



COVID-19's Impact on 2021 Content Marketing Strategy

When pandemic restrictions around the country started occurring in March 2020, few imagined that many would still be in place—or start up again—as the year drew to an end. As I write this, in mid-November, cases are rising across the country, and new restrictions are emerging. Through it all, organizations of various kinds have had to adjust and adapt to the new normal—whatever that is. As businesses plan for 2021, none can ignore the potential for COVID-19 to continue disrupting their operations and impacting consumer decisions.

For content marketers, COVID-19 has meant a sudden shift away from blatantly overt promotion and a pivot toward thoughtful, helpful, and safety-related messaging that resonates with consumers who are feeling the pinch (both financially and from a health-and-wellness standpoint). In this column, I take a look at some best practices and lessons learned from content marketing experts as they look forward to the new year. What strategies might work for your marketing plans in 2021?

REALLOCATING BUDGETS

One major impact of the pandemic has been the cancellation of a large number of events, conventions, and conferences that many marketers have historically used for lead generation, outreach, and establishing thought leadership. Budgets for these types of events, which are not insignificant, are being shifted into other areas. For instance, Lisa B. Tilt (founder and CEO of the Full Tilt Consulting marketing firm) notes that her clients are shifting these funds to focus on branded content—"a steady drumbeat of content to use with their digital marketing channels." She has seen an "increased demand for lead gen and thought leadership pieces to drive interest and compensate to some degree for the loss of in-person meetings and interactions."

While Tilt says that one of her clients tried to shift from live to virtual conferences—including live booths and live chat—the client "found them to be disappointing in terms of delivering leads or valuable engagement with prospects."

Instead, she is seeing an "exponential increase in the use of video as an effective way to tell personal stories, with excellent engagement numbers—often double digit click-through rates." She's also noticing a new interest in older tactics, such as email marketing, again also making use of video for added engagement.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH COMMUNITY

Jason Akatiff, co-founder of Boundary, which helps consumers discover affordable tech products, says that, since the beginning of the pandemic, he realized the importance of building customer relationships through communities. Facebook has been part of his focus. "Figuring out a way to organically engage and formulate relationships within Facebook groups allows you to genuinely market your product to thousands of members," he states in an email interview.

Especially now, when so many people are spending more time online, Akatiff says, it's important to "never underestimate the power and need for human connection." People are alone, he notes—and they're looking to connections in online forums, chats, and Facebook groups to help fill the void. It's a form of marketing that requires "time commitment, patience, and strategy," he acknowledges, but it "ultimately delivers high rewards."

Social media channels represent another way to build and maintain relationships during—and after—the pandemic. Many marketers are ramping up their social media activities and engagement and plan to continue this emphasis into 2021. "Think of social media as your megaphone," says Daniel Snow, CEO and founder of The Snow Agency marketing firm. "It can deliver your message across the world and into any market." But, he adds, marketers should give it some time for social media to really resonate. "Understand who you will be speaking to, give yourself time to craft your voice and what types of messages you want to deliver—don't rush anything," he advises. "You want to make sure that you have meaningful messages so you are able to stand out and be heard among your audience."

WATCH YOUR TONE

During the pandemic, content marketers have learned that it's not just what they say, but how they say it that matters to their audiences. "We have become more conscious of the tone we use in our marketing messages," says Matt Bertram, CEO and SEO strategist at EWR Digital. "Glib or comedic comments—which would have been perfectly acceptable last year—have been toned down." Bertram understands that people are feeling worried and uncertain about the future. "We want to show sensitivity to those who are especially vulnerable," he says.

NO LONGER EVERGREEN

Content marketers, says Ben Taylor (founder of HomeWorkingClub.com) need to be attuned to the fact that what they may have previously considered to be evergreen content may not be anymore. "One way that COVID has had a big impact on my content marketing is constantly having to ascertain whether to aim for evergreen content or whether to give articles a pandemic slant," he says.

Recognizing that the pandemic will eventually subside, Taylor says he saw the need to make sure that he has a process for revising his COVID-related content in the future. "One tactic I'm following myself—and I would recommend to others—is to keep a log of all content where COVID is specifically referenced," he suggests. Then, revisit that content once the virus is no longer an imminent threat.

CONTINUING WHAT WORKED

Emma Debeljak is head of content at Digital Silk, a digital marketing agency. Digital Silk implemented a number of content-related shifts in 2020, says Debeljak, including the following:

- Increasing focus on search intent and refining content accordingly
- Increasing attention to and investment in visuals
- Creating more content clusters
- Creating unique content based on in-house research, case studies, and expert insights
- Creating a thought leadership strategy
- Developing unique, relevant, and timely content on the impact of COVID-19 for clients and readers

In 2021, says Debeljak, those efforts will stay in play. Digital Silk will also work to pursue more content collaborations

LINKS TO THE SOURCE

Full Tilt Consulting
fulltiltconsulting.com

Boundary
boundary.com

The Snow Agency
thesnowagency.com

EWR Digital
ewrdigital.com

HomeWorkingClub.com
homeworkingclub.com

Digital Silk
digitalsilk.com

and pay close attention to the impact of Google's indexing activities on website traffic and SEO performance. In addition, she says, the firm will continue to focus on and evolve its user experience (UX). "No matter how good your content is, the UX will make or break its performance," she says. "UX will play an increasingly important role as the online space gets more crowded due to COVID-induced rapid digitalization."

SAFETY AND COMPASSION FIRST

One constant mentioned by marketing pros is the importance of continuing to put safety—and safety messaging—front and center in any communication activities. Consumers are clearly continuing to be concerned about their health and safety and are looking to those they do business with to clearly tell them what they're doing to ensure the safety of both customers and employees. That's likely to remain true through much of 2021.

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