

The Concierge Approach to Content Marketing

How to increase brand awareness, sales, and positive customer experiences through publishing

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Savvy organizations are building a powerful presence for themselves on the web by publishing useful information. This content can take many forms - from articles, to Twitter updates, to videos on YouTube. But it's all created for one purpose: to help their customers and guests.

This is what I call the *concierge approach to content marketing*: the practice of creating material to answer questions before they even come up.

In my experience, this yields several valuable benefits:

- Content makes it easier for people to find you. When people perform a web search, they're looking for specific information. The more information you publish, the higher the chance that people will find your website.
- Content makes you a subject authority. It helps to be the source of information for people planning a trip to your city. Now more than ever, people want to be educated before they make a purchase. Writing about your destination helps them get excited about their visit.
- Content makes you more valuable to your customers. For instance, if you're trying to sell to corporate meeting planners, a collection of useful, relevant information can make that easier. Plus, research performed while writing your content makes you a better resource, and increases the level of service you can offer.
- Content has multiple uses. The educational material you produce for your target audience can be adapted to multiple formats and uses. For example, one good article could become a series of blog posts, videos, or a podcast.
- Content typically provides higher ROI than advertising. In my experience working with clients, a network of great content provides more benefits than paid "interruption" messages.
- Content has long-term payoff. Unlike advertising, great content will stay around and deliver ongoing results. It's an investment that keeps yielding dividends.

Who should create all this?

It's always possible to share generic information that others have published. But people really enjoy personalized content from you as a business owner or manager. It's easier for your audience to connect with one person who introduces a destination or product from his or her own perspective.

How can you make the information you publish more “human”?

- Clarify the information's author or producer (it probably shouldn't be from your whole organization).
- Include a photo of the author (the less formal, the better).
- Include a fun background biography on why this person is qualified to write.
- Write in your own voice, and avoid sounding corporate.

In the travel industry, I like to imagine I'm introducing my hometown to a close friend. What little insider's tips and local hotspots can you give access to?

But I don't have any time! Can I get some help?

Sure.

As nice as it is to have the content coming from you, sometimes it's just not practical for you to do all the writing yourself. In that case...

Get your team involved

The involvement and active participation of your staff in content publishing is critical in this new marketing environment. In my experience, the best results have come from sticking with this one-line recipe:

The inside story from a real person who loves what they do

- The inside story - Something we don't already know. Behind-the-scenes stuff.
- From a real person - Not a department. A personality. Preferably, a friendly one. Someone we can identify with.
- Who loves what they do - They're so excited about it, you couldn't pay them to NOT write about it.

Hire a journalist

If you and your team don't have the time or expertise to develop all of your content, consider hiring a journalist to supplement your writing. With the print media industry declining, many talented writers are open to taking part or full time work. Partnering with a talented ghostwriter is an effective solution for many busy managers. You can provide the story topics, and the writer can spend the time doing research and turning the concept into a story. Just be sure that your own voice and personality come through - regardless of who writes the actual words.

Supplement with Guest sourcing

What is “guest sourcing”?

It’s a term I coined a while back to describe the practice of sourcing content from your customers in the hospitality industry. The purpose is to get your audience to help each other.

Guest sourcing usually includes four categories of content:

- Photos
- Video
- Wikis (for destination information)
- Blog posts

One benefit of guest sourcing is that you’ll have a wide range of media to work with. This is the reason Wikipedia is over 25 times larger than the Encyclopedia Britannica; everyone working together can create more content than one individual organization. A wide range of information is essential for reaching the long tail of niche web searches.

Guest sourcing shares the benefits of your establishment from the guest perspective. Many of your guests and customers would like to hear from other people like themselves - not marketers.

Encouraging guest sourcing can actually increase brand loyalty. Active content production can create a sense of ownership.

4 ways to encourage guestsourcing

- The next time you receive positive feedback, ask the guest for some type of online contribution. This works like magic for getting reviews on TripAdvisor, but remember we're discussing guestsourcing here – the art of getting media on the web.
- Turn existing fans into online participants. Recently, I talked with a hotel that had a very strong offline fan base, but just recently began social media marketing. With just a little bit of promotion, these fans quickly started participating and submitting their own content. It's especially important to leverage your existing reputation if you're new to this.
- Listen and reach out. Be aware when prominent bloggers and media producers are visiting your area. Roger Smith did that with Chris Brogan. You can do that by monitoring Twitter and other channels to see who is visiting your area.
- Treat media producers like rockstars! From a marketing perspective, these are among your most valuable guests. Designate a social media contact person to provide help and access. Make it very easy for people to get in touch with them: by phone, email, Twitter, etc.

What content should I publish?

To answer this question, it's useful to think through all the questions you would have if you were visiting a new city for the first time. It can be hard to do that if you've lived in the area for a long time - so ask some visitors. What's going through their heads?

Thinking through my own travel planning process, I'm likely to look for information in the following categories, and I'm not alone. Every day, hundreds of questions are typed into search engines to find this type of city-specific information:

- Flight information
- Airport transportation options
- The city's best hotels
- Guest reviews and photos of those hotels
- Best ways to get around the city (taxi, public transport, etc)
- Can't-miss boutiques & galleries
- Places to eat
- Special events going on
- Typical climate for that time of year (clothes to bring, etc)
- Best places with WiFi for guests to work from
- Exercise options (gyms, cycling routes, running paths, etc)
- Best places to photograph
- Interesting day-trips from the city

Your mix of content types will obviously vary depending on your organization and the person you're trying to reach. But the point is to think through all the questions that are going through their heads when they're making a buying decision.

Tip: Ask your concierge and customer service people to compile a list of the most common questions they are asked. This will give you a good range of topics to begin with.

What is the best format for sharing this information?

This depends on your intended reader. What do they want? (If you don't know this, you should ask them.)

Some common formats I've seen work well include:

- A visitor's guide section on your website. This is a good place to begin. Have at least one page answering common questions for guests.
- Blogging. A separate online destination guide can give you search benefits. Multiple pieces of content give search engines more information to index, and potentially raise the number of visits to your primary website.
- A PDF summary guide. It's helpful to have all information in one place and available for convenient download.
- SMS text messages. The right information can be most effective when delivered via mobile. For example, I think hotels could do a better job of synchronizing text messaging with the guest stay. What if you sent a welcome message 12 hours before check-in, another once they've arrived, and one 3 hours after departure? This is a big opportunity for service in my mind.
- Smartphone applications. Depending on your organization's goals, it might be helpful to bundle all the information into one app that can be accessed from anywhere.

Make sure your content gets read

Unread content is useless. If you're going to invest the time into producing material to help your audience, you should spend equal time putting it in front of the right people. This is a crucial part of content marketing.

Promotion is an essential part of publishing

In addition to the publishing channels shared in the section above, your staff needs to be aware of when to share this. As in comedy, timing is everything with content. Information must be delivered at precisely the right moment, or it may be useless.

Some good opportunities for staff to introduce your content:

- During inbound customer inquiries
- Proactively, in response to questions you find on Twitter, in forums, and elsewhere
- To new email subscribers
- After a reservation or sale
- During a guest's visit (a literal interpretation of concierge marketing)
- With your online community on Facebook or elsewhere

Tip: It helps if you register a memorable domain name that you can give people in offline encounters. For example, you might suggest someone visit OurCityBlog.com for insider tips.

Case Study

Hotel Marketing Strategies' editor, Katie Clapp, started out as a destination blogger for a Carmel California hotel group. She shares her experiences and tips for producing content that centers around a guest.

Which topics attract the most readers and guests to your site?

Readers love “best of” lists, insider tips, entertaining charts and diagrams, photos, and posts that highlight upcoming events at popular destinations, like the nearby Monterey Bay Aquarium! I try to choose topics that capture the spirit of the area, and for us that means a focus on art, outdoorsy activities, great food and wine, and entertainment options. Sometimes I take the opposite approach and tackle a negative preconception about Carmel, like the lack of nightlife or kid-friendly activities. Showing guests a side of your town that they won't see on the typical travel sites gives them a big reason to keep reading.

How do you find blogging inspiration?

Even though I've lived in the area for years, I was heavily reliant on city-sponsored websites for my first ideas. When you're starting out, they can give you a great feel for why guests visit, and what they're already excited to see. Once you're writing on a regular basis, ideas start to come more organically - through conversations with local friends, business owners, or your site's readers.

Travel forums can be a great source of visitor questions, too. Even if you're already an authority on your location, blogging will challenge you to look at things from new perspectives and address issues that are particular to your guests, but that you haven't encoun-

tered, personally. I imagine a travel blogger who is also a hotelier would be the ultimate concierge, and that applying researched lessons to their hotel's operations could tremendously boost their reputation and profitability.

Any final words of advice for new destination bloggers?

Jot down ideas the moment you have them! Sometimes I'll add them into my phone, or scribble a title onto a receipt; just get it down and let it settle until you're ready to flesh things out, and if you're stuck or something isn't working, ditch it and move on.

Your locale is an endless source of content and you get to play the ultimate tourist, adventurer and story-teller. Don't let little hurdles or frustrations bog you down, and remember to have fun! Be infectiously passionate about your city's unique character and guests will be excited to join you.

To get you started, here are 10 of my favorite guest-centered destination topics:

1. How to Navigate [City]'s [Rapid Transit/Metro/Subway] Like a Local
2. Why [Affordable Activity] is the Best Deal in Town
3. How to Save Big on [Popular City Attraction]
4. Five Ways to Celebrate [Mother's Day, Father's Day, Easter, Any Holiday] in [City]
5. Unexpected Places to Experience [City's] Unique Culture
6. Where's the Wi-Fi? [City's] Guide to Free Internet Access On-the-Go
7. [City] - There's An App for That
8. Why Visitors Love [City/Region] (Ask or interview people on the street)
9. Sitting Down with the Owner of [City's] Popular [Restaurant/Spa/Club/Destination]
10. 10 Things You Can't Find Anywhere Outside of [City]

Concierge content marketing

summary tips

- Think like a publisher.
- Create informative content our readers will love.
- Distribute it as far as possible.
- Build an accessible database of useful, insider information on their destination.
- Monitor real-time communications channels for opportunities to serve.
- Involve your staff.
- Guestsource content

Create content that is:

1. Timely (current and delivered to the right people at the right time)
2. Comprehensive (a true resource)
3. Useful to the reader (they bookmark & keep coming back)
4. Easy to find (search engine friendly)
5. Easy to share (linked to social media networks)

Ask yourself these three questions:

1. “What questions do I have when planning my own trips?”
2. “What content could we publish that answers these questions for our destination?”
3. “How can we get this information in front of the people that are looking for it?”

What's next?

Go put some of these ideas into action!

If you need any help building your content marketing program, don't hesitate to ask me:

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