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HOW TO DELIVER CONTENT THAT COUNTS

In 2019, thanks to smartphones, people are consuming huge amounts of content. Or, to be more accurate, they are scrolling through huge amounts of content: according to one estimate, even a light user is scrolling through content equivalent to the height of the Eiffel Tower each month, while a heavy user can be scrolling the height of the Bahrain World Trade Center every week.

As Raymond Murphy, Head of Content at furniture and homeware brand MADE.com, points out, “There’s a lot of noise out there, so the challenge is to stop people scrolling and get them to focus on your content.”

Good online content contributes to a brand’s success. That’s indisputable. But what kind of content should that be? How big a factor is social media? And how should the continuing shift to mobile influence your content plans? In this whitepaper, we’ll present the thoughts of practitioners from companies large and small, new and old, who have all been tackling these challenges in different ways.

BUILDING A BRAND

Content exists in myriad forms and on many platforms for each company involved in eCommerce. From product listings to company mission statements, with a whole plethora of guides, opinion pieces and entertainment in between, each represents your company to the outside world. But there is no point in creating content just for the sake of it. Every piece of content should have a pre-determined purpose, either for sales or to build your brand.

“It’s important to stay true to your brand values and your mission and vision,” notes Rachael Jones, Head of eCommerce at non-alcoholic spirits specialist Seedlip. “From the start, Seedlip stood for something and our content stems from that.”

Successful brands agree that having brand guidelines from the outset is vital, no matter what size your company is. And those guidelines should include direction on how you talk about your company, to create a distinct tone of voice that represents your brand.

Similarly, Rachael Attwood Hamard, Founder and Creative Director of luxury British clothing brand Brittanical, says, “It’s very important for us to talk about our status as a British brand, including our

UK-based manufacturing. Our production story is important and helps distinguish us from our competitors.”

Fran Pearce, Head of Marketing at Smith & Sinclair, describes the company’s tactic for establishing itself as an innovative and genuine brand through its in-house content production: “A lot of our content feels authentic – we try to be a bit more editorial with what we do.”

CURATING MULTIPLE FORMATS

Brand guidelines also need to cover how to work with multiple formats. “Brand guidelines are important to ensure consistency in imagery and content across all domains,” says Serena Fortuna, Head of eCommerce at Temperley London. “They ensure everything is aligned, although companies also need to determine how much flexibility they allow if, for example, images aren’t perfect.”

For some companies, such as premium clothing brand Temperley London, ‘perfect’ imagery reinforces the brand values. For others, such an approach might be at odds with the brand, so it’s important to decide which is appropriate.

"Images signal what a brand is about, down to the props and locations," says Nick Hussey, Founder of men's jacket design company FRAHM and Head of Brand & Content at Pure Scooters. "I've always used real people in marketing as that's both genuine and imperfect. I think imperfection is special, and for FRAHM being 'real' is important."

Such imagery decisions are the equivalent of determining your written tone of voice. But in 2019, brands need to extend their thinking beyond words and imagery. MADE.com's Murphy suggests, "Videos are a great way to show the quality of products and how they are made, which helps if people can't see or touch them. This is especially true for high ticket purchases."

Videos are also useful for engendering customer loyalty, offering the ideal format for how-to guides and general brand-related experiences. For example, Seedlip and Smith & Sinclair can show you how to make cocktails, MADE.com offers suggestions for interior design, and fashion brands Temperley London and Gucci will give you a peek at the runways at international fashion weeks.

Video is proving successful because so many people can now stream it on mobiles no matter where they are: bandwidth is less of an issue than it used to be. At the same time, audio is having a resurgence thanks to the growing popularity of podcasts. "Every single person who's bought a FRAHM jacket has listened to my original podcast on SoundCloud," says Hussey. Despite being a small brand, subsequent FRAHM podcasts have been listened to thousands of times.

Another audio option is branded music playlists on, for example, Spotify. "Our use of music goes back to when I first launched the brand and the network I built up whilst working with up-and-coming artists and highlighting new talent within the industry," explains Samanah Duran, Founder and CEO of Critics Clothing, who has created public playlists on Spotify. "I also tweet about music that we are connected to as we're aligned to that industry. Both help to get our brand out there."

Overall, says MADE.com's Murphy, "Your content

needs to provide value for users. The audience doesn't care [about your content] until you give them a reason to care, which means it needs to provide a benefit to them."

"Now, over 70% of our traffic is on mobile and we expect that to grow further."

John Nother - Asda



YOUR VOICE OR THEIRS?

Brand guidelines can also help teams determine whether and how to work with user-generated content (UGC).

"User-generated content is a very powerful tool," suggests Murphy. "It's quite an authentic way of showing brand love. But you can't rely on UGC: you need to balance it with other content or it can get stale."

Britannical's Attwood Hamard has another take on user-generated content: "For brands such as ours, it's important not to seem too aloof, so UGC can be a great source of connection to our audience, as long as it's well curated."

Curation is also important for internally-generated content, especially if you sell beyond the UK. "Tone, language and imagery have a certain resonance in each market," notes Attwood Hamard. "For example, the type of content and language on our Instagram posts varies from country to country, as does the length of content and the way we engage in conversation."

Some types of content lend themselves particularly well to getting your company voice across and thereby generating a response. "I started writing a blog because I cared about something," says FRAHM's Hussey, whose brand supports the mental health charity MIND. "People respond to blog posts that are 'true', rather than anodyne and safe. They can create intense emotional attachments and journalists will pick up on that as opposed to a dull press release. There's an enormous amount of power behind an emotional message."



HARNESSING THE POWER OF SOCIAL

To add even more to the workload, there's social media to contend with. Given that in 2018 one in five users said they were motivated to buy something based on 'likes' and positive comments on social media, even the smallest businesses need some sort of social media presence. "It's about meeting potential customers where they are, rather than making them come to where you are," points out John Nother, Asda's Senior Director Digital Technology.

"Images signal what a brand is about, down to the props and locations, I've always used real people in marketing as that's both genuine and imperfect"

Nick Hussey - FRAHM

Almost all of our experts agree that in 2019 Instagram is the premiere choice for eCommerce brands. "We're a visual brand, so it makes sense that we're on Instagram," says Seedlip's Jones. "It would be foolish for us to fail to be on an image-led channel, so we're also looking at Pinterest. But we have to strike a careful balance between making the most of our nature-led photography and using images that are directly about commercial sales."

MADE.com's Murphy goes even further and suggests brands should "Think social first – not just for distributing content but also listening to customers. Start with social rather than it being an afterthought."

At Temperley London, "Social is our number one focus – it's a very successful platform, so we'll put previews there first, just for our followers," explains Fortuna.

Ultimately, a key goal for many companies is to make social 'shoppable' using, for example, Instagram Checkout. This will be particularly attractive for younger audiences whose natural instinct is to do as much as possible using their phones.

Other social-led opportunities include selling via influencers, although the benefits of influencer marketing may vary across sectors. Nevertheless, it seems likely to become another form of affiliate programme.

PUTTING MOBILE FIRST

There is no definitive answer to the question of how much web traffic is via mobile devices, but it's safe to say that globally it's now at least half – and that's excluding tablets. In some markets and for some purposes it is much higher than that. For many practitioners, that is prompting them to take a 'mobile first' approach to their content.

"Shopping should be fun, but on mobiles that has been lost," suggests MADE.com's Murphy. "People should enjoy buying products as much as owning them."

Depending on where you're starting from, a mobile-first strategy may imply significant changes when it comes to creating content, as dwell times can be shorter and download sizes are more important. Written content may benefit from being simpler and shorter, and videos should be optimised for mobile viewing.

The changes can be significant at the back-end as well. "Our customers wanted a faster site, so we looked at what we needed to do to be 'mobile first' and that was making web pages start fast on mobile and then stay fast," says Asda's Nother.

Bearing in mind that bounce rates are widely known to jump after 3 seconds – and because Google takes mobile site speeds into consideration – this gives a clear target for any technical innovation.

At Asda, the solution was to implement Google's AMP (Accelerated Mobile Pages) web component framework to make pages load faster and then use a Progressive Web Application (PWA), which is akin to a mobile app but delivered and updated through the web rather than having to be downloaded via an app store. "Now, over 70% of our traffic is on mobile," reports Nother. "And we expect that to grow further."



THE VALUE OF AN EXPERIENCE

As the media continue to relish reporting the decline of bricks-and-mortar retail, the brands that are disproving this trend are those driving an experience more than a purchase.

Grace Bryan, Head of Events & Brand Partnerships at Smith & Sinclair, outlines how careful event curation benefits the brand. "When designing our events we focus on three factors: how do we educate people about us; how do we get people to discover and be interactive; and finally, how do we create a social media moment so people want to share that story on other platforms?"

Pearce of Smith & Sinclair adds that the company's stance of being a "bonkers brand" and creating a spectacle drives its consumer narrative. "Due to the nature of our events, we find that we get so much more out of them. People actually think the event is fun and has a 'Wow!' factor. This is far better than just offering one big picture moment."

A FEW FINAL TIPS

Ultimately, everything is about giving consumers what they want. As Seedlip's Jones says, "Don't create content for content's sake." Instead, use both data and customer feedback alongside brand values to guide content creation.

"The road to content isn't easy," says Anders Holmberg Lange, Head of Strategic Gamification at Gucci.

"Customers value different things and eCommerce isn't a standalone solution. Also, you can't just rely on data to give you intelligence about customers – instead you need to take data and personalise it with research, such as focus groups."

All the practitioners quoted in this whitepaper emphasise the importance of testing and not being afraid of failure, but instead being set up to learn from anything that doesn't work. "Our failures teach us what to do next," says Gucci's Holmberg Lange.

Other tips include:

- **Be consistent with your content, both across your own communication channels and where your products are sold by resellers and affiliates. This can be as straightforward as sending pre-sized assets for them to use and advice on product descriptions and brand language.**
- **Be reactive. Set your teams up to be able to respond to, for example, publicity generated from unplanned celebrity endorsement or a weakness you've identified in a competitor. Temperley London's Fortuna points out: "A small change resulting from customer feedback can make a big difference to sales."**
- **Have a system in place for promotions around one-off or annual events in any country you sell in.**
- **Look within your sector for opportunities and outside your sector for inspiration.**

As you pull all of this together, ask yourself if the content you're putting in front of potential buyers will be enough to make them stop scrolling. If they know your brand, will it make them want to purchase? Or make it easier to do so? If they aren't already a customer, will it be enough to convert them from a browser to a buyer? It may be a crowded marketplace, but there are still ways to cut through the noise if you have a clear brand and accept the need to fail occasionally as you pursue the cycle of building, testing and improving.

¹Thumb Miles; estimates by Stringberry based on a light user using a phone approximately 2 hours a day and a heavy user spending approximately 7 hours a day on their device; <https://stringberry.com/pages/thumbmiles> (accessed May 2019)

²eMarketer; Social Media Moves Down the Funnel as Commerce Opportunity Arises; 28 May 2019

³Statista; Percentage of mobile device website traffic worldwide from 1st quarter 2015 to 1st quarter 2019