

Content, Context, and Chaos

How Marketing Must Change to Deliver Customer-Centric Systems of Engagement

By Robert Rose

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Executive Summary

The battle for consumer attention is on, and the battlefield is more fragmented, chaotic, and overwhelming than ever before. Market research firm Yankelovich estimates that a resident of an urban area in the U.S. now sees more than 5,000 advertising messages per day.¹ As a vice president of marketing of a Fortune 500 technology company told me recently: *“We are now 100% focused on content ideas that blend paid, earned, and owned channels. Our biggest challenge isn’t figuring out where to place ads; it’s how we stay relevant and engaging in such a fragmented environment.”*

So, how are chief marketing officers (CMOs) reacting to this? Well, it might seem counterintuitive, but even in 2013 digital marketing and customer-centric content strategies still make up only a fraction of the enterprise marketing effort. Yes, most agree that marketing must change in order to successfully deliver customer-centric systems of engagement. But unlike most previous market transitions, it’s unclear what the new model must evolve into.

To be clear, this is not because CMOs are unaware or resistant to change. It’s precisely the *change itself*, coming after the last six years of economic uncertainty and a “do more with less” environment, that has them back on their heels as they look to fundamentally transform their operating model.

As we enter into a new era of the importance of continual customer engagement, the CMO must begin to add systems that not only manage this engagement but also embrace the rapidly shifting and expanding environments in which consumers want to interact. There are three ideas that can lay a foundation to successfully achieve this goal:

- **De-silo the content process.** Many marketing organizations are siloed, even within themselves. In many cases, these silos are creating isolated instances of relevant digital content experiences. Thus, while the business is unsuccessful at creating



holistic “systems of engagement,” one might say they have been able to create “*pockets of engagement*” through new and creative experimentation. Efforts to de-silo the content process (outside efforts to actually de-silo the organizational model) are uncovering valuable and unique methods for connecting and scaling these pockets of engagement into systemic processes.

- **Deliver contextual content as well as experiences.** As CMOs integrate content as a more unifying force managed by singular or multiple systems, context should become the overriding focus to drive more optimal experiences. Any process that helps the marketer deliver more contextually relevant content to the consumer is valuable. This includes enabling the teams to access real-life interaction with consumers. Ultimately, this is both the work of understanding audience personas *and* utilizing technology to help optimize the experience; work on personas optimizes the ability to create the relevant content consumed *within* those experiences.
- **Embrace the chaos.** It is the engagement that’s important; the systems can come with time. Today, most marketers still use customer data as “proof points” to show how *more* transactions were created instead of as a source of insight into generating higher-quality attention, deeper interest, engagement, and a more passionate brand evangelism. To fully move beyond this, the CMO must make a physical and virtual space in which creative ideas can be shaped and shared. It requires a repeatable operating model, but also one that allows chaotic and disruptive change to be an integral part.

It's No Longer About More

Here's an inconvenient truth: The budget for digital marketing is still less than a third that of its analog counterpart. According to Gartner's 2013 Marketing Spending Survey, only 25% of the CMO's budget is going toward digital. And of that, the company itself is only performing half of the functions. The other half is outsourced to agencies.²

But can this be true? It seems as if marketers everywhere are inundated with the notion that the CMO's most important mandate these days is to create compelling digital content experiences for consumers, all of it powered by digital marketing and promotion. But apparently it's only a quarter of the budget, and the organization only insources half of that. So what's the problem?

Some have suggested that one challenge is that it's a cultural mismatch and a function of a new generation. Jake Sorofman recently wrote in Harvard Business Review:

"First, there is a digital disconnect in the executive ranks, a leadership vacuum created by a mismatch between expertise and authority. ... [Digital] has

taken hold from the bottom up. Here, we find digital natives steeped in digital culture and practice... But today's CMO is different: The corporate attire may be gone, but the assimilation to the new digital culture is incomplete."

This point of view suggests, however, that the CMO is actually reluctant to change. It implies that leadership is disconnected from the importance of digital content. But on this point, my colleagues at DCG and I cannot agree. We concur that the digital change is more of a grassroots effort, being driven by rank-and-file practitioners. But the challenge is to not force old, stodgy C-level executives to button up their cravats, down their snifter of brandy Don Draper style, and "get with the times."

Rather, our experience with the leadership in marketing organizations with which we frequently work is that the barrier is the fundamental *change itself*, coming directly on the heels of six years of the mandate to "do more with less." It is the pressure of executing fast and chaotic change while simultaneously delivering increasingly profitable, data-driven results that is the true challenge.

" In a recent 2013 Marketing Salary Survey, more than 50% of marketers said that they were not at all equipped to handle new trends in marketing technology. "



This anecdotal evidence is supported by a study just conducted by Accenture Interactive titled *Turbulence for the CMO*.³ In the introduction to this report, the authors write that chaotic change:

“Is the new normal for chief marketing officers. . . CMOs are struggling to keep pace with competing business demands, proliferating channels and partners, and a disconnect between the talent they have and the capabilities they need.”

The study found that a full 70% of these CMOs feel like they are on the clock to deliver results, generally feeling they have less than five years to completely change their operating model. Accenture also found that despite the enormous investments in technology and outsourced services, four out of ten CMOs still say they are not at all prepared to meet their objectives.

Another study conducted by Aquent and the American Marketing Association substantiates these findings. In a recent 2013 Marketing Salary Survey, more than 50% of marketers said that they were not at all equipped to handle new trends in marketing technology. And a similar number (53%) don't feel like they have the right people on board to deliver results.⁴ But then, somewhat ironically, almost 70% in the Aquent study said that they were “very confident” that creating these customer-centric experiences would and could “positively impact the organization.”

So, no, it's not a reticence to change. It's the chaotic nature of the change itself that is the source of the

challenge. **CMOs are positive that creating customer-centric digital experiences is a good idea — they just have no idea how they're going to pull it off.**

Business Technology Doesn't Pull Customers Forward

At DCG, we work every day with large enterprises to match them with technologies and services. In almost every case, the marketing leaders at these companies are simply navigating this chaos as best they can. They're working fast and furious at managing change both internally and externally. And they are, quite literally, throwing technology at the challenge. Today's Global 5000 marketing department measures successful engagement using parts of no fewer than five or six analytics systems. They manage some web properties in a blogging platform and others in an enterprise web content management (WCM) system. They run beta versions of one social media management tool next to enterprise deployments of another and try and tie all the optimization together in a marketing automation system.

This is the key. Unlike consumer-focused technologies, business technology (except in rare instances) never pulls customers forward into new paradigms of thinking. Enterprise marketing is moving as fast as it can and patching over existing tools with anything that fits the bill. In many cases, unable or unwilling to wait for IT governance, many are circumventing the CIO's office and deploying “prosumer” applications.



Is it any wonder that Gartner says the “CMO will spend more on technology than the CIO”?⁵ Marketers are up to their eyeballs in technology that, candidly, means nothing to them.

But here lies the opportunity for both the enterprise marketer and the technology solution providers who can help to facilitate the change. At the heart of this chaos lies an opportunity to use adaptive and flexible management of content to create a range of dynamic and contextual consumer experiences.

As the savvy CMO builds a model to accommodate chaotic change, content and context can be a unifying force to help the CMO discover systems of engagement and the right technology solutions that can then help manage it.

Content, Context, and Chaos

Content as a Centralizing Force

There is little doubt as to the power that adept creation and management of content has as a force in today's marketing strategy. In their most recent 2013 Content Marketing Benchmarks Study, the Content Marketing Institute and MarketingProfs found that more than 90% of business-to-business (B2B) marketers and 85% of business-to-consumer marketers were deploying the practice of content marketing to drive business results.⁶

At its heart, content marketing is an approach to a customer-centric engagement strategy. A well-spun content process is not only effective at creating greater awareness, more engaged leads, and a higher close rate, but also more effective retention, higher Net Promoter scores, and the creation of brand evangelists. The opportunity is for content to touch every part of the consumer's experience with a brand.

This is important to understand because as the CMO manages the chaotic disruption of digital, the approach of using content as a centralizing force can help ground the creation of customer-centric systems of engagement.

The challenge, and one of the primary reasons the marketing process is so disrupted, is that for the last half dozen years, most large enterprises have responded to the multichannel challenge by throwing teams at it. The average mid-sized or large organization now has an e-business team, a customer relationship management team, a web team, product marketing teams, social engagement teams, and sales enablement teams all creating, fighting, and horse trading to sort out how content can or should be used more effectively.

In their recent report, *Organizing for Content*, Altimeter Group analyst Rebecca Lieb speaks to the siloed nature of marketing. *"This fragmented approach leads to inconsistent messaging; huge variations in voice, tone, brand, and messaging; and an inconsistent customer experience."*

At DCG, we agree, and would add that most rank-and-file marketing practitioners are actually more frustrated with the process than they are with the content or the people creating it. The result is that most businesses are creating only isolated instances of relevant digital content experiences. Thus, while they are unsuccessful at creating "systems of engagement," we might say they have been able to create *pockets* of engagement.

" Most rank-and-file marketing practitioners are actually more frustrated with the process than they are with the content or the people creating it. "



This is where we find that content and a strategy to de-silo that process can be a unifying force. Of the successful businesses that are using content cohesively across the customer's journey, many are simply *finding* the appropriate model for connecting and scaling these pockets of engagement, as opposed to forcefully *constructing* it.

Enterprises that take this seriously allow their marketing groups to experiment widely. Traditional marketing roles are then modified, new roles are created, and processes that start out as “pockets” of excellence are codified and connected to the larger institution later.

For example, the web marketing team may be using an existing web content management suite, aligning consumer experiences to an editorial calendar, and working directly with the sales enablement team to align those experiences for leads. But the social team may have no idea this is going on and may use entirely different tool sets to manage the blog and social channels. By establishing the WCM process as a pocket of excellence, the social team can work to start integrating more intricately with where they lie on the customer's journey and modify their processes and roles accordingly.

The “find your way” method may be chaotic, but it can be a very productive way to naturally get to a process that scales across the organization. Once enough pockets become systems of engagement, a content center of excellence can be created. This organization (whether virtual or physical) can then solely focus

on how to drive enterprise-wide, customer-centric content experiences and how they show true return on investment.

Context: The experience and content delivery imperative

In Digital Clarity Group workshops, we often present this graphic about how businesses are currently buying content management and digital experience software. (See Figure 1.)

As stated previously, many marketing groups in large enterprises are still siloed and only focused on their own needs, and most have not embraced the chaotic change or figured out how to align the process. So, most are entirely unready for all the capabilities that today's web content management systems can actually deploy. Therefore, it shouldn't really be a surprise that the average company has so much overlapping technology. Most have no idea what to do with what they have.

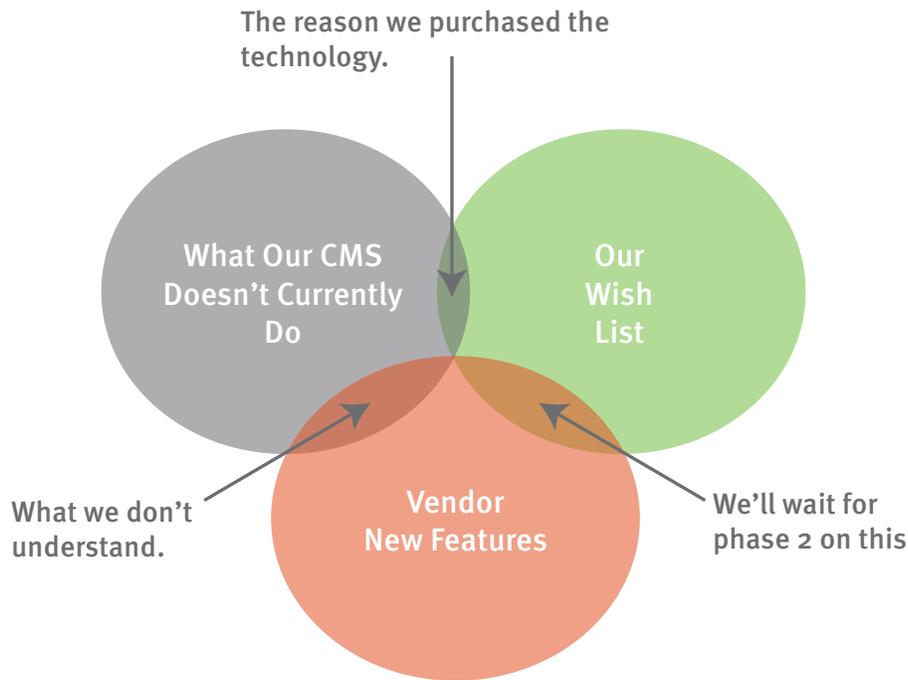
As my colleague Tim Walters has said:

“Whatever three letters you use to name it – WCM, WEM, WXM, CXM, CEM, or WTF – the time has come for a fundamental paradigm shift in how we envision and talk about relating to customers and prospects via digital assets, and most importantly, how we organize to make it happen.”

So how do marketers really prepare for actually delivering the content that is contextually relevant to users in their experiential journey?

Figure 1

Rationalizations Of Content Technology Acquisition



In our experience, one key is a combination of two elements:

1. **Persona work.** Understand the consumer, their needs, and why they care about the brand at different engagement points and across channels. This helps the marketing team determine what content to create, which content to repurpose, and which channels are most effective for what goal.
2. **Experience optimization.** Using technology and customer data, marketer's can now acquire the intelligence to automatically deliver optimized experiences to consumers across relevant engagement points and channels.

In short: **Technology optimizes the *experience*.**
Understanding personas helps marketers to create and optimize the *content*.

IBM's recent study of 1,700 chief marketing officers worldwide found that one of the biggest challenges for CMOs was developing an organization that understands today's empowered consumer. "At least 80% of CMOs are still solely depending on market research and competitive benchmarking to make strategic decisions. Similarly, more than 60% rely on sales, campaign analysis, and the like."⁸

The challenge is that data in aggregate will not provide the deeper insight into individual consumer needs and will render any technology deployed ineffective at best.

Savvy organizations are pursuing the rigorous and ongoing work of developing fully rounded and in-depth personas. The IBM study notes:

“New digital data sources can provide crucial insights into how customers and influencers think and behave. But to scale this effectively, organizations need to consider building fundamentally different relationships. They need to enable employees to directly engage with customers and provide customers and other constituents the ability to help one another.”⁹

As CMOs begin to integrate *content* as a unifying force to creating systems of engagement, the flow of that content that is managed by singular or multiple systems should all focus on *context* as the optimal strategy to drive customer experiences. Any process that helps the marketer deliver more contextually

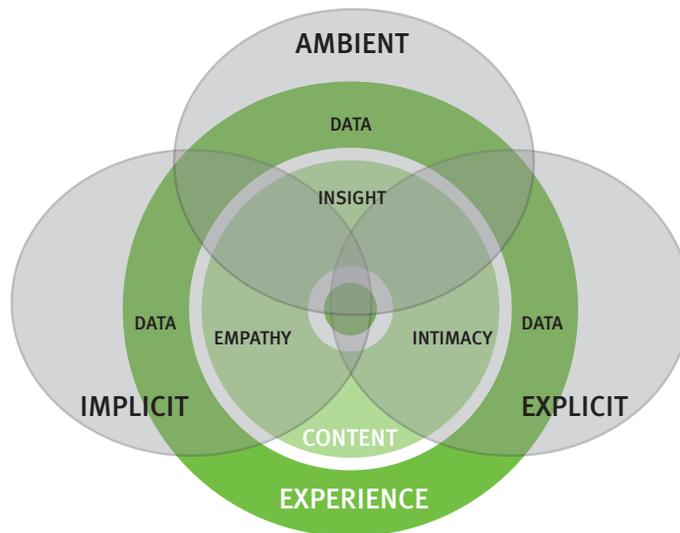
relevant content to the consumer is valuable. This includes, of course, enabling the teams to access real-life interaction with consumers so that they themselves can develop those relationships.

Then, marketers can use technology to optimize the experience and automatically display the valuable content they create. This is the simple answer to the more complex question of how to deliver the right content to the right audience at the right time.

We’ve developed one model that marketers might use as a starting point to examine how the one-to-one insight developed in persona work combines with the technology and data acquisition of experience management to begin building customer-centric systems of engagement. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2

How about Contextual Model For Understanding Customer Experiences





There are three ways to deliver more context given how we acquire the information used to deliver it:

- **Ambient context.** This is the information that we can derive and therefore use for experience and content delivery without having to know anything about the audience at all. For example, from a technology standpoint, marketers can use systems to acquire data that can automatically optimize the digital experience based on browser type or device, or from such third-party data sets as weather. But then, to deliver optimized, more contextual *content*, the marketer might use *insight* derived from research and the persona work to understand that they should prioritize location-centric information (e.g., store-finders) in the mobile interface and more experiential content to the large-screen (i.e., not mobile) visitor.
- **Implicit context.** This is information the marketer can deduce from observing behavior, although it falls short of specifying the individual or their preferences. For example, from a technology perspective, the team can track behavior on a website and begin to optimize experiences based on a series of clicks. As the visitor clicks on more content in a particular category, certain preferences are implied. The technology can start optimizing more content in that same category, or the technology may prioritize certain calls to action (CTAs) based on a specific search term. But to get to deeper levels of context, the marketer must understand the audience at more

empathic level. They must be able to identify and express the consumer's goals, aspirations, and/or feelings to deliver deeper levels of relevant content. For example, by working with customers, the team may understand that many times, consumers arrive at the site from social media properties because they are frustrated with the product. Or the team may learn that when consumers search "price comparison" on the website, they are actually looking for specific costs of differing products, not an argument for why all the brand's products deliver the best ROI.

- **Explicit context.** This is the information that has been expressly delivered to us by a potential or existing customer and enables us to deliver experiences and content that are theoretically the most relevant. It is information that the marketer can, from a technological perspective, utilize to exclusively deliver a more personalized experience. For example, an existing customer may explicitly choose a preference for a particular type of content over another. The technology can help to prioritize access to that content throughout the context of the site and deprecate access to shopping CTAs (since they're already a customer).

When *intimacy* is achieved, the marketer understands and anticipates the persona's preferences without explicit instructions. These audiences may not want that content prioritized or even want shopping features to be deprecated. Or perhaps they want this situation only through their mobile or social experiences.



Of course, true and deep contextualized systems of engagement are where the marketing team deploys all three of these techniques to deliver optimized experiences from the top of the funnel to the bottom. The savvy organization optimizes content when the consumer is unknown and narrows down the experience and content as more and more is known, and as they get permission to develop a closer relationship.

All of this comes back to utilizing the content process more strategically through each channel. Individual teams working together can pool their disparate and often differing perspectives on the customer and can develop a unified and more realistic understanding. This is why it is so powerful to unify the process of content development and the process to manage it across myriad channels. It is not to create a more efficient process (though it usually accomplishes this as well). The unification of a content and contextual process can unify a strategy and provide the opportunity for a much deeper understanding, and thus a closer relationship with consumers.

Focus on Engagement – Not the Systems

Beth Comstock, the CMO at GE, recently wrote:

“In business, we delegate what is uncomfortable. Process makes us comfortable, organized, and scalable, but do we need to pit it against creativity? People can be united around a shared goal and individually encouraged to find ways to get there.

This requires mental and physical space for ideas to be shaped, shared, iterated, stomped to smithereens, and reiterated. Yes, it requires process – guardrails and varying degrees of discipline to channel the chaos and discomfort that is the creative journey.

But to create is to be human, and I’m assured no robot can do this anytime soon – we’re too brilliant.”¹⁰

Many content driven marketing strategies are still far too focused on selling instead of engagement. As the IBM study found, more than two-thirds of the use of any customer data is focused on transactions rather than building relationships.¹¹

“ How can marketing change to focus on engagement without losing sight of ROI? ”



Part of this is because it is the data in hand versus what might be obtained, and certainly another part of it is the simultaneous pressure to change while delivering profitable results. Data is still primarily used as a proof point to show how many transactions were created, instead of as a source of insight into improving awareness, stimulating deeper interest, and creating brand evangelists. The first part can and will be solved by technology advancements; the second is the most difficult. How can marketing change to focus on engagement without losing sight of ROI? Is it any wonder that almost three-quarters of CMOs are feeling the heat about completely changing their operating model?

But this is the opportunity of enormous potential. Savvy organizations are taking a new look at the funnel and learning how to use content-driven strategies to engage well after the sale. They are using a combination of content and context to drive shared and valued experiences with consumers and build lasting relationships with them.

These organizations are utilizing the hard work of spending the time, energy, and budget to focus on creative customer-centric content solutions. They are meeting with customers and understanding their emotive needs as part of using content and context to create more expansive systems of engagement.

By doing this, marketing is now responsible for not just creating *more* transactions, but also better transactions – more valuable, passionate, and engaged customers.

Even the term “system of engagement” needs clarification. The engagement takes priority. The systems can come with time. The outperforming marketing organizations are not only using data well, they are also using content cohesively across the customer’s journey and then *finding*, rather than *constructing*, the appropriate model for connecting and scaling these pockets of engagement into systems.

Those traditional marketing roles are then modified, new roles are created, and processes that start out as pockets of excellence are codified and connected to the larger institution later.

Finally, these savvy marketing teams are using today’s technology solutions to create, edit, publish, and operationalize – at scale – these cohesive digital content experiences. As the marketing silos start to come together, so too can the technology plan. Certainly it’s a coordinated effort, and as I recently pointed out on the DCG blog, big data and our ability to coordinate better experiences using it just might be the “big ideas” that finally bring both the CIO and the CMO into strategic alignment.¹²



Conclusion

Marketers have debated whether today's technology is up to the task of actually facilitating true engagement. Some have said it's nothing more than the promise of personalization, made back in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The key difference is that personalization was, and still is, about only optimizing the content algorithmically based on explicit preferences made by the customer. Personalization is certainly a piece of delivering customer-centric systems of engagement. But it is just that: a piece.

The more the marketer focuses on embracing chaotic change, unifying content processes, and focusing team members on delivering creative relevant context, the more the group will begin to deliver on the promise of systems of engagement. There is no possible way for the CMO to know what changes will be just beyond the horizon. But by embracing a method by which change, rather than scale, becomes the new operative strategy, the CMO will be able to adapt and succeed much more quickly.

And technology can help drive the ability to facilitate that change. CMOs should explore products that differentiate themselves by making it easier for them to take advantage of true CEM and adapt, change, and unify their groups more fluidly. Enabling the organization to change is the new differentiator for digital content- and marketing-related technology.

We've seen content and the flexible management of it across multiple channels become a centralizing force that transforms the marketing department from collateral creator to instrumental strategic leader. When the CMO is charged with acting as centralized actuary, cheerleader, facilitator, and ultimately owner of the totality of branded content, the customer experience promise is kept.

Endnotes

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Digital Clarity Group

With a global research-driven advisory team, Digital Clarity Group (DCG) helps business leaders navigate digital transformation in their organization. DCG works with its clients across four distinct themes - Consumer Engagement, The Social Enterprise, Innovative Change and Adaptive Technology. DCG provides independent research, customized consulting, events, and one-on-one executive advisory programs. DCG also provides guidance to technology companies and the service providers that implement their products to help deliver insight that can guide them to better strategic decisions and more useful products and services. For more information about DCG, visit www.digitalclaritygroup.com or email info@digitalclaritygroup.com.

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