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By [Steve Kerho](#) [1]

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December 17, 2012

In the the digital world, boundaries have collapsed. So it's time for marketers to rethink digital-content development and management as shared content becomes increasingly prevalent.

For the last several years marketers have thought about digital-content development and management in terms of paid, earned, and owned. While these categorizations were once helpful, it is time to evolve our thinking.

An Evolved Paradigm

I believe that we should think about content in terms of paid and shared. In effect, collapsing the boundaries between earned and owned. Paid content remains unchanged. Shared content would be exactly that--shared between both the marketer and consumer. This isn't to say that the parties equally share in the responsibility to contribute. There would be a primary owner for each channel.

In the case of a marketer's brand website, clearly the primary owner is the marketer. But there should be relevant and meaningful opportunities for consumers to share in the creation of

content for this channel. This type of content can take many forms, including user-generated content (UGC) for new product applications, galleries of product customization, reviews and product-usage tips.

I don't pretend that letting consumers participate in your brand website is easy. It is fraught with challenges. Obviously, a marketer would need an appropriate review process. The marketer would be responsible for helping to curate content in a manner that is viewed as both appreciative and appropriate from the consumer's perspective. But for marketers who are successful at this, there is a significant upside: The opportunity to turn site visitors into more engaged brand fans.

For some social properties, the primary owner may still be the marketer. Think of a brand's Facebook pages, with shared content sourced from the consumer. But for other properties, such as Instagram or Pinterest, the primary owner may be the consumer with the marketer playing a supporting role.

The need to consider this new categorization is driven by several factors including evolving consumer expectations and some bad habits many marketers have picked up. Let's examine some of these factors.

What Has Changed

The Consumer

Consumers have increasing expectations about their ability to interact with and contribute to their favorite brands and their websites. The growth of brand-focused UGC is clear evidence of these expectations as is the growing real-time commentary for many marketing campaigns. Think of all the Twitter activity during Super Bowl commercials.

But why must this participation be limited to only the earned channels? It is apparent that consumers desire a voice in a brand's owned media channels as well. At the end of the day, consumers believe that they are the brand as much as the marketer. A few brands are starting to operationalize this approach. For example, Grey Poupon has essentially turned its Pinterest page into the brand website. This is a great vision for the future of one form of shared content.

The Marketer

While consumer approaches to and expectations for earned and owned content has changed, the same cannot be said for many marketers. The basic issue is that too many marketers apply an outdated approach to content creation. And thinking in terms of paid, earned, and owned is partially to blame.

Many marketers are not doing a good enough job supporting their earned content once it's created. They have forgotten that "earned" media is just that--earned by generating ongoing interest through frequent updates and thoughtful curation. These marketers have shifted too much of the responsibility from themselves to the very customers they are trying to court. Sometimes it's done to save money and sometimes to speed content delivery. Whatever the reason the results are often the same--a channel that is low in engagement and participants.

Marketers could learn a lot from traditional publishers in this arena. The criteria for successful content must increasingly include reuse and sharing measures. Content that is widely shared

and easily syndicated across multiple channels is more successful than content that has a one-time use. And content that is not shareable is arguably not strategic. Shared content is, after all, a catalyst for advocacy, which was one of the primary goals of earned media.

It is also outdated to assume that content within an owned channel must only be sourced from the marketer. Any marketer that believes that they alone have a lock on the best content for their brand website is narrow-minded. Successful marketers recognize that good ideas can come from anyone, including people who are not on their marketing or agency team. In many ways, our consumers may have a more authentic perspective of our brand than we do, so why not leverage it?

Thinking in terms of Shared

Labels matter. They set expectations and mindsets. Referring to our key digital properties as “shared” more clearly and accurately sets the expectations that marketers should share more of their owned channels and play a more active role in their earned channels.

One thing we know for certain is that what worked in the past is no guarantee of future success. Digital evolution is relentless and often unforgiving. Perhaps a good place to start is to ask yourself how your digital content strategies would change if you thought in terms of paid and shared?

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