Content, Audience, and Advertising: The Virtuous Circle of Customer Engagement

From Web Content Management to Customer Engagement Management

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Content Management: From Prospects to Customers

The Internet has become a crowded and noisy place—one billion Google searches per day, 45 million Facebook updates per day, 140 million tweets per day, according to each respective company. That is significant clutter for businesses to cut through in order to get the attention of potential customers. But cut through it they must, if they are to succeed.

In the face of such noise and distraction, the ability to attract, engage, and convert prospects to customers, and then retain them are primary keys to success. Executives know that engaging content, both enterprise and user-generated, are part of that equation. They also know that understanding their target audiences' interests and needs is important. And, they know that the ability to measure what content and marketing messaging works and what does not is critical. What many don't know is the best way to bring those pieces together in order to accomplish that goal.

This paper explains the new world of web content management and customer engagement, where managing content is the foundation of, but not the total solution. That total solution is an integrated environment containing content management, analytics, marketing messaging, and advertising.

One way to view the solution is as a "customer engagement engine" designed to flush out the desired goals and outcomes of a site visitor, serve up appropriate content, and then present marketing messages and advertisements that are relevant at the right moment to create the tipping point from engagement to conversion. And, at the same time, maintain brand consistency across all channels. That is the "virtuous circle" of content, audience, and advertising, and the ultimate aim and role of an integrated WCMS and customer engagement solution. The virtuous circle is created when the engagement engine learns from the visitor's behaviors, and presents ever more targeted editorial and persuasive content, eventually converting visitors to prospects and then to customers.

Trying to orchestrate that dance with visitors and prospects is challenging. It requires the ability to manage and serve up content and advertising across multiple channels and devices, and the ability to dynamically tune what is being presented to ensure that it is timely and relevant to the viewer. From a systems standpoint, simply dropping into place content management systems, ad serving platforms, and web analytics is not sufficient—they need to be tightly integrated both functionally and at the content and data level as well.

Creating the "virtuous circle" of content, audience, and advertising requires a cross-channel and cross-organizational view of prospects and customers that enables creation of consistent experiences and brand images and results in sales transactions. That is best achieved through technology that provides an end-to-end solution.

Content, Marketing, and the Buyer's Journey

The virtuous circle starts with two types of content: editorial content which aims to attract, engage, and educate prospects, and persuasive content consisting of marketing messages and advertising, the aim of which is to convert prospects to customers.

Publishers are experts in monetizing content—it's how they earn a living. For many publishers, their persuasive content, advertising, is a key revenue component. They have developed very sophisticated approaches to advertising management, aimed at driving views and click-through rates. The key to their monetization strategies is creating engaging content, then placing ads in the most relevant context for a given viewer.

Companies that rely on compelling content to sell products and services, however, have a related but slightly different challenge. They tend to think of persuasive content as marketing messages. Since they monetize content via the products and services they sell, their editorial and marketing content are even more intertwined. Those enterprises need to remember that their marketing messages are content, too—and need to be managed in the same context as editorial content for maximum impact.

Marketers have a concept called the "buyer's journey" which reflects the stages that a visitor moves through on the way to becoming a customer. The analogy serves as a solid framework from which to view the role of content, both editorial and persuasive, in converting prospects into customers.

That content draws the visitor in and guides her through the buyer's journey, from awareness through conversion and upselling. Figure 1 illustrates the stages of the journey along with the desired outcomes at each stage.

Figure 1: Buyer's Journey and Marketing Goals

Stage	Awareness	Engagement	Education	Conversion	Upsell
Content/ Marketing Goal	Create awareness and credibility	Help prospect identify pain points	Help prospect define needs and potential solution set	Convince prospect that vendor's solution is the best solution and will solve pain point	Convince customer of the value of additional or premium solutions
Desired Result	Vendor is seen as a credible source of information	Prospect acknowledges pain points and need for a solution	Vendor is positioned for RFP or vetting process	Prospect becomes a customer	Customer buys premium or adjacent products and services

Source: Outsell, Inc., 2011

The figure makes clear that content and marketing needs and goals change significantly at different stages of a visitor's interaction with a given company. Hence, content targeting needs to be driven not only by the profile of a prospect, but also by the current stage of decision-making. At the earlier stages of engagement, content is designed to attract, interest, and educate prospects; while later, messages and/or advertisements aimed at converting prospects to customers are served up. The virtuous circle notion overlays this with persuasive and editorial content continually being refined and targeted based on the visitor's demographic and behavioral characteristics.

That requires an integrated view of and approach to content creation, presentation, feedback and analysis, and fine-tuning. That also requires granular content management—not just the ability to dynamically render pages, but instead the ability to dynamically assemble fine-grained pieces of content based on rules and visitor information.

It is important to note that this buying journey can happen over an extended period for a significant purchase, or in a single website visit for lesser purchases. This means that content targeting and optimization have to happen quickly. Also important is the fact that a prospect can enter a vendor site or view content at any stage of the journey, making dynamic tuning of content and presentation a vital capability.

The Real End Game: Customer Engagement and Conversion

Web content management systems have evolved dramatically in recent years from their original focus on web publishing and repositories for digital content to a much more prominent role in customer engagement strategies—in essence driving key parts of the customer experience. Buying a web content management system to simply manage web content is not going to attract visitors and drive the behaviors and conversions that companies need in the noise-laden marketplaces in which they operate.

That is why we use the nomenclature "customer engagement engine" to represent the collection of content management, text mining and entity extraction, contextualization, and analytics tools that are needed to support the virtuous circle. Figure 2 illustrates how the engagement engine serves up a tightly woven combination of engaging, educational, and persuasive information coupled with highly targeted marketing messages and advertisements that can be tuned for maximum effectiveness.

Figure 2: Customer Engagement Engine
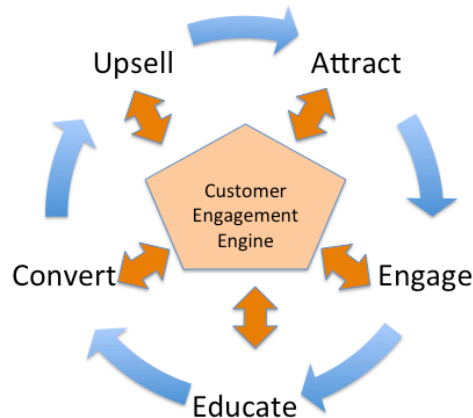
Source: Outsell, Inc., 2011

The engagement engine also incorporates social media, ranging from customer reviews and comments, to blogs and micro-blogs that provide rich and credible reviews, comments, and advice from customers. A fairly recent yet significant factor in WCMS and customer engagement is the social web and the social content it helps generate. Social media also drives buying behaviors—a recent study by Knowledge Networks states that 38 million people in the United States reported that social media influenced their purchase decisions.

In this graphical view of the customer engagement engine, it is the center of the universe in managing content and advertising, nurturing and guiding and ultimately converting visitors to prospects to customers. The goal for a business is to attract a visitor, grab their attention, and provide immediate value that engages them. Once engaged, the prospect is nurtured with increasingly specific and relevant content as the business learns more about the prospect's interests and needs, and ultimately can present highly relevant and targeted advertising—the virtuous circle.

The process involves continuous feedback and adjustment that occurs as the visitor interacts with content, and marketers analyze, and fine-tune content for relevance and impact. The use of text analytics and entity extraction helps bring automation to content tailoring by tagging content with contextual metadata that supports content targeting and relevancy.

To make this a bit more tangible, think of an online business that sells performance automotive accessories. A car enthusiast visits the site looking to add some horsepower and to dress up the looks of his engine. As he browses the site and searches, the engagement engine learns about his interests and places contextually related content next to the items he is viewing. Related material could range from tests and reviews of products, to how-to videos, to notices about near-by automotive events.

As the enthusiast hones in on a particular set of products, user-generated reviews are placed in proximity to the component description, adding credibility. And finally, personalized and contextualized advertising such as promotions or discounts is presented to convert the visitor to a buyer. Real-time web and content analytics are used to measure the success of the content and advertising mix, and to fine-tune content presentation for the next prospect or for a return visit by the newly acquired customer. The enthusiast not only finds the accessory he is looking for also but notes that the site is a great place to learn about automotive performance parts.

In another example, a news publisher starts with original content—a news story about new trends in holiday travel along with some ads selected for their relevance to the story. Using mining and text analytics, the engagement engine presents additional syndicated content that is relevant to the original story, such as hot new destinations and tips on booking holiday excursions. User content from travel blogs and trip review sites is layered in. As the reader clicks on the related stories, the engine presents personalized and contextual ads for travel companies, cruises, and other travel destinations, using the reader's navigation path to establish her interest. Finally, ads for promotions and specials are used to convince her to sign up for a holiday excursion.

These examples not only show the power of a rich combination of contextualized and personalized content and advertising, but also serve to highlight how drab and ineffective a content or commerce site would be without such functionality.

Planning for and Selecting a WCMS and Customer Engagement Solution

Planning Considerations

In planning for a content management and customer engagement solution, it is important for business and technology managers to identify and agree upon the business drivers and requirements. Enterprises have different reasons for choosing a WCMS and customer engagement solution—that's one reason there are so many to choose from. Decision factors are varied but can include:

- Achieving operational efficiencies in managing web content and minimize IT involvement

- Getting all digital content assets in one place

- Supporting content localization and multi-channel delivery

- Enabling use of dynamic and personalized content on customer-facing web sites

- Facilitating content re-use and re-purposing

- Improving and managing digital customer engagement to drive revenue

Business Value

Starting at the top bullet, the functional requirements could be fairly sparse, and most basic WCMS systems would satisfy those needs. Moving down the list, however, the functional requirements grow significantly beyond the features found in a basic WCMS, and draw upon a broader set of tools including analytics, automated and contextual landing pages, personalization, to name a few—the components that support the virtuous circle.

Key Features

Content management has evolved dramatically since its humble roots in document and digital asset management. In fact, the notion of a WCMS as key component of marketing and the virtuous circle of customer engagement is a relatively new development, in part due to growing recognition of the criticality of effective content in customer engagement.

The demands of providing a consistent yet dynamic and exceptional user experience across multiple channels, including social media require advanced functionality, include:

- *Multi-channel content*: The ability to easily author and provision content across multiple channels in multiple sites, locations, and languages.

- *Tagging and granular content management:* Content tagging by users and automated tools to enable dynamic assembly of content components.

- *Rich media:* The ability to handle rich media formats including audio, video, Flash, and HTML5.

- *Dynamic personalization*: Content and messaging presentation and sequencing driven by visitor profiles, demographics, history, and behaviors.

- *Campaign tracking:* The ability to track the effectiveness of marketing campaigns including leads generated, lead scoring and value, and conversions.

- *Integration with external systems*: APIs for integrating with marketing automation, ERP, and customer relationship management (CRM) applications.

- *Analytics:* The ability to measure content effectiveness using A/B splits and/or multivariate testing to present content, measure performance, and dynamically optimize the content.

- *Social content:* The integration and management of social media content as a dynamic part of the content presented to, and gathered from visitors.

A big driver of the evolution of WCMS to customer engagement solutions has been the realization by marketing organizations that content is the essential element in all forms of marketing, and that they need more sophisticated tools to manage that content. Another driver has been their growing awareness of the need for integrated content management, web analytics, and advertising management capabilities in order to drive the virtuous circle.

The Case for Integrated Solutions

By some counts, there are over a thousand WCMS and customer engagement solutions available in the market, and many are high-quality offerings. That means there is more than one way to create the type of end-to-end solution described in this paper. Options include integrated single-vendor solutions; point products from multiple vendors integrated to create a solution; and open source offerings integrated to create a solution.

Each approach has its plusses and minuses. Some of the key considerations in deciding which approach to adopt include the time frame in which a solution needs to be implemented; overall cost, both up-front and total cost of ownership; sophistication and availability of IT staff and resources with the appropriate skill sets; and the organization's preference for single versus multi-vendor environments.

When selecting an approach that is based on integration of open source or vendor point products to create an end-to-end solution, it is important to consider the challenges that may arise, including:

- Training and usability issues stemming from multiple user interfaces and logins.

- Siloed data which makes comprehensive analysis difficult or impossible.

- Component solutions that change and evolve at different rates and driven by different agendas.

- Multiple vendors or suppliers to negotiate with and manage.

- Extended time-to-market.

Probably the most significant of the challenges listed above is that of data integration. The ability to manage customer engagement across multiple channels requires a rich mix of profile, history, demographic, behavioral, and other data to understand their propensity to buy specific products and services, and how to convert visitors to buyers. That is made even more challenging when data exists in multiple repositories that are not easily integrated and rationalized.

So technology integration isn't just technology integration—before taking on the challenge of integrating multiple applications to provide end-to-end customer digital experience management, it is important to assess the costs and risks associated with that approach.

The IT Organization's Role

It is important to include the IT organization early in the process of planning for a WCMS and customer engagement solution, as their support will be essential in realizing its full value. IT organizations have a

disciplined approach for solidifying business requirements, developing a vendor short list, creating evaluation criteria, and managing demos and pilot tests—all essential components of a selection process.

Their assistance will also be required to integrate the WCMS and customer engagement solution with other systems likely already in place, including CRM, ERP, e-mail, and marketing automation, to name a few. They can also help in assessing the robustness of a solution architecture and core technologies; scalability; security and rights management; and open-ness of APIs and interfaces.

Finally, they are already managing a sophisticated technology environment and have invested not only in technology solutions, but also in hiring and training staff to support that environment. In selecting technology solutions, it is desirable to try to find ones that are compatible with the installed base of technology...

Conclusion

Content-rich enterprises need every possible advantage to rise above the noise and confusion in their markets and attract and monetize customers. Great content is a key component. But that alone is not enough—plenty of great content is already widely available in the digital age. Monetization of that content requires a sophisticated, orchestrated process that draws a visitor in, and ultimately converts her to a customer through education and persuasion. As we have noted, the ability to fine-tune personalization of content by analyzing and understanding both visitor and content context, closing the virtuous circle, is key to that monetization.

The very good news is that WCMS and customer engagement solution vendors have created the tools and functionality to support these dynamic environments and to ensure that marketing dollars are used where most effective. It's time for business enterprises to raise their sights from web content management to true customer engagement via the virtuous circle of content, audience, and advertising.

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