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The hidden costs of content creation

Understanding the real cost of content creation and how process efficiencies can save your marketing team time and money

Introduction

In a digital environment that seems to become more saturated with advertising messages and product offers every single day, consumers have learned to tune out the noise. Research shows that 94% of searchers now skip right past the ads at the top of a search query.[1] Ad blockers and other techniques further allow consumers to avoid the constant onslaught of digital banner ads they would otherwise face every time they open a web browser.

According to an eMarketer study, 78.6 million internet users will use an adblocker at least once a month in 2021.[2]

At the same time, consumers still have needs that must be met. Yet, they increasingly expect brands to deliver personalized product experiences that provide more of the information they want to know—when they want to know it.

In order to meet consumer demand for differentiated product experiences, quality content is essential. According to a recent Hubspot survey, well executed content marketing strategies equate to big benefits for marketers and their brands.[3]

1. https://www.smartinsights.com/search-engine-optimisation-seo/seo-analytics/comparison-of-google-clickthrough-rates-by-position/

2. https://www.emarketer.com/chart/230160/us-ad-blocking-users-2018-2021-millions-change-of-internet-users

3. https://www.hubspot.com/state-of-marketing

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3X
Content marketing delivers 3x as many leads as other marketing channels

13X
Content marketers who blog are 13x more likely to see positive ROI

62%
When executed efficiently, content marketing costs 62% less than other marketing channels

Inefficient content creation is holding marketers back

While most marketing teams are no stranger to the ROI of content, the idea that marketers can generate budget savings by pivoting to a content marketing strategy likely has more than a few marketers scratching their heads. This is because, historically, inefficient content creation processes tend to prevent marketing teams from optimizing each step—from initial idea to final, published product. Instead, the total cost of ownership—or in this case, the total cost of content (TCC)—becomes bloated by a variety of hidden costs that slow lead times to a crawl, create a need for countless rounds of edits, and force marketers to handhold content along the way.

Dissecting the total cost of content
It can be helpful to think about TCC like an iceberg. Above the surface are the costs marketers can see. Underneath, hidden costs create inherent process inefficiencies that hold marketing teams back from building lean, efficient content programs.

The budget: Every content project starts with a scope of work. Typically, this includes project management, content creation and design, rounds of editing and compliance checks, and even web publishing.

But under the surface, unnecessary costs may be hiding in your content budget:

Time considerations
How long does it take to produce new content? Is this timeline driven by multiple reviews? Who has to sign off on a piece of content before it can be published?

Bandwidth considerations
Do slow content processes take away time from marketers and content creators that could be allocated toward additional brand-building activities?
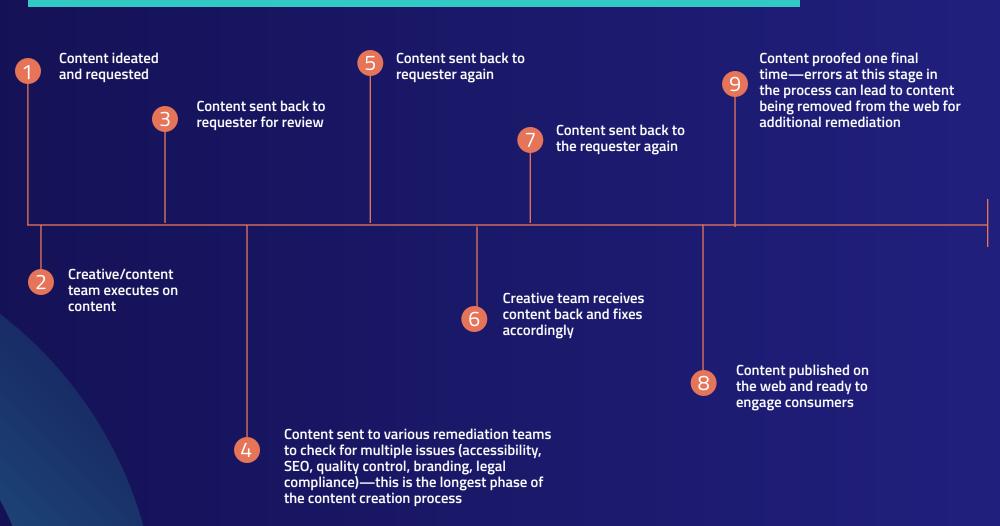
The cost of remediation
How do routine content compliance audits, accessibility audits, SEO audits and website quality checks affect your review team's ability to prioritize new content development? Additionally, what does it cost to go back and correct content issues found through these audits?

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A closer look at the content creation process

To get a better idea of the impact each of these hidden costs has on TCC, let's take a look at the typical content creation process.

MOST CONTENT CREATION PROCESSES INCLUDE NINE DISTINCT STEPS:

1 Content ideated and requested

2 Creative/content team executes on content

3 Content sent back to requester for review

4 Content sent to various remediation teams to check for multiple issues (accessibility, SEO, quality control, branding, legal compliance)—this is the longest phase of the content creation process

5 Content sent back to requester again

6 Creative team receives content back and fixes accordingly

7 Content sent back to the requester again

8 Content published on the web and ready to engage consumers

9 Content proofed one final time—errors at this stage in the process can lead to content being removed from the web for additional remediation

If this process sounds familiar, you're not alone.

It's an incredibly common approach, and for many brands, it has produced powerful marketing results. But the simple truth is that this traditional nine-step content marketing process leaves lots of valuable time and money on the table.

Inherent in its design are two dangerous assumptions.

1

The assumption that checking content for compliance across a variety of legal, accessibility, branding and SEO goals must come after the content has already been produced.

2

The assumed need for a decentralized process of review that requires shuffling between different expert teams (marketing, legal, web dev, etc.) to achieve the final product.

By making a few simple adjustments to this strategy, marketing teams can begin to reduce duplicate efforts and eliminate unnecessary steps that add more cost and time. In the next section, we'll explore three simple steps marketing teams can take to uncover new efficiencies that will help to drive faster, more-cost effective content creation.

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Improving TCC one step at a time

1 Execute better content from the beginning

One of the most impactful ways to reduce your TCC is to get closer to "done" on the first shot. Of course, your marketing team—and more specifically copywriters and designers—want to create strong content from the very first draft. Yet, many creative teams simply don't have the background in SEO or accessibility to make that happen—and as a result, content creation teams are missing out on valuable opportunities to drive a more efficient process.

Use the following SEO and accessibility tips as a starting place to begin educating your content teams and driving stronger content execution at the source.

SEO Tips:

Build from effective keyword research

Upfront keyword research offers a useful way to understand your customers and gear content to address the specific challenges and questions they are encountering in the marketplace. A "keyword bible"—whether sourced internally or externally—should accompany every new content initiative.

Prioritize accurate headlines, meta titles and descriptions

These summaries and snippets of content allow Google to better crawl your website and serve content to its users. Save a step later on—start building these descriptions in from the start.

Add in high-value backlinks

Backlinking between content streamlines the content journey for customers and can even help build credibility. Train content teams to think of content as a journey and to look for logical jumping off points to additional content that will drive customers toward conversion. Adding these links to the copy docs will mean your designers never miss a beat.

Accessibility Tips:

Write to a 6th-grade reading level

Aim to produce content at a 12-year-old reading level to minimize comprehension issues and include more users. Not to mention, aiming to write clearly regardless of grade level typically results in better research and writing from the start.

Include alternative text with all images and graphics

Alternative text allows a screen reader to explain content to visually impaired users. Adding these simple descriptions now can speed accessible web design later in the process.

Prioritize high-contrast design

High-contrast designs improve clarity for all users—especially on CTA buttons or form fills where a user may abandon the user journey if they cannot decipher critical content. Start design projects with these goals in mind to minimize revisions and redesigns down the road.

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Improving TCC one step at a time

② Remove bottlenecks from the review process

Once a new piece of content is produced, it's time for the review process. Beyond copy or design edits, there are usually a handful of teams that will need to review before it can be published—including the broader marketing team, legal teams, brand teams and UX teams.

In most organizations, this process happens in multiple sub steps. After copy edits are made, content is handed off to the brand team for review, then to the accessibility team for review, and then it is handed off to legal for one final signoff. As content moves through each of these steps, it not only expends valuable time, but also creates versioning and review headaches for the individual(s) charged with managing the project from point A to B to C. Even when content is published and live, it will likely continue to need additional revisions later on as products change and best practices evolve.

To alleviate some of the inevitable bottlenecks, your review teams need help. Automating content review is one way highly efficient organizations are reducing the burden on their review teams and churning out brand-safe, accessible content quickly.

Here are a few policy-based strategies that can help stand up an always-on review process:

SEO + QA
Configure QA and SEO policies to identify existing pages and content that may not align with current SEO best practices. This might include headlines that are too many characters, broken backlinks and other SEO issues.

Accessibility
Set accessibility policies to look for instances of meta tags that don't convey meaning or images that are missing alt tags. These helpful features are critical for screen readers and other tools that many users rely on to navigate your website—and its content.

Brand consistency
Over time, it's inevitable that your brand will change. Maintain consistency by creating brand policies that search your website for outdated product names or missing trademarks. For example, track usage of the ® or ™ symbol on first product reference.

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(3) Turn analytics into fresh ideas

Up until this point, the recommendations in this eBook have focused on the section of the content creation process that happens after an idea has already been selected. But it's also important to consider the ideation phase of content creation when you think about the true TCC that goes into every project.

In a marketing world where content is king, struggling to develop relevant materials often allows entire pieces of content—once thought to fill a strategic void in the customer journey—to end up gathering dust in an online resource center. And, to fill that same hole, a new piece of content starts its way through the content creation process in hopes of a better response.

Leverage the data

To pick the right topic and meet your audience where they are, you need data.
Ask yourself these questions as you look through your content performance metrics:

43% of marketers

cited "developing content that resonates with our target audience" as a top content marketing challenge they faced in 2020, according to a recent SEMRUSH survey. [4]

Do you understand the user journey?

Consider where users stop and start their journeys, the answers they look for at each stage in the process, and how long it takes them to move from point A to B to C.

What topics do customers search the most on your website?

Keep track of high-performing content. What topics tend to resonate most with your customers, and what forms of content delivery do they prefer to address each one?

Do existing pieces of content really answer the questions customers are asking?

A simple look at webpage UX can provide a deeper look at where customers are dropping off. Do headlines match the content users are actually receiving?

Unlock a content strategy that puts your marketing team in control

In today's heavily saturated digital advertising ecosystem, the reason for content marketing is clear: it cuts through the advertising noise and delivers actionable insights customers can actually use in their buying journey. Without the right content creation process, it can also turn into a costly endeavor.

By following the cost-saving steps laid out in this guide, marketing teams can begin to take back control of the content creation process—streamlining lead times, reducing bandwidth challenges and saving plenty of handoff headaches between marketing, legal and brand teams.

Ready to see how Siteimprove can help your team rapidly adopt a winning content creating strategy that promotes stronger content the first time and faster reviews?

Visit Siteimprove to get started. ❯

https://siteimprove.com/en-us/

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