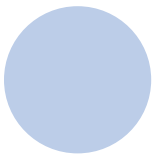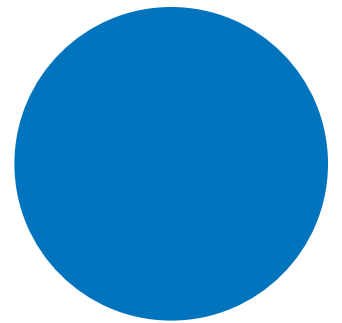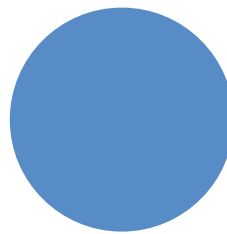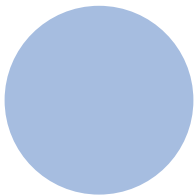# Digital Marketing for Everyone Else

A Step-by-Step Introduction to Building and Growing Your Business Online

BY ED BARDWELL

RAINMAKER DIGITAL

Table of Contents

Introduction

What does it take to build a profitable business in the 21st century?

A very big question, to be sure. Too big, in fact, for the confines of this short book, but let us begin.

And that is the perfect word for illustrating the purpose of this book, beginning. Before you ask the big questions, before you research the latest tactics, before you launch, you must begin with the fundamentals.

And what are the fundamentals of this discipline called digital marketing? More importantly, **how does one apply them in a way that actually grows one's business?**

Those are the questions (and answers) I've spent years pondering, researching, teaching, and taking action on.

If you're **beginning** down this road of marketing your business -- online or off -- my hope is that this intentionally short book will be your guide. I've worked hard to stick to the fundamentals of what truly matters to entrepreneurs.

Most of us don't necessarily have the time and/or resources to become "professional" marketers. Some may be looking to hire an agency to help. If you fit into either of those descriptions, then this book is for you. Either way, we all need to know the basics to ensure that we can get on with conducting and growing our business.

Best Regards,

Ed Bardwell
President
Rainmaker Digital Services
Dallas, TX

Chapter 1:
Content Marketing for Everyone Else

The growth in interest (take a look at [Google Trends](#)) in the term "Content Marketing" in the past 10 years looks like a grueling treadmill workout. Thanks to the pioneering work of thought leaders like Brian Clark and the Copyblogger team, marketers began learning the critical importance of producing valuable content for marketing online.

Fast-forward to today and you can find universities teaching content marketing, a multitude of articles on how to improve your content marketing, and powerful tools to allow you to focus on content creation.

Content marketing has truly come of age.

Content has long been king. In fact, if you look through a history of advertising, you can find "content marketing" examples in Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanac (1732) and The Furrow by John Deere (1895). They didn't need a MacBook to pursue effective content marketing strategies. So, why is it such a big deal today?

That's a great question and our reason for creating this "Digital Marketing for Everyone Else" book. Marketing is both science and art; the goal of this short chapter is to make sure you understand the science, so you can combine it with the creativity and inspiration that are uniquely yours.

First, if you're like me, when you hear a term all the time, it begins to lose meaning. So, let's start with the basics. What is Content Marketing?

One of the best definitions can be found over at [Copyblogger](#):

> "Content marketing means creating and sharing valuable free content to attract and convert prospects into customers, and customers into repeat buyers."

There are several important concepts implied in this definition including:

- **Create and share valuable free content**: Before the internet, advertisers reached consumers via today's traditional channels and used creativity to help them "break through the clutter" to generate awareness. Today, there is so much content online that a great jingle or interesting character won't cut through the noise. You need to share information that your prospect finds useful / interesting / entertaining in order for them to consider you to be a legitimate option for their business.

- **Attract**: This is probably both the biggest "duh" and most misunderstood part of content marketing. Like any good story, good content marketing establishes the authority and authenticity of the writer and builds a relationship with the consumer. Done well, the reader / listener / viewer wants to believe and interact with the writer. Duh? Right. OK, the confusing part … how does a writer get their content in front of the reader? Today, most content is found through either direct outreach (advertising, email marketing or social media networks) or via a search engine. We'll talk more about these methods in upcoming chapters in this book. For now, the key concept to understand is that the AUDIENCE is in control of determining whether YOUR content is attractive. Watch your data! Once you find content that attracts your audience, reproduce it until the audience fatigues.

- **Convert prospects into customers**: Though most creative professionals still bristle at this reality, it is CRITICAL to remember that you're developing content that SELLS. Creative pride needs to be subordinated to achieving the business objective. If your content does not sell, it's not marketing. Conversion must always be considered as part of your content marketing strategy.

Now that we know what content marketing is, why is it such a big deal today?

Psychology hasn't changed and neither has sociology. The fundamental equation for successful communication (message + method = results) hasn't changed. What has changed is CONTROL.

Technology has shifted control of the marketing message from the "shouting" at the audience that is traditional advertising and converted it to a "conversation" between equals — the audience and the brand.

On this level playing field, the brand has to listen as much as it talks. Content marketing allows a brand to share the brand story, express itself in "human terms" that the audience can understand, and motivate the audience to take action (not just buy products and services).

None of this is too surprising, even for the most traditional marketer. It could be argued that storytelling and building a relationship are critical for all marketing messages. So, why are we experiencing such an explosion in the value of content marketing? The secret power of content marketing comes from how people seek information today.

Between "just Google it" and the multitude of voice search tools like Siri and Alexa, search engine results have become our "over the back fence" word-of-mouth recommendations. That's right, some Silicon Valley algorithm is defining what website or company is best for "building a garage apartment for my mother-in-law."

In other words, if you ask Google and get a result, you click. Making sure your site is the result seen is accomplished through search engine optimization or SEO. We'll go into the basics of SEO in a later chapter, but a KEY component to ranking well is providing the search engine relevant and regular content that users find useful.

Content marketing feeds search engines content that convinces the search engine to show your site over your competitors' site. There is a lot of science that goes into SEO but it all comes back to a great story that engages the audience and motivates them to interact with the brand. It all comes back to content marketing.

One Last Thing …

Content marketing is about storytelling — focus on telling your story.

It doesn't matter if you use a blog, a podcast, a social media channel, video, or a combination of them all, success always comes from the best story.

Chapter 2:
Email Marketing for Everyone Else

We've all seen experts say things like this from Inc., "Email marketing has been described as the highest-ROI online marketing strategy, when implemented properly, with 67 percent of businesses listing it as their highest earner."

This chapter is not a discussion of whether or not email marketing is THE BEST digital marketing tool, what are the best email platforms, or if there is value in enhancements like personalization, dynamic substitution or device-specific content augmentation (though there is a lot of great data to consider on all these tactics) ... the purpose of this article is to establish that email marketing is important for every marketer and there is a methodology that will be beneficial for every brand. Amazingly, we still have to convince marketers to include a simple checkbox on online forms and request permission to send their customers an email.

Earlier this week, we had a client contact their account executive and tell him that they needed to reduce their monthly services agreement. This client is in manufacturing and it may be some time before they can get raw materials from China or produce products for their clients. They had a "change in staff" and a sales manager was now tasked with reducing their marketing expenses. I spoke with that manager and he basically said, "we need advertising to drive traffic to the website and lead generation so we can continue to develop sales, but to cut costs, we'd like to suspend our email marketing."

Beyond the reality that email marketing is one of the least expensive and most efficient parts of their services engagement, this thinking reflects one of the biggest challenges that all digital marketers face — a fundamental lack of understanding about what email marketing provides brands. Email connects and bonds a brand to a prospect and that bond directly translates to sales.

There are many types of email marketing. All of them start with the prospect OFFERING the brand their email address. If the user doesn't give you permission to email them, you are sending SPAM. Keep that in mind. While most jurisdictions allow you to buy a list and send up to three emails to that list, that is not email marketing. Email marketing only starts when the user offers the brand his email address.

Most commonly, an email relationship starts with the "trading" of the email address for some type of "free"

content or premium access. From there, there are many ways to use that email permission. Each has its strengths and knowing when to use the various techniques is what defines the email marketing professional.

Hint: Email marketing is about relationships. Just as you have different types of relationships with your parents, your partners and your kids, and you would not use the same language with each, you need to use the appropriate content and message type for your audience. You need to be familiar with:

Automated / Sequence Marketing: As the name implies, this is a series of emails sent either on a time or action basis with the goal of moving someone through a sales funnel.

- **Strengths**: The sequence can be built once and used many times without significant ongoing effort. A programmed sequence can help marketers define where / when / why / how a campaign performs.

- **Weaknesses**: Sequences can become overly complex without reason and can allow "technology" to take priority over strategy and content.

Promotional / Product Marketing: Generally driven by business conditions and following an editorial calendar, these emails incentivize recipients to take specific actions through contests, giveaways, product discounts or special access.

- **Strengths**: Aligns email marketing with broader business needs and develops a Pavlovian response for users to open the email for instant gratification.

- **Weaknesses**: Promotional email limits the relationship with the user to the sale. With all of the various feedback loops (like social media), a promotional email relationship is often only as good as its last offer.

Newsletter Marketing: These relationship building emails are sent on a regular schedule to recipients that want to associate with the brand. Often labeled as a "Club," "eNews," or "Courseware," these emails include content that feeds the recipient's interests and validates their decision to share their email.

- **Strengths**: Provides brands the broadest framework to interact with recipients. This framework establishes an authentic relationship that drives business success.

- **Weaknesses**: Newsletters require significant investment in content and a commitment to the process. As with other forms of content marketing, discipline is vital for long-term success and ROI is less "immediate" than promotional or automated messaging.

Many people will argue that email platform selection is key to starting an email marketing program. They are wrong. You can change platforms, add technology and even rebrand your email as you grow. The most important decisions you need to make when starting an email marketing strategy are:

- Who is your target audience?

- How will you gather your audience?

- What do you want to share with your audience?

Basic marketing stuff, huh? That's the message here. Too often, people become paralyzed with email because of "the technology" or the super cool logic that they want to build into their program. Forget all of that. Start with offering users something of value in exchange for their email, give them that value and grow your program as your list grows.

You can add personalization, frequency, monetization through sponsorships, guest columnists, and a myriad of other tactics to enhance the user experience and improve ROI. Like any other relationship, let it grow naturally and it will yield results that meet both user and brand expectations.

Remember the sales manager that wanted to cut costs? After talking him through some of these basics and reviewing their current digital strategy, we trimmed the search marketing investment and actually doubled down on email by adding a vertical newsletter to their primary target industry.

One Last Thing ...

Email succeeds because of the relationship it creates between the recipient and the brand. Like any relationship, it is hard work. Don't let the latest tech or trend fool you into thinking that it can replace your commitment to earning the relationship with your recipients.

There's a metaphor of seeing a girl across the gym at a junior high dance (the girl is the email address), the boy figuring out that the girl might be interested (audience identification), having the courage to ask her to dance (the offer) and dancing with the girl. ONLY AFTER you dance with the girl can you get to the point where she'll let you hold her hand ... there's a big lesson about email marketing in there!

Chapter 3:
Social Media Marketing for Everyone Else

In 2019, if Facebook were a country, it would rank 21st globally in terms of GDP ([behind Switzerland and before Poland](#)). Impressive for a 'free' site. How did they get so big?

Simple, humans are social animals. As our lives have become more digital, social media has become a fundamental part of how we interact and a major part of every brand's marketing.

The average American accesses seven social media accounts at least once a month and the social media landscape continues to evolve and expand. As marketers, we must recognize the power and role of social media.

Gone Fishing

Social media is too large and prevalent to ignore, it's a huge audience that's given up rights to most of the data it generates. Social media is a barrel of fish for the savvy marketer.

There are two ways to catch these fish:

1. Social media marketing: content published to engage the audience and build the relationship with the brand for a specific business goal (all marketing ties back to the business)

2. Social media advertising: paid content (advertising) published to expand the reach of a brand via a specific social channel for a specific purpose

Both types of content are an investment and need to be evaluated for ROI. The key to success with social media is in its name; it is MEDIA. Like ANY other media channel, you need to understand HOW your brand fits with that media.

Back to the Future

In the old days, marketers were taught that a great billboard contained less than seven words and great TV ads mentioned the offer three times every twenty-eight seconds. The marketer's job was (is) to match their content to the structure of the media and the interests of the audience.

There are many great articles on the best marketing use of each social media channel. I love [Pixel's donut explanation](#) of social media.

Rather than retreading that path, let us assume that you can identify which social media channels work best for you / your brand. Once you've identified the channels, you can put your creative expertise as a marketer to work.

Success is a process and it is hard work. If you're a content marketer, these steps will look very familiar:

1. Define the marketing strategy: What are you trying to accomplish and what do you want to say?

2. Identify your target audience and which channels they use.

3. Create an editorial calendar: Map out the media creation and publication schedule.

4. Analyze and Test: With the HUGE amount of data available, use it! Test the results and adjust your strategy.

5. Publish, Curate, and Re-publish: Create and publish great content. Most social media channels can use the same content concepts with slight modifications on multiple channels. Best part, you can also republish the same posts / content multiple times (especially on channels like Instagram and Twitter) since only a small portion of your audience will see the content at any one time.

A Few Things to Avoid

Hopefully you're beginning to see that digital marketing success requires the same fundamentals as every other marketing effort — great content targeted at the right audience.

Here is a list of social media marketing DON'Ts to help your program succeed:

1. Don't assume that ANY social media channel is the channel. Today's Facebook could be yesterday's MySpace (it already is for certain audiences).

2. Don't be afraid to explore. Social media is not just the BIG FOUR (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube.) Find your audience and engage with them where they are. You might find them on Pinterest, Telegram or Reddit.

3. Don't fall in love with bigger reach especially when looking at audiences and investing in access. Never forget that the right message to the right audience will outperform a generic message to a big audience. Haven't we already learned this truth from search marketing?

4. Don't confuse social media marketing with social media advertising. Each has a role, and both should be considered, but never confuse one for the other.

5. Don't be a social media expert. Unless you want to rebuild your career every few years, stick to the fundamentals. Be a marketing expert that studies, understands and uses social media. Your customers/clients are attracted to the sizzle, but they buy the steak. If you have great fundamentals, you can effectively apply them to any media channel (social or otherwise). Results pay more than gimmicks and you'll keep your clients for the long term.

One Last Thing …

Social media creates connections. It enables modern word-of-mouth marketing and constructive dialog.

Be honest and human with your audience and interact with them in meaningful ways. That will lead to trust which is the foundation for successful relationships.

Chapter 4:
Digital Advertising for Everyone Else

Global spending on digital advertising increased 17.9% to $335 BILLION in 2019 and is forecast to continue to increase [over the next five years](). More importantly, digital advertising finally passed the 50% threshold in total ad spending.

Digital advertising's growth is a result of:

- The fundamental change in the way we consume media.

- The ability to expand the ROI (Return on Investment) of digital media beyond "the sale" and gather user data, insights, and access.

- The ability to "buy digital" and appear in "traditional" channels including print and broadcast.

- The continued expansion of digital media channels.

I would argue that anyone studying media planning should skip the traditional media and spend 100% of their time on digital. Knowing how to buy programmatic ads on a DSP (Demand Side Platform) is MUCH MORE IMPORTANT than knowing how to negotiate prime time upfront ads.

And yet, there are still a lot of "marketers" and clients that look at digital advertising as a dark art. This chapter sheds light on the basics of digital advertising so marketers can develop strategies that best address their customer's/client's challenges.

The 4 "Personality Types" of Digital Ads

The first thing to understand is WHAT you can buy. As spending has increased and digital advertising has matured, providers have branded their offerings and developed nuances that can confuse many buyers.

Once you sift through the buzz, you'll find there are just FOUR types of digital advertising:

1. Programmatic (aka Display): Commonly called "banner advertising," this is the type of advertising that most closely resembles traditional advertising. Buyers place an ad, typically an IAB ([Interactive Advertising Bureau](#)) compliant unit on a publisher's digital property. The most effective unit today is the 300 X 250 pixel "medium rectangle."

2. Search Google Ads (formerly AdWords): 89% of US buyers use a search engine to guide their decision-making. As a result, sellers buy placement on search results pages (SERPs) so users see the seller's ad before the competition. Google dominates search, and as a result, its AdWords offering dominates search advertising.

3. Social (aka Facebook): Users across the globe spend more time on social media every day than any other type of online media. Advertisers want to be where the audience is, and they spend their money to get there. Social media advertising started out as "buying followers" but has become a driving force in reaching audiences for both B2B (LinkedIn, Telegram) and B2C (Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook).

4. Sponsorship (AKA Influencer): Many think of this as a "new" type of advertising. It's not. Paying a person or a group for advocacy goes back to the earliest days of trade and certainly has been a part of advertising since the first vendor picked up the tab at a happy hour. The key to success here is knowing who / what you're buying and being able to quantify the return. Sponsorship is MUCH more than getting a list of members or a mention in a social media post.

The All-Important How

The second key to successful digital advertising is knowing HOW to buy the exposure you want.

Prior to the internet, publishers used data like circulation, viewers, and auto traffic to establish the size of the audience. Advertisers would then pay for the exposure by calculating ad time multiplied by the number of exposures their message "should" receive. Known as cost-per-thousand (CPM), many of the earliest digital advertising buys were based on CPM.

Fortunately, analytics have improved, and users can now buy on other, more meaningful metrics or actions. You can buy digital media by:

1. Cost-per-thousand (CPM): This is best used when trying to generate awareness and is often associated with programmatic or sponsorship buys. Brands use CPM advertising to establish a presence on a specific media platform to create awareness for their brand. Return on Investment (ROI) from CPM-based campaigns can be challenging as many of the metrics used are qualitative and measure the audience's connection to the brand.

2. Cost-per-Click (CPC): Most commonly associated with "buying" traffic via search engines or social media, advertisers agree to pay a given rate when a user clicks on their ad. A benefit of a CPC plan is that advertisers get ad impressions without any incremental expense. CPC plans feel simple but there is huge waste and failure since advertisers don't have a strong understanding of their audience, their interests, and what is needed for conversion. ROI can come in the form of dollar-for-dollar return from a CPC campaign.

3. Cost-per-Action (CPA): A purpose-driven advertising model, sometimes mistakenly called "cost-per-acquisition" because of its focus on results. CPA campaigns buy a specific result from the publisher. Useful for social, sponsor and programmatic content, parties negotiate pricing based on the likelihood that a user will perform a specific task. Common tasks include a sale, a sign up or registration, download or software demo. Completing the action is part of the negotiated price which means, ROI is built into these campaigns.

One Last Thing ... Show me the Money

I hope you noticed that ROI is a centerpiece in all digital advertising (and advertising in general) discussions.

If you are going to BUY access to an audience, you must define a KPI (key performance indicator) and evaluate your ROI against it. Technology has given us the means to predict, monitor and achieve specific ROI outcomes.

Like all other business investments, you should have a clear idea of what you're expecting to get back before you spend a penny.

Let Us Do Your Marketing For You

If the idea of executing a digital marketing strategy seems overwhelming, know that you don't need to go it alone.

We're in this with you. If you need a little help reaching your content marketing, email marketing, SEO, social media marketing, or conversion goals, just drop us a line, anytime ...

CONTACT US

Chapter 5:
Search Engine Optimization for Everyone Else

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the darkest of the dark arts in digital marketing. While even the most inexperienced user understands the goal — to be the top-ranking result on Google, not even the most effective SEO practitioner can guarantee that outcome.

Why? Because SEO best practices are constantly changing due to both technology and user expectations. In this chapter we discuss the basics of how search engines rank sites and the evolving practice of SEO.

What is Search?

Search engines are owned by companies (in general) that exist to make money. If you keep that fact in mind, you'll see that SEO will begin to make a lot more sense.

1. Search engines make money through advertising. This means they need users (traffic) and traffic buyers (advertisers).

2. Search engines gain traffic by sharing results that meet users' expectations.

3. User expectations change as technology changes. This means search engines have to change to meet changing expectations.

#2 and #3 above are often grouped together under the heading of "relevance." That is a VERY important word in the world of search. And, relevance is the main reason why most people today talk about "'search marketing" and not just optimization or pay-per-click.

What is Search Engine Optimization (SEO)?

People have the idea that they can simply buy their way to the top of the search rankings but it's not that simple. In order to rank well, you must understand and adhere to the basics of SEO. And, when well done, SEO can significantly reduce the cost for visibility and create a highly defensible (and valuable) barrier to competition.

There are a couple of terms you need to understand that will help "everyone else" — that's you — cut through the BS surrounding SEO. For more on this, check out Search Engine Journal's glossary of over 200 terms. The basic terms you need to understand for SEO are:

> **SERP**: search engine results page. This is the page a user sees AFTER they search for something. Today, that page includes a lot of results that DON'T come from organic listings. The page may include — paid results (ads), organic results (links to content that Google thinks the user wants), snippets (short pieces of content), maps (local results), and more. In fact, there are at least **16 possible content features** that can be displayed on a SERP.

> **Keyword**: A term or concept that a web publisher targets through content creation in hopes that the search engine will display the link to that content on the SERP when someone searches for that term. This should not be confused with a search query.

> **Search Query**: the "question" that a user asks a search engine to answer. The search can range from one word to a full question. The resulting answer is a SERP.

> **Ranking**: This is how the search engines determine where you show up in search results. The key components of our ranking are the relevance of your content to the search, your site's reputation and performance. SEO seeks to improve your ranking.

Here's the problem that often appears. An SEO practitioner drives a client's link to the top of a SERP for a specific keyword (or keyword concept) but that keyword does NOT match the client's ideal customer's search query. In this scenario, everyone loses. The link may be displayed and clicked on but users don't find the content they need and they leave the site.

The client loses the expected return on their investment, the SEO practitioner loses reputation, the search engine loses because they're not delivering to a user's expectations, and the user loses by not getting the information they want.

Why does this happen? Is it a lack of research on audience or search volume? Could be but not likely. Good SEO services start with a solid marketing investigation. The biggest reason that SEO campaigns fail to deliver is that there is a fundamental disconnect hidden inside the thinking of "getting to the top of Google results."

How to Actually Rank Well in Search Engines

The latest research shows that less than 25% of users go beyond the FIRST page of search results. That seems to mean that "top of Google results" is the key to success.

Here's the issue — SEO is not aspirational. In other words, even if you could magically be listed at the top of any specific SERP, you will not achieve your business goals unless your site meets a user's expectations. This is the disconnect for believing that "Top of Google results" is the magic elixir.

SEO is the ultimate "look in the mirror." The best SEO practitioners help clients understand their differentiator and help them build content and pursue activities that will help them achieve "top of Google results" for search queries that will benefit the company and generate marketing results.

SEO as a discipline is always evolving due to the changes in the search algorithms, so staying current on the latest trends is vital. If you're seeking an SEO partner, service offerings should include:

- A commitment to remain current on the latest ranking rules (known as the search algorithms — the latest is called "May 2020 Core Algorithm" — gone are the days of fun animal names …)

- Management of a website's technical information, site navigation and content to remove any duplication (this is sometimes called code-based SEO)

- Set up and management of site indexing tools to identify errors and track performance (the most common tools are Google Analytics and Google Webmaster Tools)

- Content creation for specific audiences and content curation (starting with the website) across all of the site's content channels including social media, email and RSS

- Link building to and from other sites that help reinforce the site's authority and importance for a search topic.

There are thousands of resources online that provide information about each of these activities so you can learn more before hiring a firm. Knowledge is power but you will find that the best SEO services all do the same tasks, and many will tell you that great SEO boils down to hard work. Look for an SEO practice that has had success (and can prove it!). SEO is a discipline where "historical results" are an indicator of future success.

One Last Thing ...

SEO is often misconstrued as the digital magic elixir. It's not.

Still, if you don't acknowledge the value of optimizing your digital presence, all other content, technical and digital advertising efforts will suffer. It is a fundamental tool in a comprehensive digital marketing strategy.

Chapter 6:
Website Conversion for Everyone Else

"Convert EVERY web visitor!"

"Make these three changes and increase conversion by 90%!"

"Follow my system and generate $100,000 in less than 30 days with NO list!"

Increase traffic and convert every visitor; your site will be a success! Duh. Though these concepts are easy to understand, accomplishing these two goals are challenging and often elude even the most accomplished digital marketer.

Like most other aspects of digital marketing, there are so many blog posts, data models and "secret systems" about website conversion that most of us are left feeling confused at best and completely incompetent at worst. It is easy to fall for the fallacy that "great marketers" convert every website visitor.

What's a Conversion?

At RMDS, one of the biggest challenges we have with clients when discussing conversion is the "definition." Most people immediately equate a conversion with a sale. While that would be great, many customers must be nurtured before they're willing to buy.

For most of us, there are many "mini-conversions" between a site visit and a sale. Whether you are being challenged by the boss or your customer/client, before you start a conversion campaign, make sure everyone agrees on the definitions. Too often, "conversion specialists" want to focus on tactics rather than the real issue. Tactics won't help you until you know what you're trying to accomplish.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the most critical asset on any conversion path is a user's email address that is freely given (not purchased).

The email address is the fundamental sign of digital interest. Until you can convince someone to share his email address with you, you can't get him to buy from you. For most every conversion strategy, collecting an email address is the first conversion.

We suggest starting every conversion campaign by establishing definitions for each step on the user journey from being "traffic" to being a "customer." Another important note, the conversion path doesn't end with a mere sale.

Develop a Conversion Path

Unfortunately, most of the online experts focus on tactics to improve conversion rather than defining a plan that can predictably generate results. While I strongly believe in simple forms, popup reminders, and one-click participation (amongst many other tactics), tactics most importantly serve to IMPROVE conversion rates. A 10X improvement on a ZERO percent conversion rate ... is still zero.

Assuming you have agreed upon definitions for your steps along the conversion path (problem #1), you can turn your attention to what to do to motivate people along that path. I often use a dating analogy to help clients think about conversion.

Most of us know that you have to say hello before you can ask someone to dance, and you have to ask someone to dance before you can ask them on a date. Though every couple is unique (and so each conversion path is unique to the brand and the offering), there are several common steps that you'll find in most models ...

Conversion Step One: Say Hello

Goal: Collect the user's information (email address being the most important).

Motivation: The "pick-up" line for any conversion campaign must establish immediate value and differentiation for the user. A digital download, a discount / promotion or premium access are the most common incentives for a user's email.

Caution: Be authentic and establish trust. Technology has made it possible for users to determine if you are legitimate. Nothing will kill conversion faster than being disingenuous.

Conversion Step Two: Let's Dance

Goal: Establish a genuine connection between the user and the brand.

Motivation: Brands can't make prospects buy. Technology has made it easy for users to shop in one place

and buy in another. To convert a user to a buyer, demonstrate that the value of the transaction is more than the simple exchange of value. Common drivers are emotional benefits (support the cause or technical vision), value-add (free shipping or upgrades) or extended value (partner services or access).

Caution: Authority is subjective. It is easy to focus on the data that technology generates and the science of marketing. Never forget that marketing is also an art. Great conversion campaigns appeal to both the analytical and emotional sides of the user.

Conversion Step Three: Going Steady

Goal: Convert the customer into an advocate.

Motivation: Once a connection is established; users need the conversion campaign to fuel their loyalty. Traditional techniques include members' only discounts and events. Today, affiliate links for shared revenue, graphic badges for social and web association and "Hall of Fame" lists have been added to traditional techniques.

Caution: It is MUCH less expensive to keep a customer than it is to earn a new customer. Effective conversion strategies must address the ongoing relationship between the brand and the customer — after they make a purchase.

Back to the Tactics

As mentioned before, a quick search will reveal all sorts of "secret" tactics to improve a site's conversion rate. [Most experts even agree on which tactics work best](). Still, how they'll impact the performance on your site is the question.

A perfect example of this is form length. A common recommendation is to keep solicitation forms as short as possible. That makes sense because people are moving fast, and you don't want to slow them down … until you do.

Several years ago, we recommended that a major league baseball team use a name and email form for their fan club signup. It was a free club and we didn't want any barriers to signing up. What happened was Mickey Mouse and several dead presidents signed up without ever clicking the opt-in email. This killed email

delivery and reputation suffered. The team replaced that form with a 21-field questionnaire that gave fans a forum to share preferences with the team. The result: the bounce rate didn't increase, sign up rates didn't drop, opt-in confirmation went up and by the end of the season, the team's list was outperforming the players on the field!

There will ALWAYS be exceptions to every tactic. For that reason, always start by knowing your customer! From there, make sure your conversion campaign includes robust and on-going testing. In fact, I recommend that testing be included as a fundamental part of every conversion program. By adding on-going testing to your campaign, you give yourself the ability to respond to changes in the market and constantly improve the campaign.

One Last Thing ...

Like a "real world" relationship, a conversion strategy requires on-going effort and commitment from both parties to succeed.

Regardless of what you sell or what you call them, engaged users are the force behind today's digital economy.

Chapter 7:
Online Commerce for Everyone Else

According to the US Department of Commerce, 11.8 percent of retail sales in Q1 2020 occurred online. Surprised by that number? Is it higher or lower than what you expected?

Regardless, one thing we can all agree on is that consumers, the world over, are conducting more commerce online. Every business needs to understand how the "Internet" impacts their sales.

In the broadest terms, all forms of online commerce can be called electronic commerce or eCommerce. For many digital marketers, we divide eCommerce into four discrete versions since the marketing strategy changes based on the type of commerce pursued. The goal of this article is to define these different types of online commerce and examine the types of marketing they use.

1. eCommerce

The modern definition of eCommerce is the online selling of physical products or services with traditional business models. Features like product spotlights, catalogs, "buyer recommendations" and shopping carts are the primary functionality. There are many eCommerce technologies that serve both B2B and B2C companies. Today, you can find, negotiate, and procure almost anything via eCommerce.

For examples of eCommerce experiences, two-thirds of Americans turn to Amazon. Facilitating 49% of all online transactions, Amazon drives online commerce and sets the standard for functionality and user experience. Other eCommerce giants include Alibaba, eBay, Jingdong, and B2W. If your goal is to "have an online catalog" or "sell products" online, turn to these sites for inspiration and instruction.

eCommerce marketers use content marketing, email marketing, search advertising, and display advertising to drive traffic to an eCommerce site with the goal of an initial or introductory (perhaps, impulse) purchase. Once a customer is acquired, email/push communications are sent to a buyer, based on previous activity or data, to keep the eCommerce brand top-of-mind.

2. dCommerce

dComerce is the buying and selling of digital goods and services using the internet, mobile networks and commerce infrastructure. Primary offerings include subscriptions and memberships, eBooks, webinars, and other knowledge assets. dCommerce expands the reach and impact of many professional services industries whose traditional business models are limited by geography.

dCommerce disrupts many industries as it allows experts to monetize their knowledge without traditional "brick-and-mortar" limitations. From healthcare and expert counsel (legal, financial, business) to innovations in education, entertainment and publishing, dCommerce is encroaching on traditional business models.

Leaders in dCommerce include subscription services Netflix, online communities like Stream and Twitch, and activity services like Peloton. The current world pandemic has helped fuel a rapid expansion of dCommerce products.

dCommerce marketers focus on strategies centering on the "user journey" and introducing prospects to the power / value of their knowledge. The most common way to initiate the engagement / relationship is offering to "trade" a prospect their email or mobile contact information for a digital trial, subscription or sample.

3. mCommerce

mCommerce is the name given to eCommerce technology that focuses on mobile interaction. Though many eCommerce giants have robust mobile technology / mobile platforms, mCommerce sites embrace the fact that over 55% of all online commerce takes place over a mobile connection.

The mobile form factor requires a streamlined experience, smaller catalog listings and often a robust use of video. Typical purchases include location-based goods and services, financial transfers and mobile banking.

mCommerce has ushered in entirely new business models with many of the most impactful / disruptive companies around leveraging mCommerce. Many mCommerce solutions start with a downloadable app.

Driving engagement through an app, often registered through a social media profile, leaders in mCommerce include Uber, Starbucks, and Square, LetGo and Sell.App. mCommerce has not only disrupted traditional businesses, it is driving technology infrastructure in many parts of the developing world.

Digital marketers looking to drive mCommerce sales, focus on securing app downloads, membership / registration through a mobile number or social account and communication to the mobile device. Awareness is often created through location marketing / advertising (signage, outdoor and mobile billboards) and engagement is via app, SMS, and email alerts.

4. Social Commerce

Social commerce is considered a subset of eCommerce, though its impact, value and importance are growing. This technology involves social media, online media that supports social interaction, and user contributions (content / word-of-mouth) to drive online buying and decision-making. Increasingly buying is taking place within social channels themselves.

Social Commerce has grown out of the maturation of our collective use of social media. No longer just a way to monetize social influence, social commerce technologies are now fully fledged business models. From early community commerce tools like Etsy and Kickstarter, social commerce solutions now exist for every social platform with tools like Soldsie and Lyst. It can also be argued that platforms like Pinterest and Spotify fall into the category of social commerce as well.

Marketers focusing on social commerce shift the focus of their messaging from the product or transaction to the relationship between the brand and the consumer. Content marketing, especially via the social channels where the transactions are available drive social commerce marketing.

One Last Thing ...

While understanding how to use online commerce technology to generate results is vital, you still need effective marketing to succeed. In fact, marketing can help overcome technical limitations.

Just remember the early days of Amazon and their tremendous growth despite technical limitations. As more commerce moves online, excellent marketing will play an increasing role in determining the winners and losers.

Chapter 8:
Putting it All Together: Crafting Your First Digital Marketing Strategy

Ben Franklin is credited with one of the great digital marketing axioms, "If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail!" Digital marketing is hard work and planning is critical.

Like all marketing, it requires discipline, sacrifice (you can't be everything to everyone), and a commitment to a plan. Without a plan, even the most innovative tactics and clever creative won't yield the business results you expect.

Often called a Digital Marketing Strategy, a digital plan provides the roadmap and the key performance metrics (KPI) in a format that both the client and the practitioner can understand.

Like traditional strategy models of the advertising agencies of yesterday, many digital agencies have their own branded version of their strategy process / document. Once you cut through the spin, you'll find that most plans include guidance on:

- Content Strategy

- Digital Assets (that deliver the content strategy)

- Outreach and Audience Development

Now, let's look at each of these component parts individually ...

Content Strategy

The content strategy details the messaging for your digital campaign, where the content will be published and who will be the audience. Keeping in mind that every online company is now a media company (like it or not), here are a few top tips from our marketing strategists:

1. A content strategy should focus on no more than FIVE topic areas.

2. Curation is the key to publication. Curation is the concept that you create content once and modify it

to work in multiple channels. This preserves consistency and helps make sure that your audience finds the content regardless of the channel they use.

3. Use your content to own the engagement. Your website, your blog and your email should be central to your plan. Unlike all other digital channels, you can own and control these three. The type(s) of content (media) should also be considered in your strategy.

4. You can't please everyone. Defining a target audience is as much about defining who you don't want to serve as who you do.

The overall strategy will act as a framework for your blog editorial calendar, your email schedule and social media approach. All communications should include what we call PII™ — elements of promotion, information, and inspiration.

Digital Assets

Even though I strongly disagree with the debate about not needing a website in order to build a successful business, the fact there is even a debate is the perfect illustration of why you need to include a review of the digital assets in your content strategy.

Going through the effort to define the assets you need will minimize the tendency to either overbuild your presence or invest in an asset that doesn't have the potential to provide a return. Here are a few questions we always ask clients that we suggest you ask yourself:

1. What is the primary conversion tool on your website? Are you trying to make a one-time or repeat sale? Do you expect people to request contact through a contact form, a click to a chatbot or make a phone call? Understanding conversion will help you determine what types of content, pop-ups, landing pages and sales funnels you might need in order to activate conversion.

2. Where does your audience congregate? While this quickly leads to a discussion about social media, there are many audiences — especially in B2B — that interact in forums and vertical community sites. For instance, there is no sense in building a Facebook page for your company if your audience networks through a Slack channel.

Social media is a particularly important digital asset consideration, particularly if you plan to use social media for either customer service or reviews. A quick path to failure is publishing content to a social channel that you're not going to actively manage.

Select the right social media channels (I recommend no more than 2) for your brand and your audience and fully commit to leveraging these assets. Of course, I would secure accounts on all the major social channels but only use those channels to drive the audience back to your website or primary social media.

Audience Outreach

One of the great advancements in marketing is that outreach is no longer simply a function of the size of your budget. A Digital Marketing Strategy will provide a roadmap for building "the brand" of the business.

Don't fall into the trap of thinking of outreach only in the form of advertising or list acquisition. Some of our most successful outreach strategies include:

Guest Publication: Blogs, podcasts, vlogs or even traditional media, allow brands to borrow authority (and share it too) by contributing content to other sites. While digital marketers look at the SEO value of this technique, it is a tried-and-true public relations activity to create audience.

Vertical Sponsorship: An often-overlooked form of advertising, investing in a key audience vertical is a great way to show that audience that you're serious about building a relationship with that market. Insider tip: email newsletter sponsorship often includes access to the audience list and the opportunity to send targeted content.

Social Media Engagement: Too many brands still look at social media as a publication channel. It's not. It's a two-way street where you can engage with your audience, develop authenticity and participate in the discussion. Through social media engagement, you can identify and interact with prospects without them being defensive that you're just trying to sell them. For B2B brands, regularly commenting on posts in LinkedIn groups is a powerful way to demonstrate your authority and authenticity on a specific topic.

One Last Thing ...

A Digital Marketing Strategy is a plan and you must have a plan to generate reproducible success. At the same time, evaluate your progress and adjust your plan as you grow.

Like Mike Tyson said, "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." The market will punch you in the mouth. Allow your plan to evolve as both market conditions and internal challenges change.

Why Everyone Else?

The teaching and practices around digital marketing have become too complex, too convoluted, and too vast for the working business owner to keep up with. But it doesn't have to be that way. It shouldn't be that way.

Digital marketing is not easy, to be sure, but it's fundamentals are relatively simple. And that is purpose of this short book ... it is the purpose of everything we do at Rainmaker Digital Services.

You can successfully tell an incredible and true story about your product, service, or brand. You can do it without losing your way in a world of unnecessary and endless tips, tricks, and hacks.

So, where does this leave us? I would argue that everything in this book points to one thing: The future.

The future of marketing, to be sure. But more importantly, the future of your successful business venture.

The way to get there is not necessarily an easy path, but it is simple. In my opinion, it comes down to three things:

- Storytelling (via content)
- Technology
- Customer Engagement

If you start and build on those three fundamental principles, and the principles found in this book, you'll be miles ahead of your competition and well on your way to your entrepreneurial goals.

And remember, if you have any questions about this process, I and my team at RMDS are always here to help guide you toward success.

Though the pursuit of business can often seem a lonely one, you never have to go it alone. I wish you nothing but the best of luck in the years and decades to come!

Best Regards,

Ed Bardwell
President
Rainmaker Digital Services
Dallas, TX

Let Us Do Your Marketing For You

If the idea of executing a digital marketing strategy seems overwhelming, know that you don't need to go it alone.

We're in this with you. If you need a little help reaching your content marketing, email marketing, SEO, social media marketing, or conversion goals, just drop us a line, anytime ...

CONTACT US