The dirty side of content marketing

By Bronwyn Williams   12 Jan 2018

The logic of context marketing is simple: To get more conversions you need more leads. To get more leads, you need more traffic, that is web clicks. And, to get clicks, you need content. Lots of it.

Content marketing is an endless game. Your company constantly needs to post more and more content just to maintain your search rankings. If your competitor writes two quality key-word and content rich articles this month, you need to write three. (As a start, LinkedIn reported that 38% of marketers post some form of content marketing at least once a week.) If your competitor is active on social media, you need to be at least as active.

And on it goes.

Everyone keeps talking more and more, louder and louder, using more and more data rich media to stay ahead of the infinite Internet popularity contest. Text-based articles are no longer enough to get the clicks your brand requires. Vlogs are the new blogs. Social media posts with images outperform their plain text compatriots; posts with videos are 2.6 times more effective than those without. Luckily, all this content is still fairly cheap to produce (all you need is a team of junior writers an un-capped Internet connection) and even cheaper for your target audience to consume. From the perspective of a business, content marketing is still an incredibly cost-effective communications strategy.

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However, there is a catch. All this noise – all those YouTube explainer videos, every neatly-bulleted, click-bait-headlined blog post, every viral influencer Instagram post – comes with an additional, significant real-world cost in terms of data storage. And data storage is a dirty business.

Every single post and action recorded on the Internet, be it a simple 'like' on a Facebook post, or a 35-minute video tutorial uses data, which is stored on a real-world servers. Data farm servers, in turn, use an enormous amount of energy.

According to Green Peace, data centres currently consume 2%-3% of all global electricity usage. That figure is set to grow exponentially. IBM's Marketing Cloud Study last year showed that 90% of all the world's data was created between 2016 and 2017 alone. Britain's foremost data centre expert, Ian Bitterlin, foresees the amount of energy used by data centres doubling every four years for the foreseeable future, despite innovations in environmental-friendly energy production and data storage efficiency. Our global Internet habit to becoming a serious environmental threat.

Regulators have stared paying attention to this issue and it is not unforeseeable that heavy internet users – individuals and companies alike – could start paying taxes to post and host data-heavy content. For example, just this week, China announced that it is in the process of banning notoriously energy-intensive Bitcoin mining farms for precisely this reason. In an era where environmental concerns, such as climate change, are key issues for consumers and governments alike, the backlash on uninhibited data usage is a trend to watch.

So, next time, before you click 'post' on yet another piece of corporate content, ask yourself, is the content your brand is producing to get clicks worth the long-run environmental and societal cost?

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