The Content Marketing Paradox:

Is More Content Really Better?

TrackMaven

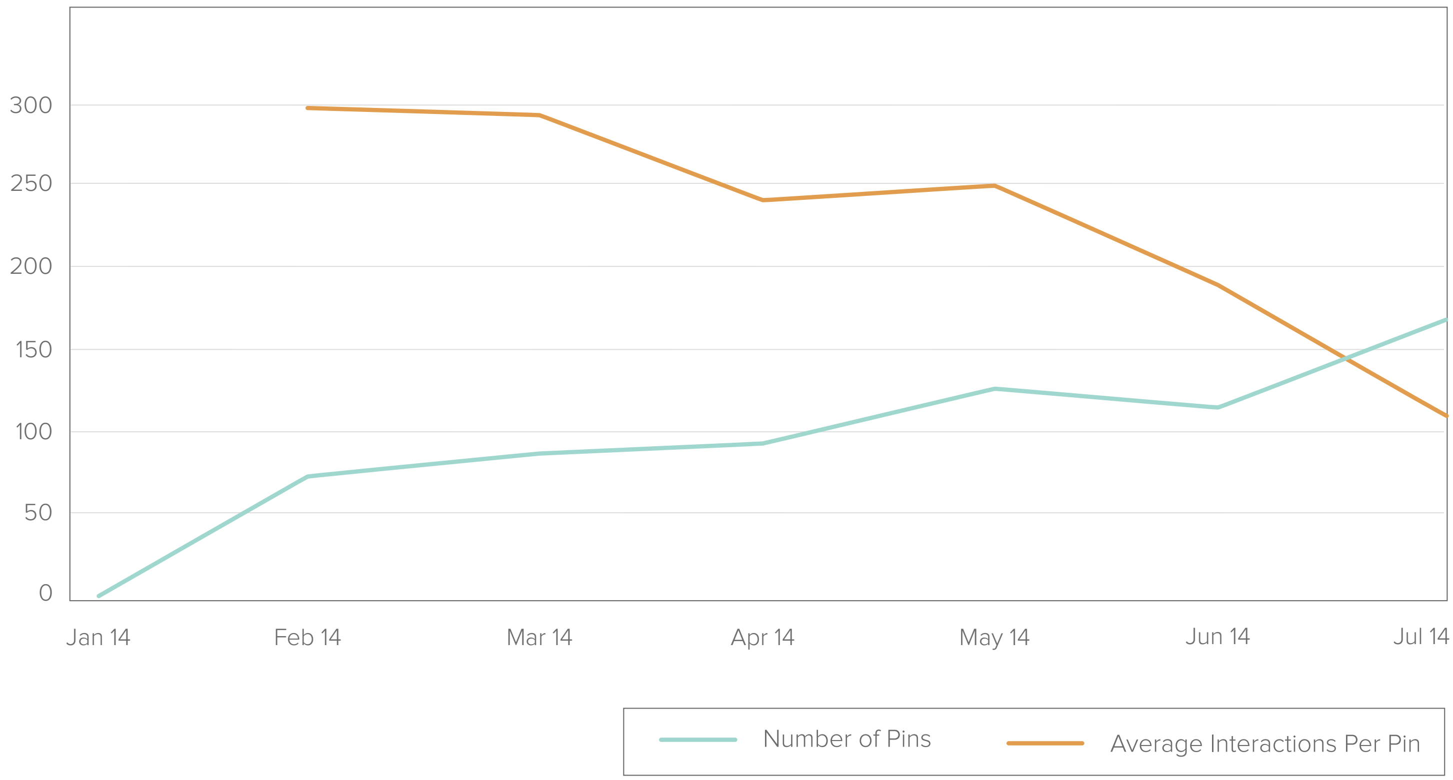
A Marketer's Dilemma

In early 2014, just after the 2013 holiday shopping season had finished, the marketing team at U.S. retailer Pottery Barn had a clear objective: to make Pinterest an effective marketing channel for the company. With its corporate image and product set seemingly tailor-made for Pinterest, it seemed like a no-brainer to expand its presence there.

Across the first few months of the year, it seemed that progress was being made. From January through July, the team quadrupled its monthly output of Pins from 38 to 170, though follower count increased only 11.4% from 214,829 to 239,144. And with closer examination, it became clear that trouble was brewing. Despite the modest follower growth, Pottery Barn's content was actually doing less and less for them.

Across the time period when their Pinterest output quadrupled, Pottery Barn's engagement level (measured on Pinterest as the combination of Likes, Re-Pins, and Comments) was falling off a cliff. Their average interactions per Pin decreased by nearly 75%, from a high of 402 in January to 109 in July. In the midst of summer, with the 2014 holiday season right around the corner, the Pottery Barn team found themselves facing a content marketer's nightmare: more content with less impact.

Pottery Barn: Pinterest Content Effectiveness



But Pottery Barn's challenge is hardly unique; theirs is just one of many fascinating stories we discovered in our research for this report. We used the TrackMaven software platform to analyze the impact of 24 months of marketing activity for 8,800 brands, including 13.8 million pieces of content across seven marketing channels, with 7.2 billion combined interactions.

In many ways, the results paint the darkest picture to date of content marketing, but the efforts also yielded some valuable insights for marketers looking to cut through the noise with their content creation strategies.

In This Report:

According to our latest research, a growing majority of professional marketing content fails to have an impact:

- Across 2013 and 2014, the output of content per brand increased by 78%, but content engagement decreased by 60%;
- On social networks, brand-generated content is seeing the lowest engagement rates now than anytime in 2013 and 2014;
- 43% of professionally-marketed blog posts receive fewer than 10 interactions.

In this report, we'll share best practices for overhauling ineffective content strategies and explain how to use leading metrics to accurately predict and improve the ROI of your content before it goes into market.

The Content Marketing Paradox: Is More Content Really Better?

We are in the midst of a marketing arms race, and content is the ammunition of choice. Digital platforms have made it easy — perhaps too easy — for marketers to broadly distribute content at scale. With the exponential growth of available channels — social networks, email, company blogs, etc. — marketers often adopt a "more is better" approach, blasting more content across multiple channels, hoping for more impact.

Marketers have a ton of data to back up this approach. For example, "B2B companies that blog generate 67% more leads per month than those who don't," and "61% of US marketers use social media to increase lead gen."[1]

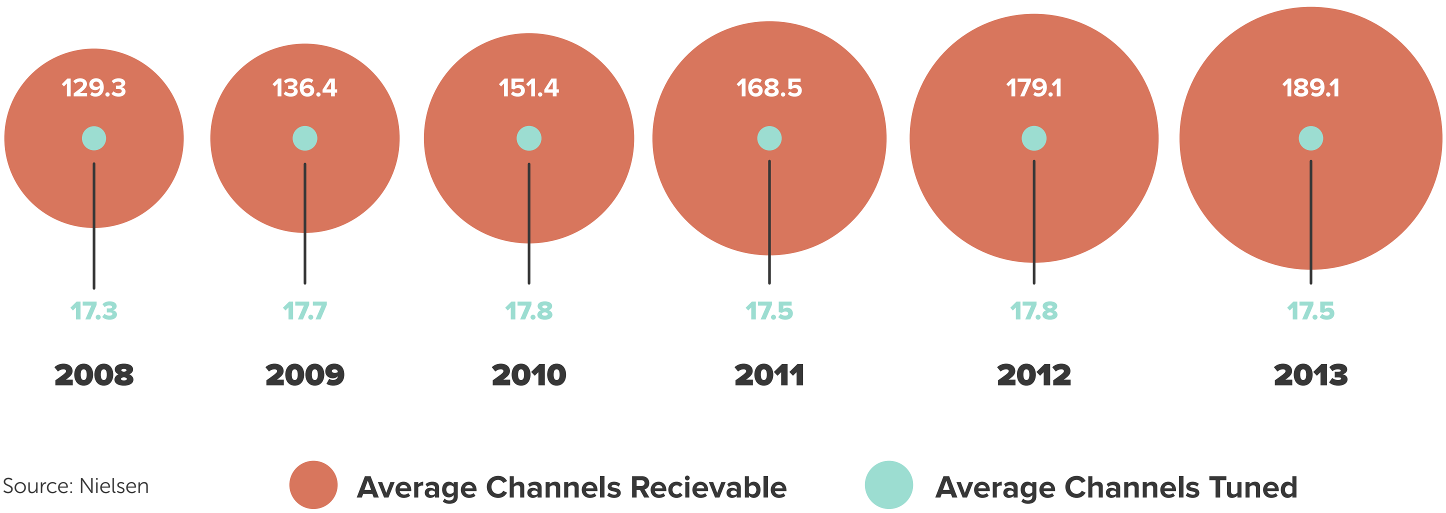
But today, multi-channel marketing has become the norm rather than the exception; simply engaging in content marketing fails to set brands apart. In light of that fact, plus the continued expansion of available channels, the time is right for marketers to ask a different question: Is more content really better?

The television industry provides an obvious analogy. Over the past half-century, the number of television channels available to viewers has exploded, and the volume of television content has grown in tandem.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the number of channels available to viewers exploded as cable TV systems, including HBO and Ted Turner's Superstation, were introduced. By 1995, the average U.S. household could choose from 45 channels.[2] That number ballooned to 189 by 2013.[3]

But did this channel explosion cause viewers to watch more television channels? According to Nielsen's Advertising & Audiences report, the answer was no. Despite the impressive increase in the number of television channels to choose from, viewers consistently watched on average only 17 channels.[4]

Channels Receiveable and Tuned Per Household



Source: Nielsen

The specific channels watched certainly changed over time with the introduction of new programming and television content, but the quantity of channels watched remained fixed. According to Nielsen:

> "This data is significant in that it substantiates the notion that more content does not necessarily equate to more channel consumption. And that means quality is imperative—for both content creators and advertisers. **So the best way to reach consumers in a world with myriad options is to be the best option."[5]**

What can this lesson about TV channel explosion teach us about today's digital channel explosion? For marketers, the answer is obvious: simply being present as many places as possible does not help you reach your customers. The best way to cut through the noise is to produce the best content.

However, most marketers fail to effectively engage audiences with their content. According to TrackMaven research, a growing majority of professional marketing content is ineffective. We analyzed a variety of content from the extensive database of brands we track. In this analysis, interactions is defined as the aggregate of likes, shares, and comments on social networks. Blog interactions are defined as the aggregate of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+ interactions for a blog post.

Our analysis shows that nearly one out of four brand-generated blog posts (23%) receives zero interactions. Even more distressing, nearly half of all professionally marketed blog posts (43%) received only 10 or fewer interactions.

Distribution of Interactions with Branded Marketing Content by Channel

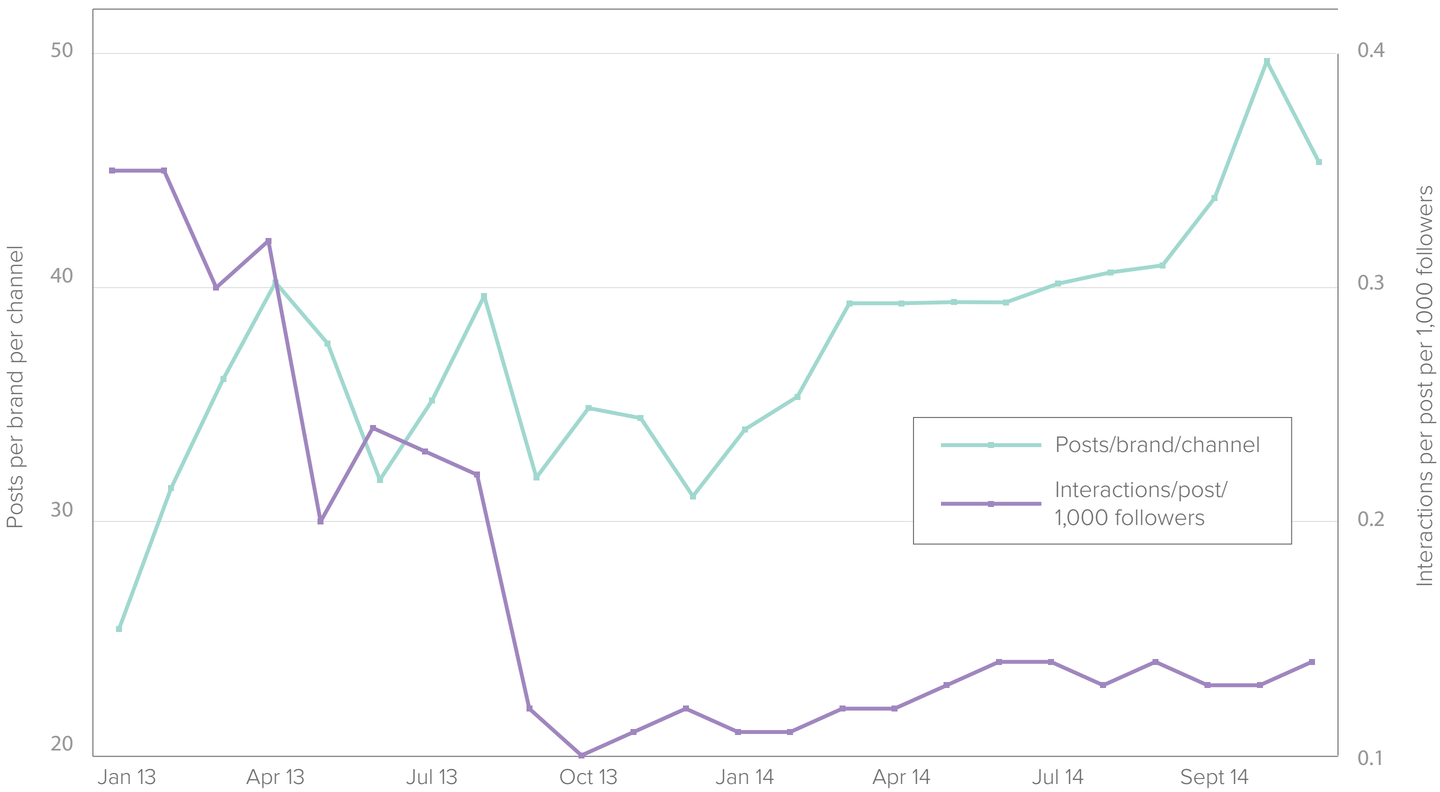
Interactions	Blog Posts	FB Posts	Tweets	Instagram Pics	Instagram Videos	Pins	G+ Posts	LinkedIn Posts
0-10	**43%**	**28%**	**73%**	**10%**	**6%**	**60%**	**65%**	**68%**
11-50	18%	17%	18%	18%	14%	23%	19%	23%
51-100	8%	8%	4%	10%	8%	8%	6%	5%
101-250	10%	11%	3%	14%	13%	7%	5%	3%
>250	21%	36%	1%	49%	60%	2%	4%	1%

But ineffective content isn't symptomatic of blogs alone; a significant volume of brand-generated social media content also fails to garner engagement. On Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, and LinkedIn, more than half of all posts receive fewer than 10 interactions (73%, 60%, 65%, and 68%, respectively).

Among the major social networks, Twitter has the lowest engagement threshold, with 73% of tweets receiving 10 or fewer interactions. Instagram has the highest engagement threshold; only 10% of Instagram photos and 6% of Instagram videos receive 10 or fewer interactions. Among the major social networks, Instagram also has the highest percentage of viral content, with 49% of Instagram photos and 60% of Instagram videos receiving more than 250 interactions.

These results also indicate the powerful impact of sponsored content on Facebook. After Instagram, Facebook has the second-highest percentage of content with more than 250 interactions (36%). On Facebook, sponsored content accounted for the vast majority of posts with more than 250 interactions.

Output vs. Engagement with Branded Marketing Content By Month, 2013-2014



Is Content Impact Diminishing Over Time?

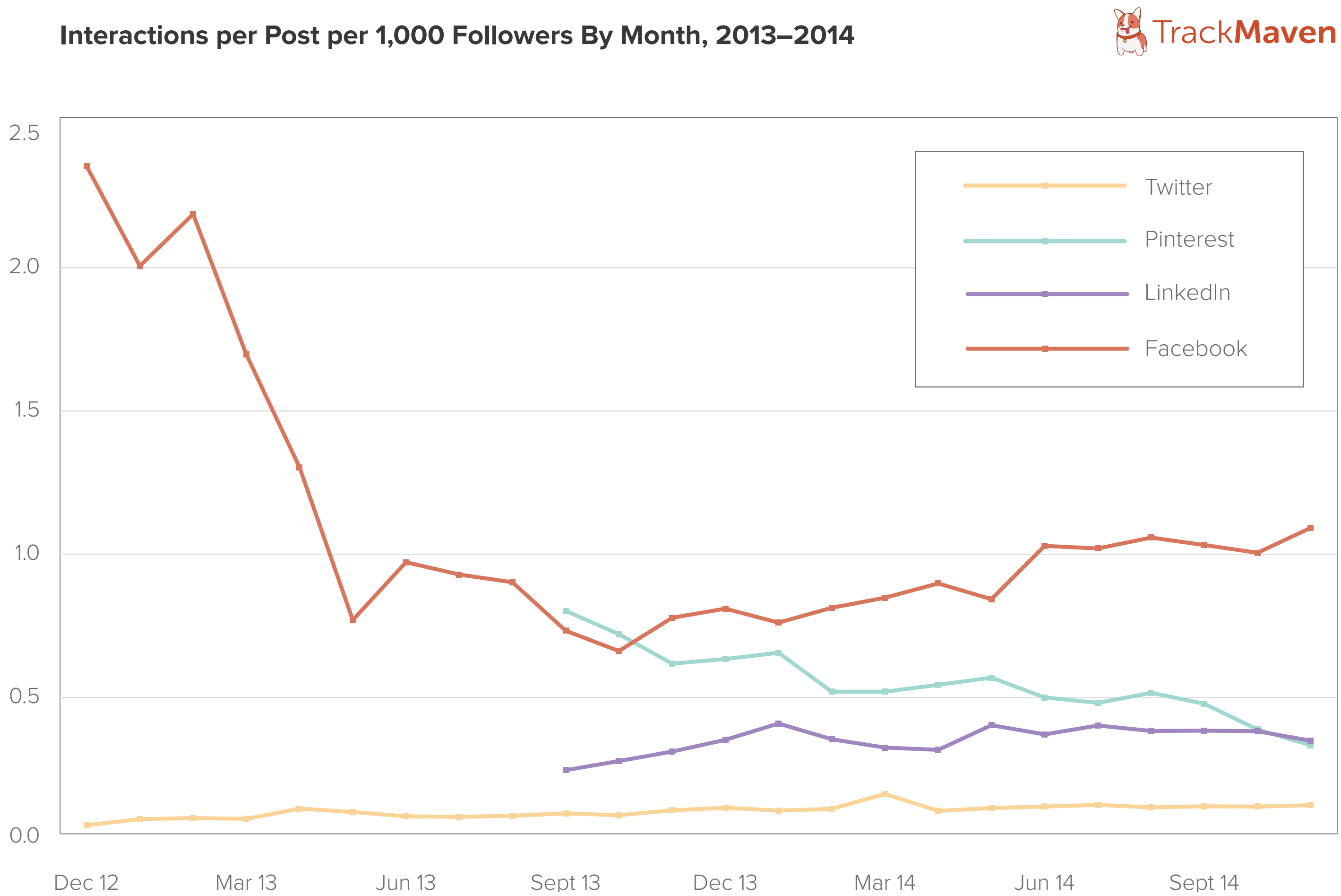
To peel back the onion further, we also tracked the output versus impact of marketing content over time. We analyzed the output of marketing content and corresponding interactions from a sample of 8,800 brands across five major social networks throughout 2013 and 2014. This sample included a grand total of 7,194,443,381 interactions across 13,816,703 pieces of content.

The above graph shows the number of posts per brand per channel over time, along with the corresponding interactions per post per 1,000 followers. Across 2013 and 2014, the output of brand-generated content by channel nearly doubled, increasing by 78%.

But instead of increasing in tandem with output, content engagement cascaded dramatically. Across the same time frame, the number of interactions per post per 1,000 followers actually fell by more than half, decreasing by 60%. Put differently, brands generated a vastly greater volume of content per channel, but this outpouring of content reaped diminishing engagement.

Let's take a channel-specific look at this trend of waning engagement with brand-generated content. The following graphs show the average interactions per post per 1,000 followers on Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest,

Interactions per Post per 1,000 Followers By Month, 2013–2014



Twitter, and Instagram over time. Across the board, all of the social networks are seeing lower engagement rates now than in the past.

Facebook in particular has seen a huge drop in the ratio of interactions per post per 1,000 followers across 2013 and 2014, but is stabilizing and slowly rising. Overall, Facebook has a significantly higher engagement ratio than LinkedIn, Twitter, and Pinterest, but nowhere near the engagement ratio of Instagram (which is in its own graph due to scale).

LinkedIn's engagement ratio peaked in May 2014, while Twitter's peaked in March 2014. Pinterest peaked in October 2013, the first month for which we have a rich Pinterest data set.

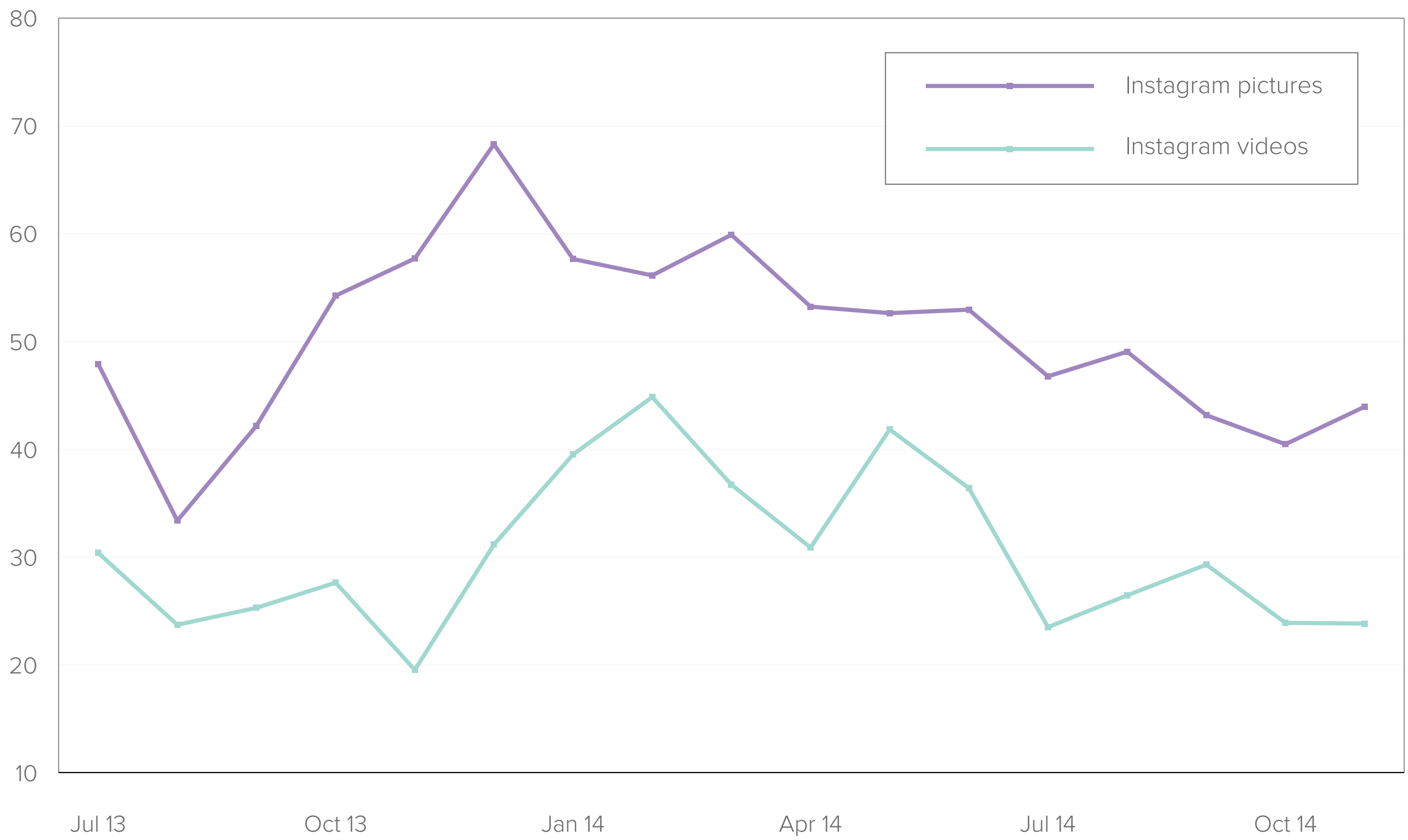
Instagram Breaks The Mold

Interestingly, Instagram has a much higher engagement ratio over time relative to all other major social networks. This data confirm findings from Forrester Research, which analyzed the ratio of interactions to total followers for 2,500 brand posts across seven major social networks. Forrester found that Instagram's ratio of interactions to followers was 60 times greater than Facebook's and 140 times greater than Twitter's.[6]

However, much like the other major social networks, our research illustrates that the engagement ratio for both Instagram pictures and Instagram videos peaked in December 2013 and February 2014, and are since on a steady decline.

In short, channel explosion has made it easier for marketers to distribute content at scale, and new channels have required them to create more

Instagram Interactions per Post per 1,000 Followers By Month, 2013-2014



content at a faster pace. But as the data above show, marketers' "more is better" approach is not an effective response to channel explosion. Stated differently, marketers are getting better at distributing content, but are not getting better at creating content worth distributing.

To understand the fading impact of branded content, marketers need only face consumers' growing appetite for non-branded content.

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Competition From Beyond The Funnel: Consumer Distrust Of Branded Content

Marketers face fierce competition to engage and retain customers with content. Competing brands are creating more content than ever before in an effort to entice consumers. But consumers tend to trust peer-to-peer recommendations and review sites more than branded content.

According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, customers rank traditional media and online search engines as the most trusted sources of information (63% and 65%, respectively). The trustworthiness of social media and owned media, however, trails by a third (45% and 44%, respectively).[7]

Consumers seek to become informed before making a purchasing decision. However, most

B2B consumers conduct product research online before they engage with a company representative. According to CEB research, B2B buyers are 57% of the way through the buying process by the time they engage with a sales rep.[8] This finding begs the question: how does your digital presence and website content compare to that of your competitors?

If a brand's content marketing does not effectively engage the buyer and influence their purchase decision quickly, then customers are likely to eliminate that brand from consideration early in the buying process.

Research shows that B2C consumers also consult user-generated content and online reviews before ever walking into a store. The Baynote shopping survey, for example, asked respondents (all of whom owned a smartphone and had made holiday purchases online) how often a variety of factors influenced their purchases, both online and in-store. Amazingly, for both online and in-store purchases, online ratings and reviews were the greatest source of influence on respondents; 48% said they frequently or always influenced their online purchases, and 37% said the same about their in-store purchases.[9]

In summary, consumers view non-branded content as more trustworthy than content provided by an organization. And alarmingly, most marketing organizations recognize this problem. According to CMI research, only 38% of B2B marketers and 37% of B2C marketers rate their organization's content marketing as "effective" or "very effective."[10]

So in this era of channel explosion, what is holding marketers back?

Rethinking The Broadcast Response To Channel Explosion

Channel explosion is, of course, a key factor contributing to content overload. New channels with unique content marketing opportunities emerge with increasing frequency. In fact, in the last two years, here is a shortlist of social marketing channels that surpassed 20 million monthly registered users.

Social Platforms with 20+ Million Monthly Active Users in the Last 24 Months

Platform	Users
Vine	40+ Million
Snapchat	100+ Million
Viadeo	60+ Million
Soundcloud	40+ Million
Weheartit	20+ Million

Assuming this trend continues — and all signs indicate that it will — the next few years will undoubtedly bring a new crop of mainstream channels to engage broad audiences.

Marketers have increased the number of channels in their marketing mix in kind. B2C and B2B marketers now use an average of seven and six different social media platforms, respectively. That number is up from only four and five platforms on average in 2012.[11]

But rather than rising to the opportunities inherent in channel explosion, most marketers continue to broadcast the same message across this growing number of channels. Put differently, marketers' "more is better" line of thinking has manifested in a broadcast approach to content marketing. However, this "broadcast approach" merely results in the quick delivery of the same ineffective content to more people.

Rather than broadcasting the same content across more platforms, marketers must create smarter content that is worthy of distribution. But what does smart content creation look like?

Smart marketers are cultivating a balance between user-generated and brand-generated content.

Understanding Smart Content Creation

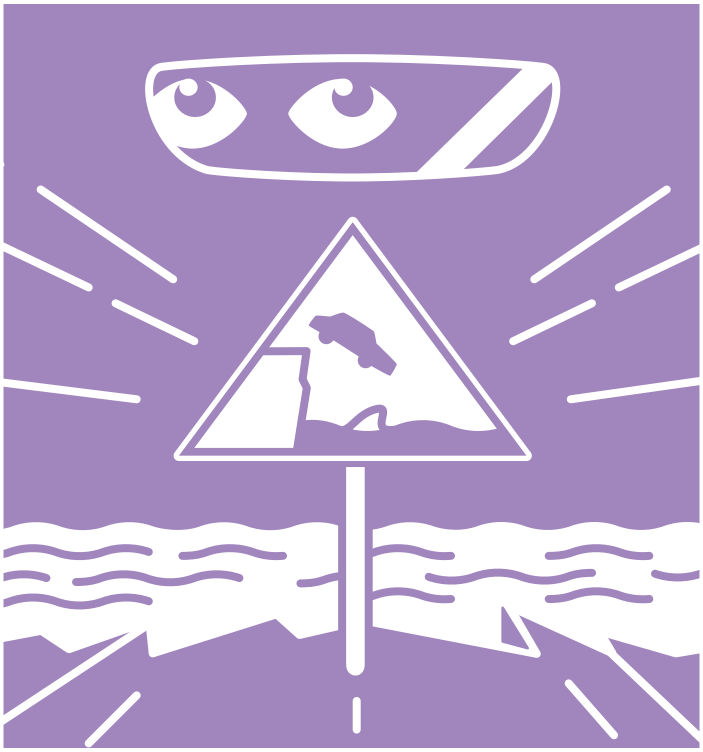
Put simply, smart content creation is data-driven. The good news is there is a plethora of data available to marketers to inform smarter content creation. However, most marketers have been doing themselves a disservice with data.

One of the primary reasons marketers struggle to embrace data-driven content marketing stems from a reliance on a backward-looking, ROI-focused approach to measuring value that is quickly becoming outdated.

Marketers want to be data-driven content creators, but most feel poorly equipped to execute on this goal. According to CMI data, "measuring content effectiveness" was the primary 2015 initiative noted by B2B content marketers. But across a multitude of surveys of B2B and B2C marketers, difficulty proving ROI is repeatedly named a chief concern. According to further CMI research, fewer than 1 in 4 marketers say they are successful at tracking ROI (21%). B2C marketers are only marginally better, with 23% saying they are successful at tracking ROI.[12]

The ROI of content has remained the elusive white whale for marketers. With a "rear-view mirror" approach to marketing results, it is difficult to pinpoint which efforts lead to the desired returns. Which action or content asset proved the effective harpoon? The last one, or other actions throughout the journey?

Long learning cycles between content creation and analysis invite a slew of confounding factors that make revenue attribution difficult. For example, a typical approach to assess ROI is the quarterly report. Throughout a quarter,



With a rear-view mirror approach to ROI, marketers have no insight into what's working.

messaging is planned and pushed out across numerous digital channels. At the end of the quarter, analysis is then conducted to assess how effectively this dissemination of content drove results across a variety of measures. Revenues and content output may have gone up or down over this period, but did one cause the other?

With a rear-view mirror approach to ROI, marketers have no insight into what's working or what isn't. Consumers are engaging with marketing content in real time, but marketers have no real-time insight into what's causing great success — or great failure.

Pausing only periodically to analyze what's working or trending creates a blind spot for marketers. Within this blind spot, marketers have no immediate insight into what is actually working. Given a blind spot opportunity, a nimble competitor can get into market with weeks or months to build awareness and gain share of voice. Competitors can seize on this blind spot and quickly gain momentum, a fact which will be unsettlingly apparent — but irreversible — come time for the quarterly report.

Smart Content Creation Requires A Real-Time View Of ROI

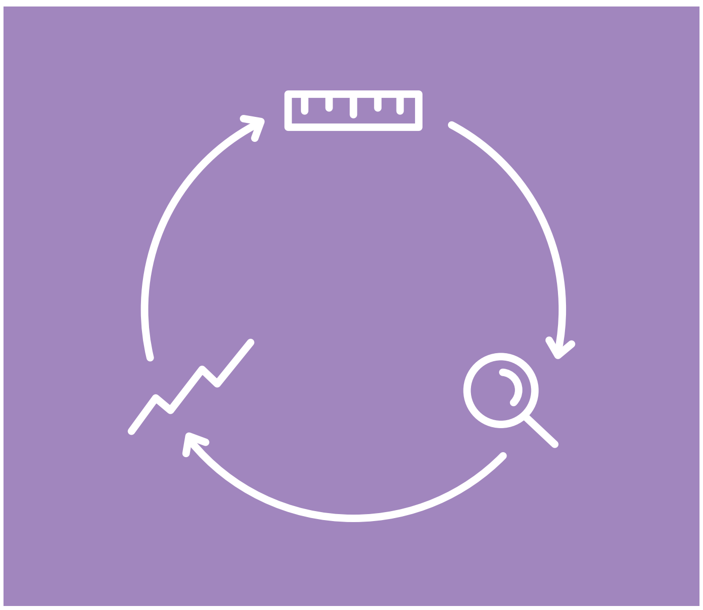
Long learning cycles with re-syndicated content blasted to countless digital channels, combined with the lag in measuring content effectiveness, is a recipe for producing more ineffective content. Rather than looking backwards, the trick is to see which content and messaging resonates with audiences as it's distributed. *Leading metrics* that measure initial customer engagement with content provide this opportunity.

Leading metrics provide marketers with early indicators of content effectiveness.
Leading metrics are audience engagement data points that marketers can optimize in

real time, such as blog page views and social shares. Leveraging leading metrics involves looking at engagement as you go — not waiting weeks or months to assess ROI.

The power in measuring real-time audience engagement with content marketing lies in its actionability. Measuring and optimizing leading engagement metrics lets marketers spot the messaging that is working, and quickly course-correct on the content that isn't.

In short, creating impactful content in the long-term requires creating content that resonate in real time. Leading engagement metrics provide marketers with this insight. By optimizing leading metrics daily, marketers can avoid the potential for blind sports inherent in a rear-view mirror approach to measuring content ROI.



An Iterative Approach To Better Content Marketing

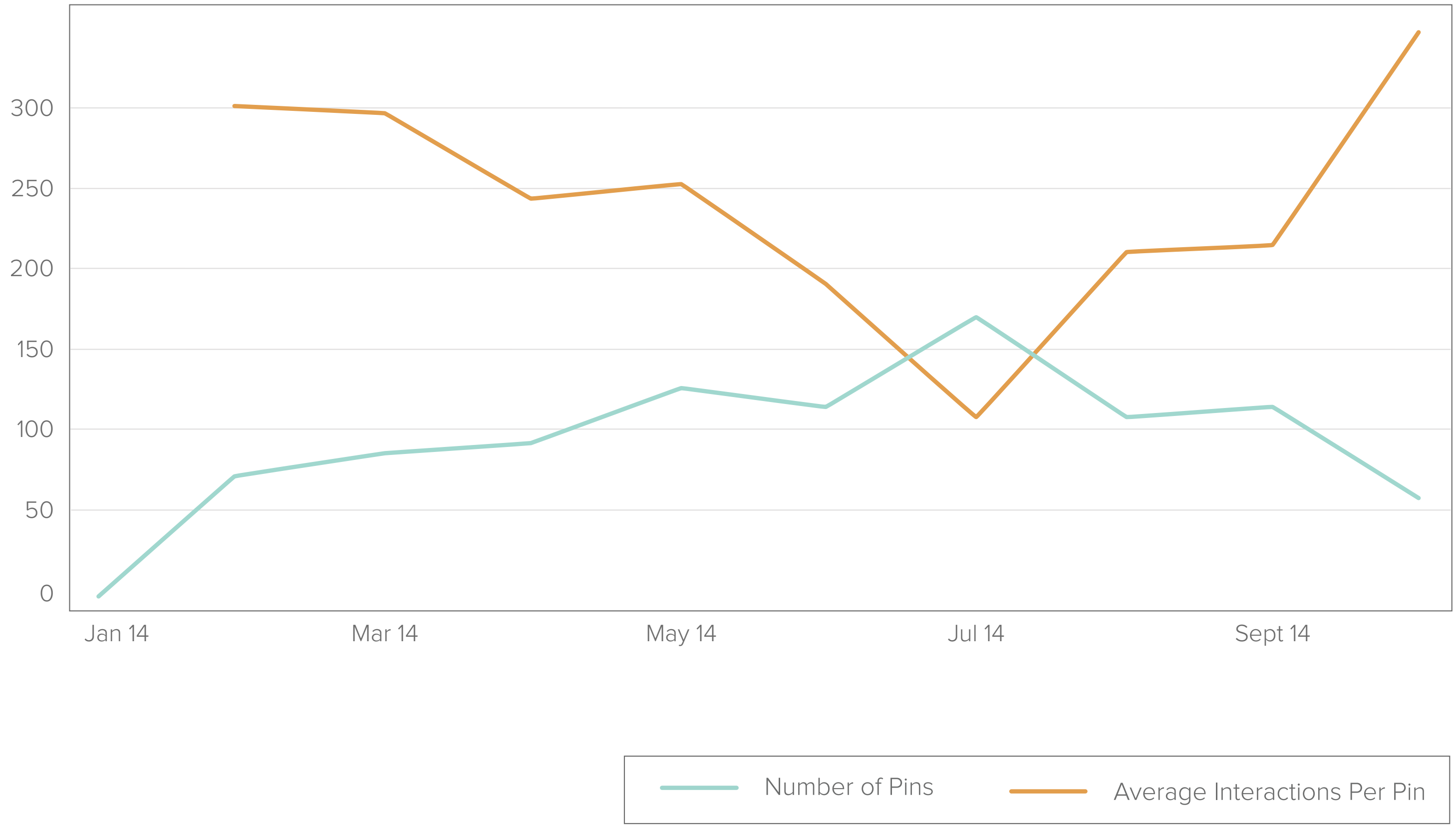
In the evolving digital landscape, content marketing is the norm, not the exception. The proliferation of marketing platforms and technologies continues to catalyze the distribution of content.

But marketers are distributing more content on more channels, while simultaneously complaining about how hard it is to cut through the noise. These marketers have been fighting the wrong battle. Compounded with a backward-looking approach to measuring effectiveness, the "more is better" approach to content marketing is destined to fail.

We've reached a tipping point where there is a greater burden on digital marketers to create better content. Smart content can overcome bad distribution, but smart distribution cannot save bad content.

For marketers, the real challenge — and real opportunity — lies in the initial content creation phase. Improved analytics empower marketers to course-correct their content strategy in real time for maximum long-term impact

Marketers that fail to adopt a "measure first" approach may soon find themselves left behind or facing the worst-case scenario of ballooning content marketing spend with diminishing returns.



Epilogue: Pottery Barn's Pinterest Rebound

Let's revisit the challenge facing the Pottery Barn team. If you remember from earlier, Pottery Barn's Pinterest strategy was a textbook example of the "more is better" approach. From January 2014 to July 2014, Pottery Barn quadrupled their monthly output of Pinterest content, but saw a 73% decline in average interactions per Pin.

However, the Pottery Barn team managed to pull up the plane on Pinterest with smarter content. They pivoted their Pinterest content strategy from drab, description-less product placements, to inspirational how-to content that encouraged their audience to create better homes (with a little help from Pottery Barn).

The results? By October 2014, Pottery Barn posted only 60 Pins, but reaped 343 interactions per Pin on average — **more than three times their average engagement from July.**

About TrackMaven

TrackMaven analyzes your marketing content — and your competitors' — to identify marketing opportunities, optimize content distribution, and track real-time progress. Learn more at www.trackmaven.com

About the Data Used in this Report

This report is based on our analysis of the marketing content from 8,800 brands across 2013 and 2014, including a total of 13,816,703 pieces of content and 7,194,443,381 combined interactions. The analysis was conducted using the TrackMaven platform.

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