

Contently

The Ultimate Content Strategist Playbook No. 3:

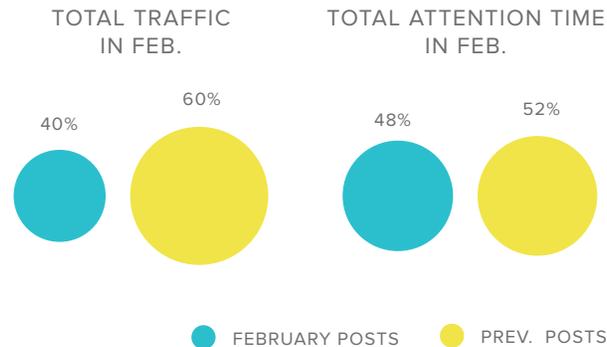
Staffing and Launching Your Content Marketing Program



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On the evening of March 2, our content/marketing team found itself celebrating at a Soho dive bar called Milano's for a few reasons: three birthdays; two new additions to the team; and, most importantly, a successful month of February in which we saw over 200,000 readers. We toasted, but in truth, a lot of that success was attributed to work we did months ago. Though it felt like new pieces were attracting all our readers, only 40 percent of our readers and 48 percent of our total attention time for the month came from posts published in February.



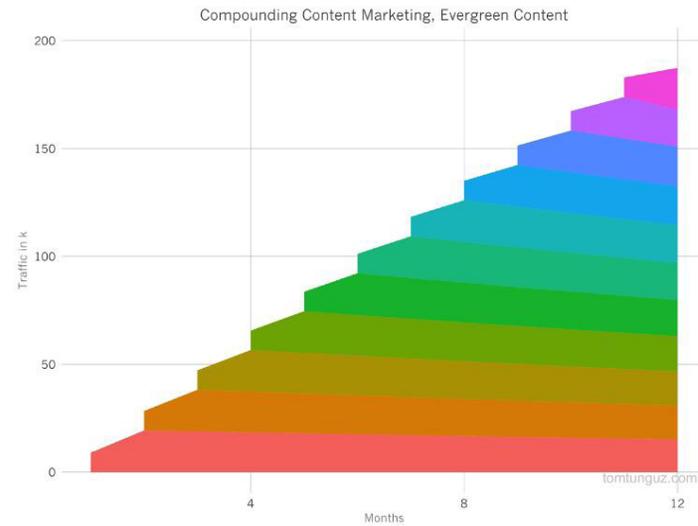
What had the biggest impact was that we spent the previous 18 months publishing three or four stories per day. In February, stories published last year like “The Pros, Cons, and Costs of the Top 10 Content Distribution Platforms,” “7 Keys to SEO for Content Marketers,” and “What’s the Difference Between B2B and B2C Marketing?” all generated over 1,000 readers and 3,000 attention minutes, just like they do every month.

In December 2013, Jay Acunzo, then senior content manager at HubSpot, had a similar revelation. That month, he crunched the numbers and found that 70 percent of the roughly 2 million hits on HubSpot’s blog came from posts that were more than a month old. “That entire team could stop blogging for a whole month and still see 70% of the expected results—zero work needed,” he wrote in a [blog post](#). “Now *that’s* ROI! Show me a PPC campaign capable of doing *that*.”

Jay was shocked. So was I. And that’s natural—when you do content marketing well, it can feel like highway robbery. As venture capitalist and content marketing expert Tomasz Tunguz recently wrote on his blog, “Content is one of the few forms of marketing that has a compounding return.”

The idea of compounding returns in content marketing may sound complex, but it’s actually quite simple. Most brand publishers aren’t in the business of publishing timely news; rather, they focus on telling stories that entertain, solve a problem, or provide important advice and information. These evergreen stories remain relevant for a long period of time and continue to bring in new readers via search and social. Tunguz, for instance, found that the average post on his blog generates about 150 views on the first day, and about 20 for each subsequent day. After one year, the average post still generates about 18 views per day.

That may not sound like a lot of pageviews, but when you’re publishing new stories every day, there’s a compounding effect. Each day, there are more total stories generating traffic, which results in compounding growth. In a hypothetical model, those compounding returns would result in readership growth that looks something like this:



“Like a bank account that starts out small and earns incremental gains, but over time becomes quite large,” Tunguz writes, “content marketing efforts require consistent investment but ultimately can yield enormous results.”

Of course, this is an ideal model, and simply publishing every day does not guarantee success. As we covered in Playbook No. 2, you need to have a content roadmap—a clearly defined audience and a sense of all the gaps in the content market so you can capitalize on every opportunity to capture your audience’s attention. You also need to produce stories that are good enough to be shared. Otherwise, there won’t be a compounding return on social. The same goes for search.

“There’s not a whole lot of value in writing a decent blog post anymore,” explained Moz founder and SEO luminary Rand Fishkin. “[There’s not a lot of value] unless you can be pretty extraordinary.”

While the potential compounding returns of content marketing are enough to make any brand marketer’s mouth water, the challenge of doing it successfully is still a massive undertaking. You need to create a steady cadence of content so your returns grow quickly, but that content also has to be so good that it will stand out in the sea of crappy posts that pollute the web. And since the competition is getting fiercer every day, you need to continuously improve and evolve if you want to stand out.

We’ve reached a crucial stage in our Ultimate Content Playbook series—the point where the difficult work begins and brands start to fail. Over the past few years, many brands have successfully evangelized a content program and drawn up a strong strategy; few, however, have successfully executed and seized that opportunity.

But if you take the appropriate steps, the likelihood of success increases—and the potential rewards are well worth the investment of time and money.

For the rest of our third content marketing playbook, we'll take you through the five necessary steps required to execute a content marketing program, developed from the best practices we learned from our own experiences as publishers and the work we've done launching the content marketing efforts of hundreds of companies around the globe:

1. Crafting a brand voice and content marketing mission statement to guide your efforts.
2. Identifying your story types and requirements so you know what to create.
3. Building an editorial calendar to hold yourself accountable to a consistent publishing schedule.
4. Staffing your content team so you can begin creating content.
5. Creating an approval workflow so you can operate like a real newsroom.

2. Crafting a Brand Voice & Mission Statement

Creating a mission statement is one of the most difficult yet enjoyable stages of the content marketing journey. A great mission statement speaks not only to your content plan and goals, but also captures who you are as a brand and as a publisher. It's the rallying cry that makes you excited to come to work every day, pushing you to do more—and do better—than your competitors.

Like the word “irony,” brand voice is something people love to talk about but don’t really understand. It’s far more than a set of adjectives (clever, smart, millennial) and can’t be captured in a mock tweet. It goes far deeper than that, which makes sense: Your brand voice is at the heart of every piece of content you create.

To craft a brand voice, I’m a big fan of an exercise that content strategist Melissa Lafsky Wall recently advocated in a piece on *The Content Strategist*. Her advice is so brilliant that instead of summarizing her ideas and butchering it in the process, I’ll just share her recommendation in full:

Say you're going to a dinner party full of people you don't know. Whether you admit it or not, you'll want each of the other people at the party to leave with a certain viewpoint or opinion about you at the end of the night. So you act a certain way, choose certain words and conversation topics over others, make certain jokes, and generally work to be the most charming, or funny, or book-smart, or emotionally sensitive, etc. version of yourself, depending on which of these traits are the most important for you to convey.

With brands, it's really not all that different. The fundamentals of voice comes down to a personality—prioritizing a set of traits that comprise an identity, and then communicating in a way that expresses and prioritizes those traits. Which means that, in order to create a successful voice, a brand is required to take on some of the personality of, well, an actual person (the Supreme Court would be so pleased).

The logical question now is, "So what personality traits does my brand embody?" The answer can only come from one source: your brand itself. No one else can identify your brand's values and point of view other than the individuals who comprise it. The most successful brands stand for an idea (Apple, GE, IBM), and that idea is a good place to start when it comes to distilling your brand values into a key concept or identity.

You may be thinking that what I'm describing resembles a common branding exercise, in which teams boil their brand down to four or five words or colors or images, etc. But identifying the voice involves a bit more anthropomorphization than that (and yes, that's a word—I looked it up).

Another way to think of it is this: If your brand was the person at the dinner party, who would it be? The gadget freak who snagged an iPhone 6 a week before they went on sale? The honest and kind friend you'd consult while getting dressed for a date? The mad scientist determined to find a way to make fuel out of pencil shavings?

These examples may sound hyperbolic, but they get at values that lead people to prioritize certain skills and behaviors over others. Brands are no different.

A clear sense of identity is what categorizes the best brand publishers. GE is the smart, inquisitive, clever science nerd who blows your mind. Red Bull is the death-defying rock star you want to hang out with. HubSpot is the inbound marketing genius who wants to help you get that promotion. Moz is the wizard of SEO with secrets that will fundamentally change your business. In different ways, they're all a kind of person who will accumulate a posse of interested admirers at that dinner party.

Of course, this exercise of anthropomorphization is just that—an exercise. Brands can't have a voice or a mission; the people who communicate on their behalf do. When I spoke with the men behind the content powerhouses at HubSpot, Moz, and GE, that much was clear. You can hear the mission in the brand voice.

TOMAS KELLNER, MANAGING EDITOR, GE REPORTS:

“Here we are. We're 130 years old. We were founded by Thomas Edison, and guess what? We are still working on really hard problems that the entire planet has to be dealing with, whether it's the future of energy or whether it's the future of electricity or whether it's new propulsion for planes that will get you from New York to Tokyo in four hours.”

JOE CHERNOV, VP OF MARKETING, HUBSPOT:

“HubSpot is not only a company, but it's also the catalyst of a movement. And as a community has coalesced around that movement, it's our job to nurture and foster it.”

RAND FISHKIN, FOUNDER, MOZ:

“[Content is] part of our DNA. We believe in sharing and being transparent in putting out there the things that we've learned. ... We want to try and help marketers first. That's our underlying goal. We really don't think about content marketing as being part of our funnel. It's part of our mission.”

While the business goals of your content marketing efforts are important—be it generating leads, sales, brand awareness, industry education, or, more likely, some combination of initiatives—we find it extremely helpful to keep your goals focused on the audience you want to serve.

For example, this is our mission statement for The Content Strategist:

If the marketing blogosphere were a college, there would currently be about 10,000 professors angling for tenure—and all of them would be teaching some version of inbound 101 or remedial content. Picture a dusty hall full of creaky desks, a syllabus full of old listicles and questionable stats, and the teacher droning on and on while the students pass notes in the form of [Pitbull GIFs](#).

Then picture the Kool-Aid man bursting through the wall screaming, “[OHOOH YEAHHHHHHHHH!](#)”

That’s us. We’re the Kool-Aid man of marketing pubs.

What’s that mean? Well, first and foremost we want to give you information you can’t find anywhere else on the Internet, and we want to do it every single day. Forget telling you that certain things work—we want to tell you why they work, how they work, and what’s going to work next. We’re going to continuously talk to the smartest people in our industry, and we’re going to tell you what we find out. Media is changing marketing (and vice versa), and understanding what it all means and how to

take advantage means thinking beyond the tropes of the past.

*We also aim to have fun because this is fun! The late, great David Carr put it best when he said, “Creating media content is a diverting activity that rarely resembles actual work.” And if you’re reading *The Content Strategist*, it likely means your job involves telling stories in some way or another.*

There’s no reason that marketing content has to be dry or boring—after all, a good story is a good story, no matter what it’s about. Just because we’re writing about content marketing doesn’t mean we can’t use NBA metaphors or make fun of our own buzzwords. There’s no reason a story about ROI or legal approvals can’t have a few jokes in it. Marketers are humans too.

At Contently, we talk a lot about “building a better media world,” which sounds like something out of Silicon Valley, but it’s true. We believe in helping people tell amazing stories instead of polluting the web with mediocrity, and in the power of ditching intrusive advertising in favor of great media experiences. The Internet is what we make it, and we want to make it awesome.

Notice how focused we are on our readers; that's not a front. We do have clear business goals for The Content Strategist—building brand awareness, fortifying our reputation as a content marketing thought leader, educating clients and potential clients, and driving email subscribers, leads, sales and opportunities—but our primary focus and editorial mission remains helping our readers become better, smarter content marketers. And we've found putting our readers first is the best way to drive all of those results.

Our mission statement reflects our commitment to editorial purity, and if you talk to successful brand publishers, they'll tell you that commitment is key. In the words of Joe Chernov: “[O]wning your audience comes with huge responsibilities—namely the need to ‘protect’ that audience from marketing’s shadow. ...

If we fell victim to the temptation to strip-mine that audience with overt promotions, we'd destroy the asset many people have worked so hard to build.”

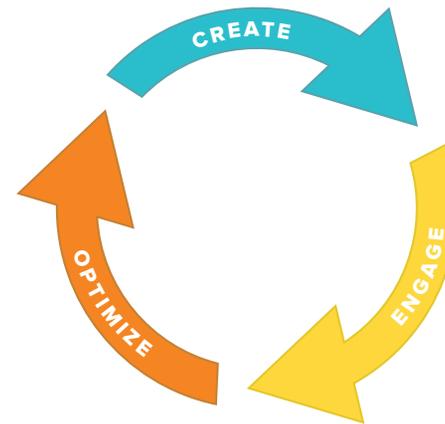
As you identify your brand voice and craft your mission statement, keep all of that in mind. You have to put your readers first and give them what they're not getting elsewhere. Your mission statement will be your guiding light, the document that keeps you in check, inspires you, and protects your content from marketing's shadow. It's crucial. I don't know where we'd be without it.

3. Identifying Story Types & Topics

Once you have a mission statement that makes you beam with pride, it's time to figure out what types of content you should create—blog posts, reported features, photography, illustrations, infographics, comics, videos, white papers and e-books, etc. This is a critical step. You can't start to map out your editorial calendar, staff your content team, or design your approval workflow until you know what kind of content you're going to make.

This is another step that should be informed by the content strategy analysis you already conducted (as outlined in our last playbook). If your particular niche is saturated with basic blog posts but lacking longform features and videos, you may want to invest in the latter. If no one's poking fun at your industry with comics, that could represent a great opportunity for you to stand out. But keep a few rules of thumb in mind:

1. Try a little bit of everything out. Content marketing involves a cycle of constant learning and optimization. At Contently, we boil this process down to the executive-friendly abbreviation of CEO—create, engage, optimize—and visualize it with the flywheel below. Your initial content strategy should be a refined educated guess about what will work, but you need to be constantly testing new things and optimizing based off the results.



2. Prioritize quality over quantity. It's hard to stand out, so you shouldn't think of your infographics as something you can get done cheaply on Fiverr, or your original photography as something Steve the Lead Gen Guy can take care of with his Samsung Galaxy. Keep that in mind when evaluating different formats.
3. Describe your story types for content novices. If you're reading this, there's a good chance you're more sophisticated than your colleagues when it comes to content. Over-explain what each content format entails.

To see what this looks like, here are our different story types:

QUICK HITTER

250–500 words to introduce breaking news, research, or a cool visual component like an infographic or video.

WEB-SOURCED IN-DEPTH

500–1,200 words based on web sources; includes a complex level of analysis.

BASIC REPORTED STORY

400–800 words with between one and three sources.

LONGFORM FEATURE STORY

1,000+ words with a compelling narrative focus and multiple primary sources.

INFOGRAPHIC

Graphic visual representation of information, data, or knowledge that communicates key industry topics.

VIDEO

A story up to five minutes long about storytelling, including interviews with thought leaders and/or brief news updates.

COMIC

Single or multiple panel illustrations lampooning the content marketing industry.

E-BOOK

3,000–10,000-word guides and industry reports, usually downloadable in exchange for an email address.

Next, it's important to detail the different topics you'd like to cover. Our topics align with the five main sections of *The Content Strategist*: Brands, Media, Social, ROI, and Voices.

BRANDS

News, trends, and analysis of the branded content movement.

MEDIA

Journalism, native advertising, and the future of the media business.

ROI

Best practices for tying content to business results.

SOCIAL

Strategies, tools, and tips for spreading content through the social web.

VOICES

Thought leadership, opinions, and perspectives on the future of content.

Once you have these tables compiled, keep referring back to them as you create your editorial calendar to make sure you're trying out each topic with all possible story types.

4. Building an Editorial Calendar

Now it's time for the fun part—building your editorial calendar. Since you still have a lot to figure out before you can get up and running, you'll likely want to give yourself a cushion of six to eight weeks before you start publishing. Building an editorial calendar will give you a clear picture of what types of stories you'll publish on a daily basis and who you need to hire to get up and running.

While the ultimate goal is to become a daily publisher, you don't want to overwhelm yourself when you're just starting out. Don't sacrifice quality for quantity. Generally, we recommend starting out with two stories per week and increasing from there—though you might be able to handle less or more depending on your internal capabilities. It's important to be ambitious, but not unrealistic.

To be honest, we're spoiled when it comes to editorial calendars. The Contently platform has a gorgeous drag-and-drop calendar with easy filters, a text editor, and built-in approval workflows. However, not everyone can afford this type of software.

If you have absolutely no budget for a calendar but are running your site on WordPress, your best bet is to use the [WordPress calendar](#). It's basic but gets the job done. If you don't have WordPress, see if your content management system (CMS) offers something similar. If not, HubSpot's editorial calendar template is a decent [stopgap measure](#) you can edit easily to fit your needs. [DivityHQ](#) can also get the job done if you have a small budget and team since its editorial calendar software is priced on a per-seat basis.

But whatever system you use, you want to be sure you can track and filter a few important details:

AUTHOR:

The storyteller or storytellers responsible for producing the story (the writer, designer, illustrator, videographer, etc.).

DUE DATE:

When the story or story assets are due from the author.

PUBLISH DATE:

The date you intend to publish the piece. Be sure to schedule extra time for revisions, adding in more time (at least four days) for more complex topics or less time (one or two days) for simpler posts.

INTENDED AUDIENCE:

The primary or secondary audience the story is intended to reach, as we outlined in our last playbook.

FORMAT / TYPE:

As outlined above.

TOPIC:

As outlined above.

URL:

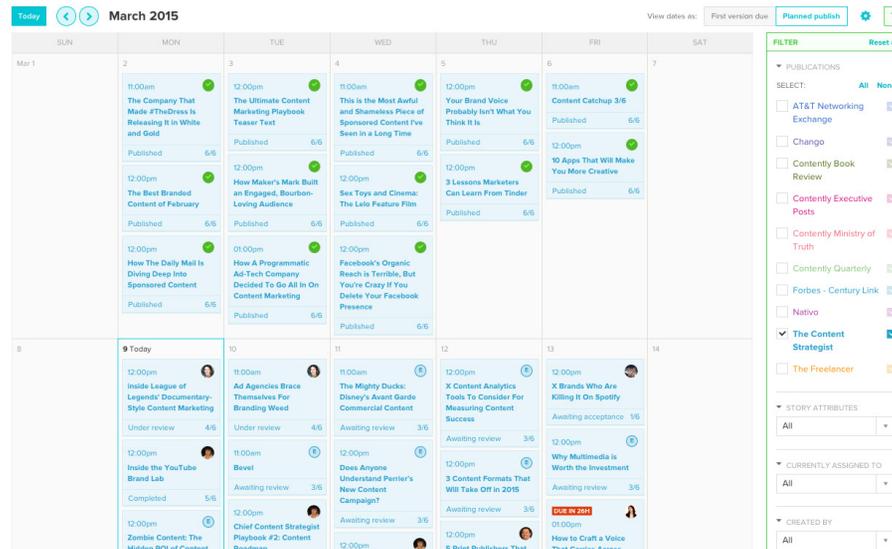
The URL of the story once it is published.

TARGET KEYWORDS (OPTIONAL):

It can also be useful to include target keywords for the writer to keep in mind—although you never want to encourage keyword stuffing, which will damage the quality of your story. It's a fine line, so make sure you walk it.

As you start to fill out your calendar, establish a steady publishing cadence. Posting at a regular pace will make it much easier to get into a rhythm when it comes time to engage your audience, measure your success, and optimize for the next round of publishing.

For example, here's a current snapshot of our calendar for The Content Strategist. Notice how there's a steady flow of two to four posts each weekday. This ensures that we deliver consistent value to our readers on each of our primary distribution channels (email, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+).



Now that you can see what type of content you need to create, it's time to staff up.

5. Staffing Your Content Team

The idea of staffing a content team and building a “brand newsroom” is enough to give some marketers a panic attack. But it’s less complex than you think.

First, evaluate what internal resources you already have. That's going to be the biggest factor that determines the mix of in-house people and freelancers you need to deliver based on the strategy you've outlined.

Most successful brand publishers take a hybrid approach to their newsroom. A core in-house team serves as the protector of the brand voice, distributes and measures content, and optimizes editorial strategy; freelancers add subject matter expertise and storytelling firepower to the mix.

"I think that brands are using freelancers a lot more simply because it's a lot easier for them to scale based on what their content needs and requirements are," Michele Linn, the Content Marketing Institute's director of content, recently [told](#) *The Content Strategist*.

Coca-Cola, for instance, has a small core team of editors and designers, complementing that with a staff of freelance storytellers through Contently to scale their content operation. They now publish 12–15 pieces per week on Coca-Cola Journey. "We've really tried to carve out a beat system with our Contently writers," said Jay Moye, Coca-Cola Journey's managing editor. "It's nice to know who we can go to for certain stories."

Those writers can also supply fresh story ideas, voices, and perspectives that spice up your storytelling. One of Coca-Cola Journey's most popular posts, for example, was a story about Coke-themed weddings—a phenomenon unearthed by a freelancer named Laura Randall. The feature story told the tale of a few happy couples and their Coke-red nuptials.

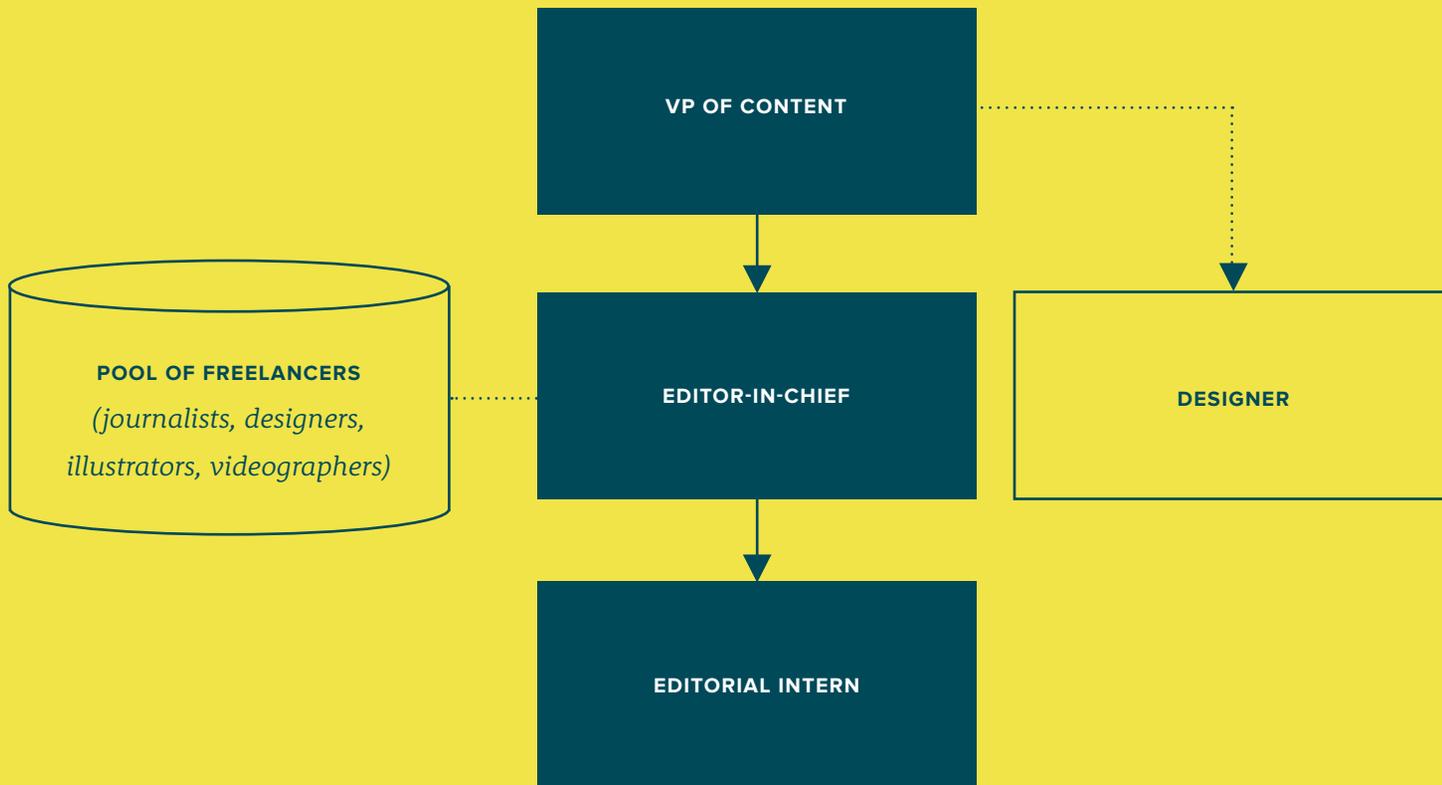
“That was not an idea that we can take credit for. That was Laura’s idea,” Moye said. “And there are many more where that came from.”

But while freelance resources can be a great help, it’s important to have at least one in-house employee devoted to guiding your content marketing operation—ideally someone with a wealth of editorial experience.

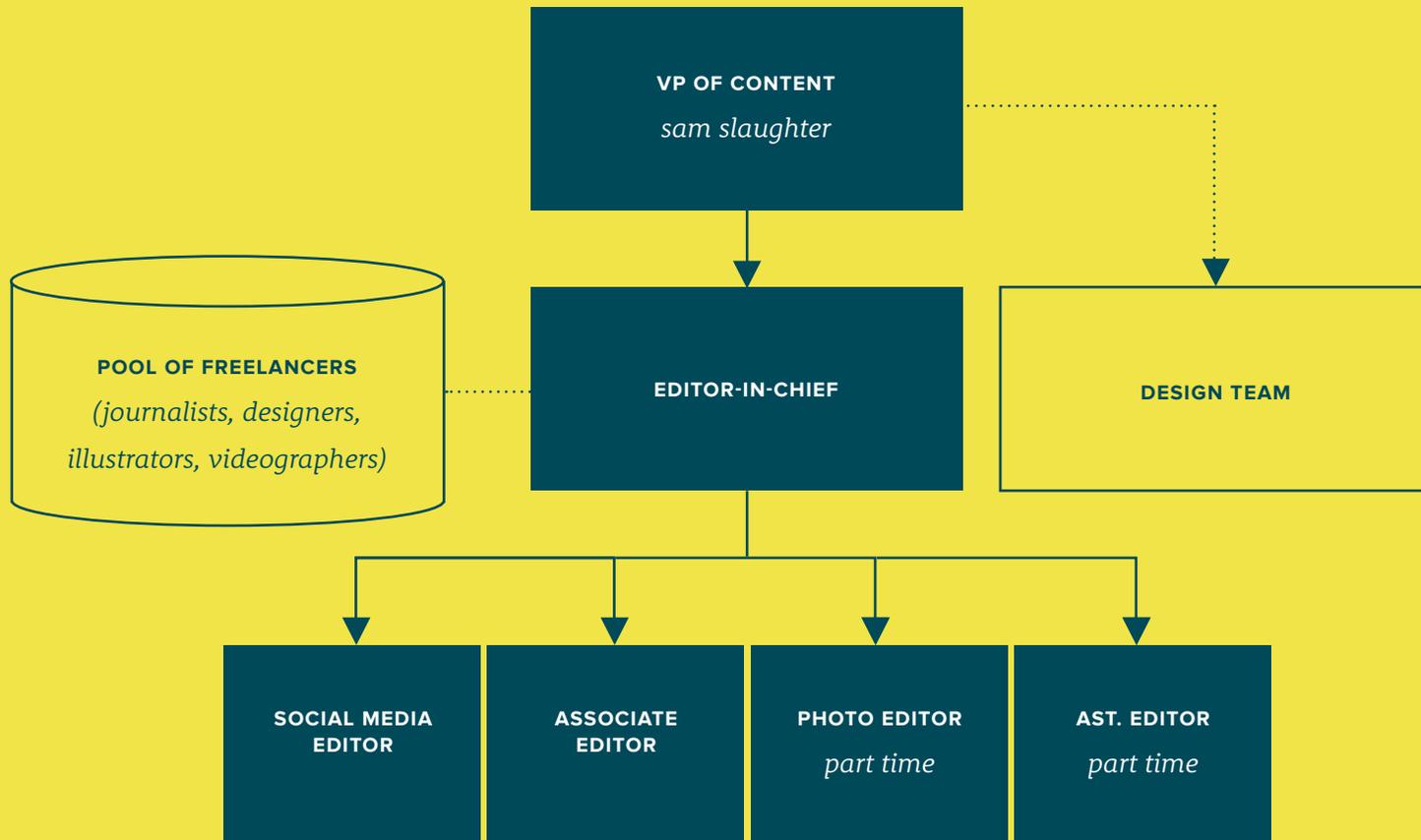
At GE Reports, that person is Tomas Kellner, a veteran reporter from *Forbes* who writes most of the magazine’s feature stories, directs editorial strategy, and teaches storytelling workshops to GE employees around the world. Kellner also relies on a small squad of internal writers and freelancers from content marketing agency Group SJR.

To visualize this hybrid model, let’s look at how we structured our own editorial team at Contently—and how it’s evolved as we’ve proven the business value of our content efforts and grown our team.

Here's what our editorial org chart looked like in December 2013, when we hired our first full-time editor (me!) and started investing serious resources in our own content marketing:



And here's how we structure things today:



As our content efforts have grown more ambitious (telling better stories, launching a second magazine, etc.) our team has gotten bigger. Simultaneously, the pool of freelancers we use through our own network has allowed us to easily scale our efforts.

Ultimately, growing your team gradually is the safest and smartest way to go. As much as I would have loved to have today's team 15 months ago, we had to figure out what worked with a small operation before taking that leap.

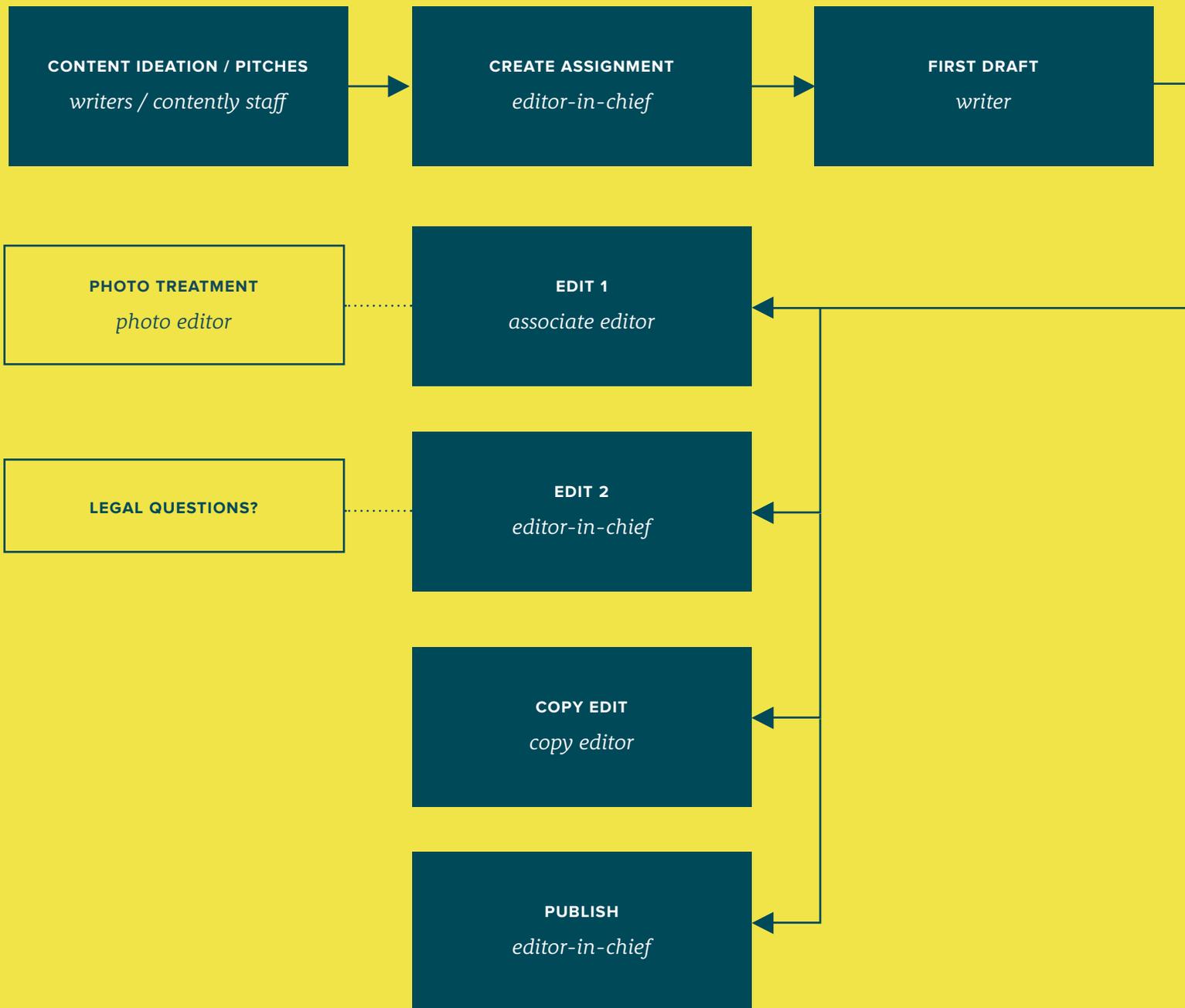
Another note: If you don't have the power to hire people to full-time editorial positions, you can still build a core staff with freelancers. When you're starting small, hiring a freelance managing editor for 10 hours a week, a photo editor/designer for another five, and a half-dozen freelance writers can be sufficient to get the job done—as long as everyone is good enough. At Contently, we supply our clients with freelance managing editors, and it's proven to be a highly successful model. All those editors are rigorously vetted and usually have at least 10 years of experience.

6. Creating an Approval Workflow

In sports, there's a common cliché about everyone knowing their role and sticking to it. The same can be said for publishing.

Whose job is it to generate story ideas? Who turns those story ideas into assignments so you don't blow your entire budget on 50 cat listicles? Who edits those stories? Who presses Publish?

Below is the approval workflow our editorial team uses at Contently for The Content Strategist for a day-to-day text article. As you'll see, anyone can come up with a story idea, but as the captain of our content strategy, I'm the one who assigns every story on the calendar. And though members of our team are responsible for edits, photo treatments, and copy edits, each story comes back to me for approval before it goes live. That way, if there are any mistakes—or anything that doesn't fit our style or standard of quality—I catch it before it goes live (or, if not, I take the blame).



This process changes slightly for multimedia posts, or if I'm the author of the article, but the system works the same: I assign, approve, and deal with the consequences, both good and bad.

Our system happens to be relatively simple because we work at a small company without a lot of bureaucracy and don't cover a highly regulated industry like finance or pharmaceuticals. And if you do work at a fairly large company or in one of those industries, you might be shaking your head because you know there's one big challenge you'll have to overcome: brand and legal approvals. You've heard the horror stories about organizations that take months to approve simple social media updates. It's something that can completely derail a content operation and needs to be avoided at all costs.

The key—as Contently Studios Director John Hazard wrote last fall in an excellent guide to content approvals—is to get lawyers and superfluous brand managers

out of the approval process as much as possible by setting and documenting clear guidelines that ensure your content is compliant with legal and brand style standards. To streamline your publishing infrastructure, you need to make sure everyone is aware of those standards. How do you do that? Conveniently enough, it's the same way you ensure editorial quality—by placing one key stakeholder in charge of final decisions.

GE Reports publishes at a quick, steady cadence, even though a lot of their stories report on the company's emerging technologies in highly regulated areas like healthcare, where non-compliant content can have serious legal consequences. But because of the standards the company has in place, the editorial team has the power and flexibility to publish at the speed of news without fear of penalty.

Managing Editor Tomas Kellner ensures that every story is fact-checked with internal sources, a practice he perfected during his journalism career. And when a story actually does need to go through legal approval, he knows when to send it up the chain of command based on his editorial instincts. “With health care, for example, you could not publish a story without legal approval,” he said. “Often, when you talk about a device, it actually has to go through two sets of lawyers. It has to go through the regular legal department, but then it also has to go through the regulatory lawyers that make sure that what you’re saying actually describes fairly what the machine is doing.”

However, the process doesn’t bog down GE Reports’ publishing schedule because of the clear understanding and close relationship that Kellner has built with his legal department over time. “In the beginning, it was a difficult practice for me to learn,” he explained. “I didn’t know who these people were and how to get the copy

through efficiently. It often got stuck. It’s like building a house. You have to put in the plumbing. Once you know who these people are, you don’t have to go through the various gatekeepers—you can go directly to them and check on your story and see how it’s moving.”

And since Kellner serves as the keeper of GE Reports’ editorial voice and content standards, the company has a system of checks and balances that allows it to stand out as a stellar publisher without getting sued.

“When it comes to a company publication and your stories get noticed by the top-level publications, you are under a special degree of scrutiny,” Kellner said.

If a 130-year-old behemoth like GE can get its content approvals in order, so can you.

Conclusion

Nearly every week, I interview successful brand publishers, and one of the first questions is almost always about how they structure their “newsrooms.” Who’s on your team, I ask. How does the sausage get made?

Universally, there’s an upswing in their voice; pride shines through. And that’s because they know a universal thing; staffing, launching, and coordinating a content marketing machine is hard work, and it’s a process that takes time to perfect. But once your team is in a groove, it’s a beautiful thing to behold; you make each other better, and it’s a foregone conclusion that your success will keep building over time.

This isn’t a unique sentiment; it’s something you’ll hear from coaches, entrepreneurs, sales heads, or, heck, even the manager at your favorite dive bar. For tens of thousands of years, people have been coming together to make something great—it’s just that only recently has that thing been great branded content.

Now, you have the tools to staff and launch the content marketing machine of your dreams and start consistently creating high-quality content that you’re proud of. In our next (and fourth) content marketing playbook, we’ll talk about how to distribute that content and build a loyal audience. Stay tuned.

Want more insights into the state of content marketing?

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