended audience

[Position your topic](#) in a useful and unique way that facilitates commerce

Design your site so that it [highlights your content](#) and communicates the useful and unique value you offer

Identify and plan your initial [cornerstone content](#)

3. Attention

You've made your initial guesses, and now it's time to start putting things out there to see what happens. You're hustling for exposure to get to the next level. The attention phase is the heart of an agile content marketing approach, as you're discovering in real time what

works, what doesn't, and what to try next.

Checklist:

Develop and refine your [editorial voice](#)

Test appropriate headlines and hooks (meaning + fascination)

Develop relationships with other producers to [contribute guest content](#)

Develop relationships with other producers for [content promotion](#)

Focus on [converting traffic into subscribers](#), with an [emphasis on email](#)

[Monitor analytics](#) for traffic sources and keyword patterns

Build up your [social media networks](#) with a mix of content and curation

Constantly refine your approach to all of the above to increase effectiveness

4. Audience

Here's where things start to get good. You've built a minimum viable audience. That audience is growing thanks to the audience itself, and instead of you making self-serving statements about your expertise, they are starting to proclaim your authority. Best of all, you're starting to glean valuable insights into desired new or re-positioned products and services.

Checklist:

- Monitor social media sharing of your content for feedback

- Build additional cornerstone landing pages on core topics

- Perform open-ended question surveys to identify frustrations and desires

- Create processes for storing and accessing product and service ideas

5. Authority

You've arrived, but don't slow down. The key to the resulting benefits of action and acceleration depends on the intelligent expansion of authority. Remember that the goal is to become the likable expert – arrogance is not an aspect of the 7A content marketing strategy.

Checklist:

Evaluate co-marketing and joint venture product opportunities

Expand industry influence with webinars, interviews, and presentations

Create a specialized email list for advanced education and future promotions

Re-position editorial as necessary for impending product or service launches

Create better positioning and copy approaches based on audience feedback

6. Action

Although you've been asking for audience-building action all along, now we're talking sales and lead generation. It's time to launch that new product. Or, it's time to switch to proactive promotion based on your more accurate view of your existing offer based on what the audience has been telling you directly (and indirectly) via feedback.

Checklist:

Hint repeatedly at the upcoming product or service well before launch

Create a pre-launch email list and encourage subscriptions

Devise a content-based launch strategy that specifically educates to sell

Craft an ongoing promotional strategy with high-value content to pitch ratio

Listen to feedback from customers and clients to build feature improvements

Test various copy approaches to increase conversions

Develop marketing partners and/or an affiliate program

7. Acceleration

Now it's time to enjoy the "unfair advantage" you've earned by building an audience (and, simultaneously, a media asset) first. Opportunities such as joint ventures for new products, affiliate and co-marketing partnerships, additional content from industry experts, better business development, and much more will arise at this point.

There isn't a true checklist for this phase, as your experience will vary by many factors. However, some of the things that will come into play are:

- Whether you're a big brand or a small business
- At the enterprise stage, C-level buy in
- Growth / ambition / lifestyle goals
- Tolerance for "entangling alliances" for growth
- Willingness to accept venture funding for growth
- Desire to shift from services to products
- Ambition to become a multi-product company

One thing that's certain during the acceleration phase is *editorial iteration*. As the site grows, and your business offerings grow with it, your content focus will evolve along with the natural outside forces that affect your industry and audience.