



cursive

(content marketing)

the school marketer's GUIDE to content marketing

your school has a powerful story to tell

Your school has a powerful story to tell.

A unique story. A story that will attract your ideal students and families. A story that will impact your enrollment.

The challenge: creating and sharing that story.

However, there is a solution - an accessible one that will work for every school:

Content marketing.

Content marketing is, in its simplest form, storytelling. It's creating content that tells a story your audiences want to hear - so much so, that they ask you for more. Are eager to receive your content. Are happy to take the next steps.

We love content marketing because it's authentic. It's a way for you to share your true school brand, and to create real and lasting relationships with all of your audiences - from current students and families, to prospects, to donors and alumni, to the media, and more.

And because we love content marketing so much (and we've seen it work so well!), we want to share the love.

This book will introduce you to content marketing and how it can impact your school's marketing efforts. You will learn content marketing basics, and how to start creating a straightforward plan for your own content marketing strategy. You'll even get access to our favorite resources - the tools we use to make our own content marketing efforts seamless and simple.

So go ahead - get reading! You'll soon be creating and sharing stories your audiences love.

Get Schooled on Content Marketing

What is content marketing?

“Content Marketing is owning—as opposed to renting—media. It’s a marketing process to attract and retain customers by consistently creating and curating content in order to change or enhance a consumer behavior.”

(Source: Epic Content Marketing)

It’s that simple. Content marketing is:

Creating original content and sharing existing content that will help your audience at all stages of the decision-making process

Owning your own story and using your content to build your audience

Using smart marketing strategies to get your audience to engage with your content and take specific action

Some examples of content that can be used in your content marketing efforts:

- Blog posts with a strong call to action
- Gated content that requires users to sign up to access
- Videos or podcasts that prompt subscriptions
- Email marketing that delivers valuable and unique content to subscribers
- Print pieces that raise brand awareness and prompt specific actions

The purpose of content marketing is to get the reader to take the next step - sign up, call you, schedule a visit, learn more.

Smart content marketing is an investment that gives you more returns over time.

It can increase:

- Brand awareness and loyalty
- Social engagement
- Search rankings
- Site traffic
- Audience satisfaction and trust
- Internal team buy-in
- Conversion rates

Creating content alone is not content marketing. Your content has a job to do. It needs to attract and retain your audience, and get them to DO something. If it’s not ... you need a better plan.

How is content marketing different?

“90% of consumers find custom content useful and 78% believe that organizations providing custom content are interested in building good relationships with them.”

(Source: InboundWriter.com)

Content marketing is different than a traditional marketing campaign in that it's not a campaign – it's an ongoing initiative that evolves over time, constantly being adjusted to meet new goals based on metrics and measurement.

You earn your audience - and therefore own your audience.

Content Marketing	Traditional Marketing Campaign
It's a continuum: You own your content and can repurpose it to continuously attract and engage audiences.	It's a campaign: When it's over, it's over.
You earn your audience – and therefore own your audience.	You “rent” someone else's audience and pay to have your message delivered.
You modify strategies based on real-time metrics. It's easier to test and refine tactics.	Campaigns can be high-risk; they are measured at the end of the program and subsequent campaigns are modified.
ROI can be realized within weeks.	ROI is often difficult to quantify.
It will form the foundation of all digital marketing moving forward.	It requires more cost and creative to cross market channels.
It creates a shared experience.	It's usually a one-sided push of information.

How do I know if I'm content marketing - or just producing content?

"We use traditional advertising to make people aware of our brand and, in many ways, to demonstrate the heart of our brand. It's the content marketing that can bring living proof of our brand to our customers."

(Source: Epic Content Marketing)

Let's be clear: content marketing is not blogging.

Yes, the foundation of content marketing is creating content that will benefit your target audiences, but that's only the beginning.

The strategy that you develop to get your content to the right people at the right time? That's the critical part. That's the marketing part.

If you have a school blog, that blog content must have a positive impact on your marketing or admissions efforts to be considered successful content marketing. Your content must be driving your audience to take specific action.

So, are you content marketing, or are you simply producing content?

Ask yourself these questions:

Is this content building brand awareness?

Is it increasing our leads, opportunities or contacts?

Is it converting readers into prospects - and then students?

Is it strengthening our brand loyalty?

Is it increasing our subscribers?

If the majority of your answers are YES, you're content marketing.

If not, you need to look for ways to make your content work harder for you.

Don't worry - we'll get to how you can do that!

Why is content marketing successful for schools?

“Your awesome site isn’t awesome. Getting your stories into the hands of the people who need them is awesome.”

(Source: Content Rules)

Content marketing works because it’s real. When content marketing is done correctly, it’s interesting, informative, entertaining ... **and an admissions tool.**

It forms authentic and trusted relationships with your school by lowering the advertising curtain and allowing the true brand voice to speak for itself.

So who is doing this content marketing thing right?

Here are some excellent examples of independent schools who are using storytelling to create meaningful connections with their audiences. These schools are taking unique strides with their content marketing, and they demonstrate how storytelling can take many forms — and those forms can produce varied results.

Star Student: Mercy Academy

Mercy Academy is an all-girl high school in Louisville, Kentucky. And while there are thousands of all-girl high schools, which all have fairly similar communities and curriculums, Mercy has framed its story in a unique way.

How? It has taken something that resonates with young girls – fairy tales – and given the concept a new twist.

The school’s recent advertising campaign used the tagline “Prepare for real life.” This tagline was imagined in both traditional and online advertising against fairy tale ideals:

“You’re not a princess. Prepare for real life.”

“Don’t wait for a prince. Prepare for real life.”

“Life’s not a fairy tale. Prepare for real life.”

([See the campaign here](#) and the [promotional video here](#)).

The campaign was widely acclaimed, and received national television coverage in both advertising and mainstream media.

Impressive Inbound: Sewickley Academy

Inbound abounds at Sewickley Academy, Pittsburgh's oldest private school for students from pre-K through 12th grade.

Under the communications leadership of Brendan Schneider, Director of Admission & Financial Aid, the school began to focus on inbound marketing in 2008-2009 and has been adding more inbound tactics ever since. They use blogs, social media, gated content and other digital tools to promote the school, and they've gotten significant results.

(See [Sewickley Academy's blog](#) and an [example of gated content](#).)

According to a [Hubspot case study](#), Sewickley Academy increased enrollment (30% from the previous year), applications (11% — a 4-year high) and web traffic (30%) after it began using Hubspot's services and focusing more holistically on inbound marketing.

Schneider told content marketing publication [The Content Strategist](#):

"It's a pain in the butt; it's a lot of work. But we've seen positive results so we've continued to do it. ... Since we've started inbound marketing, four out of five years we've increased our inquiries, applications, and visits over the previous year."

Multimedia Marvels: Proctor Academy

Proctor Academy's content marketing efforts are a reminder that not all content is written.

This private coeducational day and boarding school in Andover, New Hampshire has the traditional content marketing down with its [buzzy blogs and online content](#), but it brings it up a notch with its multimedia offerings.

Proctor Academy posts assembly podcasts, livestreams of events and activities, and has a diverse video library that showcases the school's unique brand and environment. It also uses [infographics](#) to present school facts and statistics.

(See [examples of Proctor Academy content here](#).)

These schools show that content marketing can be applied in ways that are unique to the culture and brand attributes of the school — and that storytelling can make a powerful impact when it's a priority.

How to Get Started

Now that you understand content marketing's impact, you're ready to develop your own content marketing approach, right? But before you create a single piece of content, you need to create a plan of action.

Without it, you have little chance of content marketing success (or even knowing what success is—but we'll get to that).

There are four elements every content marketing plan should include:

Phase I: Strategy

Studies show that the most effective marketers document their content marketing strategy. The act of writing a concept or strategy down makes it real and tangible, and keeps everyone working toward the same goals.

Without a written strategy, you have nothing to check yourself against to ensure you're still moving in the right direction.

Your strategy document should:

Establish your goals

Goals keep you on track—they provide an overall purpose to your content marketing efforts and act as a guide for each piece of content you create. Without goals, you will quickly slide from content marketing to just producing content.

Clarify your audience

Content that tries to appeal to everyone actually appeals to no one, so honing in on who you are talking to before you get started is vital. The idea is to understand everything about them—from what they care about when choosing a school, to what social networks they're obsessed with.

Include a competitive analysis

Understanding your competition can help you:

- **Avoid missteps and achieve success faster:** Insights from your competition can help you understand what works and what doesn't.
- **Gain insight into customer expectations:** When you know what your competition offers, you can better understand what a potential student expects of your school.
- **See areas of opportunity:** You might find that your school's vision and philosophy align with a gap in the marketplace. But you'll never know if or where that gap exists if you don't understand your competitors.
- **Determine your own strengths (and weaknesses):** A review of the competition will round out your perspective.

Outline strategies and tactics

Strategies and tactics outline the approaches and steps you will take to reach your goals. When developing your strategies and tactics, think in both the short term and long term. You might not be able to implement everything all at once, but by writing down things you plan to do right away and those you aspire to, you will establish a clear path.

Get started with strategy. Answer these questions:

Who are your target audiences – and have you created buyer personas for each?	
What are your measurable goals and objectives?	
What strategies and tactics make the most sense for your audiences, and your school's capabilities?	
What are your competitors doing?	

Phase II: Story

What is your school's story?

If you're fumbling for an answer, perhaps it's a question you've never been asked. Knowing your school story is critical as you delve into content marketing, so let's take some time to consider what "story" really means.

Story: A narrative, either true or fictitious, in prose or verse, designed to interest, amuse or instruct the hearer or reader; tale. (dictionary.com)

The most interesting part of this definition? It focuses on the hearer or the reader, not the teller or the writer.

This is a small yet critical point. A story is all about pleasing the audience. A story is not about the teller's ego or agenda. It is all about the intended response of the hearer or reader.

As you sit down to develop your school's story, be honest about who your school is, and make it meaningful from your audience's perspective.

Start at the Sweet Spot

You need to be able to clearly and succinctly explain your school's unique perspective and the benefit you provide to your students.

You have to have the confidence to take ownership of your school's expertise.

Some people call this your school's positioning. Some call it your school's brand promise. Our favorite people call it your school's "sweet spot."

"Your sweet spot is the intersection between your customers' pain points and where you have the most authority with your stories. This takes us back to one of the original questions: Where can you be the leading expert in the world?"

- Joe Pulizzi, Epic Content Marketing

It's not enough to say you're the leading school in a specific area. You have to believe it, and you have to prove it. So it's important to actually write it down.

Topics

Once you know your school's perspective, you can **brainstorm** topic categories. There is no one-size-fits-all approach here—the topics that are right for your school depend on a unique combination of:

- What your audiences care about
- The "sweet spot" you've defined
- Your goals and objectives

Formats

You know you want to tell your school's story—and you even know what that story is—now HOW will you tell it? Again, there is no go-to answer here (darn, right? That would be so much easier.)

Consider what you know about how your audience prefers to consume content, combined with how your topic would best be communicated. Be practical, but don't restrict your creativity.

Content formats you might want to explore include:

- Blog posts
- eBooks
- Podcasts
- Videos
- Checklists
- Email
- Infographics
- Webinars

Start crafting your school's story. Answer these questions:

What is your content marketing "sweet spot" ?	
What topics will you focus on ?	
What channels will you use to tell your story?	
What content do you have that can be repurposed ?	
What resources do you have for content creation and curation ?	

Phase III: Sharing

Even the best content in the world won't have an impact if it's not shared. You need to publish your content, and you need to share your content.

Popular platforms for publishing include:

- WordPress, Squarespace, or other blogging platforms
- LinkedIn
- Medium
- iTunes or Stitcher
- YouTube
- Your own website or landing pages

The publishing platform you choose depends on the content formats you will produce (see the prior list!). For example, if you won't be creating videos, you don't need to worry about YouTube; if you aren't producing a podcast, Stitcher won't be part of your plan.

Popular platforms for sharing include:

 Facebook  LinkedIn  Twitter  Instagram  Pinterest  Snapchat

When you establish a presence on these platforms, it's about much more than just sharing—you also have to connect with your audience, showcase your school's personality and maintain a strong presence. This takes significant time and resources, so evaluate each platform before deciding you need to be there. Consider:

- **Demographics of the network:** Who is using the network and, more important, is your target audience?
- **Tone/premise of the network:** Does the network fit with your brand?
- **Your capacity to maintain a presence:** What does a presence on the network entail? Consider the demands it will require of your staff, and if they have the extra hours available.
- **Your current social skills:** If you are already active on other social networks but aren't sure you're doing a good job, focus on those networks before expanding. If you aren't currently active on social, begin with one network before adding another.
- **The harm it would do your school to NOT be there:** Would not having a presence cause your school harm or change perception of your brand in any way?

It's easy to see social media as a "free" way to connect with your audience, but that is never the case. In the words of the content marketing pros at **Convince & Convert**:

**“Social media isn't inexpensive.
It's just different expensive.”**

Editorial Calendar

From strategy to creation to promotion, there's a lot that goes into building and maintaining an effective content marketing plan.

It can all be a bit overwhelming, which is why your content hub needs a management hub: one central tool that can be your go-to resource for your complete content marketing strategy.

If you build it correctly, that place can be your editorial calendar. Get started now with our tested-to-perfection editorial calendar template - grab it from the **School Marketer's Toolkit** (password: CursiveInsider.)

Get focused on sharing your story. Answer these questions:

How will people find your content ?	
Where do you need to have a presence in order to reach your audience?	
How will you make the most of each piece of content you produce?	
How will you plan and track your future, current and past content?	

notes:

Phase IV: Success Measures

“How you measure the quality and success [of your content] depends on what your goals are. ...What you have to do is develop a set of metrics around your content that are tied to KPIs: Key Performance Indicators. So is your content meant to raise awareness of your product or service? To sell your product or service? To increase lead generation? To lessen calls to the customer service department? I can’t tell you what your goals are, but once you tell me what those goals are I can help you create ways to benchmark your content in order to determine if it’s meeting those goals.”

–Rebecca Lieb

Whether you’re in charge of reporting your content marketing results to a room packed with people or simply reviewing it for your own knowledge, understanding what data to look at is the first and most important step.

Look back at the goals you defined when you first laid out your content marketing plan and concentrate only on the data that actually helps you determine if you’ve met your goals. This might mean that traditional metrics like pageviews and number of email subscribers don’t matter.

Once you’ve taken a clear look at the data, you can answer the question: “Is this content marketing approach successful?” Then you can welcome future success knowing you’re on the right track, or you can make adjustments to get there.

Be prepared to evaluate your success. Answer these questions:

What **metrics** are the most meaningful to your school?

What **data** will you track?

What tools will you use to track that data?

Additional Resources

Now that you understand the fundamentals of content marketing for schools, we have one more piece of advice:

Keep learning.

There is so much great information out there that can help you build and grow your content marketing approach. Let the advice and experiences of the content marketing community help you achieve the success you deserve.

We know you can do it.

Content Marketing Blogs

Content Marketing Institute: This should be the first stop for anyone interested in learning more about content marketing. It covers all things content marketing, from the origins of the practice, to basic knowledge, to advanced tactics.

Start here: [Getting Started - Content Marketing 101](#)

Copyblogger: Successful content marketing relies on smart content - and Copyblogger can teach you to write it. If you're stuck in a writing rut, head there immediately.

Start here: [Content Marketing - How to Build an Audience that Builds Your Business](#)

Ann Handley: Handley knows that **Everybody Writes**, and she's giving everyone the courage to do so. The Chief Content Officer of MarketingProfs, Handley is prolific and her blog encourages content excellence while thoroughly entertaining readers.

Start here: [50 Shades of Mediocrity: Does Content Have to Be Good, or Just Good Enough?](#)

Top Rank Online Marketing Blog: A comprehensive resource from Top Rank digital agency that covers timely topics in online marketing, with a focus on content marketing, social media and SEO.

Start here: [Content Marketing Tools A to Z That You Can Use in 2015 and Beyond](#)

Hubspot's Marketing Blog: This blog covers a broad range of inbound marketing strategies and tactics, from blogging and social media to email marketing and buyer persona development.

Start here: [Creating A Thoughtful Content Strategy in Higher Education Marketing](#)

Books

Epic Content Marketing by Joe Pulizzi: The king of the Content Marketing Institute covers everything from developing your strategy to measuring its impact and encourages readers to set aspirational goals.

Content Rules by Ann Handley & C.C. Chapman: After defining the content "rules", this book focuses on various channels and ends with real-life examples of content marketing at work. The "Ideas You Can Steal" section after each case study is a great source of concepts you can execute.

Education Marketing Blogs

SchneiderB Blog: Written by Brendan Schneider, this blog-turned-learning-hub shares Schneider's insights on social media, content and inbound marketing for schools. It also offers the free **SchneiderB University**, which provides more in-depth content.

Start here: [The Tools I Recommend](#) and [Independent Schools shouldn't brand...they should blog!](#)

mStoner Blog: The mStoner blog covers "insights, big ideas, how-to's and more" related to branding, strategy, content, technology and creativity in higher education - although the topics and ideas often directly apply to education marketing at all levels.

Start here: [Managing a Site of 1,000 Home Pages](#) and [Content, Content, Everywhere, and Not a Moment to Think](#)

edSocialMedia Blog: The edSocialMedia blog explores social media use for education marketing, and ranges from providing tips on various social media platforms to information on how to integrate social media into the classroom.

Start here: [Content Marketing in Education: Distribution Options](#)

eBooks, SlideShares & Other Online Content

How to Use Blogging to Attract Students to Your School: This free resource from Hubspot provides useful steps education professionals can take to turn their content development efforts into an effective blog.

School Marketer's Toolkit: Cursive Content's free library of worksheets, eBooks and guides will provide you with comprehensive access to resources that will help you create and share your school's story. Print them out and grab a pen - these tools are designed to help you get things done. Once you're in, check back often, because creating helpful free resources is one of our favorite things to do, and we continue to add them to the toolkit.

Meet Generation Z: Forget Everything You Learned About Millennials: A fantastic SlideShare that creates a robust portrait of this young generation through statistics and stories.

10 Books All Content Marketers Should Read: This SlideShare curates book recommendations for marketers who are interested in learning more about content marketing. It's a great list for anyone ready to dive into the practice.

How to Successfully Manage a Student and Faculty Blog: This and other SlideShares by **Tucker Kimball** provides insights into independent school Gould Academy's successful approach to student and faculty blogging.

Now that you understand the fundamentals of content marketing, get out there. Start creating and sharing stories your audience will love.

Authors

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