

Chapter 20

How Consumers Respond to Editorial Communication Strategies: Is Content Marketing Replacing Publicity?

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of Web 2.0 and the fact that brands can now communicate directly with consumers, it has been suggested that content marketing is replacing publicity. However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no previous study has supported this relationship. The purpose of this chapter is to explore this theory, drawing a comparative study on how consumers respond to both approaches. The effects of content marketing and publicity on message credibility, attitude toward the brand and purchase intention are analyzed, as well as the impact of consumers' antecedents on these indicators. The findings indicate that publicity is still relevant and is not being replaced by content marketing. This chapter illustrates the power of content in influencing customer decision making and provides relevant insights into how content must be used to serve consumers' needs more effectively, allowing a 360° view.

INTRODUCTION

In 2004, an expression that would change our lives forever was used for the first time. Web 2.0 marked the beginning of a new digital and interactive era and opened the door for companies to interact with their consumers in new and meaningful ways (Durkin *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, the possibility of a constant and less expansive dialogue has facilitated the creation and development of a relationship between brands and their existent – but also potential – clients (Zhang & Lin, 2015). The internet became the number

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one place to search and evaluate information (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016) and consumers became more demanding, expecting to be provided with the exact type of content they look for at all times (Kee & Yazdanifard, 2015).

As content marketing gives companies the opportunity to communicate straight with their audience and be wherever their customers are, the academy has been suggesting that all kinds of non-media brands are taking over what used to be the space for public communication (Verčič & Verčič, 2016; Zerfass *et al.*, 2016). Some authors point out the low success rate of mass media (Hetch *et al.*, 2017), others highlight the fact that brands can now act as their own gatekeepers (Andaç *et al.*, 2016), and it is suggested that the communication model based on mass media – namely, publicity – does not work anymore (Pulizzi, 2012; Zerfass *et al.*, 2016). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no previous study specifically compares publicity and content marketing as editorial strategies and analyzes their effects on consumers. The aim of this research is to fill in this gap, exploring the dynamics between the two strategies and assessing if content marketing might be – or not – replacing publicity as an editorial communication strategy.

In this context, the research question was defined as “how do consumers respond to content marketing and publicity editorial communication strategies?” and it was answered by measuring the impact of the two strategies on three indicators, dissecting these comparisons back-to-back with complementary consumers' content consumption habits information. It should be noted that this study is relevant for the academy – as a first step to assess if content marketing is, indeed, replacing publicity, as suggested – and it is also crucial from a managerial point-of-view, as it concerns the present and the future of the public relations sector and consequently the careers of thousands of publicists all around the world.

As the purpose of this study is to verify if the observed phenomena confirm a theory (Gelo *et al.*, 2008), a quantitative deductive methodology was selected. The research selection was guided by the work of Zerfass *et al.* (2016), namely a study about how European practitioners perceived the rise of new mediatized companies and organizational practices on the public relations sector. Considering that the research found highly significant differences between Northern and Southern Europe – meaning that different cultural contexts had an impact on how practitioners from different locations perceived these new collaboration practices –, the need for country-specific research became apparent. Moreover, Zerfass *et al.* (2016) pointed out the single-perspective of the study as a limitation, suggesting that future works should include the point-of-view of other relevant stakeholders, such as consumers. In Portugal, although previous research has been conducted about how communication agencies are embracing content marketing practices (see Machado & Gonçalves, 2014), there is no known study which focuses particularly on the consumers' point-of-view. Therefore, Portuguese consumers were defined as an appropriate research population.

A survey was made available, and 400 participants were selected using a mix of quota sampling and snowball sampling. The purpose was to evaluate the impact of content marketing and publicity on message credibility, attitude toward the brand and purchase intention ratings given by respondents. Statistical data analysis was conducted, and the results did not fully support what has been previously proposed by the academy. Research findings indicate that media relations strategies are still successful and thus are not being replaced by new content marketing approaches. On the other hand, the growing power of content matches what has been suggested and denotes that editorial communication strategies must be used complementarily.

From an academic perspective, this study fills in the lack of comparative research on content marketing and publicity, particularly in what concerns the consumers' responses. It highlights new directions

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