

How quality content can seal the B2B deal

 By [Charlie Stewart](#)

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This is a summary of a talk I recently gave at The Marketing Indaba 2016 in Cape Town on 25 May.



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The talk is derived from [Business to Business Marketing: A Step by Step Guide](#), written by myself and Mark Eardley and published by Penguin in early 2016.

Where do I sign?

It's the question every organisation wants to hear as often as possible. And they want to hear it a lot more than their competitors. It's our job as marketers to encourage, assist and motivate customers to move through the buying cycle towards the moment where they ask The Ultimate Question, "Where do I sign?"

To help answer it, consider 1958's infamous ad "The Man in the chair". Commissioned by McGraw Hill, the business and trade magazine publisher was voted best B2B ad of the 20th Century by Ad Age. Its tag line was: Sales start before your salesman calls – with business publication advertising.

In it, a wet-behind-the-ears salesman pays a visit to a grumpy executive who asks a series of pointed questions that are all

about establishing the authenticity of the salesman's company and products. The Business Marketing Association in the US ran a live version in 2008 to celebrate the Man's 50th anniversary and to stress this key point: *Times change, Markets change, Technologies change... fundamentals don't.*

As B2B marketers in 2016, we're still governed by the same rules as our predecessors were in 1958. But answering "The Man" in 2016 is a lot harder because while the questions buying decision makers ask haven't changed in 60-odd years, the way they gather information has. The internet has matured into a trusted resource and today's buying decision makers use it to sell to themselves.

The advent of the self-sold buyer

This has severely diluted the effectiveness of traditional B2B sales teams because customers are increasingly deciding what they want online, on their own. Self-research means there's an accelerated buying cycle – one in which many of a buying decision maker's questions are answered long before they even contact you. By the time they do, it may be simply to ask how much, how long?

Moving leads through the sales funnel

The only way to fulfill their needs is with content. While content marketing is a modern buzzword, the truth is people have been running content marketing campaigns for years.

Take John Deere, for instance. In 1895 it started producing the [Furrow](#), a magazine with informative tips for farmers – what to plant, when to plant it, commodity price projections, and long range weather forecasts. But the fundamental rule of the *Furrow* was that there was no sales pitch for John Deere's products. No 'Our tractors are better than our competitors', just useful, relevant and credible information.

Content bubble?

The organisation that's arguably best known for promoting content marketing is the eponymously named [Content Marketing Institute \(CMI\)](#). At its last annual conference, it revealed that 88% of US-based B2B companies use content marketing as a cornerstone of their marketing. Yet only 30% use it successfully.

Consider these stats: In 2010 Eric Schmidt of Google claimed that every two days we create as much content as mankind produced from the dawn of civilization until the year 2003. Every minute 350 000 tweets are sent and 4m Facebook posts are shared.

There's a heck of a lot of content out there. And as we've seen, not much of it hits the spot. So how do you make yours work?

Make content sweat

For content to stand out and build confidence it must speak to the needs of your audience as they pass through the various stages of the B2B buying cycle.

In the first phase, customers are trying to identify their needs and understand how their market is evolving. White papers and opinion articles will help show them you understand their marketplace.

By phase two, your prospects are setting criteria for what they want to achieve. They're looking for content like best practice guides that highlight how your products or services will help make a practical contribution to their success.

In phase three, they're narrowing down potential suppliers. They're looking for details of how you've helped other organisations – case studies will fulfill this need.

By the time buyers have moved to phase four they're looking for concrete proof that you're as good as you claim to be. Little beats a customer testimonial to demonstrate you can walk the talk.

By now your prospect is pretty much sold. But before they sign they're wanting to check the small print. Make sure there aren't any last minute surprises that could derail the deal by publishing your aftersales information, SLAs and contracts.

An effective content strategy will enable the self-sold buyer to validate your competencies. It'll speed up the sales process... and it'll prompt them to ask The Ultimate Question.

Make sure you deliver.

ABOUT CHARLIE STEWART

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