



(re)Gaining trust

Content strategies at the heart of the new digital revolutions

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Forward 

(RE)GAINING TRUST

CONTENT STRATEGIES AT THE HEART OF THE NEW DIGITAL REVOLUTIONS

EDITORIAL: FROM THE ECOLOGY OF ATTENTION TO THE NEW TRUST CHALLENGES

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EDITORIAL

REPUTATION, BUSINESS, AND INFLUENCE

FROM THE ECOLOGY OF ATTENTION TO THE NEW TRUST CHALLENGES

The Internet networks of 2021 are more multiple and polarised than ever. This complexity makes them rich. But it also makes it difficult to monitor and control the distribution of content that circulates massively. At a time of radical change in usage (Voice over IP, digital events, etc.), of platforms obsessed with privacy—which is undermining established audience acquisition models—and of deep crisis of confidence in institutional media, the cards have been reshuffled. The contours of the digital playing field on which content strategies have been deployed for the past fifteen years are blurred. The rules they follow and the measurement of the results they achieve are also blurred, in a lasting, probably permanent way.

A few examples? The announced end of third-party cookies signals the end of strategies centred on content aggregators (Facebook, YouTube...) through their massive audiences and profiling solutions: linked to powerful content strategies centred on SEO, the website is once again becoming a key component of digital ecosystems (see page 14). Opinion, reputation, and mobilisation are increasingly built on the deep web, i.e. in semi-closed discussion spaces such as Discord, where companies and institutions should not only listen, but can—and sometimes must—make themselves heard, some advertisers have already understood that. At the same time, newsletters are being transformed into relational programs, and internal communication into micro-learning sessions. The credit given to the testimonials from third parties takes infinite precedence over what a company or institution says about itself (see page 17): influence is not an objective; it is the starting point of strategies (see page 7). And advertisers are wondering about the final impact of their content solutions, and in particular about what happens with the final business transformation at the base of the funnels they have set up (see page 25).

These questions are dizzying, but that is precisely what makes them exciting.

Because the opportunities are huge for companies and institutions, in a context where the so often proclaimed digital revolution has finally become a reality thanks to the Covid crisis and the cloudification of entire sections of the economy. And above all by our personal uses and the adoption of a digital culture.

51%
of the French
distrust big
corporation¹

1. <https://uniondesmarques.fr/nos-services/actualites/article/2021/01/08/Re-li-Markes-et-consommateurs-un-nouveau-dialogue-Retour-sur-l-addition-sp-ciale>

More than ever, content is a strategic necessity to emerge, engage, build loyalty, rally, activate, and transform audiences, whether business or institutional, general public or niche, B2B or B2C, allied or hostile.

The battle for attention is now the battle for trust.

More than ever, effective content strategies are being built outside of historical swim lines, recipes, and fads. They lead advertisers to position themselves differently in relation to the messages, evidence, and stories they publish in their own proprietary ecosystem, to no longer be the sole narrator, the exclusive hero, and the systematic object; but also to create outside of it the conditions for the emergence and proliferation of supportive third-party testimonials ([see page 7](#)).

While advertisers are increasingly relativising the effectiveness of paid media campaigns, owned and earned content are now converging in virtuous and cumulative mechanisms, which profoundly redefine the advertiser's place at the operational level, but even more at the strategic level.

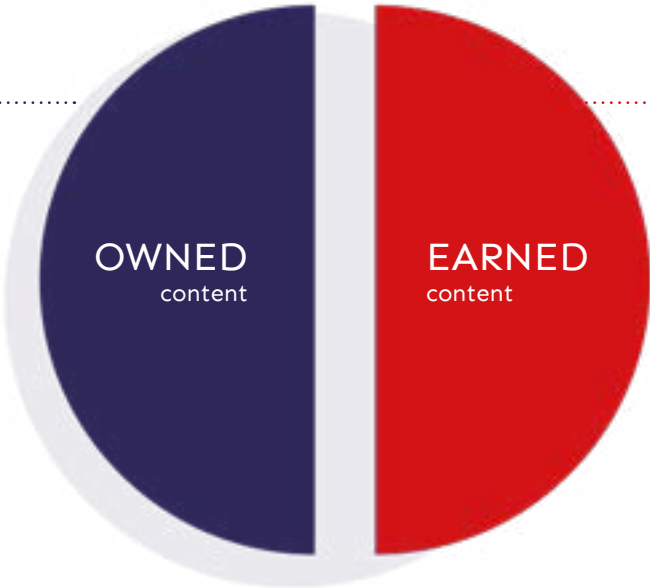
We hope that these few pages will help shed light on some of the major transformations in communication and marketing and, above all, that they will inspire you to take winning initiatives or, at the very least, to ask questions that we would be delighted to explore with you.

Matthieu Lebeau

Partner

From a siloed editorial world, structured by a watertight divide between owned and earned content...

The company speaks of itself (organisation, value proposition, governance, expertise...) on its own proprietary media (websites, social media...), in perfect alignment: the "owned content".



The company interacts with third parties (media, prescribers, influencers) and sends them information so that they can analyse the general context, the market, and its players on their own points of contact, in a logic of "earned content" that is as old as the history of the press.



Actions, materials, and compartmentalised systems that lock strategies into constraints related to organisation, channel governance, and established habits

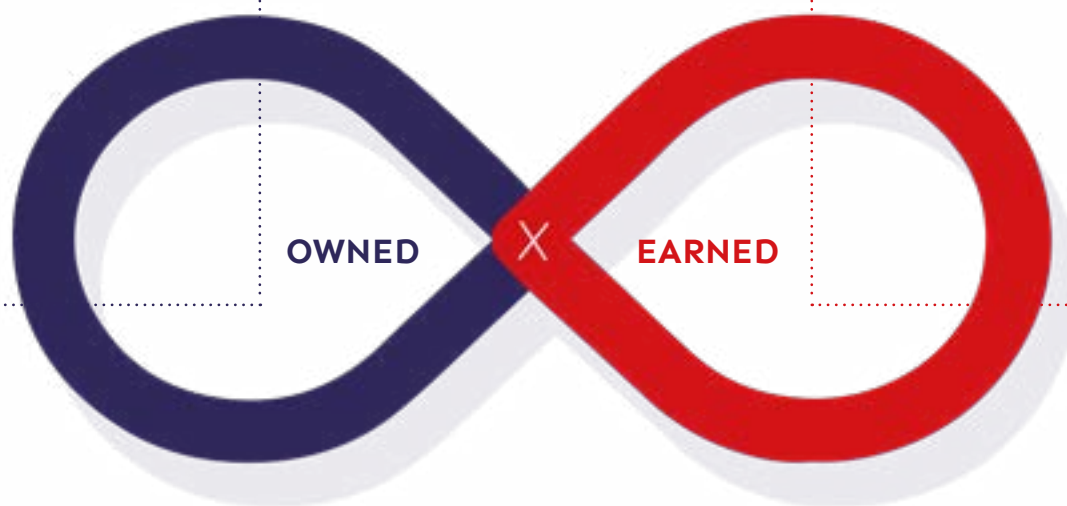
...towards new integrated and winning strategies for businesses and institutions

The company welcomes testimonials of third parties (experts, partners, customers...) and deals with external themes on its own proprietary media.

It chooses to put its institutional voice after the voice of its collaborators, experts, and managers. It accepts not to be the direct and exclusive subject of the content it publishes and amplifies with all the power of its brand awareness on its own contact points.

The company creates outside of its own scope the conditions for the emergence of stories and evidence that support its interests, of conversations and debates that serve its struggles.

It weaves the narrative of a brand story that is compelling and constructed because it is supported by third parties, at a time when the anonymous voice of institutions finds very little feedback and credit.



The company shifts its speech, it tells its story by not talking about itself.

The company tells its story by letting others talk about it on the stage it has set up and which wears its colours.

RELATIONAL
REVOLUTIONS

I. ADVOCACY & EARNED MEDIA

ALLY STRATEGIES FOR STRONG BRANDS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Trust is a central expectation of all the (commercial and institutional) stakeholders of companies and institutions.
- The need for trust marks the return of strong brands, built on values, commitments, a history, and an open community.
- Trust cannot be built on institutional communication alone: it is based on evidence—including testimonials from legitimate and credible third parties—placed at the heart of ally, advocacy and earned media strategies

“Trust is the new currency”—an essential economic and societal ingredient for conducting business and the world. We know the Anglo-Saxon expression. It has become increasingly meaningful and relevant in the course of the crises that have followed one another since the early 2000s: from Dieselgate to Cambridge Analytica, from food scandals to Covid-19, from cyber threats to data leaks...

Trust is now a non-negotiable horizon at the personal level, for each individual and each citizen; it has become the categorical imperative of companies and institutions, the fundamental and unsurpassable plinth, the only one likely to make relationships, exchanges, and value creation possible. But what is radically new is above all that trust is no longer a presupposition: public opinion no longer gives any credit for good character. Trust must be inspired, built, and earned around sensitive and exposed issues. It is the consequence of an ethos, an expertise, a vision, a fight, and not the intrinsic attribute of an organisation or a personality.

Trust is built on strong brands...

In B2B markets, 45% of decision-makers say that it is trust that strengthens the relationship they have with their service providers and suppliers². They do not buy products and services off the shelf with a purely theoretical approach focused solely on price. The virtuous, legitimate, and credible substrate of the brand is essential, because it is the brand itself—through its values, its commitments, its history, and its community, in other words, through all the history, collective past, and meaning it embeds—that makes trust possible.

“It is by relying on the precious intangible and emotional assets of brands that managers are now initiating the necessary transformations,” notes Muriel Jasor in *Les Echos*³. Because brands are no longer only B2B and/or B2C, they are also corporate, and turned towards the general public and the citizens, including for industrial or tertiary actors whose activities have never led them to speak to the general public. This trend is perfectly summed up by the tagline of Bureau Veritas: a “B2B2S company”, i.e. a Business to Business to Society company.

... driven by long-term communication and marketing strategies

Trust cannot be decreed, it has to be earned; and above all, it depends less on what the advertiser says about itself than on its reputation, i.e. what others say about it. Testimonials from third parties nourish the trust that crystallises around brands, which must now master the conditions of their emergence and visibility. In the age of trust, responsibility communication and commitment marketing are based as much on earned content as on owned content editorial mechanisms. What are the new strategies they entail?

1. Adopt the codes of true evidence-based communication

The need to “prove” statements is not new, but it is becoming strategic, in a context of widespread mistrust of institutional stakeholders by audiences. Referencing, sourcing, and not saying or writing anything that cannot be proven is a matter of course. For sensitive subjects of financial communication—but won't all subjects be sensitive tomorrow?—solutions for certifying information in the blockchain already exist.

2. <https://business.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/business/en-us/marketing-solutions/cx/2016/pdfs/rethink-the-b2b-buyers-journey-fr-v01-16.pdf>

3. <https://www.lesechos.fr/idees-debats/leadership-management/les-marques-sujet-phare-des-comex-1292966>

But it is also in the advertisers' interest to accept not to send out messages that are absolutely smooth and perfect, and therefore... suspicious. The publication of indicators is an excellent thing, but they will be all the more credible if those that are put forward are not systematically and solely those whose lights are green. Self-congratulation is not considered as evidence but rather as compulsory communication elements. Or even worse. 51% of the French distrust the word of big corporations⁴. It would be best to speak about the orange lights and the corresponding areas for improvement, or even to accept a mistake, analyse it, and suggest areas for improvement.

As for the successes and achievements, it is the customers and partners who best talk about them the best: giving them a voice—particularly using videos—is a winning initiative and the YouTube strategy adopted for instance by the software publisher Sage.

2. Reboot the “employee advocacy” software

In a context where the institutional voice of companies is being eroded (as evidenced by the social media reach and engagement rate of mature brands), employee advocacy has become a central lever. That is, if it is used properly! Indeed, the problem encountered by advertisers today and revealed in particular by our study (see page 11) is simple: today, too many employee advocacy programmes function as self-centred loops. Posts published by the brand are shared by employees, only to be liked by other colleagues. This is not a futile exercise and is actually part of the internal communication strategy of some organisations. But it is unfortunate when you consider that leads generated by interactions with the personal posts of employees have a conversion rate 7 times higher than that of branded posts.

This is why employee advocacy is best structured on the basis of specific populations and programmes: thought leaders, experts, ambassadors... in a resolutely community-based and open approach, where the objective is to create relationships and influence and not just to quantitatively amplify each corporate publication. The statistics on LinkedIn are clear in this respect: a “dry” share—without comment—of a corporate account's publication leads to an average of 750 views, compared to 3,500 for a post with an original text, even a brief one.

To generate trust, we must take a stand and assume the responsibility of exposing ourselves and making a commitment. This is of course done through an “institutional plinth” exercise that often takes the form of a manifesto, i.e. a strategic positioning text. But first and foremost, it is also done through the words of the leaders, in an exercise of leader advocacy, of forums and speeches in which the asperities and positions are central. They are on the front line, especially on social media. And their words are the compass on which the whole company can align itself.

3. Decentralise the word and find allies: advocacy and earned content

What you say about yourself carries infinitely less weight than what others say about you. This is the golden rule that guides effective reputation strategies. Creating the conditions for the emergence of this positive word is central to nurturing trust in a brand, a company, or an institution. But who are these “others”? Employees, partners, and customers, of course: we have already talked about them above and we will come back to them in the chapter on customer advocacy (see page 29). But they are also all those who are qualified as influencers: journalists, experts, academics, researchers, elected representatives, and more generally all individual or collective sources who combine legitimacy and a convergence of views or interests on a theme, a trend, a struggle, or a belief.

Identifying these allies—who are not to be confused with social media “influencers”—and making them visible and vocal is absolutely essential in the digital world. This exercise, which the Anglo-Saxons call advocacy and which aims to indirectly contribute to the emergence of supportive content (earned content), is becoming strategic for business and institutional issues. 77% of communication and marketing professionals would like their company to invest more in earned media, which they also consider to be the best tactic for building trust⁴.

All this implies that advertisers must accept a different measurement of ROI: the results of advocacy are measured in the medium term, whereas owned content and especially paid media provide a (relatively) clear short-term view of their impact. This also implies accepting—paradoxically (or not)—that the brand should take a step back to reinforce the trust it inspires: by definition, earned media is not branded and is not published in the proprietary ecosystem. Though it remains relevant to concentrate content spaces on websites (via webzines, hubs, editorial spaces...) in terms of SEO strategy, we are already witnessing a return of deported or deportalisated content sites, i.e. media dedicated to a strategic theme for which the advertiser agrees to appear relatively in the background—this is the case, for example, of the formidable medium “Redshift by Autodesk”—or totally in the background, completely erasing itself behind a category battle.

4. <https://www.cision.fr/ressources/infographies/etat-earned-media-france/>

II. END OF THIRD-PARTY COOKIES:

A NEW ERA FOR CONTENT

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The end of third-party cookies is inevitable (even if Google has postponed it until 2023) because it crystallises the contradiction between the demands of Internet users in terms of confidentiality of personal data and their expectations in terms of personalisation of digital experiences.
- Other personalisation options exist and are being invented today, based in particular on the collection of proprietary cookies.
- In the short and medium term, the end of third-party cookies renews the importance of owned and earned media strategies, and more particularly the structuring role of websites and SEO strategies at the heart of digital devices.

Several times announced, postponed again by Google to 2023⁵, but in fact already partially effective, the end of third-party cookies is the sign—amidst a certain confusion—of a major digital revolution. Indeed, it is nothing less than the main audience acquisition models that are being called into question. Installed for about ten years around advertising retargeting—which consists of drawing the data necessary for the targeted and affinity-based distribution of content from massive and qualified data reservoirs, built in particular thanks to audience aggregators such as social media—these mechanisms use small scripts deposited on the devices of Internet users (or cookies) to follow them from one website to another and offer them a personalized browsing experience. The consequences of this paradigm shift are considerable and do not simply involve a reform of advertising practices: they urgently invite advertisers to rethink their digital strategy. There are many unanswered questions... and a few certainties, including the structuring importance of content strategies.

5. <https://france.googleblog.com/2021/06/mise-jour-du-calendrier-des-etapes-cles.html>

What is the “end of third-party cookies” all about?

Why will third-party cookies disappear? First of all, this “end” is already largely underway: for example, the Safari browser (Apple) has been rejecting these trackers since March 2020, and Tor—the gateway to the deep web—for much longer. What is at stake is specifically the end of third-party cookies on Chrome (Google’s browser), which captures about two thirds of the French market. As we said, this deadline has been pushed back several times already, but it is not an option. The end of third-party cookies is certain, because they crystallise the paradoxes of digital at the time of maturity: they allow to deliver the increasingly personalised experience that each Internet user expects, and at the same time, they exemplify to the extreme the contemporary debate on privacy and the non-consensual use of personal data. Indeed, the third-party cookie makes it possible for personal data collected at point A of the Web to be used at points B, C, D, etc.; in short, to use personal data in a context that is potentially unwanted by the person from whom it was collected. We know the scandals that such mechanisms have already generated.

What will digital strategies look like in a Web without third-party cookies? They will definitely be built on a demand for privacy (for which the expectations of Internet users and citizens have never been so high—and especially non-negotiable) —which significantly exposes the reputation of brands, companies, and institutions.

It is also up to the latter to see this constraint as an opportunity to create the conditions for less dependence on advertising investments and paid media—and therefore on platforms—and to establish their digital sovereignty in terms of audiences. But they also need to (re)focus on the interests of the Internet user, the conditions of their trust, and a long-term relationship, i.e. deploy a strategy where owned and earned media are articulated in a virtuous and affinitive way.

1. Goodbye third-party cookies, hello first-party cookies!

First-party cookies are distinguished from third-party cookies in that they restrict the personalisation of the digital experience to the ecosystem in which they were collected. A proprietary cookie collected on a website A optimises the experience on that website A. Thanks to their very nature, they are not affected by the ban on third-party cookies and they allow advertisers to create a data war chest for advertisers, to enrich their knowledge of their customers, to optimise the experience on their website, and to launch relational devices , such as newsletters, on that basis. And many B2B brands are already doing this.

2. Put websites back at the heart of digital ecosystems

If proprietary cookies are strategic, then websites will become (one again) the flagships of digital ecosystems. Since 2008 and the arrival of Facebook in Europe, digital strategies—guided by the massive emergence of social media—have considerably reduced their role, sometimes leading to a cosmetic vision of the “showcase” website, an imposed exercise, without soul, asperity, or added value in terms of influence, relationship, or business. But without a website, there are no cookies. Without cookies, there is no data collection. Without data collection, there is no personalisation. Without personalisation, there is no audience. And without audience, there is no need to deposit cookies. QED.

3. Reposition the editorial offer to serve the interests of audiences

The fundamental question remains that of the audience. To answer it, we must return to a few obvious points and best practices that are ultimately very close to the principles of inbound marketing. To gain an audience for a website, the best approach—or at least the most virtuous one in the long term—is still that of the honeypot: to offer qualitative and differentiating content and services. What are the killer content and killer features of the “post third-party cookie” sequence? The ones that are useful to ME, that inform MY opinion, MY choice, or MY decision, and that allow ME to facilitate the transition to action. Specifically:

- Useful content: white papers, infographics, tutorials, etc. that offer education, expertise, and pragmatism; this is already the case for certain tools, such as the simulators offered by certain insurance websites.
- Opinion content: open forums; viewpoints; interviews; and content signed by managers or employees but also potentially by third parties and published within the advertiser’s ecosystem.
- Decision content: customer case studies, testimonials, feedback, but also insights.

4. Put SEO back at the heart of influence, reputation, and business strategies

After having been confined by the rise of social media to a tactical exercise (optimising positions that are often a reflection of the advertiser's reputation, protecting the brand and its reputation; in short, to a means of action), SEO—especially in its semantic dimension of long tail—is once again becoming an end and a strategic issue. Why is this? Because the direct acquisition of traffic and its transit through a proprietary website is central to collect data and information on audiences. Knowing that social platforms—starting with LinkedIn and Facebook—have for a long time closed the tap of outgoing audience by penalising very strongly all posts integrating a non-sponsored outgoing link, the main acquisition lever in the hands of advertisers remains the organic traffic coming from search engines and Google.

5. Recreate relational intensity with newsletters

The newsletter is the cockroach of the Internet: its disappearance has been announced a thousand times, but it now reappears in new forms: digest, relational programme, micro-learning sessions, monitoring... The newsletter has two advantages. For the Internet users, it is a useful, chosen, and regular appointment that brings to their attention a selection of relevant and useful information that can be consulted where and when they want. One would think that the newsletter alone could solve the attention crisis! For advertisers, it is a direct and privileged channel with their audiences, which allows them to better serve, assist, and know them, without the intermediation of a social platform whose algorithm will restrict—apart from sponsorship—the exposure of a brand's publication to a few percent of its own community!

6. Create the conditions for the emergence of visible and vocal allies

Whether objective or circumstantial, testimonials from third parties carries more weight every day in the construction of public opinion as well as that of decision-makers. But in a digital world where segmentation will become problematic, this word also guarantees access to specific populations and communities. Hence the central importance of the ability of a brand or an institution to weave influence and to make vocal and visible its allies, i.e. third parties whose word will be positive for the company, its themes, its beliefs, and its struggles. 77% of marketing decision-makers would like to invest more in advocacy and earned content⁶ to create affinity and credibility, around an investment that they consider more conducive of trust than the one devoted to advertising budgets.

6. <https://www.cision.fr/ressources/livres-blancs/etat-du-earned-media-en-france/>

CULTURAL REVOLUTIONS

III. ALLIES, EVIDENCE, AND REASSURANCE:

WHAT SBF 120 TWEETS TELL US

Study conducted on a corpus of 63,865 tweets in French and English published between 1st August 2020 and 1st August 2021 by 116 “SBF 120” companies with an official Twitter account.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Recurring themes: the tweets of SBF 120 companies get organised in 6 main typologies: “Institutional News”, “Management & HR”, “Risks & Safety”, “CSR”, “Company’s Expertise”, and “Testimonials from managers and employees.”
- Performance differentials: tweets from the “Expertise & Beliefs” themes; “Risks & Safety”, and “CSR” have the highest engagement rates—excluding sponsorship
- A source of engagement in external retweets: although the majority of retweets (66%) concern publications internal to the company and its ecosystem, the engagement gathered by external retweets is almost 40% higher.
- An increase in the importance of the themes “Risks & Safety”, “Company’s Expertise”, and “Testimonials from managers and employees” during the last months of the sequence.

1. Organic tweets and retweets of SBF 120 companies can be broken down into six main themes:

“Institutional News” (36%), “CSR” (27%), “Company’s Expertise” (15%), “Testimonials from managers and employees” (9%), “Management & HR” (7%), “Risks & Safety” (6%). For retweets, the order remains the same, but proportions differ, with an overwhelming share of “Institutional News” (49%).

Figure A - Tweets

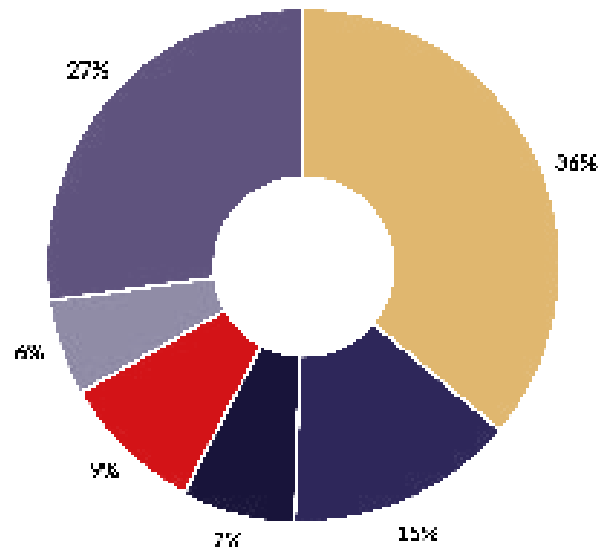
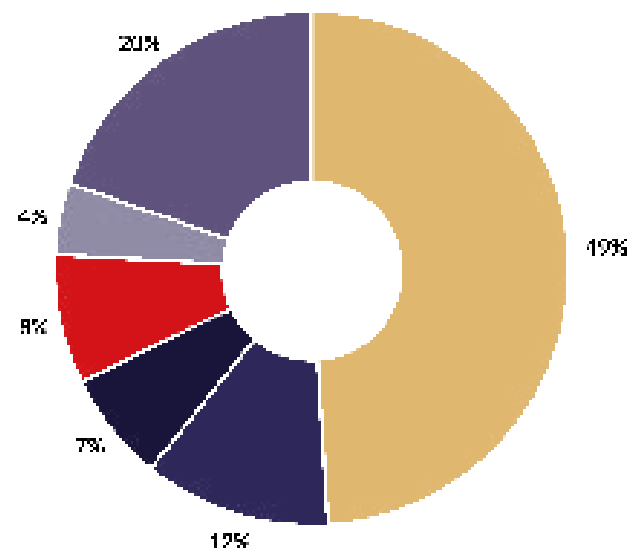


Figure B - Retweets



2. The “Testimonials from managers and employees” and “Risks & Safety” categories are marked by significant variations depending on the business sector.

While the “Institutional News”, “CSR”, and “Management & HR” categories give rise to a fairly homogeneous spread, the “Risks & Safety” and “Testimonials from managers and employees” themes are much more marked from a sectoral point of view, particularly for companies in the Finance and Tech & Telecom industries.

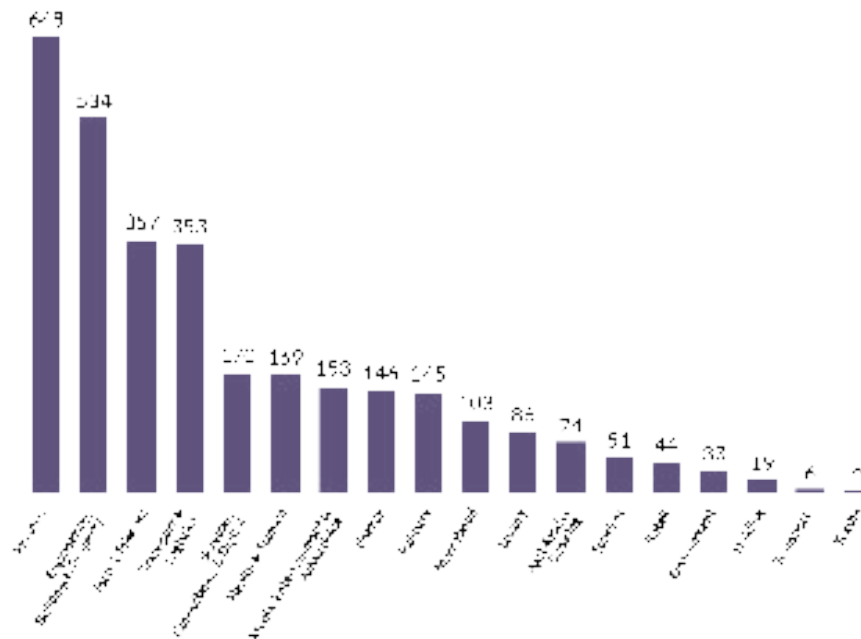


Figure C - Volume of tweets in the “Testimonials from managers and employees” category

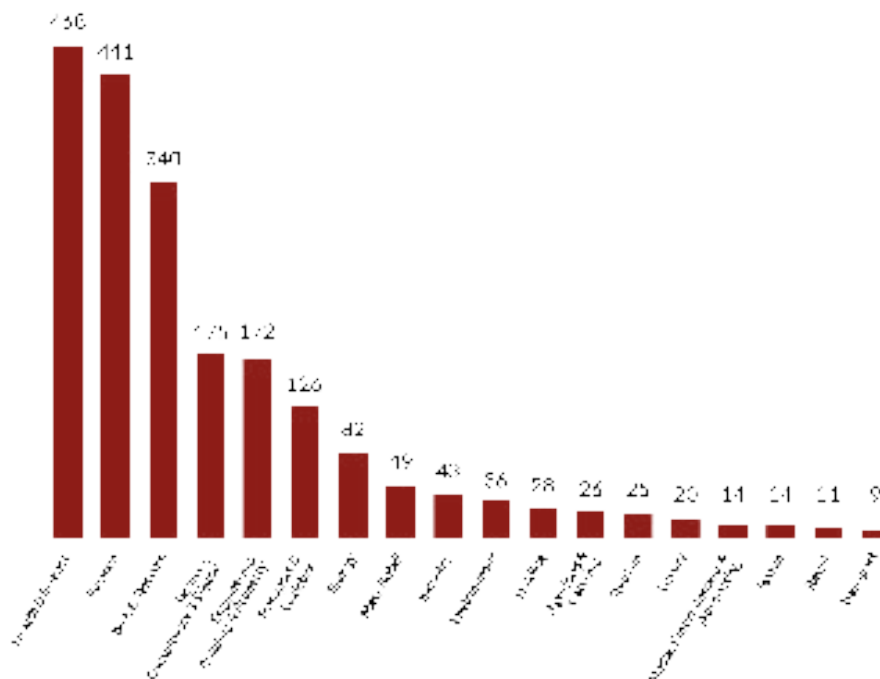
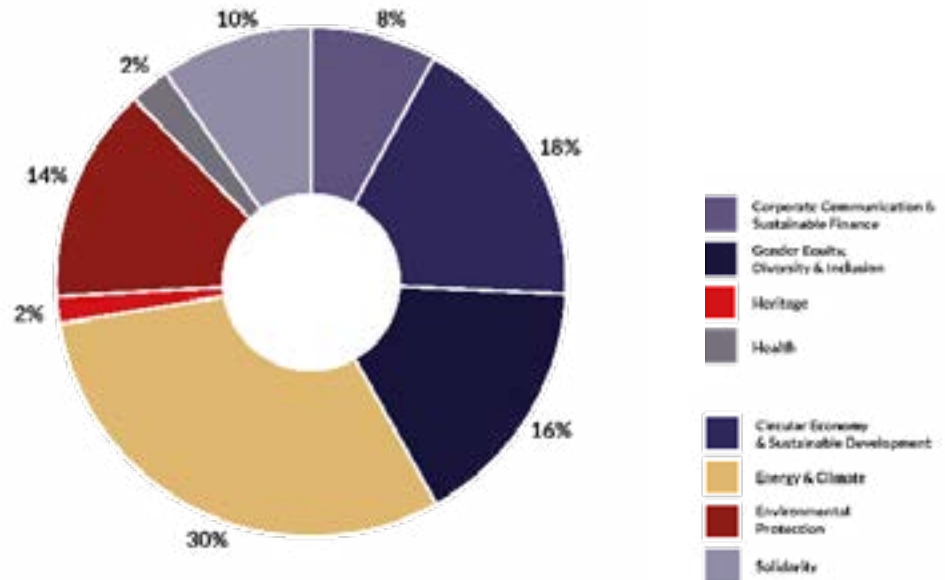


Figure D - Volume of tweets in the “Risks & Safety” category

3. What are the topics covered by companies in terms of “CSR”?

Figure E - Breakdown of the volume of CSR tweets by sub-theme



4. “CSR”, “Risks & Safety”, and “Testimonials from managers and employees” are those that generate the most engagement.

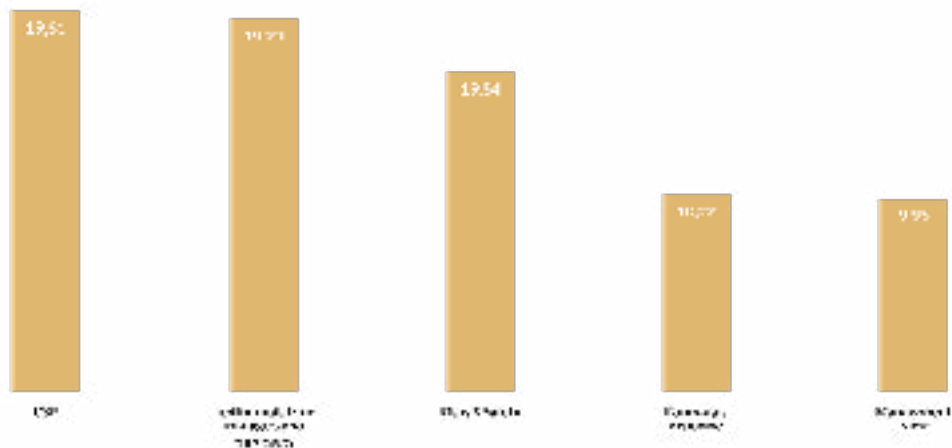


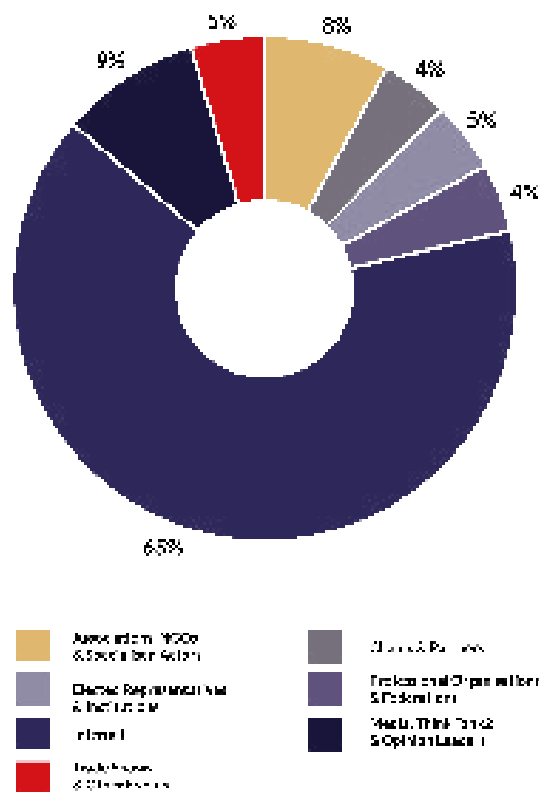
Figure F - Cumulative engagement rate by type of tweet (engagement volume / volume of tweets)

Leaving aside institutional news—whose analysis is distorted by a very high rate of internal engagement and, above all, by the significant sponsorship of tweets during the period of annual or quarterly results announcements—“CSR” unsurprisingly generates the highest engagement rate; but the “Testimonials from managers and employees” and “Risks & Safety” categories are almost at the same level.

5. Internal retweets are in the majority, but their performance is lower than that of external retweets.

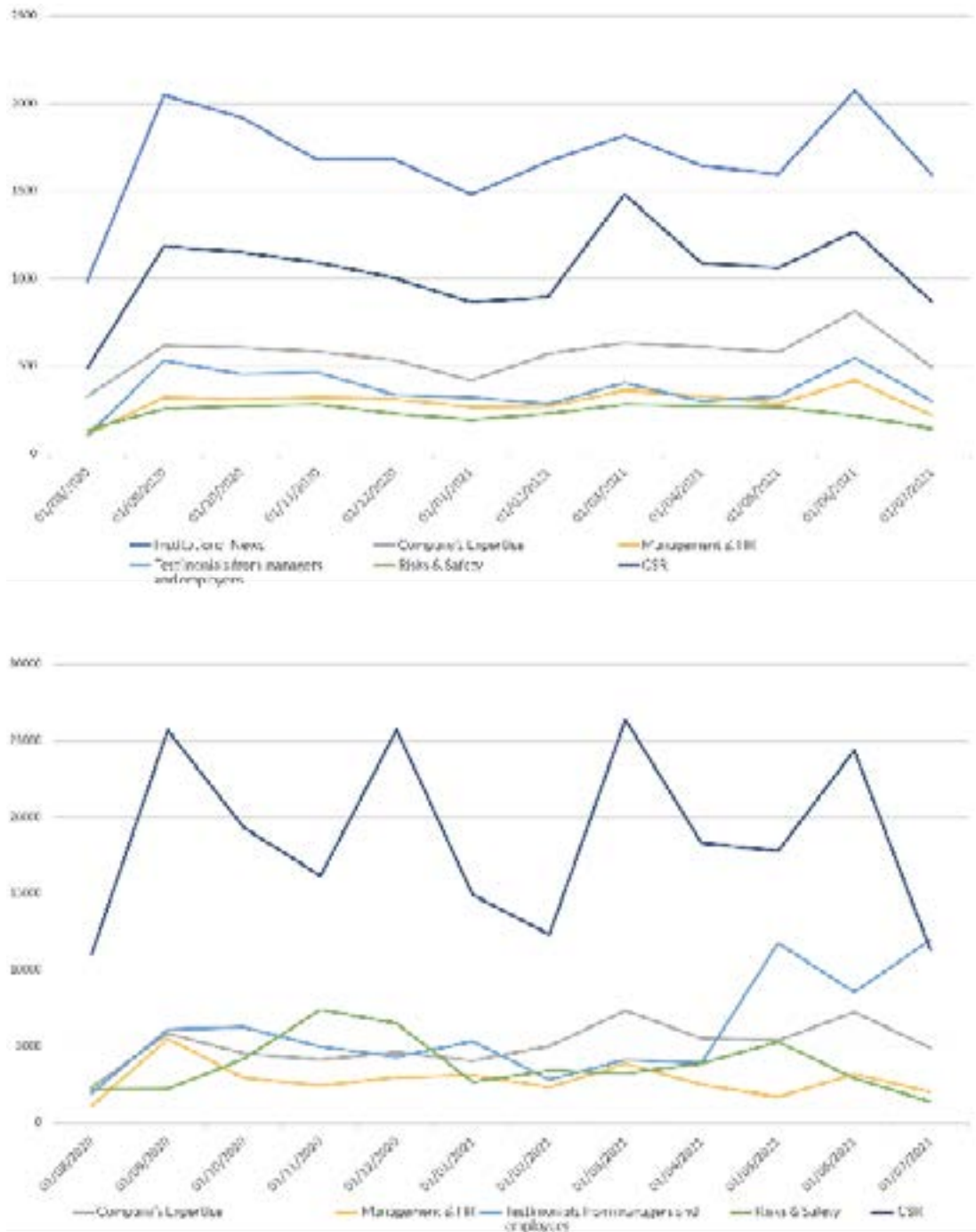
Two-thirds of retweets share an internal tweet from another company entity or one of its employees, but the average engagement generated by external retweets is 37% higher than that of internal retweets (**9 engagements per internal retweet; 12.3 per external retweet**). The importance of internal retweets also indicates a trend towards the circulation of information in a closed environment on institutional social networks: the republishing of internal publications, but also a predominantly internal community and engagement generated among circles of employees.

Figure G - Origin of retweets



6. While we see a homothetic and regular evolution of publications by theme over the year, the engagement rate generated varies considerably.

“Risks & safety”, “Company’s Expertise”, and especially “Testimonials from managers and employees” show significant peaks in terms of volumes of engagement, and a rise at the end of the sequence, which shows their importance, albeit lower than the “CSR” theme, which is dominant.



Figures H et I - Monthly evolution of the volume of tweets and engagement

Methodology of the study

Study conducted on 1st August 2021 on a corpus of 63,865 tweets in French and English published between 1st August 2020 and 1st August 2021 by 116 “SBF 120” companies with an official Twitter account.

For companies with several Twitter accounts, we chose to focus on the French corporate accounts; failing that, on the global corporate account. We also included in our corpus some accounts with a very strong B2C focus (@UbisoftFR and @Fnac), presented by their respective corporate websites as official accounts. In the specific case of the Bouygues group—whose activities extend to both media and construction—we also included the publications of the Bouygues Construction account to ensure a better representation of the group’s activities and of the sectors of activity included in the study.

REVOLUTIONS IN USAGE

IV. BOFU CRISIS:

TOO MUCH AUDIENCE, ZERO TRANSFORMATION?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Content marketing is a best practice widely adopted by the entire market to structure digital strategies.
- For some advertisers, the funnel thus set up is disappointing in terms of business transformation; but this does not mean that content marketing is just an awareness tool!
- To optimise lead generation, it is advisable or necessary to redefine the nature of the published content around opinion, demonstration, proof, testimonial, and micro-influence formats.

Content marketing is now an established (best) practice that structures the digital strategies of 97% of B2C companies and 99% of B2B players⁷. More importantly, audiences have become accustomed to the exercise: they expect and “judge” companies on the quality of the content they publish, and tend to consider it as a showcase, or a sample of their expertise and the quality of the products and services they deliver. For example, according to a Demand Gen Report research⁸, 75% of B2B decision-makers believe that the content published by their service providers should be better informed by research and data.

Paradoxically, if content marketing has become a must, or a new “debt” that companies owe to their market, it also sometimes creates frustrations for some advertisers when it when the time has come to assess the results a few years after putting the measures in place. For example, one third of them believe that lead generation linked to their content marketing system remains fragile⁹.

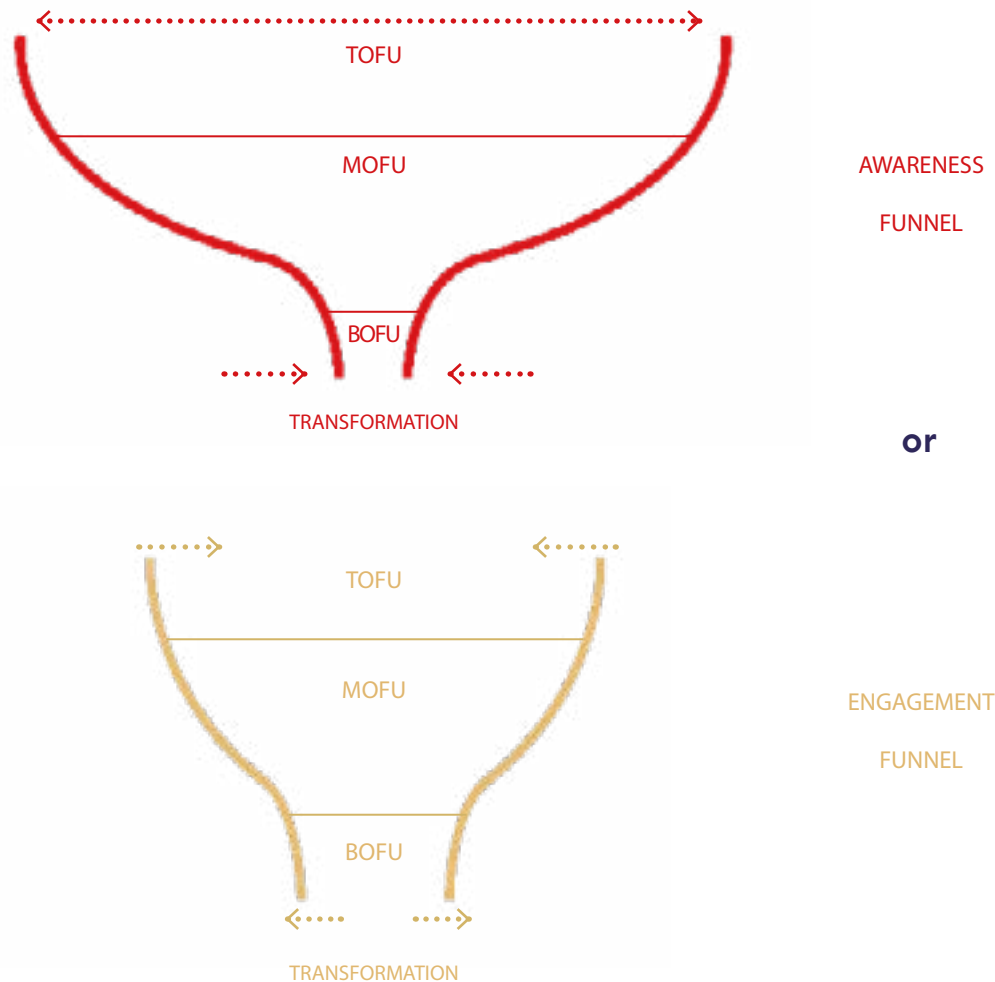
7. <https://statista.design/en/trendstudy-com-2021/>

8. <https://www.demandgenreport.com/resources/research/2018-content-preferences-survey-report/>

9. <https://statista.design/en/trendstudy-com-2021/>

What is at stake is the sometimes vertiginous imbalance between the general audience created on an editorial touchpoint (blog, webzine, website...) and the final transformation it generates. We are talking about extremely flared funnel models, where the TOFU (top of the funnel) phase generates 50, 100, or 1,000 times more traffic than the BOFU (bottom of the funnel) phase, i.e. the final transformation bottleneck. In other words, digital devices that perform well in terms of traffic (unique visitors, visits, etc.) but are disappointing from the point of view of final conversion (registration, contact, etc.) and only generate leads in a residual manner.

Is it harmful? Sometimes, yes. Is it inevitable? Not at all.



TOFU : Top of the funnel
MOFU : Middle of the funnel
BOFU : Bottom of the funnel

It is important to remember that modelling a digital funnel is only a means to an end. Some brands, companies, and institutions—whether they are newcomers, challengers, or major players in the midst of a transformation—need to create awareness, i.e. to emerge, to be (re)known, potentially at odds with an established image. This is the starting point for exciting, virtuous, and qualitative thought leadership strategies, which structure funnels that are deliberately extremely flared, at least temporarily.

It also goes without saying that content devices need time to settle in, to conquer and build loyalty with their own audience, and to capture the data necessary for personalisation that are the ingredients of the relationship and of revisitation. This is all the more important in B2B markets, which are characterised by sales cycles lasting several months, marked by a considerable and constantly increasing number of points of contact with the brand, upstream of the commercial discussion. Ten years ago, Forrester Research¹⁰ already stated that 90% of the buying journey would be completed before a prospect even made contact with a salesperson!

All this is true. But an awareness and/or thought leadership strategy must be chosen, not suffered. Paradoxically, this strategy is the one that advertisers often explore first: it is the most generalist, and the one that is considered the most rewarding. But if publishing very “high” subjects (trends, decoding...) with very open angles allows to attract a large audience, this approach also has the consequence of mechanically flaring the funnel (by widening its top and tightening its base), since an abundant cohort of poorly qualified and not very affine visitors will not go down the funnel and has no reason to turn into leads. QED.

What content can we use to activate the funnel base?

Mastering the TOFU cursor is not the only lever that companies and institutions can use to boost transformation. The MOFU and BOFU editorial offer is extremely structuring. In concrete terms, the editorial formats that are suitable for increasing the density of the bottom of the funnel and that are considered the most effective by B2B buyers in their decision-making process¹¹ have something in common: they provide a very concrete and legible benefit to the Internet user in their decision-making process.

10. https://go.forrester.com/blogs/12-10-04-buyer_behavior_helps_b2b_marketers_guide_the_buyers_journey/

11. <https://business.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/business/en-us/marketing-solutions/cx/2016/pdfs/rethink-the-b2b-buyers-journey-fr-v01-16.pdf>

- Opinion content, viewpoints, expert perspectives, in the form of analysis articles, short or long interviews, open forums, summary article... focused in a precise and specific way on a question, an issue directly linked to the market, a solution, or a product. As Jeff Ernst from Forrester says, “B2B customers don’t buy your products and services. They are buying your perspective on their problems and your approach to solving them.” This is the line chosen by Symantec’s blog, for example.
- Editorial or, better, video product demonstrations should not be considered as trivial formats. On the contrary, they generate a lot of interest from experts. They give credibility to the message, provide operational and concrete evidence, especially if they are connected to their competitive benefits.
- Customer case studies and testimonials: the ultimate fuel for BOFU, to convert by bringing the word and credit of third parties into the heart of your system! Nothing is more scrutinized by a B2B decision-maker than the words of his peers, especially if they are active in the same industry. As the most widely read and sought-after B2B content, customer case studies are the killer content of content marketing, to which we have devoted a full article in this brochure ([see page 29](#))
- Feedback: user feedback is made up of high-quality customer cases that add an expert’s view and analysis to the classic ‘use case’ format. In other words, user feedback is a sort of “customer case study raised to the power of two” that, in addition to the proof of the facts and the customer’s word, calls on the knowledge of an expert who can put best practices into perspective, set examples, and provide benchmarks and frame to reference to enable other players to draw inspiration and build their own projects. This is an area in which the Banque des territoires (a subsidiary of Caisse des Dépôts) has developed a line of its editorial offer.
- Referrals: all third-party testimonials, published outside the company’s proprietary ecosystem, are strategic: they are the vehicles of confirmation, the keys to choice that must be mastered in an advocacy and earned media strategy.
- Internal micro-influence content: tactical content that targets the N-1 or N-2 subordinates of decision-makers to give them the key arguments to present to their bosses, who are often difficult to reach directly... For example, Euler Hermes published a series of articles on the theme “The ROI of credit insurance explained to my CEO.”

V. CUSTOMER ADVOCACY :

CASE STUDIES, THE B2B KILLER CONTENT

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Customer case studies are the most viewed, sought-after and engaging content on B2B websites.
- However, the customer case study is also a format that is often neglected in content strategies, either because it is considered—wrongly—too trivial, or because its production and validation times are too long.
- The best customer case studies are based on a mix of narrative and emotions, using the video format and SEO insights.

Customer case studies are consistently among the most viewed content on B2B websites: these pages typically generate the most visits and have the highest read times and share rates. According to a Demand Gen Report research, customer case studies are simply the most preferred format among B2B decision-makers, with 79% of them viewing them as part of the buying cycle¹², especially during the consideration and conversion phases. And while events generate the most B2B leads, customer case studies are the most effective tool for converting leads and accelerating the buying journey¹³.

They are the preferred and “first line” content, and are often the gateway to B2B websites, i.e. the first step in the on-site customer journey, the first page seen and read BEFORE the home page. This is the consequence of their social media engagement potential, but also of their natural SEO power: a well-written customer case study embeds semantics related to the industry, but also to the issues faced by the market players, which is the key to emerge in a qualitative and quantitative way following queries that are relevant and interesting from a business point of view.

In a more structural way, the power of customer case studies is part of a double trend. On the one hand, the profusion of fake news and fake reviews that weaken any anonymous or anonymised testimonial. But also the excesses of owned media speech built on excessive promises that entails credit loss for brands and companies that abuse them and even for all the others. What a brand says about itself is highly suspect.

12. http://e61c88871f1fbaa6388d-c1e3bb10b0333d7ff7aa972d61f8c669.r29.cf1.rackcdn.com/DGR_DG076_SURV_ContentPref_March_2018_Final.pdf

13. <https://www.hubspot.fr/statistiques-marketing>

Although it can seem a stark figure—and no doubt very unfair to exemplary brands and companies—only 37% of buyers¹⁴ trust the word of their B2B provider. However, this figure hides significant disparities and highlights the need to build a strong and credible brand (see page 7).

The importance of the word, of customer testimonials and of third-party endorsement for B2B brands is the consequence of this double configuration. More than ever, the voice of the customer is powerful. Customers are the best brand ambassadors, the best salespeople. Their opinion builds credibility and trust. This is what gives customer case studies their power: they are proof, and this proof is even more important than the price to convince¹⁵. Indeed, studies show that customers give more importance in their final choice to the opinions of peers on the solution or product they are considering buying than to its financial cost. This illustrates very concretely how trust has become the new currency. If every customer case study is interesting and potentially strategic, the best ones—those that find their audience—are generally built around 5 best practices.

1. Adopt a narrative structure

Steven Pressfield, author of “Nobody Wants to Read Your Sh*t”, suggests a 3-part outline that can make non-fiction content powerful and engaging, by presenting it as if it were a story and you had to tell it. But still avoiding prolonging the tension that—unlike fiction—needs to be resolved quickly.

In short, the logic consists in creating a narrative scheme showing a transformation from an initial state to a final state, through the benefit of the solution proposed by the brand, around a triptych that can be “told” or presented in a very direct way to structure the content.

1. Challenge
2. Solution
3. Results and benefit

For instance, this is how Google structures most of its customer case studies, with a very emblematic example called “3 short automation stories”¹⁶.

2. Use emotion

The customer case study is often seen as a cold, distant, and expert editorial exercise. Even a technical and boring one. This is a complete misunderstanding: successful customer case studies also use emotion and subjectivity. These subjective emotions are also those that will create attachment¹⁷ to the brand.

14. https://go.trustradius.com/2018-B2B-Buying-Disconnect.html?utm_source=vendorsite&utm_campaign=

15. <https://cxl.com/blog/should-i-lower-my-prices>

16. <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/fr-fr/futur-du-marketing/transformation-digitale/3-brevues-histoires-automatisation/>

17. <https://blogs.gartner.com/jane-anne-mennella/2020/07/16/if-you-want-to-differentiate-yourself-among-your-b2b-prospects-get-emotional/>

A good example of the use of emotion is obviously found in the enthusiasm of a client rendered by the customer case study, but also and above all in more subtle and nuanced emotions, such as fear, especially of making a mistake. This leads to ambitious customer case studies in which clients are also willing to answer questions such as “What was your worst mistake during the project?”

3. Use video formats

Google’s algorithm loves videos. And the numbers speak for themselves, since a video is 50 times more likely to arrive on the first page of Google than a page of text¹⁸. This is the winning strategy chosen by a player like Sage¹⁹. Adopting the video format for customer testimonials brings this authenticity and credibility, especially if the customers quoted then contribute themselves—in a community strategy—to spread the content.

4. Pay more attention to headlines and editing than elsewhere

The title must be enlightening and summarise the benefit; the key figures must be very clearly put forward to quantify the result and make it credible. These are the elements that will grab the reader and draw them into the content.

This is what Docusign offers, for example, with clearly structured and well edited customer case studies²⁰.

5. Leverage SEO insights

Writing a successful customer case study should be guided by SEO lessons and goals. What are the common problems faced by the market? How has the company responded to them and heard them? What are the pain points and what are their solutions? All these questions weave together strategically and tactically valuable semantics to build content that finds its audience... when this audience needs it most. From a methodological point of view, SEO lessons are therefore of great help to problematise and frame a customer case study, in particular by adopting titles and headings in the form of questions; and to avoid the trap of analytically unfolding a flat, overly promotional, and/or product-centric monograph.

18. Hubspot

19. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLjk-xtDZLZJL2kt_HmYjZaZKsJXxpWBs

20. <https://www.docusign.com/customer-stories/sunrun-makes-solar-contracts-convenient-with-docusign-and-salesforce>



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