

Beating the ‘infobesity epidemic’

Writing stand-out content for the web and thought leadership programmes isn't always easy but Michelle Daniels has some suggestions.

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We all now have access to digital content 24/7 across multiple devices. That supply is changing the way people interact with content – a big factor being the information overload many now complain of. It is affecting which content people opt to engage with and which they dismiss or avoid at a glance.

The more savvy marketers are those who adjust their strategies to these behaviour changes. They are the ones whose content is still eye-catching, despite all the others around it vying for people's attention.

In this article, and following on from the seminar I ran with PM Forum's Guildford group, I've shared advice on how to write stand-out digital content in the 'infobesity epidemic' (as some have reported) which we find ourselves in.

Changing behaviours in digital content consumption

Both in business and socially, people are viewing digital content on smaller device screens. Mobile technology means content is consumed in many more environments than before. Research suggests that the volume of content people deal with has led to shorter attention spans. It's certainly making people more selective in what they choose to engage with and, as a result, 'screening' capabilities are more heightened. It's not unusual for people to be consuming content on multiple devices at the same time – think how often you watch TV whilst also looking at your phone.



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Increasingly, people are becoming choosier in how they use their time. They will disengage or get impatient if they can't find or get what they're looking for straight away on a website, article, etc. One recent statistic states that 55% of visitors will typically read articles on a website for 15 seconds or less.

Infobesity has also led to a preference for pictures, videos and audio over words. Even in an office where people aren't able to have the sound on devices switched on, those videos which carry captions to cater for silent viewing are still being favoured over articles/text.

The characteristics of 'Go-to' content providers

Most of us can name at least one blogger,

vlogger, podcaster, e-book author or social media profile who commands masses of engaged followers. When you look at the nature of these people's work, you see different strategies at play. Firms can emulate these in their own approach to harness similar engagement and here are examples...

- **The news-breaker** – renowned for being the first report, giving commentary or sharing opinion about an emerging issue, trend or situation.
- **The niche expert** – providing informed and interesting views or insight about a specific sector, trend, issue, topic or situation.
- **The interpreter** – who makes sense of a complex issue and explains it in a practical way that's quick and easy to understand and engaging to interact with. They're not always the first to report on the issue, but the way they explain it draws followers to them.
- **The journey sharer** – people like stories and hearing of other's real-life experiences. The journey sharer provides these for others to learn from.
- **The curator** – with people too busy to search for content they'd find useful, some look to other experts to signpost content which is relevant on a particular topic. These experts share their own as well as third party content. With the latter, the best also give commentary as to why the content is of interest.

In choosing which strategy is best suited to your firm, you have to ask a fundamental



question – who is your target audience?

Key fundamentals for producing engaging digital content

For your digital content to be engaging and successful you need absolute clarity about the audience you want to appeal to. If you don't fully understand their nuances, it's going to be tough to select the right subject, language, tone and structure for your content to appeal to them.

So if you are asked to write a piece of content for your firm, in addition to familiarising yourself with the topic, be sure to get briefed on the following areas:

- The audience's level of knowledge and understanding of this subject
- What they will typically want to know in relation to this
- The language and terminology they will favour (and any cultural differences you need to factor in)
- How much time they're likely to have to engage with this
- How they will be reading this – eg. on what sort of device
- Given where you're planning to post and promote it, what else will be competing with it in that environment

These points will give you a greater chance of creating content which is attention grabbing, engaging and accessible to your audience. To ensure the content is truly successful and a worthwhile investment of your firm's time, it's crucial you cover off these final points too.

- Is it clear straight away what's in it for the audience? If not, they're unlikely to give it their time.
- Is the outcome your firm wants, or call to action, clear and accessible? If not, you'll be disappointed with the results you all wanted to generate.

Writing dos and don'ts to hold the digital reader's attention

As a result of people being more selective in what content they engage with, here are some practical tips to help your firm's digital content get noticed.

The don'ts to avoid...

People will switch off and avoid a piece of digital content if...

- The heading doesn't appeal or is cryptic and unclear in its meaning
- There's no brief indication what this is about, eg. not having a synopsis at the start of a long blog article
- There's too much dense text at an initial glance
- The content doesn't immediately make sense
- The content doesn't flow logically or is confusing
- There are mistakes and errors in the copy or formatting
- There is a heavy use of jargon or technical language which is beyond the reader's knowledge
- The tone of voice doesn't appeal

The do's to adopt

These will help to grab your digital reader's attention and hold it...

- Create an eye-catching headline that clearly reflects what the content covers
- Make it clear from the start what this is about and why it will be of use
- If it's a long piece, signpost at the start how long it takes to read
- Match the tone of voice to the environment it's appearing in and the audience it's intended for – remember different audiences and social media platforms warrant different tones
- Keep paragraphs short and test how they look on a mobile screen to cater for small screen browsing
- Use sub-headings to appeal to the skim-reader
- Include images and graphics to hold attention
- Build in plenty of white space
- Incorporate call-outs and summary boxes
- Be helpful by sharing examples that back up your points
- Give clear call to actions (not just at the end but at various points in the piece) which tie in with the outcomes you want

Summary

The current infobesity epidemic won't stop certain professionals standing out from the crowd and building a significant following for their digital content. Those that fully understand their target audience will select topics and write about them in a way that really resonates with their followers. They'll also select those publishing channels which their target audience most engages with and will structure their content to work well in those channels' publishing parameters.

It's important to stress that the demographics of users favouring different channels is never static and so don't assume what's popular today will be the same tomorrow. Keep an eye on user trend data which gets reported in the marketing press. For example, many had originally dismissed Instagram as purely for the consumer market but organisations in the B2B sector are using it very successfully. Another interesting development has been the rise in popularity of the 30 minute-plus podcast to cater for commuter journeys and personal exercise sessions.



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