

Contently

The Ultimate Content Strategist

Playbook No. 2:

Strategy and Roadmap



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In 2008, General Electric CMO Beth Comstock had just returned to the company after a 28-month stint leading the digital team at NBC Universal. Back at GE and in the midst of a global recession, her goals were twofold. First, to continue to spur innovation inside what she calls “the world’s oldest startup.” And second, to connect with shareholders and the public at large, lifting back the curtain on the groundbreaking work happening inside a company Thomas Edison founded 130 years prior.

She identified content as the answer and set about planning for a future in which GE would be a publisher, not just a marketer. It didn’t take long for her plan to work. Now, it would be tough for anyone to come up with a better example of a brand building a more effective content roadmap than GE.

“It’s been a big change in our company—we’ve tried to redefine the role of marketing,” [Comstock reflected](#) in an interview with Scott Belsky during a 2011 Behance conference. “When you hear marketing, most people think you’re the advertising people. But there’s a lot more we expect from marketing. We’ve tried to make sure that marketing has been redefined as innovators. Probably another word for it in our company is instigators—trying to get change going.”

With Comstock’s guidance, storytelling would become the powerful force that pushed the company forward and lifted it to new heights, both internally and externally. It would be the impetus that drove the company’s innovation forward and invited shareholders and customers to reimagine GE on the cutting edge, which played a central role in the company’s [remarkable post-recession turnaround](#). And it would lead to GE’s rise as a media powerhouse in its own right.

Today, [GE Reports](#), the company's tech magazine, has a devoted audience of over half a million monthly readers and commonly tops Reddit boards with groundbreaking stories about the emerging technologies GE is developing. In concert, GE has developed an active, devoted following on nearly every social channel—from stalwarts like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn to emerging platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest, and Tumblr.

“Beth had vision. GE had vision. It felt like an exciting place to be,” reflects Melissa Lafsky Wall, a veteran reporter and editor who contributed to the GE Reports relaunch while working for Group SJR, a content marketing agency. “Everywhere I had been working felt like death—‘This magazine is going to close,’ ‘We’re working hard but there’s no future here’—but this felt like an opportunity where an organization was excited about creating content, and making money from that content was not the top priority. And that created a sense of possibility, a sense of freedom, because magazines were folding right and left.”

That vision is the reason GE is the darling of the marketing industry today. The company began with clear goals and identified a space in the content landscape where they could serve an audience and thrive. They cultivated every internal asset that could help them succeed in their storytelling mission and brought in outside help when needed.

“The early thinking was, ‘Let’s actually do smart, professional news technology in the science/technology space and have it be written by veteran reporters and be edited by a professional editor and publish it in a GE magazine,’” Wall says. “That was a revolutionary magazine at the time, and we did it well, and GE was really forward-thinking in their ability to think like a publisher.”

What GE did is rare. At a crucial point in their content marketing journey, GE went above and beyond in their self-evaluation and planning, and it's not a coincidence that seven years of success followed.

The importance of planning can't be underestimated. According to CMI's 2015 report, just 35 percent of B2B organizations and 27 percent of B2C organizations have a documented strategy, and those that don't are paying dearly for their lack of planning. Among B2C organizations, 60 percent of those who have a documented strategy rate themselves favorably in terms of content marketing effectiveness, compared with 32 percent of those who only have a verbal strategy. And B2C organizations with a documented content strategy are almost twice as likely to be successful at tracking ROI.

So why do brands consistently fail to document their content strategies when overwhelming quantitative and anecdotal evidence—not to mention simple logic—says you absolutely need to do so?

One theory: Brands are now in uncharted territory when it comes to content marketing, and outlining a documented content strategy is hard. There isn't an established template for how to proceed.

Until now.

In [the first installment of our Ultimate Content Strategist Playbook series](#), we covered how brands should evangelize content within their organizations, identify goals, and set themselves up for success. In this playbook, we're going to examine how you can start planning your content strategy to develop a content roadmap that will set your company up for future results.

Every brand's content roadmap is different; each path to success is unique to that brand's story, perspective, assets, and goals. But there is an overarching approach that's proven to work—one we've refined after helping hundreds of brands reach their content marketing goals and after speaking with some of the brightest minds in the industry.

We can't tell you what your content roadmap looks like, but we can tell you how to design it. In this e-book, we'll break down the development of a sound content strategy step by step, including:

- A. Adopting the mindset and philosophies shared by successful content marketers.
- B. Identifying your primary and secondary audiences.
- C: Auditing your organization to identify all existing storytelling assets.
- D: Conducting a gap analysis to identify the topics, perspective, or voice that present opportunities to reach your intended audiences.
- E: Creating a mission statement to guide your content strategy and execution.

2. Adopting a Winning Perspective

What's the secret ingredient to good content marketing? That's the question everyone's trying to figure out, and if you Google it, you'll find a thousand different blog posts with varying answers. But when you talk to the most successful content marketers, three common strategies emerge.

Content First, Marketing Second

There's a shared philosophy running through the brains of the leaders behind the world's most successful branded content, and it goes something like this: Forget the "marketing" part of content marketing. At least when you're first starting out.

The rise of GE Reports is thanks in no small part to Thomas Kellner, a veteran editor from *Forbes* whom Comstock brought on board as GE Reports' managing editor in 2011. Kellner approaches his job at GE as a purely editorial endeavor.

"I really approached it as an online magazine rather than thinking about it as a company blog. I wanted to produce an online magazine that tells people something new," he says.

"I basically ignored press releases and focused one hundred percent on storytelling. My stories have real protagonists who are trying to solve real problems and reach real outcomes."

The same fundamental philosophy is echoed by Rand Fishkin, the founder of Moz, one of the world's premier marketing software companies and SEO thought leaders that sports an audience of over 300,000 readers.

“We want to try to help marketers first,” Fishkin says. “That’s our underlying goal. Then if it so happens that they end up becoming customers of Moz, that’s great, too, but that’s a side benefit. We really don’t think about content marketing as being part of our funnel. It’s part of our mission.”

Like Moz, HubSpot is the envy of many in the content marketing world. Its three robust blogs see 2 million views per month and have powered the company toward a near-billion-dollar IPO. VP of Marketing Joe Chernov explains that protecting their content from the influence of marketing has been a crucial factor in that success.

“It’s taken the company a long time to build this asset, and it was a huge luxury for me to inherit when I joined a little over a year ago,” Chernov says. “But owning your audience comes with huge responsibilities—namely the need to ‘protect’ that audience from marketing’s shadow. Our blog generated 2 million views in January. 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.”

Those in the agency world are coming to the same realization. As chief content strategist at Edelman, Steve Rubel has seen what works in content marketing both from a bird’s-eye view and in the trenches. He agrees that putting storytelling first is crucial to content marketing success.

“Brands need to start with an audience-centered perspective,” he says. “I think too many brands start with: ‘What do we want to talk about? What’s our message?’ They’re not thinking about how content flows from the people who create it to the people who ultimately are going to consume it and all the different diversions within that.”

Before you start to plan your content marketing roadmap, you need to adopt that audience-centric perspective and focus on what your audience might want from you, not what you want from them.

“Don’t Build a House on Land You Don’t Own”

A second common element you’ll find among content marketing’s biggest success stories is a firm belief in owning the property where you publish your content, as opposed to relying purely on social or native advertising.

HubSpot’s Chernov likes to quote a line from the company’s CMO, Mike Volpe: *We don’t like to build houses on other people’s land.* “Meaning it’s better to own the channel and content than just the content,” Chernov adds.

At GE Reports, Kellner notes that the data, relationships, and content ecosystem you develop through an owned media platform are all extremely valuable.

“It’s your audience,” he says. “You know who they are, and you can communicate to them directly. You know what they like, and you know what they don’t like. Once you have your site, it sort of weaves this seamless web over your content. No one story exists on its own.”

Kellner gives an example. In January, GE published a story about the Revolution CT scan, an exciting new non-invasive technology that creates stunning pictures of a patient’s internal organs.

“It’s really similar to what you would see like at the Bodies exhibit—that kind of level of detail,” Kellner says.

He published the story with some stunning GIFs that showed the technology in action. It rocketed up the Reddit boards and soon got picked up by the press far and wide, from *Newsweek* to *The Washington Post*. After about a week, that story ran its course, but then a funny thing happened: News outlets started picking up another GE Reports story, this one about a microscope that produces incredibly detailed pictures.

“Basically, when our CT scan became old news, there were journalists out there who still wanted to run on the story, so they went for the next thing,” Kellner explains. “The way they found out about it is because that microscope story was featured below our CT scan story.

“That ecosystem is really valuable, and GE Reports allows us to build and nourish that ecosystem.”

Fishkin, too, believes an owned audience has been essential to Moz, a company that generates all of their leads through inbound marketing. “I think it’s almost indescribably huge,” Fishkin says of the benefit of Moz having an owned audience. “I think if we didn’t have it, we’d be constantly working on building it.”

Relying on Your Brand's Expertise

Just because you're taking an audience-first approach to publishing doesn't mean you have to abandon the core mission and expertise of your brand—far from it, in fact. GE did not build their audience on the back of Taylor Swift GIFs, nor did HubSpot develop their readership behind promises of 10 celebrity transformations you just won't believe. Great branded content almost universally ties back to the unique expertise and knowledge a brand brings to the table.

The key is to tell stories that connect back to your brand without involving any overt promotion or contamination of editorial integrity.

“These are GE stories in the sense that they're always somehow connected to GE,” Kellner says. “But they have to be newsworthy enough so a person who is in no way connected to GE, interested in GE, or [who] owns GE stock would still walk away and say, ‘This is a really cool piece of information. Maybe I should come back and check on them more often.’”

Indeed, the incredible technology stories that Kellner and GE Reports cover all tie back to GE in some way. In a very real sense, Kellner is a reporter within his own company—much like Kurt Vonnegut, one of the company's first reporters in the 1950s.

“It’s basically just old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting,” Kellner says. “You have to go to the factories. You have to develop sources. You have to go to the labs and see what those guys are doing. It didn’t happen overnight for me. It took me a while to develop my network of sources, and to figure out who’s working on what.”

Similarly, Moz’s content is founded purely on the company’s own learnings. “It’s part of our DNA,” Fishkin says. “We believe in sharing and being transparent in putting out there the things that we’ve learned.”

That sharing of brand knowledge—whether it be a technology, a philosophy, an opinion, or an ideal—is universally at the core of great branded content.

3. Identifying Your Audience

Once you've embraced that your audience must come first, now comes the fun part: figuring out who, exactly, that audience might be.

Primary and Secondary Audiences

In marketing, there's a temptation to identify so many potential audiences that it makes your head spin. At Contently, however, we've found that a more simplified approach delivers the best results: Target a primary and secondary audience.

Your primary audience consists of that ideal reader you imagine yourself reaching with a content program that's firing on all cylinders. And in some cases, it may be necessary to identify a secondary audience as well. In our experience, we've found that pursuing more than two audience segments at a time can jeopardize the focus and effectiveness of a nascent content operation. If you have more than two audiences you want to reach, there's a good chance you need more than one content strategy.

Kellner, for example, identifies the two audiences of GE Reports as engineers and shareholders, a large group he calls "potentially a really big audience. Most people will not buy a jet engine during their lifetime, but who knows what's going to happen in 10 years? Maybe they'll get smaller, and everybody will have a personal plane or a flying car. There are a lot of people who could buy GE shares. GE Reports is an important outlet to really lay out the business case behind GE, and we do that fairly often."

While GE's intended audience is quite large, yours doesn't have to be as long as you're connecting with a group of people who are important to your business, using content to align with their interests at a high level.

“It doesn't need to be a large audience,” Rubel says. “It could be high-interest to 100 people, if that's the 100 people that you care about.”

In other words, audience size is all relative.

For another example, let's get meta. The intended audience of this e-book looks something like this:

PRIMARY:

Executive marketing decision-makers looking to embrace content marketing in a strategic way.

SECONDARY:

Brand managers and editors seeking resources to sell the vision of a comprehensive content marketing operation to their superiors.

Or take a finance company, for example; let's call them Immaculate Investing. Their primary audience might look something like this:

PRIMARY:

Individual investors who are just starting to explore their investment opportunities. **Code name: Millennial Money-makers.**

SECONDARY:

Individual investors who are actively building their retirement funds. **Code name: Accumulators.**

Level of Understanding

Of course, not every individual who fits within your target audience is going to have the same pre-existing knowledge of the general topic you plan to focus on. Therefore, it's important to ask yourself: What is the audience's previous knowledge of the subject?

We like to classify that level of understanding in up to five different groupings:

NOVICE:

Has an incomplete understanding, approaches tasks mechanistically, and needs supervision to complete them.

ADVANCED BEGINNER:

Has a working understanding, tends to see actions as a series of steps, can complete simpler tasks without supervision.

COMPETENT:

Has a good working and background understanding, sees actions at least partly in context, able to complete work independently to a standard that is acceptable, though it may lack refinement.

PROFICIENT:

Has a deep understanding, sees actions holistically, can achieve a high standard routinely.

EXPERT:

Has an authoritative or deep holistic understanding, deals with routine matters intuitively, able to go beyond existing interpretations, achieves excellence with ease.

Most of the time, however, two or three levels of understanding will do just fine. For instance, this is how Immaculate Investing would likely grade their sub-audiences:

MILLENNIAL MONEYMAKER:

Novice/advanced beginner. Limited or novice awareness of investment strategy or tools. Primary source of understanding is through surface-level media reports.

ACCUMULATOR:

Proficient/expert. The primary source of information is specialized investment media and financial advisors. Able or expert. The primary source of information is specialized investment media and financial advisors.

Demographics

Next it's time to understand the demographics of each of those sub-audiences even further. **What is the age, gender, education background, etc. of the target reader in each demo?**

Again, we'll use Immaculate Investing's target audiences as an example:

MILLENNIAL MONEYMAKER:

22- to 32-year-old college graduate on a promising career path.

ACCUMULATOR:

32- to 62-year-old professional in an successful career.

Interests and Needs

Now comes time to ask a crucial question: Why are these people reading, watching, or listening to your content? The fact you want them to isn't good enough, nor is the fantasy they just love your brand so much that they'll come running the second they see your next tweet.

The media landscape is crowded and competitive, filled with incredible content. What need or want brought these people specifically to you?

Neil Patel is the founder of three successful companies—KISSmetrics, Crazy Egg, and Quick Sprout—and has built blogs with over 100,000 monthly readers for each. In his experience, this step is where the content marketing of many big brands goes off course.

“Big brands are just throwing money at things, and they're not necessarily thinking it through fully,” Patel says. “Just like anything else in marketing, it's all about solving problems. If you can help people solve their problems through your content, you're much more likely to get them to read your blog and pick up much more traction than if you're saying, ‘Hey, let's spend one hundred grand on content marketing.’ All right, what are you going to do with one hundred thousand dollars?”

For Immaculate Investing, the interests of their two audiences would likely look like this:

MILLENNIAL MONEYMAKER:

Seeking authoritative investment resources since they're just starting to be concerned about learning to invest or managing their first few investments.

ACCUMULATOR:

Has a desire to maintain or accelerate the growth of a nest egg and are needs education about the options and methods available to continue growing existing investments.

Answers and Expectations

Now that you have a sense of the desires and needs of your audience, it's time to think about how you can provide solutions. **What specific problem can you solve? What value can you deliver?**

Immaculate Investment would likely respond to their target demographics as follows:

MILLENNIAL MONEYMAKER:

Education about potential investment options and blueprints for a long-term investment vision.

ACCUMULATOR:

Education about immediate investment options relative to specific life stages and events, and advice for how to continue investing with confidence.

4. Auditing Your Existing Storytelling Assets

There's a good chance you've already been creating content even if you don't have a documented strategy in place. Very few brands start their content marketing with zero storytelling assets on hand. Underdeveloped company blogs, social channels, existing white papers, data, internal subject matter experts—these things can all become huge components of your new content strategy.

At GE, engineers at the company are the primary source of Kellner's stories that go viral. They're the sources who let him know about incredible technologies the world has yet to discover.

“It’s basically just old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting,” Kellner explains. “You have to go to the factories. You have to develop sources. You have to go to the labs and see what those guys are doing.”

At Contently, we analyze each possible storytelling asset a company has already created by using the following format:

ASSET TITLE:

What the heck do you call this thing?

LOCATION & FORMAT:

Where does this content live, and in what form does it exist?

CONSTRAINTS:

What limitations are placed on this form of content?

POTENTIAL:

What potential stories could stem from this asset?

WORKFLOW:

How is this asset currently created and approved?

Let's examine what this would look like in action for Money Matters, a hypothetical pre-existing blog for Immaculate Investing:

ASSET TITLE:

Money Matters

LOCATION & FORMAT:

Living on the domain MoneyMattersBlog.com, Money Matters is updated twice a month with blog posts about investment tips. It's written by the marketing team at Immaculate Investing after they consult with top financial advisors (FAs) from the company.

CONSTRAINTS:

Limited frequency, and the depth of analysis currently falls short of what competitors are publishing.

POTENTIAL:

Money Matters is well-situated to serve as Immaculate Investing's primary content hub and vehicle for audience acquisition.

WORKFLOW:

Money Matters is owned by Immaculate Investing's marketing department; posts are also approved by the legal department.

An existing blog is an easy content asset to identify, but it could be trickier for Immaculate Investing to identify all of the other content assets that aren't as obvious, a list that could include: its own investment trends data, data and queries gathered at its customer call center, the expertise of its financial advisors and other internal subject matter experts, the expertise of outside investors, and traditional corporate comms messaging.

So let's look at how you'd break down an amorphous asset like user data:

ASSET TITLE:

User Investment Data

LOCATION & FORMAT:

Compiled semiannually by Immaculate Investing's data science team.

CONSTRAINTS:

For confidentiality reasons, the data must be displayed as percentage changes, not hard numbers. Data is only compiled semiannually.

POTENTIAL:

By compiling and analyzing the data monthly instead of semiannually, Immaculate Investing could position itself at the forefront of investment trends, using the data-driven storytelling to educate users and address their concerns. This would provide Immaculate Investing with a distinct competitive advantage in the content market

WORKFLOW:

Data is compiled internally.

After a thorough evaluation, most companies should be able to identify at least a dozen different storytelling assets that can serve as foundational pieces of content marketing or become the secret weapon that gives them a distinct competitive advantage.

5. Conducting a Gap Analysis

Want to know another one of the biggest mistakes brands make with their content marketing? Assuming they're only battling with their direct business competitors for consumer attention.

“The competition isn’t just, say, Samsung versus Apple or Unilever versus P&G,” Rubel explains. “The competition is for every minute of that stakeholder’s time. How do we create something that’s going to compete with that? And ‘that’ could be Hollywood, it could be Bollywood, or it could be the traditional media companies or digitally native media companies. The entire ecosystem is competing for attention from everybody else.”

When it comes to launching a brand publishing initiative, you want to avoid saturated areas as much as possible and look for the gaps that aren’t being served.

Visualizing this isn’t rocket science. In fact, it’s a simple five-step process.

STEP ONE:

Identify and list all publishers already serving the primary and/or secondary audiences you’ve identified.

STEP TWO:

As you spend time researching each publisher’s approach to content, make a list of:

- Audience types those publishers are targeting.
- Content formats they use (news, tutorials, video, etc.).
- Sources they use in their stories (consumers, executives, etc.).
- Topics they cover (investment tactics, individual stories, etc.).

STEP THREE:

Create a grid chart. Place the first list of competitive publishers on the vertical axis. Place the second list of content attributes on the horizontal axis.

STEP FOUR:

Color-code the report based on how often each publisher addresses each attribute on the vertical axis.



STEP FIVE:

Pay close attention to the grey (no evidence) and charcoal (rarely) “gaps” in the existing landscape; that’s where your opportunity lies. In our next Ultimate Content Strategist Playbook: Content Execution, we’ll provide a guide for how to turn these opportunities into specific content types, as well as a mission statement to guide your work everyday.

Conclusion

When I last spoke with Kellner, he was in a good mood. GE Reports was successfully expanding internationally, their stories were garnering lots of press, and less than halfway through the month, they'd already surpassed 300,000 readers.

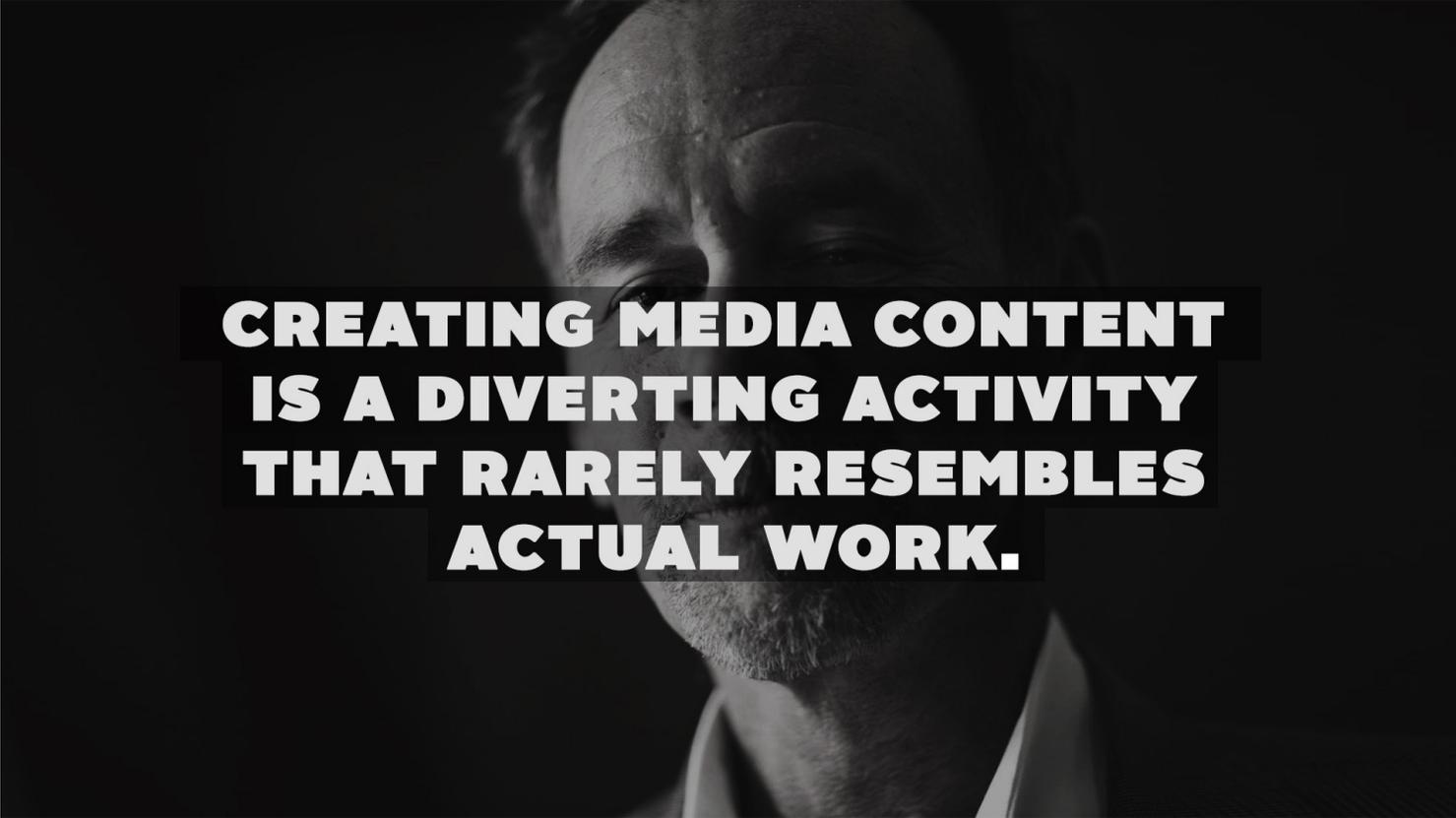
“That’s a good month,” he said. “I have to say, it is a good month. When it goes well, that’s basically what it is. We had a couple good stories. It’s a number, and I’m willing to share that number because it’s repeatable. It’s not the most we’ve ever had. And it’s not the limit.”

Around GE, there’s a distinct sense they’re just getting started—if content marketing is a marathon, they’ve hardly surpassed the three-mile mark. Perhaps it’s easier for a 130-year-old company to keep the long game in perspective. “Here we are, we’re 130 years old,”

Kellner says. “We were founded by Thomas Edison, and guess what? We are still working on freaking 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... Right now, we are really winning the hearts and the minds of people and really shifting the perception of GE.”

Kellner and GE can look at their content roadmap and see there’s more work to do, more room to grow, and great things over the horizon. With the right plan and approach, there’s no limit to what you can accomplish either.

Remember: This is going to be fun. At Contently, when we come to work every day, we often remind ourselves of some famous words from the late David Carr:



**CREATING MEDIA CONTENT
IS A DIVERTING ACTIVITY
THAT RARELY RESEMBLES
ACTUAL WORK.**

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