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Much of the discussion in marketing of late has centered on the idea of "Big Data." While this is an interesting and important topic, there is another that is equally as important and worthy of our attention. That concept is "Big Content."

Big Data doesn't appear spontaneously; it is the by-product of large-scale observation. Consumers engage and interact in the world, and we track, collect and make sense of their activities. But what are these consumers engaging with? Content. Big Data isn't just a result of better data-tracking technology. It simply wouldn't exist without the ever-expanding catalyst that is Big Content. And insights from Big Data can — or at least should — help brands create more, better Big Content.

To define Big Content, we need to start with a definition of marketing content. At the most basic level, marketing content refers to any artifact that a consumer interacts with that relates to a brand. What makes content "Big" is its amplification, iteration and dissemination across multiple channels, devices and platforms; when it leaps the tracks and is no longer controlled solely by the brand, but can be summoned and even manipulated on demand by consumers themselves.

The digital era has made Big Content possible. It has expanded the footprint of branded content from broadcast and print formats to Web properties, online CRM, display ads, social media tweets, pins and posts, custom publishing, search ad copy and even mobile apps and SMS messages. Big Data is connected to content because Big Content helps fuel Big Data.

We have seen an incredible growth in digital content in the last 10 years, and it is still picking up speed. The Internal Data Corporation (IDC) predicts that the digital universe, a measure of content, will have grown by a factor of 300 between the years 2005 and 2020. According to Google's own statistics, the total number of pages they indexed will grow from 1 trillion in 2008 to an expected 30 trillion in 2013. And the average number of daily searches on Google, another measure of digital demand, has grown by a factor of four from 2007 to 2011, according to Comscore.

Marketers have done more than their fair share to contribute to this content growth. Based on a 2012 survey by Content Wise, marketers increased their total spending on the development of content by 45% from 2005 to 2012. Not surprisingly, the biggest area of growth was in digital. During this time period, the percentage of marketers' budgets that went to content creation increased from 31% to 39%.

Big Content – Where does it come from?

A key reason for the growth in content is the most basic of economic principles— Supply and Demand.

On the demand side, we are finding consumers to be hungry for more relevant digital content experiences. Many want a deeper experience with their favorite brands. This desire has helped drive consumption of brand-related content within social channels. The fact that consumers can now actively participate in those conversations has also fueled growth.

To feed this demand, we have seen a concurrent increase in the supply of content provided by marketers. Marketers are racing to fill out the ever-increasing number of channels that their consumers are spending time in. Let's look at some cases that illustrate this.

Take the example of a 30-second Super Bowl ad. This one piece of content can find several homes in multiple channels. It can be posted to the brand's YouTube channel, which might also include several longer, re-cut versions or outtakes. The video can also live on the brand's Web site or a special Super Bowl microsite created just for the campaign. Photos from the creation of the ad can be posted on Instagram, Pinterest and flickr. And of course, all of this content can be placed on the brand's Facebook page before the spot even airs.

There could also be a related group of SEO and SEM terms designed to drive traffic to various destinations. The brand could post to Twitter during the game. It could also follow up with its consumer database by sending an email that has the commercial embedded within. From just one commercial, the brand would now have dozens of pieces of content living in 11 different channels.

A result such as this is possible thanks to the explosion in the variety of social media channels. Prior to 2004, the key social media outlets were MySpace and perhaps Second Life. Fast forward to 2013, and there are more than a dozen social media channels worthy of attention from marketers. Hardly a marketing campaign is created that doesn't have a strategy for Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube and Instagram. This has led to a multiplying effect on the instances and variations of available brand content.

Another factor helping to increase the supply of marketing content is that the price, or marginal cost, to create and support content continues to decrease. This should not be read to indicate that good content is cheap — it isn't. But the process of concepting, building and deploying digital content continues to decrease. Over the last 10 years, the cost to create, update and maintain a robust brand Web site has declined by approximately 30%. This is due to many factors, such as the widespread availability of open source content management systems (CMS), accessibility to offshore development resources and increased access and use of computer-generated imagery (CGI).

The Super Bowl ad is an example of a single spike of content, which is very temporal in nature. The growth of Big Content is also due to the need to fill multiple channels with specific, always-on content. Within this type of environment, many brands are increasing the variety and depth of their content.

Lowe's is one of these brands. Their *Lowe's Creative Ideas* program (LCI), which has existed for 15 years, has shifted during the last six to perfectly reflect the move to Big Content. The program is designed to drive loyalty and purchases through increased consumer engagement. Originally print-centric, using a magazine format, it has since evolved to become an idea- and story-centric program, focused on a broad list of touchpoints and channels. It now takes a 360-degree content planning approach that includes Lowes.com, a magazine, an e-Newsletter, Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest pages, as well as mobile apps.

In this new approach, the content of the story is at the center. Extra consideration is given to the different channels the story can be distributed through, which can impact some of the story elements. Lowe's has learned that stories that contain more in-depth content and elements such as detailed "how-to" videos often increase engagement. That much of this content is now digital means there is a rich behavioral data set illuminating what their consumers have the most interest in.

The *Lowe's Creative Ideas* article "Dinner Time to Office Hours" displays this type of story-based, "how-to" content. The Creative Idea is to transform a dining room into a space that also doubles as a home office. The article contains inspiring visuals and several tips on how to utilize the area and furniture pieces. The online version of the story is delivered through a slideshow with a link to building instructions and a "how-to" video. This content will also be featured in their Apple Newsstand edition, in a more interactive format and will be featured in an e-Newsletter, on Facebook and Pinterest.

http://www.lowescreativeideas.com/idea-library/articles/dining-room-office-combo

It is easy to see how this story-centric approach, as opposed to channel-centric one, has resulted in significant growth for Lowe's content ecosystem. One indicator is in the success of the *Lowe's Creative Ideas* Holiday 2012 issue. In this edition, the total number of pieces of content was 286 as opposed to only 88 for the same issue in 2010. This represents a 325% increase. Using these findings, Lowe's has been able to determine that consumers engaged with this type of content deliver markedly more revenue, or ROI, compared to the general population.

Factors such as those noted in the aforementioned examples have moved marketers from the world of content to the universe of Big Content. Major marketers are now firmly in the mode of creating and distributing ever-larger content offerings across continually growing ecosystems. In order to pull this off, a content strategy has become a necessity.

Such an endeavor isn't just reserved for major brands like Red Bull or Coca Cola, both of which are on the leading edge of this trend and have aggressively embraced the concept of content-fueled marketing. Big Content is now increasingly relevant to any B2C and B2B company with a complex ecosystem. Every marketer should understand how much content they have, the type of content it is, where it resides and how it is performing. A detailed content mapping exercise for a brand and its key competitors is a must at least every few years and forms the basis for developing a content strategy.

Tracking & Measuring Big Content

Because brands have so much content, it is imperative to track and manage it. One best practice is to apply a detailed set of attributes to each piece of content. There are two primary types of attributes: descriptive attributes and performance attributes. Relating these attributes to concepts from classical physics can be extremely helpful, focusing our attention on the relative impact and effort necessary to expose consumers to content.

With descriptive attributes we want to understand the nature of a discrete piece of content. These measures can include concepts like mass, density and the number or instances or variants within the overall ecosystem. For example, a four-minute video has significantly more mass than a 30-second video, and an email with an embedded video, four articles and eight links has more density than an email with two articles and three links. There are also various meta-data descriptors we can add that are key to successful SEO performance and relate to effective content mapping. This doesn't mean that more "mass" or "density" is necessarily better, leading to better performing content. Rather, it is the relevancy of the content that ultimately determines success.

With performance attributes, we want to understand the number of exposures, shares, engagements, etc. We can also calculate the acceleration of a piece of content by how we define our descriptive attributes. The concept of content acceleration provides unique insights into how our shared and earned content is performing in terms of engagement. We can also consider the effort or force required to accelerate a piece of content that has a given mass by applying the formula:
Force = Mass X Acceleration.

Conceptually, this helps us understand that it takes less force to create momentum behind a small piece of content versus a large one (assuming both pieces of content are of comparable quality and relevance). A Tweet about Oreo cookies during the Super Bowl requires less "force" to disseminate than a two-minute commercial (cleverness not withstanding). Since relevance is the biggest driver of content quality, we can quickly see that extremely relevant content requires less force to be distributed through an audience. And we know that an increase in relevance always results in an increase in response rates.

The ultimate performance measure, however, is engagement. There are several approaches, many of them channel specific, that quantify engagement. The one thing they all have in common is that engagement is driven by relevance. However performance measures are aggregated and defined, it is critical that they accurately ascertain engagement. Calculating a content ROI is much easier with a solid methodology for measuring engagement. Ongoing ROI measures are critical to determining where future content investments should be made within an ecosystem.

Does Big Content = Big Budgets? Not necessarily

As noted earlier, we have seen the percentage of marketers' budgets allocated to content creation increase. Much of this is due to the shifting of funds toward digital activities. Also increasing is the need for content-filled destinations to send consumers to, shared channels such as YouTube. The growth of social media has also required additional content creation, even though a significant amount of content is now user-generated.

In the past, a larger percentage of a marketer's budget was usually allocated to media — think of the cost ratio of broadcast media to broadcast creative. In digital, while we still spend money in media, we spend heavily to create rich destination experiences, or experiences to be dispersed among other channels. Similarly with CRM, communications are increasingly personalized and customized, vastly increasing the amount and variety of content required to support sustained engagement. These growing channels and touchpoints have allowed marketers to get more out their budgets. Because there is a decreasing number of brands that can afford a robust network TV plan, dollars are now shifted from media budgets to fund growth in digital. Recent trends show that marketers would much rather spend money on a piece of content that has a long shelf life and is part of an efficient pull ecosystem than on a one-time use, expensive media buy.

Method, the natural cleaning supply company, is a strong example of a smaller brand creating a large content ecosystem. Although it is unlikely that they have the vast marketing budget of competitors like Clorox or S.C. Johnson, they have still managed to create an extensive content ecosystem, with rich content experiences on their brand site, blogs, YouTube, Pinterest and Facebook pages. A visit to their YouTube channel gives consumers access to several , engaging, fun-filled videos.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4P6Qwppw-3U

Big Content and the Agency Model

Marketers are in the business of creating good product, distributing it to the consumer, creating awareness and increasing buys of the product. They also understand that they require help to generate the communications programs and content to support these efforts. This is where agencies come into play.

But are most traditional general market or digital agencies equipped to help clients deliver on Big Content? One could argue that they are not, especially if a brand is looking for something similar to the Lowe's content example. Content in this sense is much more complicated than finding new channels for a television spot. There is a great deal of content strategy and content expertise required to deliver a Lowe's type of content program. This type of program requires a different staffing model and approach to content creation and delivery.

A handful of content strategists, which some larger digital agencies do have, will not be sufficient to continually feed the diverse channels and touchpoints that are part of Big Content. Having a content "Ninja" within an agency team may help create a content strategy, but then the question remains as to who will populate it, maintain and refresh it? Lowe's, for example, employs a team of content specialists who function more like magazine editors and writers than traditional agency copywriters. Though this may not be the right solution for every marketer, it does point toward a need for new, evolving content-creation solutions.

Lately, we have begun to see the emergence of a new type of agency, often referred to as a Customer Engagement Agency (CEA). Forrester's Fatemeh Khatibloo outlined the details of a CEA in a November 2012 article. There are several aspects of a CEA that are aligned with Big Content—namely optimizing experiences throughout the customer journey by applying data and analytics to each interaction. This is a connection to Big Data. While this is a very good place to start, we need to more specifically account for how to relate consumer insights with business needs to further drive engagement through relevance.

High-performing content is fundamentally about relevancy. Beyond all the analysis, this is about content that connects with a consumer, has more pull than push and delivers something of value to its end user. Big Content provides the opportunity to connect and engage with consumers through the channels they prefer, when and where they prefer to do so. It represents the opportunity to tell a story that mixes entertainment, education and enlightenment. And brands that successfully deliver on Big Content will fundamentally have more high performing assets and will be more valuable as a result.

How to Approach Big Content

Is content still king? Perhaps, but what that means has changed. We are better served by saying that the consumer is king and that content is the coin of the realm. Getting started with Big Content is not as overwhelming as it may seem. In fact, many marketers are already operating in this world and just don't realize it.

A good starting point is to conduct a content audit of your brand and your key competitors. Looking at existing efforts through the lens of a new paradigm can be insightful and will often clearly identify content gaps. If content doesn't have appropriate descriptive and performance attributes, then marketers can work to create them and begin tracking engagement of content across all touchpoints.

Yet these are merely stepping stones toward working through the much-discussed vision of structured versus unstructured content, and even content modeling. A brand may also need to assess the capabilities of their existing agencies and potentially seek out expertise from a progressive Consumer Engagement Agency. This is not an area where you can afford to be too far behind the curve.

While we continue to contemplate the future of marketing with Big Data, there is clearly a need to devote time to Big Content, and how the understanding of this new paradigm can help to better connect and engage with consumers. If you were able to increase your response rates by 50% from the top 20% of your audience what business return would you receive? How much would you be prepared to invest to get that return? That may be the start of a business rational for an investment in Big Content.