

Contently

On the Money

How 5 Finance Brands Built Loyal Audiences by Investing in High-Quality Content

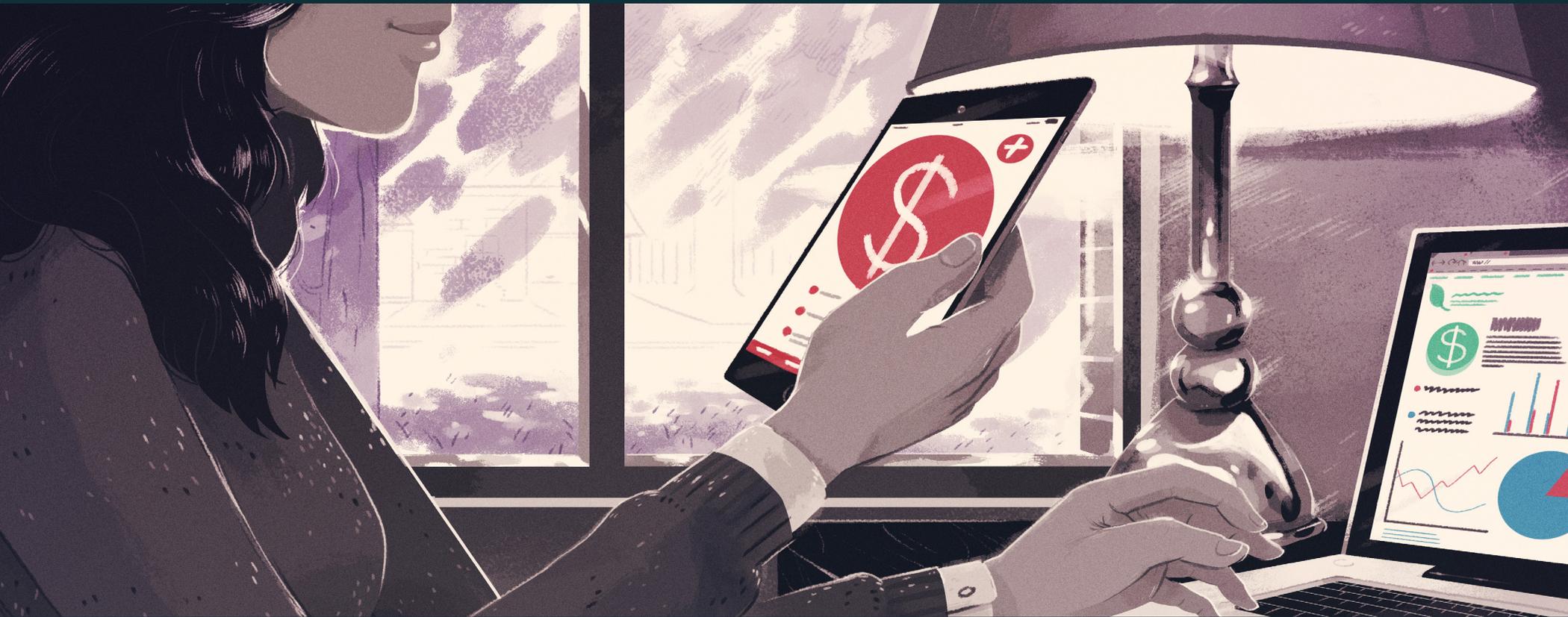


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Introduction

Money can't buy everything. Perhaps nobody is more aware of that than financial brands attempting to build audiences with content marketing.

According to the [Content Marketing Institute](#), 69 percent of marketers are creating more content now than they were a year ago. And considering the average human attention span actually [dropped](#) from 12 seconds to eight seconds in just over a decade, brands don't have a lot of time to appeal to consumers in an increasingly noisy marketplace. In a crowded and competitive content space, how exactly is a brand supposed to hold the attention of an audience—much less grow a loyal following—while discussing the complicated world of finance?

The upside for finance companies creating content is that they have a unique opportunity to connect with audiences. Why? Just about everybody wants to know how to make more money. Brands that position themselves as the gatekeepers of such knowledge have the potential to create very powerful content. But to keep people coming back for more, that content can't just be useful; it also has to be engaging.

In this e-book, we'll examine how five financial services brands successfully built audiences by investing in owned media properties and high-quality content about asset management and personal finance. While money may not be able to buy a loyal audience of consumers, these brands are figuring out what can.

Trends

Editorial, Not Marketing

Transparency, education, and creativity are supposed to be the hallmarks of good content marketing. Essentially, companies succeed as publishers when they tell stories, not when they push products.

But even in 2015, it's still incredibly hard for brands to commit to that approach. Pressure from executives who want content to directly drive sales can result in advertorial-style copy that is about as attractive—and as trustworthy—to consumers as a banking brochure.

However, each of the brands we profile below have built audiences through content that delivers true value to audiences. ANZ, based out of Australia and New Zealand, hired award-winning journalists to guide the company's BlueNotes blog. Mint hit their editorial

stride on the MintLife blog by creating highly shareable content and relying on A/B testing to figure out what resonated best with their audience. And Northwestern Mutual found success by launching smaller trade publications as part of a multi-channel strategy.

These organizations are proving just how much content can grow an audience when it's fueled by creative people making smart editorial decisions.

Building a Resource

While consumers may not want to hear a sales pitch, they still want help. And the brands that resisted the overt sales pitch reached more consumers by becoming trusted resources.

“If you didn’t like the article, you wouldn’t come back,” said Julie Salchert, Northwestern Mutual’s director of marketing integration. “When they come to realize that it’s not all about our product, they think maybe there is something we know that can help them.”

Offering valuable financial advice with no strings attached has proven to be an effective audience-building strategy for the best financial services brands, a strategy that even extends to social media channels. For example, Merrill Lynch committed to a social distribution

strategy without promotion that positioned the brand as a resource to customers.

“It’s important for us that our [Twitter feed](#) is not about promotion for Merrill Lynch,” said Bob Mirales, the director of content development and delivery for Bank of America Merrill Lynch.

“It’s about providing insights for that audience who wants to follow us about the world at large and what’s going on.”

Audience Targeting

Just because consumers want to learn how to manage their money doesn't mean it's easy for brands to supply them with that information. Finance is a broad topic full of intricacies that aren't easy to understand. An audience of young professionals, for example, might want simplified money management tips, perhaps with an emphasis on paying off student loans and saving for a down payment on a home. Meanwhile, a small-business owner with multiple properties, college-aged children, and looming retirement will probably want more in-depth advice about complex financial decisions.

Therefore, a site full of general financial advice aimed at anyone with money isn't effective. Brands need a specialty that sets them apart from competitors, and good content marketing comes down to targeting the right

audience at the right time. According to a [LinkedIn B2B marketing study](#), audience relevance was ranked as the most important aspect of effective content.

With that in mind, let's take a closer look at how a few impressive financial services brands were able to build owned audiences and reach more consumers by investing in content marketing.

5 Brands That Built an Audience

Mint: [MintLife Blog](#)



For established financial institutions and capstone banks, building an audience can be a little easier if customers are already familiar with your brand and name. But for Mint, a digital personal finance service founded in 2006, there was no head start. They had to start from scratch.

But from the get-go, Mint had a target audience in mind and a plan for reaching that audience. According to serial entrepreneur Sachin Rekhi, one of Mint's earliest goals was to get the attention of their prospective customers: young professionals. Since this demographic spent so much of their time online, Mint launched MintLife, a personal finance blog that would act as a significant money management resource for these young consumers, even though the company didn't have a finished product people could buy.

“They decided in the early days to invest heavily in building out MintLife ... independent of the eventual Mint.com product,” Rekhi writes [on his blog](#). “This created a welcome audience when their product eventually launched, and MintLife went on to become the number one personal finance blog on the web.”

Even in the early years, articles like “[Home Budget: Affordable and Cheap Dates](#)” and “[How-To Guide: Paying for College](#)” were perfect for that “welcome audience.” And when Mint eventually revealed its product—a tool that helped users budget their finances by gathering different accounts and balances in one place—the viral nature of the blog was key to the company’s rapid growth.

How rapid? Mint grew quickly enough to sell to Intuit for \$170 million after three years in business. By 2013, the tool reached [10 million users](#), many of whom trusted Mint to handle their sensitive banking information because of the blog’s smart, helpful content.

Building Content Demand

Since Mint was in the unique position of relying on its site for both sales and content marketing, they needed to make sure their content hit exactly the right audience.

While many established financial services brands already have more than enough capital to build a publication, Mint had to hustle in the early days before it sold. To create content on a tight budget, the team invited finance bloggers to write for free and sponsored other finance blogs. Those tactics eventually helped Mint attract 20,000 email subscribers.

To fine-tune their creation process without wasting money, the company seeded their content on popular distribution sites, building strong presences on Digg and Reddit and tracking the engagement after an article went live.

As Mint's former lead designer, Jason Putorti, told KISSmetrics, "Our app didn't have a high viral coefficient, but we had content that [did]."

That highly sharable content included features like "Trainwreck Tuesday," a series that highlighted personal finance disasters—some of which were crowdsourced—and in-depth interviews about personal finance habits with people such as Shelley Elmlad of About.com Financial Software.

In an interview with Big Think, Mint founder Aaron Patzer said that by the time the product was released, MintLife was driving more traffic than their competitors were to their entire websites.

Demand was so great, in fact, that their system couldn't initially handle allowing all 20,000 email subscribers to try the beta version of the product. Mint took the hurdle in stride and created even greater demand by giving readers who wanted early access to the product the ability to post an "I want Mint" badge on their blog or social media profile—which helped boost the search ranking for MintLife content and generated even more buzz for the young company.

Once the groundwork was all laid out, Mint started to see incredible results. Seven months after Mint's 2006 launch, Bloomberg reported the site was adding 10,000 new users each week. That momentum still continues today. TrafficEstimate.com shows

Mint.com received nearly 12 million visits in January of 2015, up almost 8 million year-over-year.

Brands from all industries dream of building an audience that big. For Mint, there's no need to dream. The brand committed to content from the very beginning, and as a model to other financial companies, Mint's owned media property not only became a hub for resourceful articles, but also a place for users to open up their wallets and buy a financial product.

ANZ: BlueNotes

BlueNotes

Australia may be known more for surfing and sunshine than savings bonds, but that didn't deter Australia and New Zealand Banking Group Limited, also known as ANZ, from riding the content marketing wave last year.

Instead of publishing a lot of quick-hitting lifestyle content, ANZ went in a different direction, emphasizing big-picture topics such as national rate cuts and trend pieces about nearby countries like Indonesia and Myanmar. And although this type of content isn't designed to generate a lot of social shares, it's perfect for ANZ's very specific target audience: policymakers, academics, and shareholders.

Since ANZ's blog, BlueNotes, launched in April 2014, it has attracted more than 110,000 unique views. The company can expect to see between 5,000 and 6,000 views on their most popular articles, which is respectable in its own right, but even more impressive when

you realize they're only focusing on a niche subset of readers. Successfully honing in on that target is one of the main reasons Australia's 2014 BEfest Awards named BlueNotes "Brand Site of the Year" before it had even been live for a full 12 months.

Even though ANZ has won awards and reached a high-value audience in a short timeframe, polishing their approach took trial and error.

"It's been an interesting journey," Paul Edwards, group general manager of corporate communications for ANZ, told me. "Traditionally, we tried to reach our audience

through media relationships and traditional publications. One of the issues with media relations is you never really understand who you've reached."

With such a specific audience in mind, not knowing who's listening or reading can be a huge roadblock, one ANZ solved by establishing an owned media property that gave them the freedom to build personal relationships with readers on their own turf.

Touting Thought Leadership

Audience ambiguity is no longer an issue for ANZ. With BlueNotes, the brand knew exactly who they wanted to reach. In some ways, they'd been building this audience for years, sending executives to meet with members of their three key demographics.

Before BlueNotes became a financial news resource, ANZ stepped back and examined their social media platforms. On Twitter, they had 50,000 followers, and on LinkedIn, they had 164,000 followers. The challenge then became using content to feed those social channels so ANZ could connect with the right people.

"BlueNotes is really the child of our social media strategy," Edwards said.

"To have an effective social media strategy, we had to have a great content strategy to run alongside that. BlueNotes is the content engine for social engagement."

With such a specific, high-brow audience in mind, thought leadership became the angle of choice for the blog. Content pillars include the economy, technology and innovation, business and finance, leadership, sustainability and inclusion, and "The Asian Century," which covers the economic rise of Asian countries.

All of these pillars fall under the fitting tagline “Connecting News and Insights,” which is at the heart of what ANZ hopes to deliver to its audience. For example, in a [recent eight-minute video](#), ANZ CEO Mike Smith explained his confidence in the Australian economy and why the Reserve Bank of Australia should resist cutting interest rates. Other stories focus more on global financial news, like “[A Slow Start No Surprise for Shanghai-Hong Kong Stock Connect](#),” and still more on general insights, such as “[Philanthropy Isn’t Just for the Wealthy](#).”

Overall, many contributions come from company executives and chief economists, which bring a level of expertise to each article or video.

Quality Quotient

With such an educated audience comes high expectations for quality content. From the very beginning, ANZ knew BlueNotes needed seasoned professionals and editorial transparency to succeed.

“One thing we did well was hire a very respected senior journalist to run BlueNotes, which immediately gave us enormous credibility,” Edwards said,

“and then not publishing stuff that seemed to be too self-serving. We try to put everything through that filter so we aren’t publishing stuff that is just corporate PR.”

In [“Financial Services Still Has a Gender Problem,”](#) for example, one writer analyzes the hot-button issue of gender equality in ANZ’s own industry without trying to claim the company is above reproach. The story simply explores the results of a study while leaving room for a commenter to mention that ANZ could do better on the issue themselves.

For many financial services companies, the legal labyrinth of compliance departments can water down content, compromising its quality, relevance, and journalistic integrity. But because of BlueNotes' thought-leadership focus, rather than a consumer marketing focus, ANZ was able to avoid some common obstacles that get in the way of successful publishing.

As Edwards said: "Every piece of content has to be signed off by me, but unless there is particular reason to, we don't run anything by compliance or legal. That gives us flexibility, but also a big responsibility."

Thus far, that process has served ANZ extremely well, coloring BlueNotes with polish, professionalism, and relevance, three common traits for just about every premium publisher.

Global Growth

Developing content for a niche audience on BlueNotes has proven to be so successful for ANZ that the brand is now developing more publications to reach new audiences. For the financial firm from Down Under, these new media properties could potentially target female executives, small businesses, and corporate clients.

Yet even as they explore launching trade pubs, ANZ is still very committed to growing its core audience on BlueNotes. Seventy-five percent of the blog's readership is based in Australia, so the brand's next focus is New Zealand, where ANZ has the largest presence of any bank. After that, the next stop is Asia. ANZ already has locations in more than 20 countries, and BlueNotes has channels for content focused on North Asia, South and Southeast Asia, and Greater China, some of which is translated into simplified or traditional Chinese.

These are big plans for an emerging bank, but by committing to building an owned audience, ANZ positioned itself nicely for long-term growth regardless of where it tries to expand.

"More content for different geographies is what we're focused on," Edwards said. "But we're pretty happy with what we've done so far."

(Full disclosure: ANZ is a Contently client.)

Sun Life Financial: Brighter Life



Canada-based Sun Life Financial had some hype to live up to as soon as they launched their lifestyle and money management platform Brighter Life in 2011. At the time, [the *Financial Post*](#) immediately called Brighter Life “worth taking note of—particularly if you’re an executive developing corporate blogs, web sites and trying to develop a social media strategy.”

Since then, Brighter Life has risen to the occasion. According to [the Content Marketing Institute](#), within the first 9 months of launch, more than 620,000 pages of content were consumed on the blog, which helped the platform convert approximately 4 percent of traffic to leads and garner more than 8,700 click-throughs to SunLife.ca—exactly the impact the brand was aiming for.

As Brenda Spiering, manager of content strategy at Sun Life Financial and editor for BrighterLife.ca, put it:

“Brighter Life was launched as a way to reach consumers where they are, searching for information online before they may have even considered Sun Life or are aware that their needs may be met by a financial product.”

Starting With Quality

Early on, Brighter Life shaped itself as a resource by focusing on useful tips and tools about money, health, family, working life, and retirement. And like Mint and ANZ, Sun Life made sure their content served consumers, not the company's bottom line.

“Consumers are quick to dismiss content that's little more than thinly veiled sales messaging,” Spiering said. “Brighter Life articles do not discuss Sun Life-branded products and services. Instead, the site looks to engage consumers with content that's credible, unbiased, written in plain language, and free of marketing tactics.”

For lifestyle content like “[Five Fun Ways to Get Your Family Fit](#),” it's a bit easier to steer clear of a marketing agenda. But even for their investment content such as “[How Will Bank of Canada Rate Cut Affect Consum-](#)

[ers?](#),” Sun Life avoids mentioning any of their financial products. These kinds of articles smartly stick to general advice about how consumers will be affected by the financial news of the day.

Once that editorial model was put in place, Sun Life continued to invest in content as it rolled out a French-language edition for Quebec in 2011 called [Simplement Brillant](#), before launching custom platforms in [Indonesia](#) in 2012 and the [Philippines](#) in 2013. Each platform has its own editorial team tasked with developing content for its region.

And as Spiering pointed out, even shared content is “carefully adapted to ensure the nuances of the language and the cultural references work for their specific audience group.”

Paid Content Distribution

No matter how refreshingly unbiased content might be, for a brand to grow a sizable audience, people still need to know it exists. When Sun Life started publishing their work, they were buoyed by an advertising campaign that included paid search, ads on popular publications, and targeted ad buys for Facebook sponsored posts.

But even though that strategy worked well in the beginning, Spiering explained it had to evolve as the blog continued to thrive.

Now that Bright Life has a loyal readership and large followings on social media, it has since decreased its paid distribution, which can be expensive and lead to inconsistent traffic. Today, with more than 155,000 Facebook followers across the four international platforms, Brighter Life's social network is its most powerful audience-building tool.

“As our social media followers and newsletter subscribers have grown,” Spiering said, “we’ve gradually reduced our paid content activation strategies and focused more on activation efforts across our own Sun Life web platforms.”

Those efforts include integrating links to Brighter Life content on both the Sun Life homepage and plan member community site as well as working with business partners to share targeted Brighter Life content.

Leveraging Content as an Internal Tool

While reeling in consumers may be crucial to Brighter Life's overall content strategy, that doesn't mean the brand is limiting its audience growth only to potential customers.

Sun Life has started to leverage their financial advisors as promoters of the platform, using content to educate and engage their existing clients.

When a particular article relates to a client's needs, Sun Life advisors now reach out with a direct link or send timely and relevant content to everyone on their email lists and social channels. Sun Life even rolled out a tool to automatically add advisor contact information to

Brighter Life pages after an article gets shared. So while the advisors aren't penning guest posts themselves, they are helping create a culture of content, which is a smart move for any company that wants to seriously transform their marketing from top to bottom.

Banking on content takes support from executives, and any company actively working to get more employees involved in the marketing strategy, regardless of their editorial experience, knows what they're doing. And for Sun Life Financial, it's clear they've known what to do every step of the way.

Bank of America Merrill Lynch: A Transforming World



Sun Life Financial isn't alone in turning their focus inward to grow their publication's audience. In fact, Bank of America Merrill Lynch built their own publication, *A Transforming World*, which contains insightful content on five investment themes—people, innovation, markets, government, and Earth—with that very concept in mind.

“[*A Transforming World*] is really about providing content to our clients that describes how what's happening in world around them might be impacting their investment strategy,” said Bob Mirales of Bank of America Merrill Lynch. “Rather than read a dry research report on something to get some insight, you might need someone with more expertise to help unravel it.”

Advisor Action

Fortunately, clients always have an expert within reach if something isn't clear at first: their financial advisor, or FA. Joseph Corriero, Merrill Lynch's director and head of digital marketing for its global wealth and investment division, told [Direct Marketing News](#) that FAs are at the heart of everything the company does and have become one of the most important delivery channels for A Transforming World, similar to how other companies send salespeople into the field armed with white papers and other content to educate prospective customers.

"We now have FAs send out emails on any particular piece of content they're interested in sharing with a client," Mirales said. On top of that, Bank of America Merrill Lynch gave advisors unique content privileges. With certain articles, they can access an "advisor side" that's only available internally, which includes additional in-

formation on the topic and helps the FAs provide more insight to the client.

One of the key tenets of successful content marketing is the ability to give your audience content they can't get from competitors. Not enough brands use exclusivity to their advantage. But for Bank of America Merrill Lynch, this exclusive content not only allows for FAs to quickly connect with a ready-and-waiting audience, but it also gives them the opportunity to explore the site and become loyal readers on their own.

Covering All the Bases, All the Time

When A Transforming World went live in 2013, it was built as a place that could complement the company's existing content platforms, such as [Merrill Lynch Edge](#).

"The Global Fight Against Obesity," for example, appears as [just a video](#) within a webcast library on Edge. But on A Transforming World, the video is accompanied by a transcript and text. With this system in place, the many divisions of Merrill Lynch can tweak A Transforming World content for their unique needs.

"The strategy is to have really deep curriculum so we can align with the conversation that is going on," Mirales said.

In an interview with Direct Marketing News, John von Brachel, Merrill Lynch's director of content and publications for its global wealth and investment division, gave a concrete example of how this plan plays out. The blog will prepare a piece of content about, say, gold fluctuations before the topic is newsworthy. Then, if gold starts trending on Twitter, Merrill Lynch can send out a link to their piece and offer insight on the topic before others have time to publish.

A lot of brands want to publish at the speed of news, but for a huge company like Bank of America Merrill Lynch, there are going to be certain compliance checkpoints that content creators can't bypass. But as Mirales and Brachel have shown, just because a company is large doesn't mean it can't be nimble and ambitious with its content marketing efforts. The lesson here: Plan what you want to publish in advance. With a lot of foresight and a little luck, brands can stay relevant regardless of the situation.

Northwestern Mutual: Learning Center & Inspire 360



About two years ago, Wisconsin-based financial services firm Northwestern Mutual started posting articles about retirement, financial planning, and entrepreneurship to [Forbes BrandVoice](#). In May of 2014, the brand launched [Inspire360](#), a digital publication focused on female leadership. Seven months later, Northwestern Mutual's corporate site was revamped to include a [new content hub](#) with much of the work the company posted on the other outlets, including their digital monthly newsletter.

(Full disclosure: Forbes BrandVoice is a Contently client.)

How's that multi-channel approach working for them now? With a small team, Northwestern Mutual generated more than 2 million pageviews on its BrandVoice channel in 2014 and built an email list with approximately 700,000 subscribers.

“Our philosophy is build once, use many,” said Julie Salchert. “It’s about taking a piece of content and chunking it up for multiple audiences and driving traffic.”

Walk Before You Can Run

With so large a readership after only two years, one might assume Northwestern Mutual came charging out of the gate with their Forbes BrandVoice content. But in reality, the company was silent on social media, and didn't even announce internally that the channel had launched for the first six months.

“My boss takes the approach of ‘First you need to crawl, and then you need to walk, and then you need to run,’” Salchert said. “He didn't want us to show everybody until we had a pretty significant pool of content and proved that we could deliver.”

Six months later, the channel was announced—internally. But once Northwestern Mutual had the infrastructure in place to publish consistently, they started growing rapidly thanks to *Forbes* homepage promotions and distribution traffic powered by Outbrain. In other words, transitioning from crawling to an all-out sprint didn't take very long.

Keeping it Honest

Salchert, a journalist by training, came to Northwestern Mutual with a commitment to unbiased content creation.

“I wanted to create stories that added value and not have people say, ‘I could see right through that,’” Salchert explained.

Though she has firmly acclimated to the role of marketer, the journalistic principles she brought to the job still drive the objectivity of Northwestern Mutual’s content—so much so that the hands-on *Forbes* team that used to check every article for impartiality has mostly left the channel in Salchert’s hands.

“We have very little interference from *Forbes* because we’ve proven over time that we have thought leadership and good content,” she explained. “We have interesting stories and interesting topics.”

No one can accuse Northwestern Mutual of being unoriginal. Stories like “How Drew Brees Is Helping Teen Entrepreneurs Score Success” from the brand’s *Forbes* channel and “Women Score Higher on Leadership Metrics, so Why Do We Prefer Male Bosses?” on Inspire360 bring fresh takes to a finance industry that’s often inundated with dense reports and dry writing.

After all, the distribution strategies and internal tools are only beneficial if a brand can tell meaningful stories. With Salchert at the helm, it’s abundantly clear Northwestern Mutual has storytelling set as its top priority.

Conclusion

As these five companies know firsthand, audiences will read about complex topics if brands dissect them in unique and engaging ways. In the finance industry, trust is key. Companies like Mint, ANZ, Sun Life Financial, Bank of America Merrill Lynch, and Northwestern Mutual have built high-value audiences by giving their readers helpful articles, videos, and infographics that make it easy to understand money management .

As the content marketing arena becomes more crowded with just about every brand fighting for consumer attention, smart companies will separate themselves by producing work that is transparent and educational.

Content is the hot new investment in the world of finance, and the companies that are investing with purpose are seeing some impressive returns.

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