Content and coronavirus: How you can differentiate from the masses

All coronavirus all the time: that's what everyone's content looks like right now. It makes sense, because most digital marketers feel compelled to respond to the crisis.

However, the proliferation of "conronacontent" also creates a dilemma and a practical problem. There are a ton of me-too listicles and volumes of "how COVID-19 is impacting e-commerce" data circulating. This creates a kind of content din and raises the fundamental question: what should you be creating and how do you differentiate your content when everyone is basically doing the exact same thing? We know content is foundational for SEO success, but rising above the rest is easier said than done, particularly now.

It's a challenging issue and there's no single, simple answer. I reached out to a range of digital marketers to help answer this question: **Meghan Keaney Anderson**, VP of marketing at Hubspot; **Casie Gillette**, senior director of digital marketing at KoMarketing; **Todd W. Lebo**, chief marketing officer at Ascend2 and **Patrick Reinhart**, VP of digital strategies at Conductor.

I also asked them about non-coronavirus content and whether and how to prepare for the post-COVID future. At the end, I've tried to distill their advice into a list of principles.

Meghan Keaney Anderson, Hubspot

At its core, content marketing is about helping audiences solve problems. In recent weeks, we've seen countless businesses, employees, and communities face new and

unprecedented challenges for which there is no pre-existing playbook. High-quality, relevant content can be invaluable at a time like this.

We have never witnessed such sudden and dramatic shifts in what audiences need, and we are continually adapting our content strategy in order to be as helpful as possible. Marketers across every industry should try to do likewise. In this rapidly changing environment, content that was hugely helpful to audiences last week may not be relevant to the challenges that next week holds.

My three pieces of advice to content creators right now are to:

- Remain laser-focused on audiences' most pressing needs by continually gathering feedback and closely monitoring engagement rates on new content being published.
- Strive to deliver unique value without asking for anything in return – instead of dialing up the promotion of products and services, focus above all else on being helpful.
- Always be prepared internally to quickly adjust content strategy as the rapidly changing situation continues to evolve.

Casie Gillette, KoMarketing

Right now, people are writing about the Coronavirus because it feels tone-deaf not to. That being said, and I can't stress this enough, you shouldn't be writing if you don't have something unique to say. I have clients who serve the restaurant and retail industries and the content they are putting out deals with how they are helping/can help during this time. It's unique to them and their customers so it's genuinely useful. We always say, don't write for the sake of writing and that certainly applies here.

At the same time, we are encouraging clients to publish their regularly scheduled content – why? Because some of that content is being created to help them rank in search and by delaying it, they aren't helping themselves. We do want to be cautious though. For example, we had a client post scheduled to go live that included the phrase "statistics to keep you up at night." Nope: that title was fine two months ago but certainly not now. I think publishing is fine as long as you are being mindful of what you are putting out there.

A side tip: as for not wanting to appear insensitive, one suggestion I have given to clients is to make your COVID post/announcement sticky. That way it's always at the top of the blog and it's the first thing people see.

In terms of preparing content for the future, I have a client in the healthcare space who is already thinking about this. We started creating topics around the issues hospitals will be facing when the crisis slows. I don't think there's anything wrong with that, but you have to be OK with the uncertainty of knowing when to publish that content. I'm of the mindset it's better to be proactive than reactive so if you are thinking about your future content initiatives, I'd start by thinking about what challenges your audience will be facing at the end of this and what information they'll need.

Todd W. Lebo, Ascend2

My suggestion is to create content based on research and data (tests and other sources). Readers want science and data to help them make the best decision and this is especially true during challenging times.

Our June 2019 study, Content Marketing Engagement, found that when it comes to content, having solid evidence to support a claim is extremely important. That is why a 60% majority of marketing professionals report that research and case studies are the most trusted content type by target audiences.

Another B2B study we conducted shows that research is what prospects consider the most valuable content vendors can provide them. Research provides an agnostic perspective on topics that are most important to your prospect. Prospects consider original research extremely valuable because they can use research to generate ideas, influence decision-makers, determine strategy, get approval for their budgets, and much more.

Patrick Reinhart, Conductor

It’s tough to differentiate because everyone is putting out content that speaks about the impact of the virus to their business and in their industry. We did that at Conductor so we are no different. What I think businesses should consider is having a “next step” that compliments their research or content. I am not seeing a lot of companies put out that type of content along with research and statements, etc. This may not work for some businesses but will for the majority.

Right now, you should be creating content that helps your customers and users. Every time you put something out, the question you should be asking yourself is: “will this help my customers?” If the answer is yes, then you’re on the right track. If it’s just a piece of content that you’re putting out for the sake of putting out then it’s more than likely not worth it.

As for non-virus-related content, you have to be OK with not addressing what’s going on. It’s OK to still run your business, it’s OK to still try and help your customers, you just have to be careful how you go about that. The biggest mistake businesses can make right now is appearing like they are trying to capitalize on the pandemic so it’s a balance.

You should absolutely address what’s going on in the world, but you also should be OK with not addressing it. What a lot of businesses are doing right now is only talking about the

virus and not talking about other ways to help their customers. Right now is a great time to plant trees for SEO if you haven't already. The trees you plant now will provide shade on sunny days in the future and there is nothing wrong with creating it along with content that addresses the current state of things.

Answer questions to help your customers; go and contribute on forums that are specific to your industry, create video tutorials, etc. Everyone has to remember that this is a snapshot in time and there is the other side to this that we all need to be planning for.

Content lessons and takeaways

Below are the distilled lessons and advice from the group:

- Don't create content for the sake of content, but do maintain a regular publishing schedule.
- Don't be self-promotional or appear to be capitalizing on the pandemic.
- Focus on customer needs: does your content pass the "will this help my customers?" litmus test? Get regular feedback on customer needs.
- Determine what you can say or what value you can provide that's (relatively) unique.
- Review scheduled content to make sure it's not inappropriate or insensitive.
- Be agile and prepared to change your content plan as the environment changes.
- Be proactive, plan content for the post-COVID-19 future (be thoughtful about when to release it).
- Use research and data to support your content.
- Continue to develop and publish content that helps your longer-term rankings and SEO.

More about marketing in the time of the coronavirus

About The Author



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