

The ultimate guide to content creation...



STOP,
collaborate
and listen!

A little note before we get started...

This guide was written in collaboration with the ridiculously talented Sophie Cross.

A freelance marketing strategist, there's nothing Sophie doesn't know or can't do when it comes to marketing – she even runs her own marketing school, has a super successful email newsletter full of useful advice and recently set up the Sunrise Club for creatives.

Find her online here: www.thoughtfully.co.uk

Both of us committed to undertake the #Write52 challenge, where every week we created and posted original content. Then one day we thought:

“Wouldn't it be fun if we played consequences...”

A few random Twitter messages later, and we challenged each other to write alternate chapters for a comprehensive guide all about content creation.

So here it is in all its glory...

1. Where do I start and why?

“It’s time to get the party started.”

As you probably already know, Alice and I are big believers in content creation. We dedicate most of our working lives to it. And it gets results.

Whether it’s a printed magazine, a blog, a long-form sales letter, an email newsletter or a social media post, it’s all content and it has the potential to connect if it’s done well.

As with so many things in life, the key to successfully creating content isn’t so much a skill as it is a mindset. A marketing mindset, an open mindset and a mindset that puts connecting with your customers first. Tasks can always be outsourced but the foundations of why you are doing something can’t be.

Start with why

If your first thought is *“I need to start a blog/Instagram account/magazine (delete or insert as appropriate)”* then whoa there, cowboy. This is great news but slow down, you move too fast. You’ve jumped about five steps ahead. And these are really important steps. Steps that success depends upon and steps that will mean you

haven't totally wasted your precious time creating wildly and aiming blindly.

Ask yourself why you want to do this. And not just once. Keep asking yourself 'why' until you can't ask anymore.

"I want to start an Instagram account for my cake business."

Why?

"Because I want to share photos from behind the scenes and the finished cakes with my existing customers and target market locally."

Why?

"Because I have loads of good photos that I already take of the baking process and cakes. I'd like to motivate others to bake by explaining the methods in the captions, show customers how much love goes into the cakes and inspire them to dream up their own creations. It will also serve as a nice archive for me and a good way to showcase my portfolio of what can be done to my customers."

Why?

"I'd like to get 50 new customers this year."

Why?

“To hit my target revenue growth of £2,500.”

You get the picture. Content creation takes time so you need to make sure you have the right motivation in place. The example above demonstrates a good mix for a perfect ‘why’ because it involves:

Content that is already being created (don’t start an Instagram account if you don’t know what you’ll capture, how you’ll do it or how to write good captions).

It works in line with business goals, attributing actual trackable target metrics.

There’s an incentive to create the content beyond revenue driving tactics.

It’s about the target audience. It’s about inspiring them and giving them something useful.

2. Who is my target audience?

“You to me are everything, the sweetest song that I could sing.”

We thought you'd never ask. And we'll tell you who your target audience definitely isn't...

Everybody. We know that you've had male and female customers, young and old, black, white, Cuban and Asian. But no, this still doesn't mean your target audience is everybody.

If you start creating content (or launching any marketing campaign) believing this or without establishing who your target market is then you won't know how to go about finding them and connecting with them. First, we need our why, then we need our who, only then we can move on to our how.

Give yourself permission to think about your absolute sweet spot for your target audience. Your ideal customer. Do you really know who they are? Yes? Prove it! Create a persona for them. The more detail the better.

Answer these questions:

- What gender are they?
- What age are they?
- Are they in a relationship? With who?
- Do they have kids? How many and how old?
- Do they work? Where? Doing what?
- Where do they live?
- What car do they drive?
- Where do they shop?
- What do they do in their spare time?
- Where do they holiday? And how often?
- What's their favourite social channel?
- What other brands do they follow?
- What do they care about?
- Why do they use your business?

Now give them a name. Draw them if you want to. Stick them on your wall. Really get to know them. Everything you do revolves around them.

Let's pretend you called them Doug. Now all content can be created thinking about talking to Doug. Don't know what to write? What would Doug most like to hear about?

If you have multiple products or services that have wildly different target audiences, just repeat the process until you have a persona for each. If you're targeting families or couples, think about who the decision maker is most likely to be. Don't forget to use any information you already have around your target audience, whether this is qualitative or quantitative.

3. What is my brand?

“I’ll be your dream, I’ll be your wish, I’ll be your fantasy. I’ll be your hope, I’ll be your love, be everything that you need.”

Who are you?

What do you do?

What do you stand for?

Why?

All very good questions – so have you answered them yet? And answered them honestly?

The whole world is busy, and a lot of the time we get so caught up in delivering the day-to-day, we forget to step back and define what we’re doing and why.

Your brand is your most valuable asset because it’s the reason people buy from you and not someone else. And in terms of your company’s actual financial value, brand equity sits there as a line item. So, if you want your company to be worth something, you need to build your brand.

But where to start?

Your brand comprises several elements – from the visual look and feel, to the content and the way you interact with your clients. Here, we're going to focus on tone of voice for your messaging – get this right, and it flows through every communication.

Organising idea

Start by thinking about your organising idea – the one thing your business is recognised for. This becomes your guiding principle because when you're questioning whether or not to do something, you just ask yourself, 'Does this align with my organising idea?' and if the answer is 'yes' you do it, if the answer is 'no' you don't.

Target audience

When it comes to your brand, the thing that's really important to identify is your audience's aspirational identity – who do they really want to be?

If you can promise and deliver this, you've got a customer for life. (And he's called Doug).

Value proposition

What is the story that you're offering people? How is it different to the competition? Why does that difference matter? What's the value in buying from you?

To craft your value proposition, you first need to ask yourself three things:

1. **What:** the products/services you offer to your customers
2. **How:** the things that differentiate you from the competition
3. **Why:** the reason you are passionate and why you exist

Traditionally, marketers refer to the value proposition as the 'elevator pitch' because you're meant to be able to deliver it in the time it takes for a lift to reach the top floor. In reality, a couple of paragraphs should suffice...

And once you've got this down, cut it to a sentence that sums up what you do. Imagine you walk into a networking event and someone asks the question:

"What do you do?"

This power sentence becomes your carefully crafted response – think of it like the logline to your movie.

Tone of voice

Are you corporate? Or are you my best friend?

Are you professional? Or are you going to drop the F-bomb whenever possible?

Are you funny? Or are you factual?

There is no right or wrong answer because tone of voice is individual to your company. And in reality, your company might have one tone of voice, and the spokespeople you offer up for PR opportunities and speaking engagements present a different tone of voice – that's ok.

To decide on where to pitch your tone, it's useful to ask how you want the experience of working with you to make people feel. For example, in my business, I want people to feel safe, happy and like they want to smile.

If you know how you want people to feel, it guides the sort of content you want/need to create, and the words you use. For example, through my content I want to teach people about copywriting by sharing my skills, knowledge and experience so they can learn how to write great copy for themselves.

4. Creating a strategy

“Look, if you had one shot, or one opportunity to seize everything you ever wanted, in one moment - would you capture it? Or just let it slip?”

Jump in blindly and who knows what's going to happen.

No, if you want to capture that opportunity, you need a strategy.

Content should never be produced for content's sake – it's absolutely pointless and just wastes your time and money. When it's produced as part of a wider marketing strategy that's driving to something bigger, you're going to see it deliver a return for your business.

It might seem counter-intuitive but start at the end. Ask yourself: *“What does success look like?”*

Then work it back:

- What do I need to 'sell' to get there?
- Why would someone choose me?
- How am I going to deliver that product/service?
- Who is going to buy-in to what I'm offering?
- Where can I find them?

With your strategy starting to come together you'll naturally start to identify pieces of content that you need to create for your business.

But that's still not enough to seize everything.

If you want to win, you need to start getting more strategic in planning your content too because if you leave it to chance, or think "I'll just post something every week", it's never going to happen.

Grab yourself a blank sheet of paper

In the centre write the name of the product/service/theme. Then start to brainstorm anything and everything to do with it. Make sure you cover every angle, no matter how random because at this stage there are no wrong answers.

Write your working titles

Next, start to hone your list down into a shortlist of the content your audience is going to find most

interesting/relevant/useful and generate some working titles.

Schedule

Schedule these working titles onto a content calendar to give them a deadline and make them a priority – fail to do this step, and again, your content is never going to happen because marketing always falls off the ‘to do’ list when there’s client work to be done.

Start writing

In “Fortune Cookie Principle” it talks about how your words are your front line. They are so important to your success so if you don’t have the time, resource or skillset to give your content the love, care and attention it deserves, hire someone.

Time is of the essence, so identifying your weaknesses upfront and outsourcing to someone who specialises in this field will save you missing the opportunity.

5. Which channels shall I use?

“You know it's true, Everything I do, I do it for you.”

Where is your audience? (Where are you Doug?!)

There's no point posting on Instagram, Facebook or Twitter if your audience isn't there to read it.

Fancied dipping your toe in the world of PR? Great! But what publications are your audience reading?

What about your website? I bet you've spent a lot of time painstakingly pulling that together, juggling web design with development and content creation – you definitely want to make good use of your website. So, is it SEO optimised for the search terms your audience is actually using to try and find a company like yours?

Hopefully you're starting to get the picture – you don't choose the channel; your audience dictates it.

Your job is to be smart about how you create content to optimise your conversion rate for each channel. I'm a big advocate of re-spinning, re-purposing and re-forming existing content to give it a new lease of life because:

- It ensures you have regular content to publish, which builds momentum behind your sales and marketing efforts.
- It's cost-effective as you're not having to generate content from scratch every time.
- If you need the input of subject matter experts, a lot of their expertise can be found on the pages of your existing proposals.

And changing the perspective on your content is easier than you might think...

Choose your content wisely

You want to select a piece of content that gives you scope to explore different angles in more depth. For example, if you choose a case study, you could pull out the market trends that were causing the customer pain, which drove them to seek out a solution like yours, or a webinar recording would give you the opportunity to re-tell that story through a different medium.

Don't forget your internal documentation

We might be focused on top of the funnel content, but that doesn't mean you need to start with existing promotional material.

Some of the most valuable content in your organisation resides within the internal documents – the proposals, statements of works and project completion reports. Yes, it's all confidential and personal to each client, but written on those pages are your company's IP and the knowledge of your subject matter experts.

There's nothing to stop you re-purposing this into new content that can be used to promote your organisation. And if you can get the client's permission, these are invaluable assets to help you create that wonderful case study.

Do it again

So, let's imagine that we took a proposal and made it into a case study – why don't we turn that case study into a series of blogs to elaborate on the market drivers?

And then why don't we turn those blogs into a series of emails to send out to our customers?

And then why don't we turn those emails into a series of social updates?

This idea of re-spinning, re-purposing and re-forming content goes on, and on, and on. And the beautiful thing is that because it all originated from a single document, the overall messaging is consistent, the positioning is consistent and the purpose is consistent, and it's this consistency that will help you to grow a strong brand in your marketplace.

6. Coming up with a content plan

“Take the time to make some sense of what you want to say.”

If you've already covered the first five steps of Alice and Sophie's Ultimate Guide, the planning part should be pretty easy.

By this stage you've established:

1. why you are creating content
2. who you're creating it for
3. your brand
4. your marketing strategy and
5. your ideal channels.

If you've skipped over any of these, go back and do them now. They needn't take you ages but it will be worth it in the end. If you have completed all of those, then kudos to you. Seriously, take a minute and give yourself a huge pat on the back. And now that's done, I wouldn't mind betting that you've started coming up with loads of great ideas already.

Creating your planner

Now to organise them into a working content planner (with emphasis on the word 'working'). This is not a document that you create then never look at again. It's your bestest buddy and you need to check in with it regularly.

How and where you create this planner will be totally down to your preferences. My preference is a Google Sheet (or Excel or a table in Word if you're old school). I find the columns and tabs really useful. On one tab/column I might have an events calendar of all the relevant events (internal and/or external – they could be product launches, peak booking windows, National Donut Day, staff birthdays) happening this year. These events provide a good starting point to slotting in my first ideas for what content I want to create and when.

You could then use other columns for:

- Title ideas
- Content ideas
- Image ideas
- The person responsible (if it's not just you)
- Deadlines
- Publish dates

Your planner can also easily become your tracking document for when you measure your content's success.

Add different tabs for ways you will repurpose the content. So, as we already mentioned, a blog post might turn into an email newsletter, a series of tweets, a video, an Instagram or Facebook post and you could have different tabs for each of these channel plans. Here's a bit more on the process I use for creating client content.

I'll repeat one last time, this is a working document. You can shift things around, delete ideas and add to them later down the line. In fact, this is imperative as you learn more and more about what works and what doesn't.

Capturing your ideas anytime inspiration strikes

I use a multitude of tricks to capture ideas when I have them which I will come back to later to be reviewed and then formalised in my planner. Just a few of these include:

- Phone/Mac Notes
- Evernote
- Screenshots on my desktop
- Screenshots in my phone photo album
- Notebooks
- Emailing myself
- 'Inspiration' folder in my email inbox
- 'Inspiration' folder on Google Drive
- Bookmarking a webpage

It's worth remembering where you squirrel away all your inspiration to so that you can dig it back up during your long, cold content planning winters.

7. Creating the content

“You have so many relationships in this life. Only one or two will last. You go through all the pain and strife. Then you turn your back and they're gone so fast.”

How does that saying go? ‘It takes a village to raise a child’??

Well it takes a community to create your content. I’m yet to meet Superman – someone with the incredible abilities to do it all, and do it all well. Even if you know about a lot of things, you’re probably trained as a specialist in one area – I spent a decade as a B2B marketer before specialising to become a copywriter.

If you want to create the best quality content your business deserves in order to hook the audience in and convert them into clients, you need to create a specialist team to collaborate and make it happen.

For example, I’m a freelancer, but I have a whole team that sits behind me. I might write every word of content for my business, but I have a VA who uploads the content to my website and then shares links on my company social media accounts, an SEO specialist working behind the scenes to help optimise my content online, I have an artist to help with my visual identity, a close-knit online community of fellow copywriters who I

introduce to clients when their projects require a different writing style or content for a channel I don't touch...

And did I mention that this blog is a collaborative effort with a fellow member of #Write52?!

You need a leader

Ideally you need someone in charge of marketing who knows what they're doing. Not only do they have the time and effort to ensure that the content is completed on time and to budget, they have visibility of the wider marketing strategy and therefore they see how each specific piece of content fits into and supports the wider plan.

Hire the team

If you have the resource in-house already, great! If not, hire them.

The way we work is changing. Today, it's commonplace for organisations to pull specialist teams together with the objective of completing a specific task before disbanding.

It's why the freelance economy is growing in strength.

You don't need to go through a lengthily recruitment process, onboard people, get them up to speed, and then worry about performance appraisals and keeping them busy. Simply hire people to complete a specific project and then let them move on to the next thing.

And a decent freelancer will have surrounded themselves with fellow freelancers with complementary specialist skills. They've probably worked with these people before and know how to get the best out of each other. So, find one person you like, and they'll probably do the hard work of finding the other skills your project needs.

Establish how you're going to work

Unless you have everyone sat in your office, you're going to need to think about how your team communicates and collaborates on your project.

From O365 to Confluence, Slack, SharePoint, Zoom, Google Docs and many, MANY more, there are several business productivity tools that connect your disparate team to get the job done.

Use your planner to help communicate what you're aiming to achieve with deadlines and the role everybody has to play in making it happen. And then telling the project team how you want them to communicate and collaborate with you and each other.

If you set the expectations from the start, there's less likely to be any surprises later on.

8. Maximising your reach

“Climb every mountain high.”

You've come a long way baby. Don't underestimate that. And after all that, you want to make sure that people are appreciating your efforts. This is the point where I tell you how busy people are, how attention spans have become a lot shorter and how much content is already out there, yada yada yada.

Stand out

We already know you're not trying to be everything to everybody, you're trying to be really something to somebody. Doug. Hopefully you've thought of delivering something that Doug really wants, in a format that's going to make him think 'wow'.

There is a lot of content out there but a great percentage of it is crap. And for the most part, not that much thought has gone into it. You might find this hard to believe, but most people won't have read Alice and Sophie's Ultimate Guide to Content Creation, so this already puts you light years ahead of all of those people and means that you'll be creating blow-Doug's-frigging-socks-off-type content.

Tell people

There's no point starting a blog or an Instagram account if you aren't going to shout about it from the rooftops. Put it on your website, tell your customers face to face, put up a poster, have a launch party, email people, add it to your e-signature, ask people to be involved, collaborate, join #Write52!

Grow your database

One Doug probably isn't going to be enough to make your business a roaring success. You need lots of Dougs. They'll look at your content and there'll be no question as to if they're the type of person who it is meant for. You want them as part of your community so make sure you give them a clear reason to join (tell them what to expect and incentivise if you can) and an opportunity to get on board with a sign-up form.

Grow your following

You can also grow your social media communities. An email database is thought to be more valuable as you own it. Obviously, people can still unsubscribe but you don't have Facebook deciding whether to include you in the algorithm or not. But social media definitely has a place. Master one channel before you move on to the next and ask your social community to sign-up to your database.

Repurpose your content

A blog becomes an e-newsletter or a video, this can in turn become a series of tweets or posts. Make your content work efficiently for you to get out across your different channels.

Who inspires you?

What do you like that other people are doing and why do you like it? What are your competitors doing that they seem to be having success from? How can you replicate this in your own way?

Put some budget behind it

You've got to spend money to make money. Use some of your marketing budget to test advertising and promotion or for outsourcing some tasks to do with your content creation and delivery.

9. Reviewing what's worked

“So I guess the fortune teller's right. I should have seen just what was there. And not some holy light.”

Post it and they will come.

You wish!

No-one wakes up and instinctively thinks to visit your new website, read your blog, talk to you on social media. You have to make it happen...

And in reality, not everything works.

One of the joys of being a marketer is figuring out what does/doesn't work so you can fix it.

Define success

Right back at the beginning, we created a marketing strategy and in this marketing strategy you should have written some objectives.

Now, my training dictates that these should be SMART (specific, measurable, accurate, achievable and timely), but the wise old experienced me knows that in reality it's often a bigger vision of success. So, the business might

need to hit £5m turnover, but in terms of what that looks like in the business, it could be clients registering 70% NPS, or getting a front page headline in CIO Magazine.

Ask yourself, what does success actually look like?

Measure

When you know what your picture of success looks like, you can select the right key performance indicators to measure.

It's incredible that we're heading into the 4th industrial revolution where the world is all about being digital. But this means that every system we operate is producing vast quantities of data and 101 different reporting metrics.

Take Google Analytics for example. It's going to tell you the number of visitors to your site, the number of unique visitors, number of pages visited, bounce rate, average time spent on the site...

So what? What action are you going to take as a result of knowing that information? If the answer is 'nothing', why bother measuring it?

If you know that success is a front-page headline in CIO Magazine, then that's what you track – anything else simply distracts from your purpose.

Test

Ooh, this is the really fun bit!

What if...I turned up on someone's doorstep with cake to present my value proposition?*

What if...I posted biscuits and coffee to the people I really want to work with?*

What if...I wrote a book to teach my clients how to write their own blogs?*

I like to think about marketing as being permission to fail, because it's all about having the ability to try something new and learning from your mistakes so that next time you do it better.

If you write an article that's topical and you know should resonate with the audience (Doug!), but it only gets 10 views, why not:

- Test a different headline?
- Optimise it for a different keyword?
- Promote it on a different social platform?
- Re-spin it to come at the topic from a different angle?
- Re-purpose it into a more valuable piece of content, like a guide?

As long as you define what success looks like for that piece of content, and then measure the performance, it will tell you what to test and tweak.

** Note: I have tried all of these things in my business!*

Leave wiggle room

I worked with a marketing agency once that had a lot of charity clients. In the charity sector it's all about securing donations and they worked off the model that 70% of your promotional budget should go into the tried and tested tactics that you know work, and the remaining 30% should be spent on trying something completely new.

You should try it.

In the digital era, things are changing so quickly so you can't afford to sit back and trust that what's always worked for your business in the past will continue to work for you in the future.

When you're planning your marketing activities for each quarter, think about something new you could try. Perhaps it's pitching a case study to a publication to see if you can secure that headline in CIO Magazine, or throwing £5k at promoted Tweets, sending locked boxes of goodies to companies you really want to work with, or turning your existing articles into an ebook...

The possibilities are endless, so try something new and see what impact it has on your business.

10. Ask for help

“So, no one told you life was going to be this way.” (Clap, clap, clap, clap).

I'll be there for you. Or rather, we'll be here for you. This post represents a mere soupçon of the knowledge and ideas that we have between us in the content creation, copywriting and marketing arenas. And we're more than happy to share that knowledge.

Alice specialises in copywriting for IT companies and Sophie in the travel and hospitality industry.

We both blog every week and you can sign up to our individual blogs here:

alicehollis.co.uk/blog/

thoughtfully.co.uk/marketing-blog

Find us on Twitter (@AliceKHollis & @FullyThoughtOut) or drop us an email with your questions, thoughts or random musings. If we can't help you, then no doubt we can recommend someone who can.

If nothing else, find someone to collaborate with!