

Academic guidelines for content marketing: research-based recommendations for better practice

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Abstract

Due to rising interest in sharing brand content online much has been written about using content marketing as part of the company's marketing mix. However, different perspectives of what content marketing entails and how it should be implemented still abound. In addition numerous competing terms also add to the confusion. Content marketing is generally understood as sharing brand content via owned media to gain earned media in an attempt to encourage conversations about the brand to create, amongst others, more brand awareness. A documented strategy is at the core of successful content marketing practices yet very few companies follow documented guidelines impeding success.

This paper adds to the paucity of academic research with regard to content marketing by focusing on best practices within specific academic guidelines. The paper qualitatively evaluates the prevalence of six fundamental elements of content marketing which should be considered by marketers as identified by Du Plessis (2015). By exploring an example of the content marketing practices of a large and successful company these six elements were verified against best practice in a real life setting. Even though Du Plessis' (2015) six elements provide some added clarity in terms of how this broader marketing approach should be managed and implemented, it needed some more theoretical and functional substantiation as the term content marketing has been mainly socially constructed.

The research method applied for this study consisted of several steps which commenced with a literature review of content marketing, the importance of using a strategy and explaining the framework for the analysis. Second the content marketing of one of the world's leading brands via its stories microsite was qualitatively evaluated using this framework. The findings indicate that the six essential elements of content marketing are present in the way the brand stories are created and shared. The findings were then further illustrated through a concept map which could be used as a heuristic by those companies embarking on content marketing to construct better strategies.

Key words: branding, brand storytelling, content marketing, content marketing strategy, social media

Introduction

This study connects an example of the content marketing practices identified in brand-related content framed within the Microsoft stories homepage, one of the world's leading brands, to Du Plessis' (2015) proposed six essential elements of content marketing (see Sensley 2014 & Interbrand 2014). This is done by way of a concept map to indicate interrelatedness as part of the first process of an ongoing research study to build content marketing theory which currently lacks scholarly contribution.

Numerous viewpoints of what content marketing constitutes abound, predominantly from practitioners' own perspectives, backgrounds and epistemologies, which also gave rise to umbrella terms, impeding its consistent implementation. Content marketing is generally understood as sharing brand content via owned media to gain earned media in an attempt to encourage conversations about the brand to create, amongst others, more brand awareness. A documented strategy is at the core of successful content marketing practices yet very few companies follow documented guidelines impeding success. Corcoran (2009) explains owned media as the company website or blog content, while earned media refers to user-generated content as a result of owned media, which can include but is not limited to reviews, social media shares, comments, subscriptions and reposts to name but a few.

As a result of this confusion, Du Plessis (2015) analysed 55 definitions of content marketing which were triangulated with practitioners' views and in doing so identified six essential elements which was used as framework for the data analysis of this study. While it is acknowledged that both business to consumer (B2C) and business to business (B2B) content marketing practices exist, this study does not refer to such particular focus, but rather proposes generic elements which could be adapted for both B2C and B2B content marketing.

This paper commences with a literature review of the current status of content marketing. It then explains the importance of using a documented content marketing strategy and the framework used for the analysis. Microsoft Corporation and its stories home page are also explained, including the study's research questions and methodology. Based on an analysis of the research findings, the paper concludes with a concept map of how Du Plessis' (2015) proposed six essential elements of content marketing relate to content marketing efforts of Microsoft Corporation's stories home page. This concept map not only informs this ongoing research study but could also help marketers to draft their content marketing strategies.

The current status of content marketing

Content marketing is a recent marketing paradigm with creating, sharing and pulling brand content to the target audience as its focal point (see Steenburgh, Avery & Dahod 2011). However, Pullizi (2010) who coined the term "content marketing", argues that it has existed for many years but recently came more to the forefront because of overcoming barriers such as more available technologies and in that non media companies are now also being able to produce content. Brands have thus now become publishers using pull marketing strategies to engage the target audience in compelling brand stories.

Many perspectives of what content marketing constitutes still abound resulting in various definitions and competing terms impeding consistent practice based on own perspectives, backgrounds and epistemologies. Some of these competing terms include but are not limited to post internet branding, brand journalism, open source branding, co-creating brands, influencer marketing and native advertising (see Kent 2013, Steenburgh et al. 2011, Fournier & Avery 2011; Payne, Storbacka, Frow & Knox 2008 & Swan 2013). However, content marketing mostly resembles inbound marketing which pulls customers to the company's products and services by offering useful information and resources and in doing so adopting various pulling marketing strategies and techniques (Steenburgh et al. 2011). Holliman and Rowley (2014) interestingly coins the concept digital business to business (B2B) content marketing which they explain as a useful inbound marketing technique to sustain brand status by adopting a "publishing approach". This is reiterated by Chernov (2014) that content marketing is perceived as a "subset" of inbound marketing as content forms an essential part of it.

It is important to clarify the position of content marketing adopted for this paper as is evident in Du Plessis' (2015) definition. Du Plessis (2015) formulated a definition of content marketing based on an analysis of 55 definitions triangulated with content marketing practitioners' views (see also the framework for this analysis). No definition of content marketing is, however, final as this discipline continues to evolve as social media also changes.

This paper furthermore adopts the position of the Content Marketing Institute (CMI) (2015) by referring to this concept as content marketing and appreciating it as a methodical approach and not merely a new catchphrase. The CMI advances the practice of content marketing and was founded by Joe Pullizi in 2009.

This paper adopts the definition of content marketing as proposed by Du Plessis (2015) as follows:

"Content marketing is a strategic brand storytelling technique aimed at changing consumers' inactive behaviour through unobtrusive, engaging brand conversations in earned media".

Earned media is preferred for this definition as the success of content marketing depends on the advancement of brand conversations. Irrespective of different perspectives of what content marketing entails, there is an increasing appreciation that it is an innovative pull branding technique to create brand awareness, visibility and trustworthiness in especially social media. In addition content marketing can drive social media engagement, steer blog or website traffic or encourage a call to action. It can thus be argued that content marketing falls within the marketing communication field by pulling the target audience to brand content (Lieb 2012 & Miller 2013). When a pull strategy is adopted, consumers who are already interested in the brand or are seeking information or advice, are attracted to brand content because of its relevancy (Holliman & Rowley 2014).

Brand content often takes the form of brand stories strategically linked to the company's brand personality or brand persona to catch the interest of consumers based on relevancy to their own lives. These brand stories are then shared in social media or via email subscriptions using search engine optimised (SEO) blog posts, infographics, free eBooks, whitepapers, videos, podcasts, case studies, webinars, press releases, interviews and testimonials, to name but a few. This is typically done to encourage electronic word of mouth (eWOM), social media engagement or converting the target audience into long-term loyal customers (see Pulizzi 2010; 2012 & 2014).

The importance of using a content marketing strategy

Several authors (for example, Holliman & Rowley 2014 & Linn 2014), including the CMI (2015) argue in favour of using a documented content marketing strategy due to its strategic nature to guide content marketing efforts for best results. There is also still much confusion about the difference between content marketing and a content strategy that needs some clarification as these are often used interchangeably. An explanation is provided by Rose (2013) who indicates that content marketing and a content strategy are related but different. While content marketing is a marketing strategy using content to enhance relationships with customers (dealing with the *why*), content strategy manages content as a strategic asset across the entire company and is thus considered a business asset (dealing with the *how*). Content strategy thus uses a repeatable framework whereas content marketing concentrates on relationships (see also Lieb 2012). However, both should work together to map out the *what* and *where* of the brand content. A content marketing strategy is furthermore also often confused with a social media strategy. The focus of a social media strategy is using conversations within social media itself, whereas content marketing uses social media to drive awareness to brand content elsewhere, usually the company blog or website (Murdoch 2012). Although there seems to be concurrence on using a documented content marketing strategy for optimal results, perspectives on its components still differ and depends on the company's objectives. This paper aims to shed some more light on essential components of a documented content marketing strategy which can be tailored to meet the company's brand positioning objectives.

Although the similarity with a content strategy is acknowledged as explained above, this paper refers to a content marketing strategy as the driver of strategic brand content to the company website or blog to create brand awareness, loyalty or brand conversion.

Framework for the analysis

This study uses the generic framework proposed by Du Plessis (2015) that consists of six proposed essential elements that encompass the field of content marketing identified from an analysis of 55 definitions that included competing terms which were triangulated with some content marketing practitioners' perceptions. These six elements are described below:

Medium element

The medium element refers to the nature of the channel for the brand content as well as determining the right channels and volume. This includes the platform's interactivity, functionality and self-publishing abilities. Each channel is unique with its own unique users. Brand content is typically created using the company website or blog to which awareness is directed via various channels using content marketing techniques. Before content is created and shared, content marketers should decide on opportunities for interactivity, collaboration and co-creation (Du Plessis 2015). For example, the target audience is not active on all social media and the brand positioning strategy should therefore also be a consideration. Many brands have a multi social media presence while social media sites tailored for more visually appealing content, are nowadays more favoured by brands since visuals draw attention easier than merely text (Taylor 2014). The aim should be to generate as much earned media as possible, which refers to social mentions, views, comments, shares, reposts, reposts and subscribers. Earned media generates eWOM and is not controlled by the marketer (see Corcoran 2009).

Strategic element

The strategic element refers to the strategic approach that should be adopted to create and share brand content using brand positioning as the main guiding principle. Brand content should thus be created purposefully as part of the company's overall brand strategy and in an integrated manner to enhance brand consistency. Companies have many possibilities when it comes to content and it is therefore important to create and share content which best align with the target audience's interests. By considering brand content creation as part of a strategic integrated approach, more value can be added for the target audience and ultimately brand content engagement (Du Plessis 2015).

Formation element

The formation element refers to the actual creation of the brand content. Brand content should be based on the brand's values and brand promise and encompass engaging brand stories which are evergreen and reflect the core values of the company. This could advance co-creation by consumers to share their brand experiences to enhance brand awareness. It is important to humanise the brand in order for the target audience to better relate to and understand the brand's values (Du Plessis 2015).

Intrinsic element

The intrinsic element refers to the natural aspect of the brand content, namely being unobtrusive and part of consumers' daily online conversations. This will not only create a familiar brand voice but consumers could decide to join the brand conversation if it is relevant and of interest to them. It is thus essential to have a good knowledge of the target audience and the particular channel. Content marketers need to realise that consumers have their own private online spaces and that the content should therefore blend in with the channel and the target audience's interests (Du Plessis 2015).

Communication element

The communication element refers to the technique(s) used to convey the brand content. Content marketers should ensure that the brand content is relevant and fulfil the consumer's current

information needs. Brand content should be conveyed in an appealing manner which could include, amongst others, being educational or entertaining (Du Plessis 2015). Social media have become cluttered with "much noise" and the consumer needs to content with the brand content will be an advantage in order to be noticed (see Payne et al. 2008).

Corollary element

This element refers to the envisaged outcome of the brand content which should be, amongst others, to turn consumers into brand advocates who will share and co-create the brand stories and elicit eWOM via social media (Du Plessis 2015). Outcomes of the brand content depends on the company's brand strategy and objectives and could be to create ongoing brand awareness, drive traffic or encourage brand conversion (see also Hyoryung & Kannan 2014).

Microsoft Corporation as a powerful example of brand storytelling for content marketing

Microsoft Corporation, a multinational American company, was founded in 1975 and is today the world leader in selling computer software, personal computers, services and electronics. Microsoft was selected for this study as it is distinguished for its successful content marketing practices which could be used as an illustration of best practice to inform Du Plessis (2015) proposed six elements of content marketing (Microsoft 2015).

Microsoft's content marketing practices is illustrated through its stories homepage, a microsite which forms part of its bigger website. This site's focus is to showcase its employees and company culture using long form interactive content which is excellently written illustrated by captivating visuals. At the same time the engaging brand stories reflect the Microsoft brand's values (na 2014).

Research questions

This study was guided by the following two research questions:

Research question 1: How are Du Plessis' (2015) proposed six essential elements of content marketing reflected in Microsoft's stories' blog?

Research question 2: How can these six elements be mapped conceptually as a heuristic for a generic content marketing strategy?

Research method

This study adopts a pragmatic worldview as research paradigm since the researcher needed a deeper understanding of how the six generic essential elements of content marketing as identified by Du Plessis (2015) are reflected in the way the stories on the Microsoft stories microsite are created and shared (see Shar & Corley 2006). Pragmatic research offers an interesting alternative to interpretive studies when it comes to qualitative research as argued by Goldkuhl (2012). A pragmatic research approach is deemed suitable for this study in that the existing body of knowledge of content marketing currently mainly consists of practitioners' contributions and is socially constructed, namely a result of human thought and interaction. Pragmatism puts forward the idea that the meaning of an idea or concept is its practical consequences, namely that its meaning is anchored in the different actions that are taken based on the belief in this concept (Goldkuhl 2012).

Since the topic constitutes an under researched academic area with only one identified scholarly study (see Holliman & Rowley 2014), concept mapping was used as qualitative data analysis method to link Du Plessis' (2015) six essential elements of content marketing and their interrelations as put forward by Daley (2004), to an example of content marketing by Microsoft Corporation. Concept mapping refers to the graphic display of concepts and their interrelations which is functional in the formulation of theory. In this study concept mapping was used in combination with the procedure

followed by Du Plessis (2015b) to narrow down the analysis while the six proposed elements of content marketing were also used as the framework for the analysis. This procedure was informed by Ryan and Bernard (2003) who propose going beyond epistemological and disciplinary boundaries in order to obtain results. This study is the starting point of an ongoing research study about content marketing which will consequently also include quantitative data obtained from content marketing practitioners.

Sample and unit of analysis

As mentioned in the section above, the study was conducted following the same procedure as Du Plessis (2015b). Website content constantly changes and the sample of content analysed for this study is therefore only applicable to April and May 2015 to enable to connect Du Plessis' (2015) six proposed essential elements of content marketing to an example of best practice as a first process of theory building for the content marketing discipline. To first gain an understanding of the large content as well as structure of Microsoft's stories blog, several techniques were used to narrow down the analysis. This included using a content auditing software program to structure the website in terms of its most prevalent topics, and then using Issue Discovery, a heuristic data exploration tool, to confirm and further explore these issues. The Issue Discovery tool was developed by the Digital Methods Initiative, which was established in 2007 as a research program at the University of Amsterdam (see also Rogers 2013; Gibson 2011). In so doing, the thinking of Konopásek (2008) was followed to first make the data more visible to facilitate the analysis, before gaining a better understanding of these vital issues.

After identifying the main issues on the Microsoft stories they were examined within the context of the six proposed elements of content marketing. Consequently a concept map was drawn by focusing on the study's research questions (see Figure 1) which was the context frame for the concept map. Cmap software developed as a result of research conducted at the Florida Institute for Human and Machine Cognition (IHMC) was used which allows users to construct concept maps. The concept map for this study spans through several concepts and linking phrases. First the six elements of content marketing were used as the key concepts for the map. A preliminary concept map was then drawn which involved starting to connect concepts, using linking words and creating propositions considering the results with regard to Microsoft's stories blog. Once the preliminary map was built, cross-links were identified which constitute of links between concepts in different segments of knowledge on the map that illustrate how these domains are related to one another. Thereafter the concept map was revised. It needs to be mentioned that all concepts are in some ways interrelated, that a concept map will never be completed and is usually continuously updated and revised as new knowledge becomes available.

Discussion of the findings and interpretation

The findings of the study will now be explained in accordance with the two research questions. With regard to research question one, the six essential elements of content marketing as proposed by Du Plessis (2015) are reflected in the example of Microsoft's content marketing as follows:

Medium element

Microsoft's stories' blog is a focal point for its content marketing efforts of which the content is owned by Microsoft which has a dedicated editorial team to writes long-form stories for this blog. The platform is well-designed, interactive and aimed at engaging current and potentially new customers by sharing stories about people working for Microsoft as well as how things work at Microsoft. This is done without referring to the brand itself but by considering the employees as the brand. The stories are all shareable in that in many of the Microsoft stories, the consumer is the topic also displayed in the visuals. The platform is thus suitable for the type of stories that are being shared.

Microsoft has a multi social media presence on many popular networking sites with a huge following, for example on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Google Plus, LinkedIn and TED talks. Its social media presence is, however, not only for its corporate page, but also for its various sub brands which often point towards the stories on its blog. However, Microsoft's Facebook, Twitter and Instagram presence is more geared towards sharing stories. In the case of Instagram visual stories about employees and stories promoting the idea of empowerment using the #DoMore hashtag are shared. It is thus evident that Microsoft, like many other brands, is also tapping into becoming more visual to enhance its visibility on social media to gain earned media. Microsoft furthermore seems to have considered its social media presence as part of its brand positioning and has a social element in all its marketing efforts. The company shares its many stories on those social media platforms where they will be of interest most and also not to overwhelm its target audience – thus where the company needs to have a presence. Each story is accompanied by share buttons for Facebook and Twitter only. Social media are thus used which the target audience will pay most attention to.

In addition to its social media presence, the company has a dedicated advertising blog, a forum and a social media collective research group.

Strategic element

Microsoft's brand content via storytelling is strategic in that they are carefully planned. The content is developed with a specific target audience and goal in mind. These stories are furthermore also guided by its brand positioning as being a productivity and platform company. Stories are purposively created to subtly reinforce the brand promise of empowerment in the minds of consumers which are illustrated by its various stories. These stories also reflect Microsoft's data culture of innovative technology, collaboration, leadership and awareness and accessibility of its products and services. The stories reflect these through its resources and talented employees. Its brand positioning as being a productivity and platform company with accessible products and services to all ages and abilities, is also subtly illustrated through these stories. In addition, Microsoft's brand promise of empowerment is also reflected and reinforced by sharing stories about how ordinary people empower themselves. Microsoft perceives its products and solutions as being about empowerment. This is further reinforced by long form experiences and stories from real people who are using Microsoft services and products.

Microsoft is in the process of becoming a single brand to be recognised by function and not by product and consequently has been adopting a leadership practice that aligns all actions and messages with its core beliefs and communicates stories to create deep, long-lasting relationships with its audiences. This creates more value to the brand content to engage the consumers.

Formation element

Microsoft's stories are evergreen and will therefore remain relevant to the target audience for many years to come. Microsoft's stories blog consist of long form, engaging storytelling based on high quality content centred on human experiences. This, for example, includes long form profiles of interesting people, employees as well as feature stories about company projects. Each story is accompanied with its own, unique, custom photography, illustrations, videos or audio to complement each story format. In addition stories include people who are using Microsoft products and services. In doing so the Microsoft brand is humanised making it more accessible and understandable to the target audience through relatable content which emotionally connect the consumers. Microsoft's stories are appropriate for the platform both narratively and from a design perspective. Its long form brand storytelling has the potential to connect its target audience in powerful and compelling ways.

The Microsoft brand is perceptibly not put at the centre of the story. An opportunity for co-creation is often enabled by also building interactive features into stories about new products. For example, the Project Spark story is interactive by allowing the reader to create its own path for the story (picking a

path between being an adventurer or not an adventurer) of which each outcome is different depending which options are selected during the unfolding of the story. The reader is therefore allowed to create his or her own outcome for the story. Project Spark is a game maker video game for Microsoft Windows 8.1 and Xbox One released on 7 October 2014.

Intrinsic element

Microsoft seems to have a familiar brand voice in that the same long form format and style for all its stories are used as was discussed in the formation element section above. These stories are all engaging, unobtrusive and part of consumers' daily experiences and conversations. These daily experiences thus connect the consumer to the story content. The Microsoft brand is seldom mentioned in the content but the consumer is rather connected with the brand through the compelling stories with which they can associate. Consumers can decide themselves whether they want to read these stories which are shared on social media platforms as discussed in the medium element.

Communication element

Microsoft's stories have various communication techniques evident. These are mostly emotional, educational and entertaining. Educational stories contain compelling stories about how things at Microsoft work behind the scenes making the company more familiar with its target audience. Entertaining content, for example, consists of quizzes where the reader interacts with the content and selects the outcome, depending on which path is selected in the story. Stories are also shared which evoke an emotional connection with the reader. The characters in the stories are real people with which the target audience can relate making the content relevant. The stories are also part of a broader, long-term story and consistent with the brand promise to deepen relationships.

Corollary element

Microsoft's stories are more aimed at changing the way the Microsoft brand is perceived and at the same time creating brand awareness and long term loyalty. Instead of being concerned about metrics, "sentiment" analysis is more important. Its long form content, however, could also drive traffic or encourage brand conversion in the long term.

As evident from the above analysis, Microsoft stories are owned by Microsoft, strategic, visual, thoughtful, native, evergreen, targeted and shareable with a multi-channel presence. Users are inspired to share their experiences with the brand by means of opportunities for earned media and co-creation. Du Plessis' (2015) six elements of content marketing are reflected in Microsoft's stories but framed within Microsoft's unique brand positioning strategy, brand promise and content marketing strategy. Microsoft's stories are more aimed at changing the way the Microsoft brand is perceived and at the same time creating brand awareness and long term loyalty and conversion.

With regard to research question two, these six essential elements of content marketing can be depicted in a concept map as illustrated in in Figure1 below.

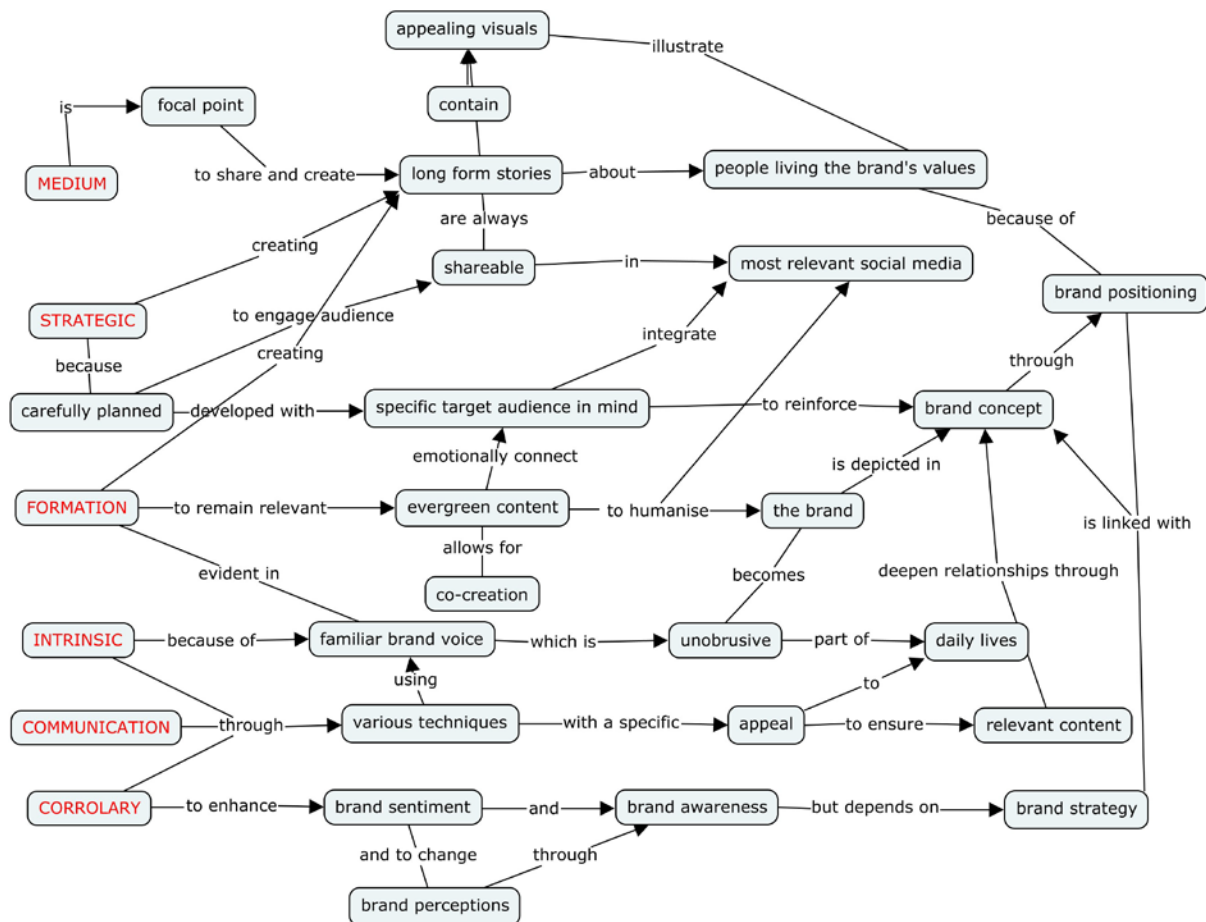


Figure 1: Concept map of Du Plessis' (2015) six proposed elements of content marketing connected to Microsoft's stories blog.

The concept map as depicted in Figure 1 above can be clarified as follows within the context of the stories created and shared via Microsoft's brand stories' microsite. Companies that embark on content marketing should have a specific target audience and goal in mind for creating content using a dedicated blog or website. The brand should not be the focus of the content, but rather inconspicuous, interactive, engaging, relatable yet planned evergreen long form stories illustrated with visuals to make them more shareable. It is important to emotionally connect the consumer to these stories which can also be done via co-creation opportunities and interactivity. The company should have a dedicated focal point for its owned content and adopt an integrated approach to create compelling, long-formed brand stories with real characters sharing their experiences while living the brand's values. The emotional connection elicited with the consumer humanises the brand through these experiences. Content marketing is a strategic process informed by the company's brand positioning and brand promise that reinforces its familiar voice in social media. Several communication techniques with a specific appeal are used according to the objectives of the company to make the content relevant and applicable to the target audience's daily lives. This can deepen relationships with the target audience. Companies have different expectations regarding the outcome of their content marketing efforts, which could be changing perceptions, creating brand awareness and sentiment but which depends on the brand strategy and positioning. The brand promise drives the content marketing efforts of companies.

Conclusion

Du Plessis' (2015) six proposed elements of content marketing are reflected in Microsoft's stories blog and are all interrelated. The proposed concept map linking these six elements with Microsoft's stories could be used as a heuristic for companies wanting to devise a content marketing strategy. The concept map further represents structural knowledge indicating how preceding knowledge of content marketing is interconnected. In addition, it provides an overview of a domain of knowledge which requires further interpretation. These six elements of content marketing are, however, generic which could be adapted for both B2C and B2B content marketing practices.

Since the concept of content marketing represents an under researched area, the concept map is by no means complete and should be adapted as new discoveries are being made. It currently serves as a starting point in a continuous academic study to build theory with regard to content marketing.

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