

Elevating the B2B Content Conversation

An eBook From

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ELEVATING THE B2B CONTENT CONVERSATION

The one thing that is constant in our work is this: We repeatedly hear the same challenges and issues that organizations face when trying to scale content strategy. Recent discussions focus on how AI and machine learning will take content marketing to the next level and beyond. In many instances, a huge readiness gap exists for AI adoption as organizations still grapple with streamlining processes and creating a single view of their customers across functions and business units. The biggest demand for our work at ComBlu is to help organizations streamline content operations, stimulate collaboration between content creation teams, better understand the content needs of their customers across the full customer lifecycle, and determine topics that are both differentiating and relevant to target audiences.

We call this the manual labor of content. Without a shared roadmap across functions and business units, it is premature to scale or automate, much less

introduce machine learning. Delivering “customer-first” experiences overwhelms many organizations because they try to leapfrog to scale rather than first creating the right foundation.

This eBook presents four conversations that we’ve had across many companies and industries. In each case, manual labor leads to better outcomes before scaling and automating content operations. Each section summarizes the conversation, offers tips and techniques for addressing the challenge and provides insights into automation to leverage and scale once this initial strategy work is complete.

Hopefully these insights can help change the narrative and elevate the content conversation.



Conversation One:

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When we talk to companies, this conversation keeps coming up:

“Content is created in many different areas of our company. Marketing, product, sales, corporate communications, brand: Each of these functions produces content, often about the same topic. To add to the confusion, subspecialties within marketing create dueling content assets. Little collaboration exists across functions resulting in content with varying degrees of relevance, quality and usefulness.”

While content is created independently across functions, it is essential to understand how this content is planned for and staged, particularly in relation to where each fit within the customer lifecycle and an omnichannel environment. The content needs to work in concert, irrespective of what part of the organization produces it.

Conversation One: TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

1. Map the current state. Many good templates exist to help in this process. ComBlu created this one:

 Content Sources	 Content Goals	 Content Types	 3 Key Topics	 Tools & Templates
Brand Product Demand Gen Sales Enablement Sales CX/Support Communications Other	List for each source <hr/>	List for each source <hr/> Thought Leadership Assets Videos Podcast eBooks Newsletters Blogs White Papers etc.	List for each source <hr/> Key Products Process for Identifying Topics	List for each source <hr/> Production Management Tools Automation Tools Sample Planning Docs Editorial Calendar and Tools Used to Create



Conversation One: TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

2. Identify all content creation functions to uncover points of overlap or potential collaboration.
3. For each function, collect information that will allow you to determine how to design a future state. This would include such things as:
 - Planning templates
 - Editorial plans and calendars
 - Distribution plans and channel strategy
 - Volume
 - Publishing cadence
 - Taxonomy
 - Platforms
 - Metrics
4. Organize content topics with following data points for each:
 - Source (function or department)
 - Author
 - Format
 - Publish date
 - Distribution outlets
 - Tags
5. Look for points of redundancy. Determine points of collaboration between functions creating content about the same topic(s).
6. Use data to shape future state and guide meaningful governance.



Conversation One: TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

7. Questions to ask when analyzing data:
- Is the publishing cycle synced so that all content about a single topic is orchestrated?
 - Is there an opportunity for tighter collaboration?
 - Is all the content about a singular topic of equal quality and value?
 - How many different content formats have been developed for this topic? (white paper, video, podcast, etc.)
 - Which authors produce highest quality content?
 - Which content gets the most engagement?
 - Where is content hosted? Can it be easily accessed for multiple uses across functions?
 - Are the planning tools used by various functions compatible? Have they been integrated

in any way?

Answers to these questions should lead to constructive internal discussions and allow the organization to use a fact-based process to co-create a future state that all functions can support and buy into. It also allows the development of an actionable governance approach that provides guardrails without stifling creativity or functional authority.





Conversation One:

AUTOMATION INSIGHTS

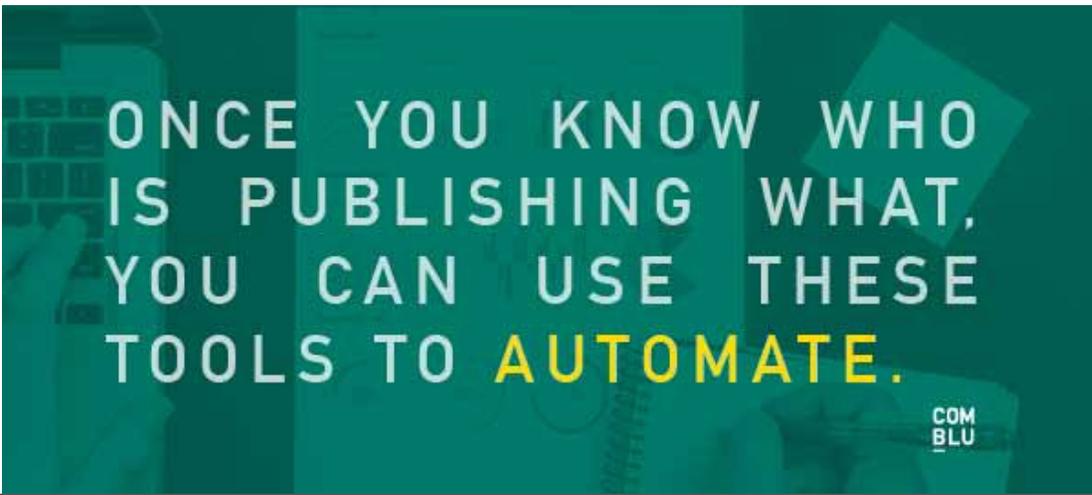
Content production platforms leverage the work you've done to understand where content is being created and distributed. Once you know who is publishing what, you can use these tools to automate the planning and production process without taking away the ability to create content closest to its most authoritative authors.

Typically, these platforms help manage several functions including:

- Eliminates ad hoc content creation
- Provides collaboration tools
- Generates shared calendars or crawls across multiple calendars to find points of synergy
- Uncovers editorial gaps
- Hosts content for multiple use/reuse
- Manages workflow across functions or departments

- Centralizes core management functions
- Scores and analyzes content performance

It is difficult to find a platform that “does it all” for all authoring entities. Some may need tools or platforms for highly specific needs. In this case, the organization needs to assure that there is seamless back-end integration between the content production platform and other nodes in the tech stack such as the DAM or the marketing automation tools.



ONCE YOU KNOW WHO
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TOOLS TO **AUTOMATE.**

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Conversation Two: **GROUNDHOG DAY**

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Another frequent conversation goes like this:

“ We don’t know if we’re writing about the right topics. Our SMEs seem to know what buyers and customers are thinking about, so they drive the editorial planning. We interview them once or twice a year and then create an editorial plan for our thought leadership content. ”

While SMEs cast an impressive shadow, they should not be the singular input for your thought leadership content calendar. Insights from internal subject matter experts are important but sole reliance on them leads to an insular view. Even worse, it limits topic innovation as you focus on what you know vs. emerging customer challenges. Instead, look at multiple sources for building your editorial plan. This prevents you from dealing with the same topics over and over or not addressing important issues of your buyers.



Conversation Two: TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

1. Use SME input as a starting point
2. Tap into your ideal customer research to consider topics through a role or segment lens
3. For each topic, explore other inputs such as:
 - Social intelligence reports
 - Customer insights reports
 - SEO or search intent data
 - CRM and marketing automation reports
 - Content engagement dashboard
 - Other
4. Overlay inputs and create a topic Venn diagram to determine topics best suited for brand differentiation and marketplace resonance
5. Further define topics or look for interesting tangents through deeper research
 - Editorial review
 - Social intelligence
 - Industry events
 - Think tank work product
 - Third-party research
 - Regulatory agencies
6. Do peer research to determine:
 - Ownability
 - Differentiating POV
 - Topic saturation among peers
7. Use results to inform the content roadmap process



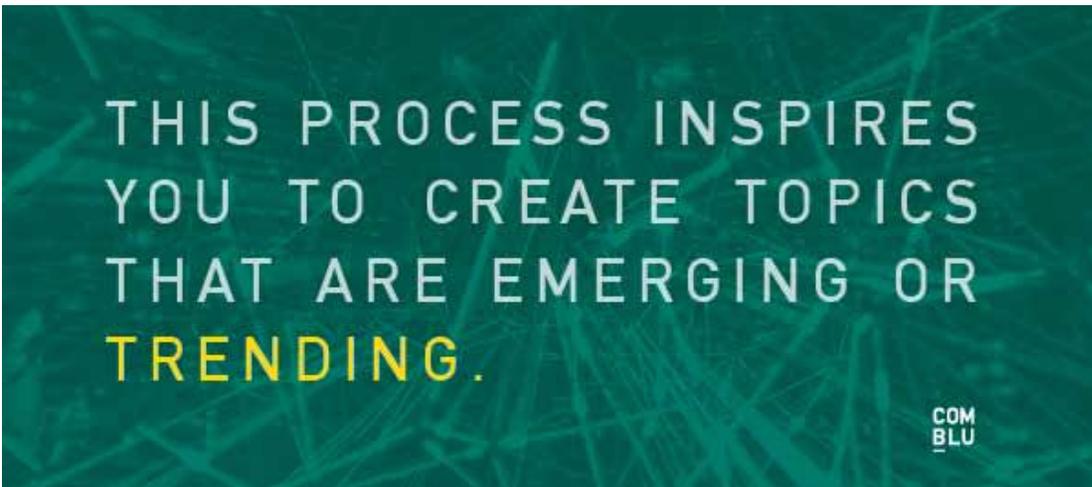
Conversation Two:

AUTOMATION INSIGHTS

The manual approach looks well beyond your own experts or website analytics. This process inspires you to create topics that are emerging or trending and for which people show great interest. Once you identify an intelligent starting point, you can employ a platform that uses machine learning for progressive topic iterations. These platforms use advanced text analytics to extract themes across a series of topics. The platform searches for correlated words across owned and audience channels. They scrape information from a variety of sources but will perform best with a good starting point of relevant topics, decision-makers/roles, industries/segments and a short list of competitors.

These platforms also will allow you to monitor if a topic is waxing or waning. You can also compare the topics your content addresses vs. the interests of a specific audience, segment or role. Other algorithms provide sophisticated content scoring to gauge

engagement and see which clusters of content are indicative of buying behaviors. This data can inform the calibration of your editorial calendar. This is also great information for sales enablement content and to help customer facing people spark meaningful conversations with buyers and engage customers more deeply.



THIS PROCESS INSPIRES
YOU TO CREATE TOPICS
THAT ARE EMERGING OR
TRENDING.

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Conversation Three: ECHO CHAMBER

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Does this conversation sound familiar?

“ We know our buyers. We created personas and developed a journey. We’re just not quite sure how to apply the information to create better experiences and drive-to conversions. ”

Personalized experiences require knowledge of the needs, preferences and triggers of all people who influence a purchasing decision. Yet, many organizations create personas exclusively with internal knowledge. They often fail to probe deeply enough into the psyches of all the roles involved in a specific buying scenario. Even worse, they rely on one general journey instead of developing one for each major buying trigger or fail to account for buying behaviors that cross channels and devices. Without these inputs, it is almost impossible to create a meaningful personalized experience for each person involved in the purchasing decision or to expose next best action.



Conversation Three: TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

1. Start by defining the full buying center for your services
 - Include all roles that could potentially touch or influence a decision
 - Identify the core group that will typically be involved in multiple buying scenarios
2. Review the personas you have for each of these roles
 - Make sure your persona template is robust enough to provide actionable information
3. Map the full customer lifecycle and make sure there is a common definition across business units and functions
 - Define the business goals of each stage
 - Describe the triggers that kick off a buying journey
 - Create a journey for each trigger that accounts for the preferences and behaviors of each essential role
4. Create an objectives-driven enterprise roadmap that personalizes experiences for each role for each buying trigger
5. Map your content against enterprise roadmap
 - Identify content gaps for each role/journey
 - Develop sourcing model to fill gaps
 - Develop taxonomy to surface right content by trigger/role/phase of journey
 - Make sure that you develop roadmaps for scraping information from a variety of sources for a single view of the customer/role



Conversation Three:

AUTOMATION INSIGHTS

Many platforms today embed machine learning to accelerate role-based content strategy and to predictively personalize content. These platforms audit actions by role and journey stage to determine which content and experiences lead to more in-depth engagement. Some look at search intent matched to actions and abandonment rates on the site. This data in turn is used to score content and recommend topics that may be more useful for specific intentions.

Other tools progressively hone taxonomies by searching for semantic similarities of content for specific roles and journey phase. Another function of machine learning is continuously improving initial personas and identifying net-new ones that the brand may not have previously considered.

Machine learning facilitates microcontent strategies at the persona and buying stage level. It allows brands to account for the nonlinear nature of purchasing journeys and customer needs. The upfront deep dive in persona development helps machine to scale in a deliberate and complex manner. Matching persona and journey stage to the right next action is a daunting challenge which requires the processing of huge pools of data from multiple sources and channels.



MATCHING PERSONA AND
JOURNEY STAGE TO THE
RIGHT NEXT ACTION IS A
DAUNTING CHALLENGE.

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Conversation Four:

IT'S DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN

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Here the conversation goes like this:

“ We have a ton of content but have no idea if we have the right stuff to support personalization across a full buying team or account. We’ve created personas and understand their role in the path-to-purchase for a variety of use cases. We just don’t know how to organize our content to deliver progressively honed experiences. ”

In this instance, it makes more sense to start with automated tools and then bring in the thinkers. Here’s why: Creating content inventories is a long, arduous process. Many great tools exist that will crawl your digital properties and generate a list that includes:

- Asset name and type
- Metadata
- Location
- Date published
- Document size
- Views
- Action tools

Once the inventory is complete, most tools have the flexibility to allow report customization and organization by designated categories. This is where all the manual labor described in the previous chapters gives the content strategist an edge.



Conversation Four: TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

1. Use insights gained from creating personas and journeys to define the categories of the inventory report. This will organize content by trigger, role or point on journey. This makes it easier to determine if the right content exists to create personalized, meaningful experiences. (See Conversation Three)
 - Buyer center personas provide detailed insights into the type of content each role needs for decision-making
 - Journeys show role-specific needs at each journey point by trigger
2. Inventory by subject helps to determine if enough content exists for high-value topics. Content bingeing around a specific topic indicates sales readiness. These topics need to have several content assets in varying formats with different levels of detail.
3. Organizing the inventory by categories also aids in creating a taxonomy that supports both personalization and bingeing.
4. An organized, categorized inventory uncovers gaps for editorial planning. By reviewing content against the data generated through persona creation, journey mapping and content scoring, the inventory helps identify things like:
 - Topics that need more assets
 - Missing topics (See Conversation Two)
 - Content passed its freshness date
 - Missing content formats
 - Lack of content from authors with high engagement scores
 - Need for credible third-party content



Conversation Four: **TIPS AND TECHNIQUES**

5. Resource planning is next. This is where the work done to identify all the functions involved in content creation bears fruit. (See Conversation One)
 - Determine the best internal sources for specific content needs
 - Augment with both external content creation partners and curated content
6. Build a roadmap with clear timing, roles, responsibilities and distribution guidance

The knowledge gained during these processes instills the knowledge needed to make informed choices when deciding what content should be aligned with specific personas, journey phases, and use cases.

CONCLUSION

B2B buyers today expect consumer-grade experiences when researching and making a purchase. They believe companies should recognize who they are and anticipate their needs or preferences. With machine learning and AI, marketers can address the micro-interests or account actions rather than taking a more generalized approach to content.

The following chart from Salesforce indicates the ways marketers believe that machine can impact their productivity and ROI, mainly through better customer experiences.

Areas Where Marketing Leaders Expect AI Will Have Substantial or Transformational Impact on Their Business Over the Next Five Years



Source: https://c1.sfdcstatic.com/content/dam/web/en_us/www/assets/pdf/datasheets/salesforce-research-fourth-annual-state-of-marketing.pdf Page: 24

CONCLUSION

Sitecore's CMO describes the importance of AI in marketing: "Machine learning lets you use fewer rules and more intelligence to leverage the power of the computer to discover connections and correlations and causations that a human might never even see."

The need for human contributions and intervention, however, will not disappear. Instead, we'll have deeper, more informed conversations about who our customers are and what they need from us to make better decisions or find the best solution. Machine can't explain everything; it simply does not have the same cognition as humans. Machine automates workflows to allow teams to focus on higher level tasks. As this evolves, organizations will evolve the skill sets of its people to accommodate the needs of a higher functioning marketing discipline. Marketers will need to be data scientists as much as strategists and creatives.

AI is only as good as the accuracy of the underlying data and ultimately how the "learning" is tweaked. Success is a result of an evolving partnership between marketers and their algorithms. Translating the learning into meaningful conversations that drive better decisions and programs is the goal.

ABOUT COMBLU

ComBlu specializes in content strategy, thought leadership programs and content marketing. We objectively assess the collective content and experience needs of your key stakeholders and determine how well equipped your organization is to deliver that content efficiently. We then create workable plans and programs to enhance and deliver compelling content to target audiences.

Some of ComBlu's services include:

- Mapping and streamlining processes across functions and business units
- Determining the right personalization approach for the company's content marketing maturity
- Providing insights for topics and content assets for specific segments and personas
- Building integrated content roadmaps
- Identifying the skills and training required to staff content operations
- Reviewing the tech stack to assure automation success and creates governance for both centralized and self-publishing models

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathy Baughman is president and co-founder of ComBlu Inc., an organization specializing in content and community strategy, thought leadership programs and influencer marketing. Kathy has consulted with top tier companies such as Cisco, Microsoft, Aetna, McKinsey, Capital One and GE.

She is a frequent speaker and panel moderator at industry conferences, with appearances at SXSW, Social Media & Community 2.0 Strategies and the Department of Defense Social Media Conference. She conducts webinars and workshops for organizations seeking to better grasp social strategy.

Kathy is an advisory board member of the ANA and is an adjunct professor for Georgetown University and past board member of the Council of Public Relations Firms, and WOMMA (The Word of Mouth Marketing Association).

Kathy has authored multiple eBooks, including *Elevating the B2B Content Conversation*, *The CMO's Guide to Personalization*, *Content Supply Chain*, and *The Alchemy of Content*. She is a contributing author to Oracle's SmarterCX blog and the Content Marketing Institute.



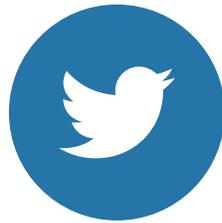
CONTACT

If you would like to schedule a webinar about Elevating the Content Conversation for your team or want to talk more about your content pain points, contact:



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