

The Experts Guide to Online Marketing

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Opinions and Developments on Online Marketing:
SEO, Content Marketing and Social Media

A White Paper by exploreB2B

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*Opinions and Developments on
Online Marketing: SEO, Content
Marketing and Social Media for
Companies*

Intro:

This project turned out to be more complicated than we ever imagined. For almost a year, we here at exploreB2B have researched the connections between SEO, social business strategies, and content marketing. We conducted many interviews with international experts, drew our own conclusions and successfully implemented according strategies into our own marketing efforts.

This report is our wrap up – a complete summary on what we have learned from our own experience and from the experts.

We conducted interviews with international experts on these topics. We took great care in selecting interview partners, basing our decisions not only on expertise, but on diversity. Among the interviewed experts you will find established and well-known marketers such as Lee Odden and Joe Chernov as well as young and successful entrepreneurs like Social Katy. We interviewed people who base their careers and everyday work on the assumption that their theories about these topics

are correct. The original interviews have been published on exploreB2B.

1. To put things in perspective: What is “Traditional SEO,” and does it still work?

With the more recent updates of the Google search engine algorithms “Panda” and “Penguin”, SEO experts worldwide have complained that SEO itself has become obsolete. This is because Google has effectively reduced the influence that links to the content have on the ranking of the content in the search results. Over the last 10 to 15 years, link building strategies and keyword optimisations were the primary ways of optimizing content for search results and there is no doubt that the downranking of links from link directories and article pages have hit the industry hard.

What we found in our research however is not that SEO is therefore obsolete, but that most experts agree that SEO needs to adapt to the current time. Content quality, social ratings and sharing currently become more relevant.

In his interview with us, Lee Odden explains how he came into the SEO business in 1997 and gives an impressive example that the current shift in SEO is not the first time the industry had to adapt:

LO: “Those were the days of the Yahoo! Directory, Excite, Lycos, HotBot, Alta Vista and later, paid inclusion to Inktomi. SEO tactics at the time focused on adding keywords to web pages, title tags, meta and

description tags. We created landing pages for each major search engine, modifying content and page formats to increase the chances of ranking on specific keywords for specific search engines. Submitting (and re-submitting) web sites to directories and getting them included on 'What's New' review lists attracted traffic and buyers."

For Lee Odden, who has a long-time SEO career, this was the rise of the SEO business. He was around for the first, big shift in search that came with the introduction of Google's search engine.

LO: "Google came on the scene and SEO focused a lot more on links."

As Lee Odden articulates it, SEO is something that has been constantly changing since its rise in the nineties. The focus on links, which is

Kevin Cain (KC):

Kevin Cain is the Director of Content Strategy for the Boston-based VC, OpenView Venture Partners. As one of the first VC firms to master content-based marketing, Kevin and his team have revolutionized the way VCs create their names through the production and distribution of optimized content.

very often viewed now as "traditional SEO," was the first evolution of original SEO.

While we do believe that Lee Odden's explanation on the early progression of SEO is very valuable to put things into perspective, we will focus this report on the more

Lee Odden (LO):

Lee Odden is the CEO of TopRank Online Marketing, editor at MarketingBlog.com and author of the new book, *Optimize: How to Attract and Engage More Customers by Integrating SEO, Social Media and Content Marketing*. He's been cited in the *New York Times*, *Forbes*, *The Economist* and *The Wall Street Journal* for his internet marketing and PR expertise and writes a Social Media Marketing column for ClickZ.

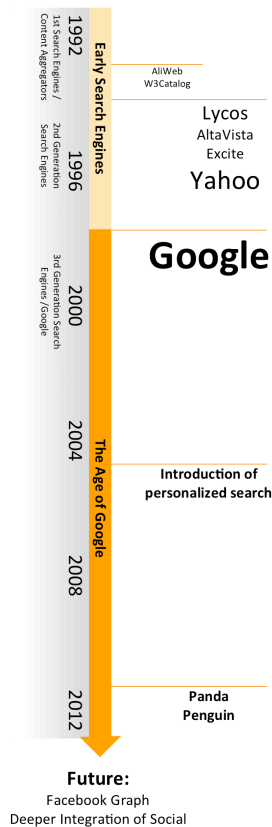
recent history of SEO and the changes that came with the recent Google updates. Kevin Cain summarizes the continued changes in SEO strategies:

KC: "SEO has evolved from being a somewhat formulaic process into an art and a science. Because of updates like Penguin and Panda, the rules of the game are in a continual state of flux. As a result, you can't rest your laurels and expect to get results. You've really got to evolve your strategy as Google continues to change."

Google keeps refining their algorithms to try to get better results for the person performing the search; every once in a while evolution leaps forward and marketers are able to adapt to this change. Kevin notes that these changes are something SEOs must live and come to terms with to adapt their strategies. While Kevin accepts this change, it has led to some frustration with other expert

optimizers, such as Adam Torkildson.

AT: "Every new algorithm change, all the new mobile initiatives, the localization and personalization, and the tightening of referring data in analytics all lead me to believe that Google is actively trying to put SEOs out of a job, and turn their search results into something impossible to influence in any way."



Opposing Adam’s viewpoint is Jonathan Gebauer who claims that even before Panda and Penguin, SEO could backfire on the optimizing party.

Adam Torkildson (AT):

Adam Torkildson is the VP of Operations at Customer Hook, a viral marketing company that helps businesses gain exposure, increase ROI, and create strategies for customer generation.

JG: "The thing about SEO strategy is that it can work in 'the now' but backfire in the future. This is not just due to Google’s algorithm updates, but also from over-optimizing content. Content might be good for search, but hard on readers’ eyes and brains."

He is also strongly advocating the use of SEO as part of an overall marketing strategy and not as a single traffic acquisition strategy.

JG: „SEO still is valid when used in conjunction with the production of high-quality content and as a technique to improve other marketing efforts. What is currently dying is SEO as a sole technique for driving traffic and profit.“

Jonathan Gebauer (JG):

Former mathematician, Jonathan Gebauer, is the CEO & co-founder of exploreB2B. As the main business developer and part exploreB2B's marketing team, Jonathan uses his scientific background and inherent creativity to propel growth for the social business platform.

Gisele Navarro Mendez (GM):

Gisele is a freelance social SEO consultant and blogger, coaching other bloggers and small business owners on how best to amplify their SEO. Gisele is the social community manager for Upstream Connections. You can find her blogging at In Social We Trust and on Twitter (@GiseleNMendez).

Jonathan's view of troublesome, over-optimized content is backed by Gisele Mendez, who also believes that SEO would have done better from the start if the client, the consumer, and the content had gotten more attention than dirty, optimization tricks.

GM: "Back then, SEO had very little to do with the actual site, it was not about the content and -most importantly- it was not about the clients: every move was planned based on how search engines worked. Nowadays, we all know that there's no room for a strategy that doesn't take into consideration consumer behavior and their needs, the website's design, and its precious content."

Gisele continues with a warning that summarizes what a modern SEO consultant should keep in mind if expecting to retain long-term results:

GM: "As long as SEOs keep seeing themselves as detached from the bigger marketing picture, they will keep falling into sketchy methods that might bring them short-term results,

but won't contribute to their clients' successes."

Jonathan even claims, that the current developments within the Google search algorithms enforce something he would call natural SEO.

JG: „A good friend of mine once put it this way: ‚Good SEO is no SEO.’ I would rephrase that: ‚Good SEO is natural SEO.’ Recent developments at Google make me believe that they might actually be of the same opinion.“

Search engines are built to give their users quality content that matches their search terms – the main goal of SEO is to attract more traffic from searches. After all, was there ever a possibility of these two coexisting in the long run if they did not focus on the same aspect of giving search engine users the high-quality content they were looking for?

In this sense, the recent rise of online content marketing seems to be a logical progression in the views of many experts.

2. The Recent Rise of Content Marketing

With the help of Google's Penguin and Panda updates, SEO was forced to evolve. Rather than an emphasis on keyword placement and page ranking, content had to be relevant and useful. Such a progression made room for the concept of "content marketing."

Content marketing is the art of creating and spreading material that provides some kind of value to its

readers. The benefits of a content marketing campaign can differ, though the most relevant ones are successful in achieving:

1. **Brand Awareness:**

When your brand constantly publishes high-quality content that consumers of the content value and share, your brand becomes recognized for this content and its topics.

2. **Recognition of Expertise:**

This is closely tied to brand awareness, if you manage to constantly publish high-quality content that demonstrates knowledge and expertise (as well as an element of emotional connection and entertainment), your brand will become recognized for this expertise.

3. **Inbound Marketing Effect:**

The inbound marketing effect is a direct result of establishing brand awareness and expertise. You know you have achieved this when clients and potential customers reach out, follow and contact you - instead of you having to spend hours cold-calling before making a sale.

4. **Trust:**

Strong and consistent content made readily available to consumers eventually establishes a bond of trust between the reader(s) and creator of the content. Just as

people continue to buy books by authors they know – trust in the quality of the content inspire investment and return.

5. **Entertainment:**

People want to be entertained and moved in an emotional way. Engaging content allows you to get to the heart of your consumers and to attain their constant attention.

What makes Content Marketing special is that (when applied correctly with a well-thought out campaign) it hits a home run in terms of marketing goals. Content Marketing possesses the ability to reach the right people in the manner they want to receive information, in a way that benefits you. In Michael Brenner's words:

MB: "The ultimate objective of marketing: reach the customer in an integrated fashion with the right messages at the right time in the most cost-effective and productive way."

Michael Brenner (MB):

Michael Brenner is the author of **B2B Marketing Insider**, the co-founder of **Business 2 Community** and serves as Sr. Director of Integrated Marketing and Content Strategy for SAP where he is the founding editor for the **SAP Business Innovation** blog.

Michael Brenner accentuates the importance of content in relationship to people and human interaction. This process, he notes, inevitably affects the way we market and conduct social business:

MB: "Content is the engine that drives the whole machine. Content is the catalyst, or even the glue that brings people together and binds us there. It is in the stories we tell that allow us to begin relationships that have the potential to deliver real value to both parties."

Content marketing has been a hyped topic in 2012. While some marketers would like us to believe differently, content marketing itself is nothing new. But it is Lee Odden again, who helps to bring things into perspective and points out that Content Marketing is one of the oldest forms of marketing itself:

LO: "Brands have been publishing content as part of their marketing efforts for over 50 years. Today's online versions of brand content marketing range from General Mills' Tablespoon to LifeTime Fitness's Experience Life. The fact that SEOs are getting into the game now might seem like content marketing is on the rise, but when you view the world outside of just SEO, content marketing has been rising for a very, very long time."

Lee's observation does not mean that there has not been change in how marketers *value* content in recent years. The meaning of (quality) content has long been underestimated, or as Lisa Barone puts it:

LB: "Content has always had the crown, but now it's got the respect to go with it."

Lisa argues that while "content" has always existed in SEO, consumers and marketers recognize the necessity of making *purpose* the chief attribute if that content wants to be optimized online. For a long time the emphasis of online content was not how useful it was, but whether you were the sole (or chief) distributor of this content. In 2012, things finally changed:

LB: "We've seen a shift away from creating 'unique content' to creating 'purposeful content' that will contribute value and benefit customers for years."

Lisa Barone (LB):

Lisa Barone is Vice President of Strategy at Overit, an Albany web design and development company, where she serves on the senior staff overseeing the company's marketing consulting, social media, and content divisions.

What plays a huge role in the rising adoption of content marketing throughout the marketing world is that it is applicable to almost any industry and in almost any business stage. Lisa Barone goes as far as proclaiming that when you state that your industry is too uninteresting to produce quality engaging, entertaining and useful content, it just means that you yourself are missing something:

LB: 'Complaining your industry isn't 'glamorous' enough for high-quality content instantly tells me two things about you:

1. You don't fully understand your customer's needs/pain points/wants.
2. You're boring.

The opportunity to create high-quality content is there, regardless of what industry you serve. In many cases it's not the topic that's boring or unglamorous, it's the mind creating content around it."

All experts agree that Content Marketing is not easy. On the contrary, it is challenging to create original, useful and purposeful material. In addition, content must have a compelling element about it that makes readers want to spread this material. Spreading the content involves acquiring readers, followers or fans.

Joe Chernov (JC):

After implementing a highly successful, content marketing strategy at the marketing automator, Eloqua, Joe Chernov is now the VP of Marketing at Kinvey. A content marketing pioneer, he was named the 2012 Content Marketer of the Year.

Figuring out how to propel the spread of this content is what keeps marketers employed. But regardless of the industry or number of followers, the originality and quality of the content are what hold a content-based strategy together -

and puts value in it. The perceived value of the content is what makes the audience remember the author and forward this content to their social and professional communities. According to Lee Odden:

LO: "Content marketing isn't just about adding more content; it's about creating information for a target audience that has a particular purpose and intended outcome. Content drives awareness but also social interaction, customer engagement and sales."

All our experts agree on one point: a modern content strategy can not be limited to the creation and simple publication of content, but needs to be applied to a targeted, optimized, and social sharing strategy as well. The goal is to create awareness for your brand (no matter whether your brand is a person or a company) and its marketing channels. Joe Chernov puts this concept into wise words:

JC: "It's all about getting discovered – and getting discovered for topics with which one wants to be associated. The primary advantage of content marketing, whether the technique is used for a corporate or personal brand, is trust. By producing informative, entertaining or engaging content that doesn't overtly push a sale, the publisher establishes herself as a trusted resource. And trust is a marketer's most precious asset."

3. Correlation between Content (Marketing) and SEO

We feel, that the connection of content, content marketing and SEO needs to be further investigated

before continuing. Simply put, content is what you publish, while SEO is supposed to bring visitors to the places on the web, where you published your content. On the other hand, you can also place content on highly frequented places on the web and link it to the places you want to get visitors to go to. The effect of Google’s latest updates was, that simply placing content where ever you wanted and linking it back to yourself does not work any more. Adam Torkildson summarizes:

AT: “No more can you pay someone in India to do blog commenting, forum spam, spun content, or any other spamming technique.”

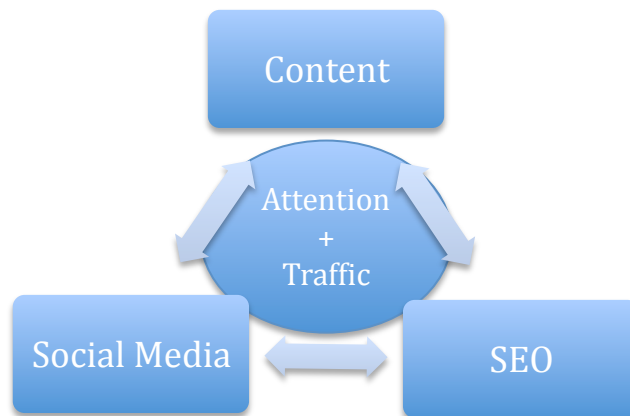
SEO has evolved and with it has its relationship to content. If optimized content is not of high quality – its optimization is irrelevant. Therefore, online marketing needed better strategies for placement of content and content campaigns needed to become more organized and quality driven – and this is where content marketing and its recent hype enter the scene.

Our interviewed experts agree on the correlation between content and SEO. Lee Odden again points out that this correlation is also nothing novel – that strong SEO would always have focused on content because a good SEO strategy also means that it is

well implemented into other marketing efforts.

LO: “Initially, a lot of SEO-related blogs started promoting the need for more content then better quality content. I think a lot more SEOs are now doing that. However, great SEOs have been content focused for years – long before Panda.”

The reality is that SEO should never have been seen as a singular strategy. It worked for a time due to imperfections in the still relatively young technology of search engines.



LO: “SEOs are writing about and implementing content marketing tactics, but long before the Panda or Penguin updates, marketers were creating digital content and media for the purpose of marketing to customers.”

Yet, with the growing amount of (bad) content on the web, users need search engines to filter results in order for them to provide any usefulness. Due to the high-volume of content and old SEO tactics, search engines (with Google on the forefront) needed to adapt. Jonathan Gebauer summarizes:

JG: “Panda and Penguin fine-tuned Google to put more emphasis on the actual quality of the content and are therefore a step in the direction of making traditional SEO (more or less) obsolete. The traditional ways of

building, or buying links to improve the ranking of a site, no longer work to the extent they used to."

The SEO industry (as a whole) is now forced to do what Lee Odden suggest it should always have done: provide useful material. Lisa Barone describes the usefulness of content in relationship to SEO activities:

LB: "Producing high-quality content needs to be part of your SEO efforts. It's not enough to create a technically sound site and fill it with meaningless pages. Your site has to mean something and your content is what you use to tell people who you are, gives them a reason to care and what, ultimately, converts. Hopefully that's been the biggest takeaway to site owners this past summer – you exist to serve and attract your customers. Content is simply one of the biggest (and most cost effective) ways to do that."

There is a huge disagreement within our group of experts whether SEO is changing to a point where it is actually not SEO any more, or if it is actually becoming more relevant and necessary than ever.

Adam Torkildson thinks SEO is slowly turing into PR and therefore disappearing...

AT: "What works now is all about PR and content marketing.

Eventually SEO is just going to turn into PR; it will fall out of our vocabulary and simply merge into being named what it actually is right now: Online Public Relations."

Melissa Fach (MF):

Melissa Fach is the owner of SEOaware, where she helps businesses optimize their marketing strategies, exposure and ROI by enhancing SEO and SEM techniques.

... while others, like Kevin Cain, believe that no content marketing campaign could be undertaken without SEO:

KC: "Today, as the number of people in this world who use Google outpaces the numbers who don't, effective content marketing without SEO is becoming virtually impossible."

Kevin then brings up the important point that with the rise of content marketing has come a rise in the amount of content. Content now, whether good or bad, is always at the risk of getting lost in the noise.

KC: "SEO is one of the most important tactics you can employ to ensure that your content can easily be found online. With so much other noise out there competing for attention, if people can't find your content quickly, chances are that they will never find it at all."

Maybe it is Melissa Fach, who summarizes the current developments best, as she takes both arguments into consideration.

MF: "You cannot be successful without content and SEO combined. I know there are those that get a site at the top of page one with crappy content, but they have nothing in place for conversion and/or maintaining a solid

audience. So, even if you get to #1, without the right content you fail anyway."

Jonathan seems to think that it really does not matter on how you view the

current trend, as content marketing is just a currently successful way of driving traffic and therefore follows the need that SEO follows as well.

JG: "Search engines are making progress in finding an actual representation of quality and interest. The current 'rise' of content marketing could be seen as a natural evolution away from SEO. One could say 'SEO is dying' – or one could phrase it in a way that would proclaim the emphasis on content marketing is the 'new' form of SEO."

In this context, SEO is not losing importance; it is merely taking on a new and natural shape.

Michael Brenner again shows that even the process of SEO and content marketing are already very similar:

MB: "SEO forces you to look at what your customers want, based on their priorities, and in the terms (the keywords) they use. SEO forces you to put the customer first. It forces you to look at how to answer their top questions with effective content and in the channels the customers are using."

The development of SEO and content marketing has thus become circular. Strong content needs a strategy that involves optimization in order to be found and shared. Optimization is only relevant when that content provides value for the reader. Which leads directly into the next chapter – how can the quality of content be defined?

4. What is good content?

With the focus on "quality" content, what makes content "good content"?

The discussion of this topic is highly relevant, as content production takes time and simply trying out what type of content will work might not be the best strategy for most. We will start with a quote of Gisele Mendez again who gives us a good starting point as for what you should aim for in content production:

GM: "If there isn't a clear strategy behind it, content is just content. Instead of aiming for vague 'high-quality,' I would think in terms of relevant, creative and timely content. Once the content is there, it will work as a cycle: SEO will help you get that content in front of the right eyes, and working with good content will make building links easier."

But what type of content is relevant? Where should your creativity be aimed at? Any type of content your customer is looking for, claims Lee Odden. And make sure you put it where your customer plans to look for it:

LO: "Go wherever customers are looking. For one segment of customers it might be search engines. For another it might be social or email. It could be on a tablet, mobile or computer. The content might be text, image, audio or video."

It is always difficult to define "good" content when the type of content (medium for display), arenas and customers have such different motives and are each diverse. But what becomes relevant is the concept of content (re-)distribution. How sharable is your content via social networks? Jonathan Gebauer points out that one aspect of quality is making content redistribution as easy as possible on social networks –

and therefore creating another way of being found.

JG: "Making content easy to read, interesting and likable is one part [brand recognition]. Making it easy to share on social platforms is another. Reputation and trust are large aspects of that concept as well. If you are a trusted source, who gains a following through strong writing and informative and likable content that can easily be shared - your content will be found."

But this does not seem to be enough. Strong and differentiating content, Social Katy points out, is even more important as social networks become flooded with content. Your position needs to be unique, your information needs to be special and your style compelling.

SK: "The social media landscape is completely saturated with content. It's hard to stand out from your competitors unless you have compelling information that grabs attention. Differentiating yourself with high quality content is key. It immediately positions you and your brand as a domain expert."

Social Katy's definition of good content is strict to the point:

SK: "We are also going to see a stronger emphasis on keyword heavy, relevant content that people actually want to read. Brands and their marketing teams are going to spend a lot of time thinking about how their content impacts SEO."

Maybe the term **"keyword heavy, relevant content that people actually want to read"** describes good content best.

Lee Odden concurs, effectively stating that he and his company already provide this type of content:

LO: "We don't really isolate SEO tactics but rather add SEO best practices to content marketing, public relations and web development."

And continues with advice to generate this kind of content:

LO: "...optimize for target customer preferences that are synthesized into topics and keywords vs. just optimizing for keywords by themselves. A customer centric approach helps us stay focused on what's important: attracting and engaging buyers, not just rankings and organic referral traffic."

Lee also emphasizes that strong

Social Katy (SK):

Katy Lynch is a young, progressive and active social entrepreneur. Her company, Social Katy, helps businesses generate a thriving social persona by driving their online presence and instilling a cutting-edge, brand strategy.

content relies on relationships with industry influencers and maintaining healthy communication with current and potential clients. These not only help promote your social channels, they serve as resources that allow for relevant links.

LO: "With our agency at TopRank Online Marketing, we're still using online PR, content, and blogger-relation tactics to win media

placements and links that come from well-promoted, relevant content that people like and want to share."

While Lee's advice is sound and good content is very important, we have decided to end this chapter with a word of warning by Lisa Barone – good content is not all there is and technical aspects are not yet outdated.

LB: "Content marketing is part of any SEO strategy. It has to be. But that doesn't mean that content marketing is all that goes into being a great SEO, because that's not the case. You still need to build technically sound websites, you need to understand your audience, there are usability concerns – a site with great content but a broken checkout button isn't going to make you any money."

5. The Social Connection Between Content and SEO

The places you publish content are of great importance as they are where your content becomes visible. In the previous chapter we have found that one quality indicator is how sharable your content is on different social platforms – in this chapter we are going to examine the correlation between Social Networks and Content and its implications on SEO. Let us start with a quote of Lisa Barone:

LB: "The content you've created and optimized needs a (social) home. Ideally, you know where that home is before you've created it. Otherwise, oops? ;)"

She elaborates:

LB: "Blogs and social publishing platforms are access points to your customers. From a consumer standpoint, they allow you to get your message out, connect in more personal ways, and have buying conversations in real-time. From an SEO standpoint, blogs and publishing platforms lend themselves to important social signals (tweets, shares, comments), fresh content, links, authority in the search engine result pages (SERPs) and other benefits. And that's really just the beginning."

While the publication process today is still important, it is only an entry point for your content to be redistributed. Social Networks allow the viral redistribution of content – and apart from driving traffic itself, this also influences SEO. Every Tweet, status update and share could influence search results and be recorded as a social signal – indicating to the search engine the importance of your content. Therefore you need to optimize your content for social networks – and treat your fans and followers to the content they want.

Michael Brenner makes clear it is important to deliver value to your fans (potential customers) when employing online marketing strategies. Only then will you be able to make use of the viral element of social media.

MB: "Social media marketing is essentially what good marketing has always been: marketing that puts the customer first and delivers them value. That value comes back to you in the form of sales and loyalty and - even more importantly - referrals."

Gisele Mendez also elaborates on this point, stating that virality cannot be achieved without creating a following and continually building on these relationships. She notes that even search engines realize this difference:

GM: "Search engines are increasingly identifying authority, trust and popularity in association to social signals. In my opinion, achieving huge followings won't help you boost your rankings unless you're also building relationships - that's the strongest way you can prove relevance and relevance is the core of search."

Lisa Barone points out that this actually means to not just publish content but to see oneself as part of your own community: You have to be in constant dialogue with your community, else you will not be successful!

LB: "Don't go in spamming the community. Become a member. Show an interest in the community. And develop an audience that actually cares about what you have to say (by saying stuff that actually matters). You make yourself stand out by developing relationships."

The social data obtained by search engines allows for better rating which content the user actually wants and therefore leads to better search results, as Jonathan Gebauer points out.

JG: "Social data means we obtain statistics on how far the content spread, which channels produced high amounts of interaction, and combine it with how we observe our content was received among specific audiences (...) In essence, social analysis can be added to the already

extensive amount of statistical data that search engines produce to generate relevant search results. (This has already begun.)"

Probably the best description of how best to act on social networks and how to therefore promote your content, is given by Joe Chernov. It will serve as our conclusion for this chapter.

JC: "Using social media to build a brand -- whether personal or professional -- relies on the same fundamentals. Be transparent (but not confessional), positive (but not giddy), human (but not frivolous), supportive (but not pandering) and, most of all, patient (but not lazy)."

6. Current Risks, Challenges and Chances

With the theoretical background covered, we were eager to find out the experts' opinions on the current situation and the challenges faced by today's online and content marketers, SEOs and Social Media enthusiasts. What are the risks, what are the chances?

While it seems that almost all of them agree that the highest potential for online marketing lies in content and social media, one of the main challenges they see lies in overcoming barriers in company culture that limits the effective use of both. It seems that even basic understanding of the structures is still lacking in many companies, as Dion Hinchcliffe explains:

DH: "The actual issue is that many organizations don't understand the [social network] medium very well

and have seen only incremental results. Others that have invested in figuring it out are driving high-impact results including major cost reductions and higher customer satisfaction, beyond just the bottom line benefits."

This is even more troublesome, as a key point in an effective strategy is involving as many employees as possible into it. Concerning social media and content, the employees really are the capital of the company.

DH: "The social capital of employees collectively outweighs that of most companies. If companies want to engage socially to drive marketing, sales, and customer care, they need to get those employees involved and engaged - in scale."

In accordance to this Michael Brenner points to the importance of addressing culture issues and defining a company's social values in order to seize the opportunity that arises when company employees become brand advocates.

MB: "Effective social businesses will have their leadership first address the culture issues and to define social values as important. Then they will need to prove that they mean what they say by becoming active themselves. The next issue that cannot be underestimated is of employee engagement. If a business does not have passionate engaged employees, it will never reach the social business potential."

One of the groups of employees that are hard to involve in a social media strategy are C-level executives, as Michael Brenner knows. As advisor on content strategy and social media

for SAP his job involves consulting executives on this:

MB (On reasons for low participation on C-Level): „Part of it is probably lack of skills and training. But I think mostly it is fear of openness and transparency. I once saw a CEO write a blog post on website that received hundreds of comments, mostly all positive and the CEO never responded to a single one. This CEO probably wasn't used to just anybody being able to comment or ask him a question. This can be incredibly horrifying for senior people who live behind a bubble of protection."

Dion Hinchcliffe (DH):

Dion Hinchcliffe is the Chief Strategy Officer at Dachis Group. He researches, writes and speaks around the globe on social business topics including strategy, business transformation, big data, analytics and enterprise architecture.

Michael continues to point out that it is the group of senior employees who could profit the most from the new kind of communication:

MB: "The upside [of social media] is that our senior people can have direct access to customers on the front lines. They also show the entire world that they do not live on a pedestal. They are human, humble and open."

As technology and social media culture are evolving and constantly changing, one of the biggest challenges for companies is to keep

up. Change is not often introduced at this pace into corporate structure and companies are unwilling to accept this. However, adapting to this new technology and culture is one of the biggest opportunities that companies currently have, as Dion Hinchcliffe and Valeria Maltoni explain.

DH: "Put simply, [companies] must design for constant change. The pace of technology is speeding up, not slowing down. Organizations that are not continuously adaptive will fall far behind those that are. Thus, the framework is volatile, though the mission of creating happy customers itself is timeless."

VM: „Looking at it from the business standpoint, you have the opportunity to keep delivering on your promises and reminding your customers about it, building relationships with networked individuals in the process. It's not separate from how you do business; it's part of it. There is still enormous opportunity for B2B brands.“

While companies especially in B2B have not yet found their definite standpoint on social media, this also means that the enormous opportunities as early movers are still open to most of them.

7. Actions to be taken to move from business to social business

Effective content and social media marketing in a social world means that all employees have to act together. That does not just include the social capabilities of employees; Jonathan Gebauer makes it clear that

a modern marketing strategy also includes the work of every employee. Content as a marketing tool needs to be created by a consortium within the company – no longer is it enough to give it to the copywriter and be done with it:

JG: „I currently see content marketing as a natural progression. That means, I foresee an online marketing world in which marketers, experts, copywriters, designers and strategists work together.“

Michael Brenner also sees integrated marketing as the future –

Valeria Maltoni (VM):

Valeria Maltoni is a bilingual strategist with a host of thriving clients and one of the top blogs on business development. Using fast-paced advancements of the Digital Age, she helps companies work through the complexity of business trade, networking and communication. Valeria helps create an environment for financial success.

thoughtfully hinting that these strategies have to be introduced into the specific company's value and reward systems. Does gamification of these processes maybe have a grand future?

MB: „[Companies need] a value system that rewards employee engagement and employee use of social tools to share their passions - whatever they may be.“

Employees need to be guided and not left alone in the social business

world and companies need to provide aid and training about how to act on their company's behalf.

MB: „There needs to be a solid training and enablement infrastructure. Too much time is spent in discussions on social business around tools. Tools are such a small part of the equation. I think there needs to be a system that provides guidance on social selling, storytelling and personal branding skills.“

Another topic that the future holds is better tracking of the social distribution of content. Measuring where your content goes to and who reads it is still one of the harder tasks in Social Media and Content Marketing – though Social Katy (in disagreement with Michael Brenner above) points out that the huge amount of today's and upcoming tools constantly bring better tracking abilities for every social channel.

SK: „The great part about using [social] tools is that almost all of them have tracking/analytics built in - so you can easily measure how well your tweets, blog articles, and Facebook posts are performing.“

Social Katy also points out that the biggest challenge with the new forms of marketing is still to find the right people to advise and supervise on these new strategies: there are too many so called experts on social media and too few real social media and content strategy experts.

SK: „The BIGGEST challenge I have faced within social media is hiring the right people for my company. There are way too many ‚social media gurus‘ out there who try to position themselves as experts. The problem is,

these ‚gurus‘ have absolutely no experience working with brands.“

It seems that social media in connection to brands is still too new to predict the future, however we did allow our experts a look into the crystal ball – with some surprising results.

8. Predictions for the Future

Our experts have also made predictions for the future – and some of them might be hard to grasp for others. Joe Chernov for example states that in a near future, the internet will disappear in the minds of most people as a place of exchange and will be replaced by Facebook as the primary place of exchange and publication:

JC: „People hate when I say this, but I believe it elementally: Five years from now, for most people Facebook will be the Internet. It will be where they turn not only for social interaction, but also news consumption, product research, entertainment.“

JC: „We’ve flip-flopped our relationship with news. We no longer seek out news and information. Today news has a way of finding us.“

Not all of the marketing experts see the modern world with optimism – Adam Torkildson for instance sees the recent Google updates as signs of a trend where marketing becomes unfair and rewarding the ones with the biggest marketing budget. He assumes that Google's search results will soon be safe from manipulation – forcing marketers and companies to buy into the traffic source of Google Ads.

AT: „The major advantage [of Google updates] is for marketers: If you have a big enough budget, you will win, and no one can beat you. A disadvantage for smaller budgets is that the playing field is no longer level.“

AT: „Google's algorithm and search results get doubly harder to manipulate/influence every 2 years. And this year marks the biggest shift in that strategy by far. So in 2 years from now, their algorithm will most likely make SEOs obsolete.“

AT: „Google benefits because more people have to rely on Adwords to get the same kind of traffic.“

While Adam Torkildson points out the negative effect for low budget marketing, Jonathan Gebauer provides a more positive viewpoint this future holds for the actual search engine client, claiming that the less search results are being manipulated, the more compelling information reaches the eye of the consumer.

JG: „The better the content, the less time the searcher wastes digging through meaningless text. In the end, I believe it is the actual researcher who benefits the most - the person sitting in front of his computer, searching.“

Lisa Barone agrees heavily on that, seeing this as what SEO should always have been about – focused on conversion rather than just pageviews:

LB: „I've enjoyed the shift SEO has taken from technical-based to marketing-based because I think it puts the focus on the right party – customers, not the search engines. It's

about understanding who your audience is, what they want, and then setting your business up to be the answer. SEO is about increasing conversions on your website.“

The necessity of changing and adapting to these modern marketing strategies is well summarized by Michael Brenner again. Customers, whoever they are, have been bombarded with traditional short-on-value marketing slogans for a lifetime – they have had enough.

MB: „Most companies are simply promoting themselves with content that says, 'We are the best. Choose us. Here are all the reasons why we are great.' But we, as consumers, are tired of these self-serving product pitches and promotions. Marketing is about delivering customer value, not about pitching products.“

Maybe it is we, as consumers, who will profit the most?

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the experts for giving such compelling answers.

The complete interview series is available on exploreB2B.