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## Content That Matters

An Interview with Ann Handley, Chief Content Officer, MarketingProfs

### Ann Handley:

Ann Handley is the Chief Content Officer of MarketingProfs and the best-selling author of two books on content marketing.



*Welcome to the Customer First Thinking podcast, Episode 13. My name is Stephen Shaw, the host of this podcast. In this episode we interview Ann Handley, the Chief Content Officer of MarketingProfs*

Pushed to the sidelines by a worldwide epidemic, brands have been obliged to mute their commercial voice. To stay in the game, however, some have opted for public expressions of solidarity (“We’re in this together”, “We’re with You”, “We’re Here for You”). The same refrain, one brand after the other, rarely rising above the level of greeting card sentiment. These brands felt they had to say something – even though it meant nothing. Just another instance of marketers failing to create content that matters.

The reason these attempts at empathy fall flat is that brands normally prefer to steer clear of any public discourse, worried about the blowback. When they do step out into the open at a time of crisis, they like to play it safe. Which is why they all sound exactly the same.

Of course, there are exceptions – more assertive brands that have always been true to their ideals. They have earned the right to step up to the podium, having proved their sincerity in the past. Nike is certainly one of those select brands, a model for corporate citizenship. Once again, it is speaking out against racial injustice (“For once, don’t do it”, implored a 60-second video on social media). But the ice cream maker Ben & Jerry’s went even further, demanding an end to “white supremacy”, a point-of-view completely consistent with its progressive values and history of social activism.

Staying relevant in times of crisis involves more than jumping on the social media bandwagon with platitudes and hashtags. Every brand should be on a mission to change minds, unafraid to proclaim its convictions. People today would love brands to do the right thing - they just lack faith it will happen. By creating content that matters, brands can be heard above the street noise. They can help to build consensus and accelerate social progress. And they can be the catalyst that turns a cause into a movement.

The idea of using branded content to empathize, inform and inspire is one that Ann Handley fully endorses. After all, she has been in the forefront of content marketing from the very beginning, before it even came to be recognized as a discipline of its own. A journalist by training, Ann was a co-founder of the digital marketing news site ClickZ before selling it and moving to the online marketing training company MarketingProfs in 2002. Today that company has grown to 600 thousand subscribers. Ann is now the Chief Content Officer, overseeing all educational content. As a long-time advocate of content marketing, Ann is a popular guest on the speaking circuit, known for her plainspoken advice and humour. She is also the best-selling author of “Everybody Writes,” and the co-author of “Content Rules”, both essential reading for content marketing professionals.

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I met up with Ann in between sessions at Uberflip's annual content marketing event in Toronto. Given the struggle brands are having creating content that matters, I started by asking whether it is a discipline in need of more discipline.

AH

**Ann Handley (AH):** I mean, yes and no. I think that where the market is right now is that there's a lot of people who are doing great things with content marketing, who are pushing the boundaries a little bit or pushing the industry forward. But I also think that we can't forget that there's a whole lot of people who are not there yet. You know, I talk to all kinds of audiences and all different industries and verticals and levels of content marketing adoption. And there is a pretty big gap still between the content haves and the content have nots. So I guess it's hard to answer your question just with one answer because I don't think that everybody is at the same level. But I do think that most industries, most people do understand the benefits of content marketing. I think there's a lot of companies who at least buy into it on a mindset level but really aren't sure still where to start, what to do. And it's kind of funny because content marketing has been around, at least in its modern inception, I mean it's been around forever, but in its more modern inception... you know, my book "Content Rules" came out 10 years ago, you know, so... (4:48).

SS

**Stephen Shaw (SS):** I was just looking at it the other day.

AH

So it's not rocket science. But at the same time I was speaking to a big company two weeks ago and the talk that I gave there was not that different than the talk that I first gave, I won't say... maybe not quite 10 years ago but at least 5 years ago. And it was tailored to that group because that's sort of where they are. Because of some internal reconfiguring and restructuring and so on there, they're still needing to educate their core marketing team about the benefits of content. So all that to say, it's all across the map.

SS

And it is still... Yes, it has been around a long time. I completely agree. I've seen that infographic that the Content Marketing Institute has done about the evolution of content marketing. But that aside, in its modern form, it's still fairly an immature discipline. A lot of people are trying to figure things out. Obviously, we're all in experimental stage and it hasn't made its way into marketing academia

really much, has it? I mean there's your books, there's Joe Pulizzi's books, there's a few other reference sources, but frankly, there is no real playbook out there, is there? That would be considered third-party neutral, apart from companies like Uberflip, which do a great job, as they are at this Conex event that we're attending here. But for the most part, it hasn't worked its way into the classroom, has it?

AH

I actually think that it has. I mean, actually I just got a text yesterday from a friend of mine whose wife teaches at the University of Iowa and she's using "Content Rules" in her classroom. "Everybody Writes" has been adopted in a number of marketing classrooms. I've actually spoken to a classroom at the University of Toronto here. Like I Skyped in because they were using my book in their class. So I mean, I don't know, I can't speak for every university or every higher education institution in North America but I actually see it increasingly being brought in. Now that said, you know, it's not every professor, I mean every professor is going to think about content marketing a little differently. Like my daughter goes to Northeastern University in Boston and she took a marketing course. They barely talked about content. They did not talk about social media. But that was because her professor was very old school. So I guess it's going to vary as well.

SS

So a sort of a generational turnover is required here.

AH

Yeah, sadly I think that's probably true. But she kept saying to me, "Mom, you should come in. And you should come in and talk to the class." Now that said, she did take a business writing course and they talked about content. They didn't really call it that but a lot of the concepts that they talked about were in my book, "Everybody Writes." They talked about writing for social media. They talked about how writing is still relevant to businesses today. And that was not from a marketing standpoint, but it was just a broader communication class. And so I think the concepts are there, they were just packaged a little differently.

SS

Well, I just get the sense that the paint is still wet on the walls and that until enough companies are out there with reference cases, it's sort of hard to evangelize internally in organizations. I want to come back to that subject, but I do want to throw out some numbers because the numbers

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aren't encouraging. Forrester talks about 86% of marketers feel their efforts aren't generating business value, whatever that might mean. Why do you think they're struggling with that idea of generating business value? Is it an inability to correlate what they're doing to business value? Or is it that they're simply so poor at doing content marketing that they're not seeing the results that they need? (8.19)

AH

I mean, it's probably a mixture of both, I'm guessing. So when you say the 86%, that's strictly from content marketing?

SS

Yeah.

AH

So it's not just marketing more broadly, right? It's about content writing. Yeah.

SS

No, it's content marketing specific.

AH

So MarketingProfs and the Content Marketing Institute, we do a content marketing study every year. And so you know, our audience may be a little different but like the MarketingProfs audience is not an audience of content marketers. I mean the Content Marketing Institute audience probably is or at least aspirational content marketers. So I mean, I know from that research that again, there's a pretty big gap between the people who are most successful at content marketing and the people who are less successful at it. And so what does that most successful group do? They do things that you suggest, you know. They're developing content that maps throughout the buyer journey. They are measuring the impact in measurable ways, in very specific ways that will resonate. They have a business goal behind everything that they do. I think that when we started thinking about content as a marketing discipline or as a marketing tactic, there was this feeling that we have to keep throwing stuff out there. You know, we set up editorial calendars for our self and we said we have to publish a blog post every single day or three times a week or whatever the cadence was. And so now I think we're at an inflection point where it's a good time to reevaluate some of those decisions that we made because we were in the sort of experimental phase and really map it to a real business strategy. How can we actually measure it to outcomes?

SS

So there is this question of strategy versus tactics. And folding in content marketing under sort of the traditional

marketing tactics umbrella and it's just one of many. But you talked this morning at your talk about content more strategically and a higher order form of content really where in order to engender trust, which is what you were talking about, there's this emphasis on quality. What does quality really mean? And I think you also alluded to the fact that this has to ladder up and narrow it into a very interesting space where there needs to be a level of commitment to this idea of customer-first mindset, which is what we talked about, or Laura Ramos just talked about it in her talk this morning. But that requires organizational alignment. So is the concept of strategic alignment around the brand purpose, which obviously leads down the path of higher quality marketing, one of the major stumbling blocks that you're seeing in organizations? In other words, stop treating content marketing as a tactic and more as a way of doing business. (11.06)

AH

Yeah. I mean this is the interesting thing because it's... When you asked me the initial question, you know, it is just about sort of the evolution of content marketing. I mean I think part of the way that I approach it now is to not... like content marketing is marketing. I mean you can almost lop off the content piece of it because everything that we are doing as marketers, it should have some sort of content component. I mean it all does. And so it's kind of silly to think about content marketing as a tactic. It's not something that lives over here in a little silo. It's really something that happens across, you know, all the marketing activities and should always map into what does your customer need from you? Like that's where that customer-centric mindset I think really applies in content marketing.

SS

Well in part too isn't it that it's almost marketing as a service?

AH

Yeah.

SS

As opposed to a messaging medium or a way to get the brand message out there. It's more a question of communicating, which is again something you've talked about and emphasized in your talk.

AH

Yeah.

SS

So there's another figure Forrester trots out and they have these best practice scores that they apply to companies and they have something called content masters, whatever that

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might mean. I'm presuming it's the top scores on all their questions. But just 4% of marketers today fall into that bracket, that they've designated as content masters. I'm wondering where you see the biggest weaknesses. Is it the fact that marketers have to just learn how to be publishers? Is the concept of brand journalism, something you obviously preach, is that something that's still somewhat nebulous or is it due to a lack of commitment? That is, a feeling that senior management is, "Well, okay, prove it to me that this works," and it's still viewed as an experiment. What are the reasons why so few companies are climbing up that ladder to being content masters, do you think?

AH

I mean, again, I think it comes down to because they're viewing it as a tactic when in fact it's a strategy. You know, content is not a short-term tactic. It's not a short-term play. And so, if your boss, your CEO, your client, whoever it may be, if they are looking for something that's a quick hit, like don't think about, you know, a content marketing strategy against that because it's not going to be short term. It's long term. I believe that it delivers results over time. So, I wonder about that 4%. Like when did they start? I don't know. Do we know the answer to that question? When did the other... when did the other 96% start? So I think it's kinda hard to really understand the value of content if... unless you look at you know, sort of the bigger picture.

SS

Sure. So let me talk about strategy for a second because it is important and I think it's mentioned either in your study or in another Forrester report, that I think 30% of companies, actually, I think it's maybe your report, have a formal strategy. Another 24% are not really committed. Fifty-six percent, this is a head-scratcher, don't even have an ROI plan. I presume there's not a measurement plan around that. So again, I'm just asking that question, is that the commitment question? Is that, that it's still viewed as something so new that really we're going to approach this as an experiment as opposed to something that is fundamental to how we go to market?

AH

Maybe. People are looking at it as, you know, we need a YouTube channel. We need a video strategy. That's not a strategy. (14.47)

SS

We need an e-book.

AH

Yeah, exactly. They're viewing it as a one-off, you know, or they're viewing it as something that we need right now because we have a content hole to fill as opposed to really thinking about it strategically long term. So thinking about you know, what is your story? How does it map it into your purpose? What does your customer need from you? All those questions that I talk about, that Robert [Rose] talks about and then how is it that you're going to implement that. You know, forget about video or audio, like this, or forget about an Instagram feed. Forget about any of that, until you really think about, you know, who are we, what's our story, why do we exist and how is it best going to be communicated to a customer in a way that's going to engage them emotionally.

SS

And there's a buy-in here. There's some leaps of faith that that is going to lead to greater engagement, which leads to greater loyalty, etc., etc. I don't think people are connecting the dots quite well enough here.

AH

And honestly, I don't think that people have a choice. You know, I think maybe what we're seeing is people are still pushing against this idea because there is very much still this mindset of let's talk about ourselves and let's talk about what we do. People don't care about that. And you know, I showed this "wheel of busy" this morning about what happens every minute of every day.

SS

And that was great. I love that.

AH

You know, there's a whole lot of stuff going on and you can't break through that. You can't. And so I think there is this mindset that we can, if we do something, if we produce a better ad or if we shout louder on our broadcast, it's like that's not going to work.

SS

Well, targeting and campaigns haven't disappeared from our vernacular. I think that's part of the issue is the language we use betrays us really. It's amazing because you still hear that word campaign being used as much as it is. I think it was you or somebody else today just said, "No way, maybe this is a program, not a campaign about that." Yeah, that's the right language. Let me pick up on what you just said though, which is the content glut. And I think I found another figure at this conference that 73% of marketers are planning to produce even more content.



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AH

Yeah, that was mine actually.

SS

That was yours. OK. That was interesting because now we have more bad content on top of bad content. We have a content glut – we have a risk of content fatigue. I read somewhere else, I think it was [Dev] Patel who said yesterday, we've gone to a billion blogs from about 50 million in 2006. Have we reached peak content here? There's an attention deficit. How on earth do you break through that clutter? (17.22)

AH

I mean, my solution to this is to slow down. I talked about that - be strategic and then do less and obsess. So create less content but obsess about the quality and value of that content. And when I say quality, I don't mean, you know, hire the 2019 version of you know, William Shakespeare to write a blog post for you. That's not what I mean by quality. Quality to me means does it have value in the mind of your consumer, your customer, or your prospect? Do they care about what you do? Will they miss you if you go away? That to me is quality. So I showed an example today of a zoo and their Facebook, you know.

SS

That was funny. It's where we'll go.

AH

So that was not quality content in the sense that the video that they produced was shaky, it was you know, sort of random and weird but at the same time it was so engaging. It was real. It felt real. And you know, your customers, your prospects, they want to know you. They want real. They don't want marketing that feels like marketing. And so, you know, all that to say, I think that we do have an opportunity to slow it down, to do less and obsess with what we do. But the other thing that I would say is that I also think that you know, as much as we talk about content and new tools and tactics and thinking about all the ways that we have to reach customers, sometimes the simplest thing is staring us right in the face. So I talked this morning about the need to think about your email newsletter in a very different way.

SS

I love that piece.

AH

So many brands, I mean 94% of B2B brands have an email newsletter. But yet when we asked in that same study, what are the most effective ways that you are nurturing your customers, email newsletters doesn't even make the list,

at least in the top five or six. And so what does that say? What are we doing? That's a classic example of slow it down, reevaluate, do less and obsess. So what is the purpose of that email newsletter? That is an opportunity to engage customers at a more intimate and in a place where they have invited you to their inbox. So the question is, could we use that a little bit more effectively? Could we focus less on the news in newsletter, what we want to say, and focus more on the letter, the communication to one person, from us, from us, one person at a company? So I think that's a disconnect. And it's a perfect example in my mind of you know, what I see a lot in marketing today. Where we're, "Yeah, we're doing that." But are you really doing it as well as you might be?

SS

I had the privilege of interviewing Don Peppers for one of these podcasts, which was terrific. And they basically invented the term one-to-one marketing back in the mid-90s. We're starting to see that they realized today, all these years later, but we still haven't crossed the threshold with respect to personalized content. And you're just alluding to the idea of email newsletters and one of the reasons, of course, that they don't have great open rates is because, I think you made the point today, is the content is generic, it doesn't feel personal and it's not relatable. And I love that concept of being relatable. This concept of relatable ethos, it's really part of that conversation a brand has to have. Again, is that because there's a disconnect between how the brand is viewed, traditional brand positioning, you talked about brand voice a little bit, and that idea of being relatable at an individual personal level? There's a big chasm between those two schools of thought.

AH

Yeah, there really is. And I think a lot of that is there's some fear there. There's some fear that if we come across as more personal...personable, I think is the way that I talk to brands about it is because personal, what does that mean? Like it's sort of scary to people. So I think there's a real big difference between personal and personable. And so when I'm talking to brands and companies and executive teams I counsel them on personable is a much more...it's a much better place to be. (21.32)

SS

I like the term a lot.

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AH

So I think there is a fear there though that well, if we are personable, if we seem like people, I mean it sounds crazy but it does mean that there's some vulnerability there. And you know, it's uncomfortable for a lot of companies. A lot of leaders they're scared of that. And I understand that. I mean, I totally get it. I mentioned my email newsletter this morning and every two weeks I send out an email newsletter to my list of about... it's almost at 20,000. But every other Sunday, I mean, I get letters back from a handful, like not a lot, like two or three, but you know, they hate it. They tell me why. So like, okay. So all that to say, you know, I mean when you make yourself personal or personable, that means that you have a personality and that means that somebody will not like you. And that's a hard thing for a lot of companies, a lot of brands.

SS

It's hard to imagine somebody not liking you. You're such a nice person.

AH

Oh my gosh, thank you. But you'd be surprised. There's some real jerks out there, you know.

SS

Of course. We call them trolls. So just looking back just this past year, again, you've been in the front trenches for a long time now. You've seen the industry evolve. What's been the most significant trend or shift that you're starting to see in the content marketing space?

AH

We talked about one of them already, which is you know, doing less and obsessing. I think the smartest companies are focusing more on providing real value for their customers, for their prospects. So I think we're seeing that. I also see in email newsletters, it kind of falls into this, but going back to basics in a lot of ways, not chasing the next bright and shiny thing. That's why I gave a massive shout out to email newsletters today because you know, if you do nothing else, at least get that right. And that doesn't require a lot of technology, it doesn't require a lot of special skill but it does require a lot of brain. So that's the other thing that I'm seeing.

SS

What about the whole area of content hubs? I mean email newsletters clearly have a role to play either in terms of the content that's actually in the newsletter but more importantly directing people to content that's relevant to them obviously. So it's a tool that way. Are you seeing a greater adoption

and use of content hubs generally as a means of getting this information or making this information available, organizing it, optimizing, personalizing, etc.?

AH

Yeah. And I think actually that you know, if you approach it that way too it's why this conference is so well attended, frankly. It's because making your content easily accessible and discoverable, that's a massive challenge. And so content hubs really solves that challenge very nicely for some of the brands. (24.21)

SS

Sure, because of discoverability. I was also quite impressed that you know, more advanced in terms of the integration of ABM into the equation of... into the B2B equation, the idea of streaming content, and all these individual personalized streamed at the account level. It's actually pretty impressive that companies can pull that off today.

AH

It's amazing how far the technology has evolved to allow that to happen, you know.

SS

It's galloping at warp speed. It's astonishing. Seeing Uberflip's product roadmap was quite interesting to see where this is going to. There's this convergence of technologies beginning to occur.

AH

Exactly and super... like this... I think they've done an incredible job of really defining a roadmap for them that's going to take them far, plus they're just really nice people. And so I like that a lot.

SS

No, I find the same thing. I mean it's curious because it's harder to define them versus the other players in the space. You kind of focus more on the authoring, editing, the process management piece of this production piece. There's a lot of good tools out there that handle that. I think these guys are trying to discover, almost create a category by themselves because I don't know another company quite like them. So this isn't meant to be an Uberflip advertisement. I'm paying to be here at this event.

AH

And you can sign up at [uberflip.com](https://uberflip.com).

SS

And you're trying to sell me on their platform.

AH

That's so funny.

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SS

I want to ask another question. We have a few minutes left. Have we entered, I'm going to use this term loosely, a post-literate era, and by that, I mean where video is starting to become so dominant or predominant as a form of communication? And what does that do for the future of long-form content, which we traditionally describe as e-books and white papers or longer posts? Do you see a displacement here, particularly with a new generation coming along that's used to short-form content, social media, etc.? What do you see the future for content going forward?

AH

So, short answer, no, I don't think we are entering a post-literate era at all. Mary Meeker in her 2019 state of the internet report, I don't know if you saw that but she published it in June...

SS

Yes.

AH

...she quoted Kevin Systrom, the co-founder of Instagram. And Kevin's quote in the Mary Meeker report was about how we are increasingly communicating through images. You know, and that in a way our...the way that we're communicating through images like on social platforms, of course, he's talking about Instagram as well as Facebook, it harkens back to the way that we used to communicate when you know, we drew pictures on the walls of caves. So, okay. I mean, a few things. Number one, I don't like binary thinking. I don't like saying that the rise of Instagram and the rise of visual media means that there's the death of text. And I don't understand anybody who can't balance those two things at once. Both can coexist nicely. I love Instagram. It's my favourite social media platform next to Twitter. Twitter and Instagram I think are sort of neck and neck for me. And so I am not saying that I don't believe in images or I don't love video. I do. I think it's fantastic. It's super strong. The whole presentation I did today would not be nearly as strong had I not had video in that. But that said, that doesn't mean that I don't also believe in the power of long-form content or text. And I also really don't like the idea that we live in a world where everything is short and snackable, to use that word that makes me want to throw up in my mouth a little bit even saying it, because that is just flat out not true. You know, I mean I have a 22-year-old daughter who is in college and yeah, she scrolls Instagram when she's relaxing. But you

know, she also sat down and watched the entire season three of "Stranger Things" with me. So, you know, she has the capacity, she has an attention span and she chooses to apply it in much more discernible ways. And so I don't see that we're getting to this post-literate era. I mean she also reads books on her Kindle, you know, so I don't think that it's just about being able to access long-form video content or long-form audio. I also think it has a lot to do with just you know, we are more discernible on where we're spending our attention, what we will give our attention to. And so I think that's the place where we need to focus. It's not... Like there's no battle between images and video and text. Like that's just silly. I mean I think really what it comes down to is, are you creating something of value and are you matching the format to the best delivery mechanism that you can.

SS

How do you see the discipline evolving? So let me put it this way, so first of all, marketing as a discipline, there's a big question mark around that, but secondarily, in terms of content marketing, as you were saying earlier, does it just not become all content marketing and the term disappears? Like where do you see the discipline going down the road here? Maybe and a corollary question is, what are the skill sets required for that to succeed and take hold?

AH

I think where content is heading is that it actually is going away. I think the term content marketing, I would be surprised if we saw it in 10 years. I think it just becomes marketing. You know, I said I think the ability to produce content that engages an audience, that is across the entire marketing department. So I don't think that content is going to be living in its little corner over here, you know, anymore. I think it's integrated across everything. So that's the first thing. And then secondly, you know, what skills do we need to meet that challenge or rise up to that challenge? I think the biggest skill that you can have as a marketer is empathy. So I don't think that the skills we need are the ability to write well or the ability to speak well or the ability to communicate or to be a technologist. I mean all of that, yeah, you can learn all of that. But I think that hone your empathy for other people, what value do you bring to them? Think of things through their point of view. I mean, honestly the world needs more empathy, but I think companies need more empathic leaders as well.

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SS

Sure, they do.

AH

And so the ability to really think about things not just from your own point of view, which is important, I'm not saying you discount what you need completely, but the ability to really understand another person's point of view. It doesn't mean that you are subverting your own needs or that you are ignoring them in any way but it does mean that you are able to think outside of yourself a little bit. And so I think that's a skill that I look for in anybody that I hire.

SS

And I imagine curiosity being number one.

AH

Yes, exactly. Yeah, that's another really good one too. Yes.

SS

So does marketing become the empathy department?

AH

Yeah, I love that. "Empathy and curiosity, can I help you?"  
"Yeah. Hi. I'd like to order an e-book."

SS

Empathy and curiosity.

That concludes our interview with Ann Handley.

As we learned, the biggest skill a marketer can have is empathy: the ability to know and feel what customers are experiencing. And that

extends far beyond the shopping aisle – it includes how people live their lives and the values that guide them. For content to rise above mediocrity, marketers have to translate that understanding into stories that explain why the brand exists and what it believes. Only then will marketers be able to create content that matters.

You can find past episodes of this podcast on [CustomerFirstThinking.ca](http://CustomerFirstThinking.ca) where you'll also find blogs, articles, strategic frameworks, video and more on the transformation of marketing.

In closing, a big shout-out to Justin Ecock for his contribution in making this podcast happen. Until next time, thanks for listening.



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