

Contently

State of B2B Content Marketing

The Van Damme-ification of Business Storytelling



Your writing doesn't have to be boring just because it's for other businesses. Businesses have people who read stuff.

— [Valeria Maltoni](#)

VP of digital strategy at PM Digital

Editor's Note

At Contently, there's probably no subject closer to our hearts than B2B content marketing. After all, as a B2B company that doesn't engage in any traditional advertising, it's kind of what we do all day. Instead of buying TV ads, magazine pages, and banners, we opt instead to cover the industry we operate in here at The Content Strategist. It's a unique challenge, but one we've found to be a rollicking good time as we've built an audience of over 150,000 readers. We hope you enjoy this ebook and that it helps you build a content marketing powerhouse of your own.

— Joe Lazauskas
Contently Editor in Chief

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“The worst fault a salesman can commit is to be a bore.”



In 1935, David Ogilvy wrote these words in an instructional manual for his colleagues to help them effectively sell stoves. Eighty years later, companies selling consumer products have echoed his now-famous sentiment, pushing the limits of their creativity—for better or for worse—with marketing campaigns aimed to spark excitement. But while business-to-consumer (B2C) brands have avoided boredom at all costs, business-to-business (B2B) companies have historically anchored their restrained ad campaigns for fear of rocking the boat.

As a result, when most people think of content marketing, their minds likely jump to buzzy, consumer-driven campaigns like [Chipotle's "Farmed and Dangerous"](#) web series, Red Bull's breathtaking extreme sports films and YouTube videos, or even [The LEGO Movie](#), which not only earned respect from customers, but also over \$450 million at the box office.



However, some inventive B2B brands are starting to change the way they sell their services, and recently, a few have begun to dive head first into the world of content marketing. Some of the results have been legitimately entertaining—even though it's harder for B2B brands to create campaigns centered around [making a cow explode](#).

In this ebook, we will examine how Volvo Trucks, Zendesk, and IBM have managed to make their recent B2B content marketing engaging enough to rival what leaders are doing in the B2C field. We will also look at how, in some cases, companies operating in the B2B ecosystem may even have an advantage over B2C brands when it comes to content marketing. Some pieces of B2B storytelling are driving upticks in purchase consideration that would any marketer's mouth water.

Trends: Planning for Success

B2B CONTENT MARKETING STRATEGY

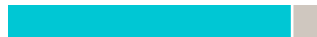
44%

HAVE A DOCUMENTED
CONTENT STRATEGY



93%

SAY THEY ARE USING A
CONTENT STRATEGY



42%

BELIEVE THEIR STRATEGY
IS EFFECTIVE



For some companies, simply having any sort of content marketing strategy counts as progress. According to research from the [Content Marketing Institute](#), only 44 percent of B2B marketers have a documented content strategy, even though 93 percent of B2B marketers say they're using a content strategy of some kind. The math may seem funny, but respondent confidence and effectiveness have both increased year-over-year. More than half of those surveyed have increased their budgets this year, and a bigger budget brings the freedom and resources to plan and tackle meaningful projects.

This may be why 42 percent of B2B content marketers believe they are effective in 2014, a six-percentage-point increase from 2013.

Thought Leadership

B2B companies that blog generate 67 percent more leads per month than B2B companies that do not.



B2B companies can bypass traditional advertising avenues through thought leadership. Since some of these companies don't spend money on television and print ads, publishing insightful articles is one way B2B employees can control the dialogue while explaining the complexities of their services and products to a wider audience. Vanguard's [financial blog](#), which includes many helpful articles on investing, is a great example of B2B content that educates readers not only about a company, but also the industry at large. According to [HubSpot](#)—a great example of a marketing thought leader in its own right—B2B companies that regularly blog generate 67 percent more leads per month than B2B companies that do not. Many in the industry believe that B2B blogs are becoming the new trade mags.

Tying Content to ROI

The metrics game is heating up in just about every facet of brand publishing, and it's starting to catch on in the B2B world as well. Last year, [Skyword found](#) that only a quarter of B2B marketers had metrics in place to capture the return on an individual piece of content, and as sales cycles become longer, there's more need than ever to understand what exactly content is bringing to the table. At g2m Solutions, [Chris Fell found](#) that leads generated from LinkedIn were twice as effective as leads that came from email marketing. Understanding this trend is the key for all B2B companies that want to spend their money as efficiently as possible.

Going Social

It took some time for B2B companies to understand the value of social marketing, but they appear to be catching on. Usage on SlideShare, Google+, and Instagram, all increased by at least 15 percentage points, more than 60 percent of marketers believe that LinkedIn is an effective social network. B2B companies may not be able to target their customers on every social network, but as they spend time and money testing out their options, they've [begun to understand](#) where to put their precious dollars.

Following the Lead of B2C

One of the smartest things a B2B company can do is to simplify the way they reach their contacts. As Beth Cohen King, director of marketing at Ve Interactive, wrote:

The same buys who buy that expensive pair of shoes are usually the same decision makers at B2B companies

Trying too hard to target your content marketing to a hyper-specific audience will only hurt you in the long run. But if you send the right message to a large enough audience, potential partners are sure to find you. And the most successful way for B2B companies to follow suit is to create entertaining content. As we'll see below, Volvo Trucks is a great example of a business that chose not to play it safe in favor of an out-of-the-box success.

Best-in-Class Examples: Volvo Trucks: Splitting the Difference

74
MILLION
VIEWS



What separates many imaginative B2C campaigns from more informational B2B campaigns is the ability to incorporate pop culture into ad content. Selling a service or a product takes on a new dimension when an audience can relate the message to a celebrity or movie character. It's not as if B2B marketers aren't interested in upping the entertainment value of their work, but according to a report from AdAge's BtoBmagazine, [59 percent of advertisers](#) selling to businesses cited lack of budget as their biggest obstacle.

Volvo Trucks, however, recently bypassed those challenges by creating the most successful B2B ad campaigns we've ever seen, and all it took was a little muscle.

Volvo Trucks is a subsidiary of AB Volvo and the second-largest heavy-duty truck company in the world. Last November, they premiered "The Epic Split" on the company's YouTube page. Eight months later, the one-minute-and-sixteen-second clip has nearly 74 million views.

How did it get there? Jean-Claude Van Damme, Enya, and some slick engineering.

It's said that B2B marketing is more rational and less emotional, but there's always emotion there, we're all human. I think it would be a way to fail to think B2B marketing is any different from B2C.

And “The Epic Split” is all about emotion. The clip shows Van Damme, the popular Belgian actor and martial artist nicknamed “The Muscles from Brussels,” doing a split on top of two trucks driving in reverse. Enya’s soothing single “Who Can Say” plays in the background as the camera zooms out from a close-up on Van Damme’s deadpan expression to reveal a sunset and a barren landscape.

Just as the commercial conveys a calming mood with its visuals, music, and a composed voice-over narration by Van Damme, the viewer can pick up on just how effortlessly the trucks are moving in reverse. It didn’t take long for audiences everywhere to catch on.

“The number of social subscribers on YouTube and Twitter has exploded,” said Bjorn Engström, senior partner and creative at Forsman & Bodenfors, the agency that helped produce the ad. “However, those measurements are just indicators. We wanted people to relate to ‘The Epic Split’ and our other films. We can see that it has driven huge engagement.”

“The Epic Split” was actually only one video in a series of six created for Volvo Trucks. While designed to promote the company’s knack for innovation, the series didn’t take off globally until Van Damme’s version went viral.

So how did Volvo come up with such a great idea? It actually goes back to an engineer who came into work one day and mentioned how he had tested out the new steering system on one of the trucks. He was surprised at how easy it was to reverse his trucks at high speeds. The Volvo creative team then went through a series of trials that were either “too impossible or too dangerous,” as Engström put it, until they brainstormed “The Epic Split.” Most of the campaign’s budget was dedicated to choreographing the stunt safely and artistically.

When it came time to distribute the content, Volvo Trucks chose to only post the video on YouTube. That decision proved to be incredibly cost-effective.

The company also pulled off some content marketing magic by bringing in Van Damme, who is instantly recognizable (especially in Europe) but does not come with the expensive price tag of an A-list celebrity endorser.

“That’s the challenge for us,” said Vilhelmsson. “If you have a small market like truck buyers, it’s inefficient to put something to a large audience. What you need to do is learn a lot about your customers. ... And for us, the smart way was doing something viral.”



After the video became a digital hit, Volvo Trucks and Forsman & Bodenfors surveyed 2,200 truck owners, many of whom hailed from Europe, to gauge the campaign's impact on business.

A deep dive into the data revealed that almost half of truck buyers who watched "The Epic Split" and the other viral videos on innovation said they were more likely to choose Volvo the next time they bought a truck.

That's incredible. Even more incredible is the fact that approximately one-third of those surveyed contacted a dealer or visited Volvo's website to research informa-

tion after seeing the videos. The Volvo team took these statistics as an overwhelmingly positive sign, since the report also found that respondents didn't want to admit (or perhaps didn't realize) they had been influenced by a commercial.

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While "The Epic Split" has paid significant dividends, the campaign's success was not always easy to predict. There were risks involved in creating such a unique project, since Volvo Trucks had typically depended on more traditional advertising.

"You still have to do things in line with the brand, and it was a challenge to think out of the box from the start," Vilhelmsson said. "We see this as a process to anchor a new way of doing things."

"Dare to be unconventional," echoed Engström. "It's important to select stories with very high relevance within your target group, but we will definitely be creative in our future projects."

Zendesk: Work Hard, Play Hard

QUICK GUIDE

TO

GOING GLOBAL

35 TIPS

FOR

10 COUNTRIES

Respectful and culturally appropriate behavior is important when doing business overseas. But what's customary in one country may be rude in another. Check out our business etiquette guide to ensure you're making all the right moves.

KEY

Meetings

Body Language

Eating

Dress

Gift-Giving

Communication

AUSTRALIA

Punctuality is critical.

A single, male passenger should sit in the front seat of a taxi.

When paying for a round of drinks, do not pick up the tab out of turn.

In Brazil, it's acceptable to be a little late.

BRAZIL

Do not eat with your hands, even if it's a sandwich or pizza. Use a napkin or other utensil.

Sneezing or cleaning your nose at a lunch or dinner table is a huge no-no.

CHINA

Allow Chinese affiliates to leave a meeting first.

In China, it is customary to present and receive gifts with both hands.

Striking gold with a global campaign may work for some B2B companies, but owning a niche as a smaller brand requires a long-term commitment to consistently producing quality content.

For Zendesk, a San Francisco-based customer service platform that sells business software, B2B content marketing is all about supplying a helpful resource to all audiences in their space, not just their existing clients. On the [Zendesk blog](#), one can find an assortment of infographics, insightful articles, webinars, and videos about operating respectfully and efficiently in the workplace.

“We’re in the people business,” said Monica Norton, Zendesk’s senior director of content marketing. “Not only are you serving your customers, you’re serving people. We’re always thinking about how to hire the right people, manage processes, and how to reach out to companies.”



Use your phone for more than pictures of lunch: tips for screening job candidates

Image via Zendesk

Zendesk's blog draws in readers with a playful aesthetic and bright color palette meant to mirror their focus on customer relations. (Fittingly, the blog's old logo was a smiling Buddha wearing a microphone headset.) To see this strategy in action, look no further than "Are you polite... in Japan?" a recent infographic that compares the cultural differences in politeness around the world. In addition to its propensity for playfulness, content on the Zendesk blog has remained relevant over time. The most popular article on the site, "10 Interview Questions for Hiring Great Customer Service Reps," was published back in July 2012.

"One thing we're not doing is publishing more," Norton explained. "We don't think there's a lot of value in publishing more frequently. We're more focused on producing quality content, having a unique voice, and providing useful information that isn't just about getting attention."

Of course, getting attention is still important.

Seventy percent of Zendesk's leads come from organic content, and evidence suggests that setting up relationships with potential clients has been paying dividends in the B2B arena.

According to a white paper by Google and the CEB Marketing Leadership Council, buyers aren't contacting business suppliers "until 57 percent of the purchase process is complete." And as Norton said, the Zendesk content team is always interested in addressing companies that don't need their services now, but may need them in the future.

"There's this assumption that B2B has to be more serious and has to be less playful than B2C, and I think that's false," Norton said. "The same people who enjoy great content from consumer brands are business people who are buying business products and software and services."

The trick for Norton and her team is to tailor content based on the individual medium. Video, for example, has been found to be best suited for complex visual stories like profiles of clients' offices; animation has proven to be an effective way for showing how Zendesk products work; and infographics have become a valuable avenue for showing off big-picture industry and cultural news. Publishing varied types of content has allowed Zendesk to locate a sweet spot when reaching their audience, rather than force-feeding them simple text advertising.

"If you're Coca-Cola, you're marketing for the entire world," Norton said. "If you're Zendesk, you tend to know your audience, and sometimes I think that gives you more freedom because you don't have to cast such a wide net. You can use certain lingo your audience will know and create content that will resonate with them. That's the blessing and the curse of B2B marketing. It takes away the pressure to appeal to the masses."

Chango: Marketers Against Marketing



Image via Chango

Volvo Trucks and Zendesk have advertised their respective brands by creating content focused on their products, but what about when a company uses content to create a new product entirely?

Chango, a programmatic advertising platform for marketers (and—full disclosure—a Contently client), did just that with their newly released Cards Against Marketing, a riff on the popular fill-in-the-blank game Cards Against Humanity. Chango's version of the game includes cards meant to spoof the proliferation of confusing and awkward marketing jargon.

"We thought, Let's make fun of ourselves," said Bryan Bartlett, Chango's marketing manager and editor-in-chief. "Our jargon and frameworks are lame, but we still have to live with it, so let's make it fun or funny."

The game began as a small project meant to build on the success of Chango's print magazine, *The Programmatic Mind*, but the idea quickly turned into a larger campaign called Marketers Against Marketing.

The power of satire can be both good and bad when it comes to marketing, and according to Bartlett, the company worried about appealing to the wrong audience. “It scared us,” he said. “[But] this has become more of a tough leadership piece and positioned us as very human—the anti-marketers, if you will—that makes us approachable to clients and prospects.”

Cards Against Marketing is one of the more unique pieces of B2B content marketing out there: Even though it hints at Chango’s attitudes toward their own industry, it doesn’t exactly explain how their services can benefit clients. In that regard, the game more closely resembles a piece of B2C marketing than the traditional straightforward B2B advertising that we’ve seen in the past.

“What I think we’ll begin to see is that from a marketing sense, there will be less of a difference between B2B and B2C marketers. We’ll all become content marketers, which is a skill that can be applied either B2B or B2C,” Bartlett explained.

Perhaps what Chango’s deck of cards really shows is that B2B content marketing is in a state of rapid change.

Bartlett believes there is a need for companies to produce more and more content in the future. In turn, they will have to produce different kinds of content to attract attention away from competitors.

“Right now, I think that the big disparity between B2B marketers and B2C marketers is how they think of demand generation, something much more common with B2B marketers,” he said. “It’s just a different way of thinking that doesn’t really translate well into B2C marketing. Rarely do consumers need to fill out a form to download a white paper on the major benefits and research needed to buy a new pair of Nike shoes.”

Chango also has a new print magazine, *The Programmatic Mind*, and they recently recently sent out to their second issue to every subscriber of *AdWeek*. The first version of the magazine, however, was only distributed to 1,000 influencers, but paid off big. Chango VP of Marketing Ben Plomion said that the company landed a top-five U.S. retailer because of the first issue of the magazine, and Editor-in-Chief Bryan Bartlett reported that it’s brought in some of the company’s biggest deals.

What Experts Are Saying

“In the world of B2B, your professional network is everything. Because your business is about business, the potential of who you know and who they know is where powerful connections happen.” —[Amber Naslund](#), owner of SideraWorks

“Your writing doesn’t have to be boring just because it’s for other businesses. Businesses have people who read stuff.” —[Valeria Maltoni](#), VP of digital strategy at PM Digital

“Please stop waiting for a map. We reward those who draw maps, not those who follow them.” —[Seth Godin](#), founder of Squidoo

“Whether you’re in the B2B or B2C sales side and whether or not your product is a cheap impulse buy or a multimillion-dollar long-term sales cycle, your business is now—without a doubt—a media company as well.” —[Mitch Joel](#), president of Twist Image

“Good content should be at the heart of your strategy, but it is equally important to keep the display context of that content in mind as well.” —[Tim Frick](#), owner of Mightybytes



Predictions: A Move to Mobile

Even as mobile usage has boomed—more than half of all emails were opened on mobile devices by the middle of last year—[B2B marketers have been incredibly slow to adapt](#).

As reported by AdAge's BtoB, only 10 percent incorporated mobile into their content strategies last year.

But as B2B marketing budgets continue to grow, so will the commitment to mobile, where there is currently a ton of untapped value.

According to a [recent survey](#) by Forbes, more than half of B2B executives expect mobile devices to be the most popular business platform in the next three years.

A Revolt Against Self-Promotion

Forty-three percent of readers of B2B content marketing identified “[blatantly self-promotional content](#)” as their biggest turnoff, according to [a B2B Marketing Insider Report](#). How can companies overcome this obstacle? It’s simple: native advertising. Don’t be surprised if B2B brands double down on native in the near future as a way to tell important stories related to their businesses without tooting their own horns.

Call Me Maybe Definitely

According to Fusion Marketing Partners, [51.4 percent of B2B leads](#) are never called, and the average call response time for those who care to be contacted is 46 hours. This could soon change, however. As these companies become more comfortable interacting on social networks, they should get used to quicker response times. And here’s the most telling stat about the topic: Potential customers who reached out over email were [60 times](#) more likely to convert to a company that responded in the first hour than to companies that took more than a day to respond.

After all, what’s the point of effective content marketing if companies aren’t following through?

Smart Videos > Viral Videos

This prediction is more about intent than consequences. There are benefits when a company strikes it big with a viral video, but as [MWP Digital Media argues](#), trying to create a viral video from the get-go, rather than a smart piece of visual storytelling meant for your audience, is a major mistake. The intent should always be to let your products or services take the lead, just as Cisco has done with their [“Be Everywhere With Video Collaboration”](#) clip, and Moz has done with Rand Fishkin’s wildly successful [Whiteboard Fridays](#).

The LinkedIn Lovefest Continues

LinkedIn is already the most popular social network for B2B companies, but in the coming months and years, there’s a decent chance it will become B2B marketing’s only significant network. Why? Because LinkedIn has shown a willingness to let these companies become [Influencers and publishers](#). For B2B companies that don’t have the infrastructure to own their own publishing platforms, LinkedIn is a prime real estate, with more than 300 million potential customers.

A B2B Heart-to-Heart

David Ogilvy has made a lot of clever remarks that almost read as if they're meant to be shared. He once said, for example: "Talent, I believe, is most likely to be found among nonconformists, dissenters, and rebels."

With respect to Mr. Ogilvy, what he was really talking about is opportunity. Those who have the chance to break away from the pack and do what has never been done before are capable of producing great advertising. In the B2C space, everything has been done to death twice over, but in the B2B space, there's plenty of room left for the nonconformists.

Volvo Trucks, Zendesk, and Chango are just three players that have rebelled against the all-too-traditional streak of B2B content marketing. Boredom is no longer a strategy; 97 percent of B2B marketers say they are pursuing new kinds of work and that they expect the industry to continue to change at a faster rate.

Ultimately, selling to businesses is about selling products to the people who run those businesses, and telling great stories is still the best way to reach them.

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