



# Business Strategies

## Content Marketing Tips

The thing about content marketing is that to do it right, you need a plan. To make that plan, you have to really understand what drives readers.

By Michael Hammond

In a white paper written by HubSpot and Outbrain, they say that content marketing is the new king of the digital marketing world. Marketers of all stripes are embracing non-interruptive inbound marketing. Why? Because it lets them build rapport with their prospects and customers organically. Content marketing's power to connect with and grow engaged audiences is huge for one reason: people like it. It puts customers first. Instead of bothering them with ads, it supplies them with genuinely useful, entertaining, and interesting content.

The thing about content marketing is that to do it right, you need a plan. To make that plan, you have to really understand what drives readers to click on, read, share, or interact with different kinds of content. You also need to have clear and explicit business goals for a particular piece of content before creating it.

Generally speaking, there are three kinds of goals marketers have for content: traffic, engagement, and conversion. Each goal has its own metric for success, and each does something different for your organization.

In crafting your content marketing, everything starts with a good headline or title. Your headline or title is often a reader's first interaction with your brand online, so it's arguably the most critical component of your content marketing strategy. It's your first, and maybe only, chance to grab your target audience's attention.

Your reader has complete control—they either choose to click and engage with your content or they don't. It's that simple. Interesting and relevant stories are important, but if your headline doesn't communicate value to the reader, nobody's going to see them. You can (and should!) always optimize and try again, but every dud headline costs you crucial opportunities to reach your audience.

The most important headline rule is: respect the reader experience. In this era of clickbait (eye-catching content whose main purpose is to attract attention), it's more important than ever to write a headline that delivers on its promise. At the most

basic level, you want the reader to have a good experience with your brand. When she clicks on a link, you've got to be sure she's getting what she expected and not being duped in some sort of digital shell-game. Once you lose that trust, it's gone.

And let's face it, clicks matter. Regardless of what your strategic goals are for your content marketing, without that first click, you've got nothing. If you're trying to grow your traffic, CTR is the metric you want to be looking at. So what increases CTR and what hurts it?

**Whether you're looking for clicks, engagement, conversions, or all three, a content marketing campaign starts with great headlines.**

>> When used in a headline, the words "photo" and "who" increase CTR, whereas the words "easy," "how to," "credit," "cure," "magic," and "free" decrease CTR.

>> Making references to the reader by using the words "you," "your," or "you're" in the headline decreases CTR.

>> Including positive superlatives ("best," "always") in headlines decreases CTR.

>> Headlines generate the highest level of engagement at moderate lengths (81-100 characters).

>> Bracketed clarifications, which are clarifications of the type of content represented by the headline - e.g. [Infographic], increase CTR when included in headlines.

>> When used in the headline, the words "simple," "tip," "trick," "amazing," and "secret" decrease CTR.

>> Using words that convey a sense of urgency (e.g., "need," "now") in the headline decreases CTR.

People care about the Whos, not the Whys. Headlines that included the word "who" generated a 22% higher CTR than headlines without the word

“who.” “Why,” on the other hand, decreased CTR by 37%. When it comes to intriguing readers with your headlines, focus on who not why.

People want to be shown things. Headlines featuring the word “photo(s)” performed 37% better than headlines without this word, a margin even larger than we’ve found previously (29% increase among 2013 headlines).

Headlines with bracketed clarifications (e.g., [photos], [interview], [video], [slideshow], etc.) performed 38% better than headlines without clarifications, suggesting readers are more likely to click when they have a clear picture of what lies behind the headline.

Similarly, certain words and headline concepts stand out as things people just don’t like to click. One consideration in this category is saturation—once a certain kind of headline becomes popular among clickbaiters, readers no longer trust the keywords in that headline. Because of that, the “bad words” are more likely to evolve over time.

People don’t want instructions. Headlines containing the phrase “how to” performed 49% worse than headlines without this phrase, showing that reader aversion to this phrase has not dissipated much since the 46% decrease we saw in 2013. This year we found that another instruction-oriented word, “tip,” also decreased CTR by 59%. These behaviors highlight the difference between a reader in search mode and in content consumption mode. How-tos can be highly desirable to people searching for specific content, but they’re less appealing to readers who are browsing.

Headlines with the word “easy” generated a 44% lower CTR than headlines without this word, consistent with the 46% decrease we saw in 2013. This year we also saw a 49% decrease in CTR among headlines containing the word “simple.” Readers are constantly bombarded with “easy ways” and “easy steps” that start to sound spammy. Further, “simple steps” speak more to the search mode reader with a goal and less to the person consuming content.

Headlines that used positive superlatives (“always” or “best”) performed 14% worse than headlines that did not, showing not much has changed since the 23% decrease we saw in 2013. Contrary to popular belief and their widespread use in headlines,

these words do not appear to be compelling to readers. This may simply be a product of overuse, or it could be because readers are skeptical of sources’ motives for endorsement. On the flip side, sources of negative information may be more likely to be perceived as impartial and authentic.

Headlines that made references to the reader by including the word, “you,” “your,” or “you’re” performed 36% worse than headlines that did not contain any of these words, showing a heightened distaste for this tactic since 2013 when we saw a 21% decrease in CTR among such headlines. The attempt to make readers

feel as though they’re being spoken to directly appears to do more harm than good.

Okay, so you got the click. Now what? After successfully driving traffic to your site, often the next goal is engagement. That basically just means that you want your readers to stick around and consume more of your content. Successful engagement has a lot to do with the type of content you are driving audiences to a slideshow or multi-page article naturally encourages readers to click along to read more. Ideally, though, the surrounding content on your site also engages readers

by being interesting and relevant.

In the end, content marketing in its truest form should not be overtly promotional. What sets it apart from other marketing techniques is the focus on providing value to the reader or viewer. That said, an important goal of content marketing (and one that is growing in popularity) is generating conversions.

A conversion is getting your reader to take some action. That action could be opting into a newsletter, buying something, agreeing to have a salesperson contact them, or anything else that gets them more involved with your organization. Generating conversions without a hard sell requires finesse.

Whether you’re looking for clicks, engagement, conversions, or all three, a content marketing campaign starts with great headlines, or ends with bad ones.

By engaging a professional to help you, by experimenting, and by using metrics to measure the success of each experiment, you’ll eventually be able to develop your own set of best practices for headline engagement. Data can be the most powerful tool in your content marketing toolbox—use it. ❖



**Data can be the most powerful tool in your content marketing toolbox—use it.**