



# OPTIMIZE CONTENT MARKETING PERFORMANCE THROUGH ACTIVE AUDIENCE LISTENING

*New research from Content Marketing Institute and Vennli highlights the current challenges with technology and how overconfidence in our message is not the same as confidence in our audience.*

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Vennli

## *A message from our sponsor, Vennli*

Vennli is a proud sponsor of this study from Content Marketing Institute (CMI) and the ContentTECH Summit. At Vennli, we believe that connecting with your customer in meaningful ways is a result of a deep understanding of buyer journeys, personas, and the use of data—especially customer data. Bringing all of those together results in more intelligent content and messaging to audiences—and those audiences can, in turn, have more meaningful relationships with brands and companies.

However, a challenge exists. Forty-one percent of respondents say they do not have or are unsure if their organization has a documented content strategy—a strategy that may include elements such as business objectives, measurements, and desired outcomes. This can create gaps—in being able to demonstrate content ROI and in creating alignment across marketing teams and the organization.

Additionally, driving focus to the right audience is a significant issue. When thinking about the audience(s) within their market, respondents say they are challenged with prioritizing marketing effort toward one audience over another (71%) and knowing what is most important to the audience (61%).

All of this speaks to the need to put tools and resources in place to tackle these issues—whether that be taking steps to document just one aspect of your content strategy or to focus on a part of the buyer journey—say awareness—and deeply understanding what is most meaningful to just one persona. While you don't need to tackle it all at once, making inroads can help drive your content strategy—and the impact it has on your audiences.



# INTRODUCTION

## ARE WE LISTENING, OR WAITING TO SPEAK?

When we're listening to someone—whether it's a friend, a coworker, or our life partner—consider how often we're thinking only about what we want to say next.

You're in a meeting where your coworker is talking about the state of the business, the results from last quarter, or the proposed new project, and you have this internal Q&A dialogue in your head:

*“Wow, that’s a lot of data she just laid out. Do I agree with it? Which statements should I respond to? Should I ask a question now? I’m ready with an answer. What should I say to sound smart? What was I supposed to pick up from the grocery store?”*

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**We're “waiting to content” rather than listening to (or observing) what’s really happening with the audience we’re trying to serve.**

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We hear (and maybe even process) some of the words. But we're not actually listening. We're waiting to talk.

This happens with content and digital marketing, too. We're “waiting to content” rather than listening to (or observing) what’s really happening with the audience we’re trying to serve.

For example, the Content Marketing Institute (CMI) team recently worked with a professional services company that was sending “leads” to its sales team based on how many blog posts a person read, or how many thought leadership papers they downloaded. In one case, a potential client had downloaded two papers in one visit to the site. Conversion triggered!

The first piece of content was research supporting the top reasons their industry is being disrupted. The second was an interview with one of the company’s customers about their decision to make a fundamental change to their business.

The algorithm tagged this potential client as a lead, and sales got the notification to make a phone call. The salesperson was noticeably frustrated when the lead indicated she had no intention of buying and was unconvinced she needed to change.

In this case, the prospect was saying:

*“I’m trying to understand this concept, and I have unanswered questions about why we would change.”*

But the company wasn't listening. They were simply waiting for their turn to say:

*“Great, how much change would you like to purchase today?”*

# DO MARKETERS NEED HEARING AIDS?

So much of today's content and marketing technology messaging is crafted around helping managers deliver the "right message to the right person at the right time."

Salesforce found in its *State of Marketing, Fifth Edition* that more than half (52%) of marketing leaders surveyed are at least trying to use technology to engage customers with content in real-time on at least one channel.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, according to new research from the CMO Council, 42% of marketers surveyed believe that content engagement juggernauts such as Amazon, Google, Apple, Nike, and Starbucks are more effectively using customer experience technology as a driver for profitability and growth.<sup>2</sup>

However, in as much as there is high pressure and a plethora of technology for marketers to leverage in order to deliver the right content at the right time, most businesses are struggling. That same Salesforce research found that only 49% of marketing leaders believe they provide an experience that is completely aligned with customer expectations.

This gap is almost certainly due to today's overreliance on "waiting to content," and the pressure for speed. Much of today's marketing and content technology is designed to help marketers speak more, faster, across more channels, and with shorter and shorter wait times between what they'll say next.

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In fact, the CMO Council's *State of Engagement 2018* report noted that when asked to name the most important ingredient needed to ensure the consistent delivery of the customer experience strategy, 42% of marketers said "systems that leverage real-time data to deliver relevant, contextual experiences."<sup>3</sup> But the inherent assumption built into that, is that the content delivered in real-time is *relevant to the customer*. In other words, it's entirely possible that marketers are extraordinarily capable of delivering exactly the wrong message at the right time. It's telling then, that

the second priority the marketers in that study cited was an "organization-wide, single view of the customer to ensure uniform and consistent engagement."

Put simply: We can easily build the ability to speak in real-time, but we almost certainly need hearing aids to understand what we should actually be saying.

# NEW RESEARCH: THE 2019 CONTENT MANAGEMENT & STRATEGY SURVEY

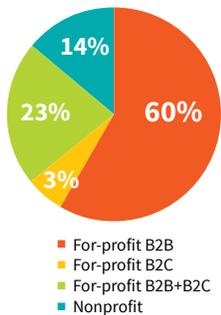
Now in its third year, CMI’s *2019 Content Management & Strategy Survey*<sup>4</sup> report shows how marketers are using technology to help create, manage, deliver, and scale enterprise content and marketing, as well as how their teams use it to more precisely target and engage audiences across the customer journey.

## METHODOLOGY

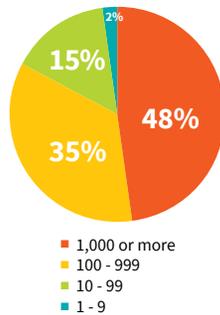
In January and February of 2019, CMI surveyed a portion of its marketer subscriber database. A total of 250 surveys were completed. Qualified respondents were those who indicated 1) their organization takes a strategic approach to managing content and 2) they are involved with some aspect of strategic content management in their organization. Agencies and consultants were excluded.

The survey defined a *strategic approach to managing content* as an approach that involves setting up processes, people, and technology to better scale and deliver content with the intent to improve the overall customer experience. It defined *success* as achieving the organization’s overall desired/targeted results for its content strategy.

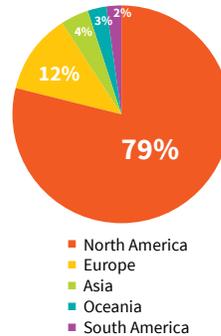
Nature of Organization



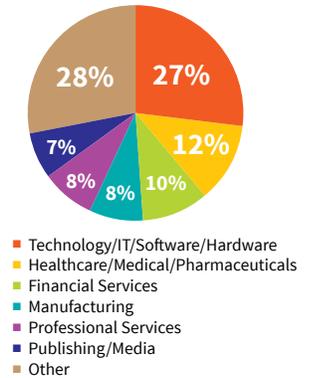
Size of Organization



Location of Organization



Industry Classification



The 2019 research suggests that while many organizations have a handle on the physical management of content assets (e.g., nearly 70% have undertaken content inventories and audits), there is a great need for optimizing the use of technology to make content flow more quickly and seamlessly throughout the enterprise—and to get that content in front of the right audiences at optimal times.

The broader findings on technology and content governance are presented in the *2019 Content Management & Strategy Survey* report. Here, we aim to illustrate the challenges content professionals are having around the use of audience-centric tools and processes, and how those challenges impact the success of their content and marketing.

## HOW ARE WE LISTENING TO AUDIENCES?

For this year's survey, we partnered with Vennli to dive deeper into how content professionals listen to their audiences and how that listening may (or may not) influence their content creation efforts. To that end, we started with a hypothesis. We believe that successful content professionals:

- Understand that (over)confidence in their company's message is not the same as having confidence about the audiences' needs
- Listen to their audiences to understand their needs *before* they create and distribute content.

Our overall findings were clear:

**Content professionals know what they want to say, but often lack insight on what their audiences want to hear, and are struggling with where and how to prioritize content as a result.**

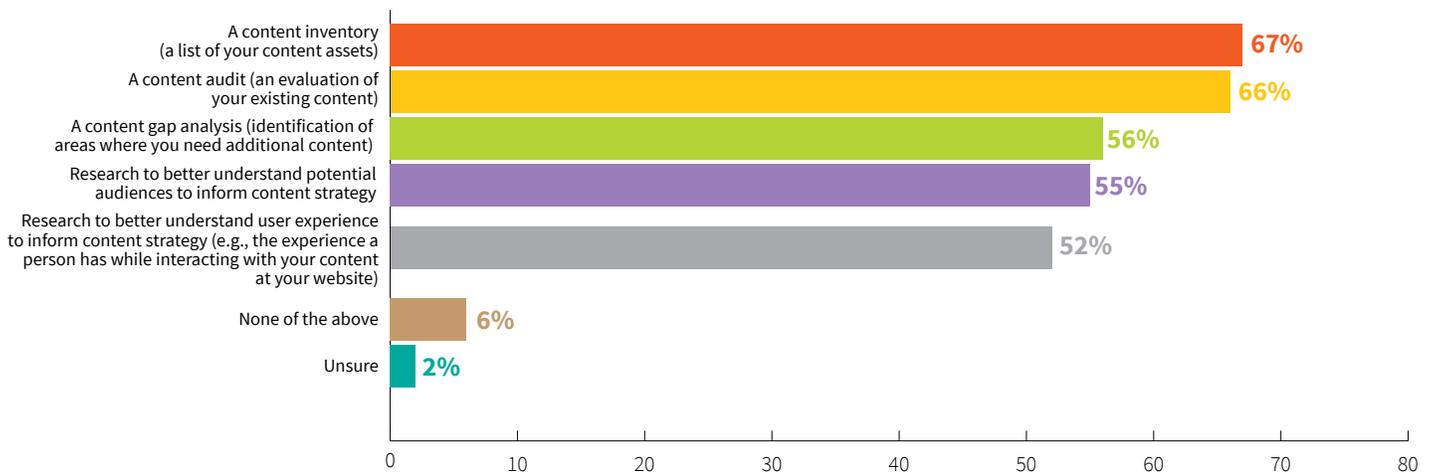
When businesses learn best practices for actively listening to customers to identify their true needs across the engagement journey; deploy systems to measure content performance to help prioritize editorial strategies; and create better internal communication between teams responsible for creating customer experiences, they have a much better shot at delivering the right message to the right customer at the right time.



# FINDINGS: “WE’RE TOO BUSY MANAGING TO MANAGE WELL”

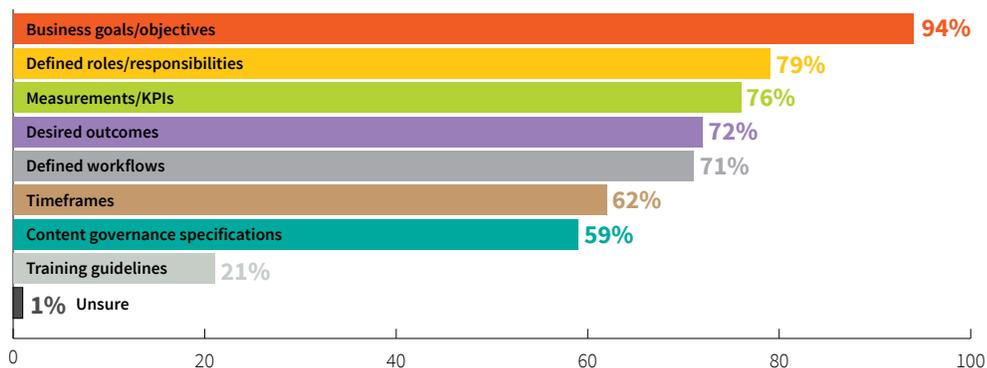
It was refreshing to see more businesses taking content as a strategy seriously: Nearly 70% report their organization has undertaken a content inventory or content audit, both of which can help a business better understand what they are currently saying to customers.

## Content-Related Activities Undertaken



Further, almost 60% say their organization has a documented content management strategy, and that these strategies include business goals/objectives, defined roles/responsibilities, measurements/KPIs, desired outcomes, and defined workflows. (In 2018, only 43% of those we surveyed had a documented strategy for managing content as a business asset.)

## Elements Included in Content Management Strategy



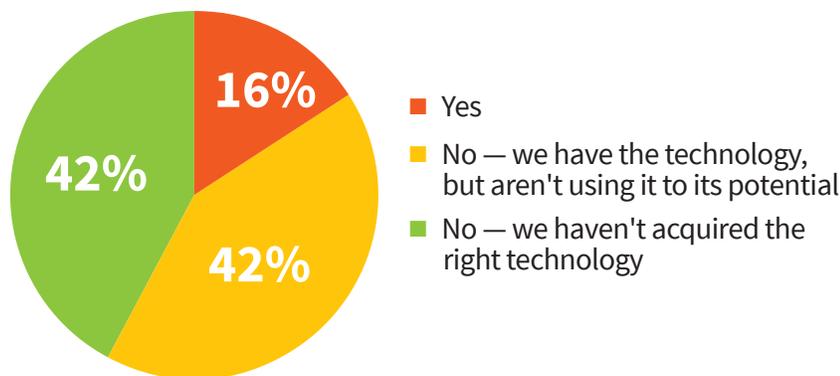
However, we also found that most businesses still seem to be manually “brute forcing” their way to better content strategies. In terms of scalability, 78% report that while they have some technology solutions in place, there is still a lot of manual work involved with their strategic content management-related efforts. This result is almost identical to last year’s finding, where 80% of those surveyed said they are doing a lot of manual work.

### Scalability of Content-Related Efforts



This finding makes sense when we look at content-related technology: 42% report their organization hasn’t acquired the right technology to manage content across the enterprise. And of the 58% who say they have acquired the technology, only 16% are using it to its potential.

### The Right Technology in Place to Manage Content Across the Organization



This is nearly the same percentage of respondents who last year said their organization isn't using acquired technology to its potential (14%). However, more respondents last year said they hadn't yet acquired the right technology (51%). This suggests that some businesses may have spent the last year acquiring even more tools, but aren't making any better use of them than they did a year ago.

Regarding strategic content management challenges, respondents cited their top two as communication between teams (65%) and enough staff skilled in content strategy (53%), suggesting that it's the *human part* of technology that continues to be an issue.

These results, which point to content strategies that are being stretched thin to produce more content in faster iterations, provided context for us to dig deeper into respondents' audience- and content intelligence-related challenges.

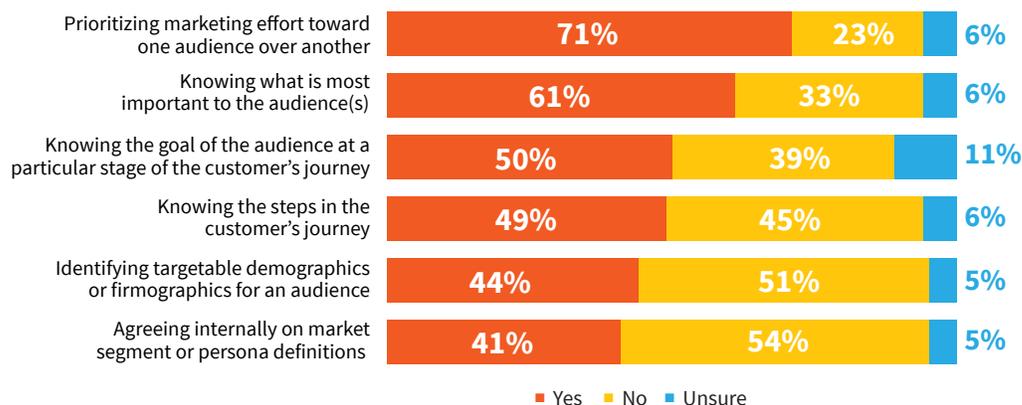
## THE VALUE OF CONTENT INTELLIGENCE AS A LISTENING TOOL

Most marketers realize they cannot continue to scale their efforts by simply hiring more people or demanding more content from the people they have. We also cannot “power” our way out by using technology to create more content, faster. Marketers must focus, and truly leverage every moment of attention they receive from potential customers. Listening to audiences to identify their most important needs should help us create a more optimized content strategy and improve our ability to determine what content to develop and how, where, and when to distribute it.

As part of this study, we included three questions about audiences and content planning. Specifically, we asked about the challenges faced when thinking about audiences; confidence levels while planning new content; and the typical approach taken to creating content.

The top audience-related challenge, by far, is prioritizing marketing effort toward one audience over another (71%). Interestingly, knowing what is most important to the audience is the number two challenge (61%).

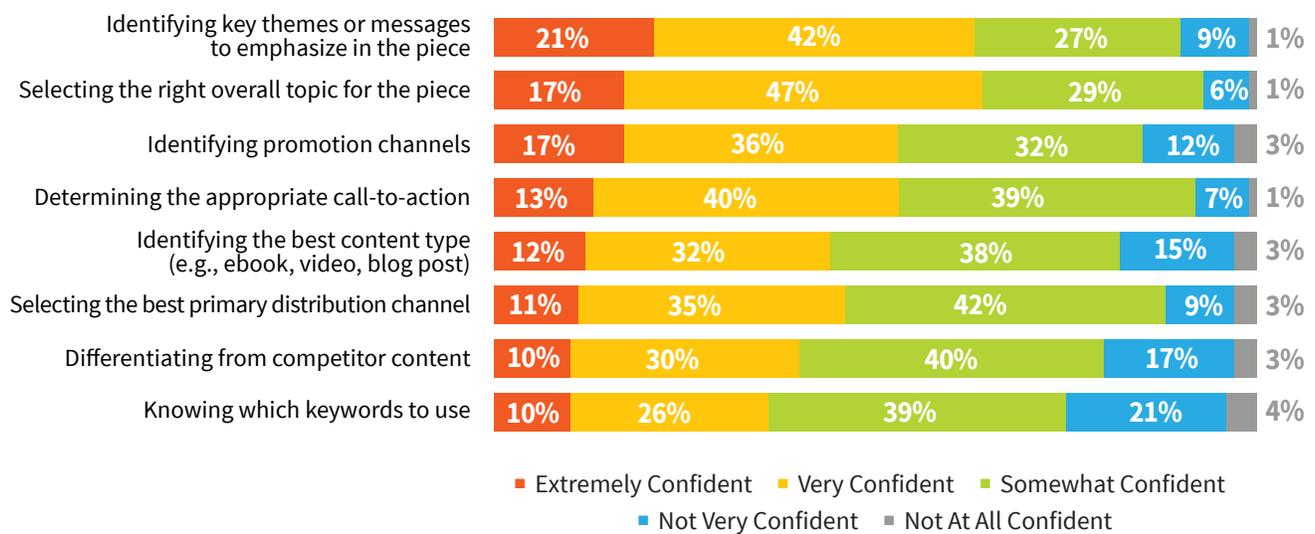
### Challenges Faced When Thinking About Audiences(s) Within Their Market



However, when we asked respondents how confident they feel while planning new content, their answers suggest an inverse level of confidence when compared with their top challenges. The areas respondents say they feel most confident about are:

- Identifying key themes or messages
- Selecting the right overall topic
- Identifying promotion channels
- Determining the appropriate call-to-action.

## Confidence Levels While Planning New Content

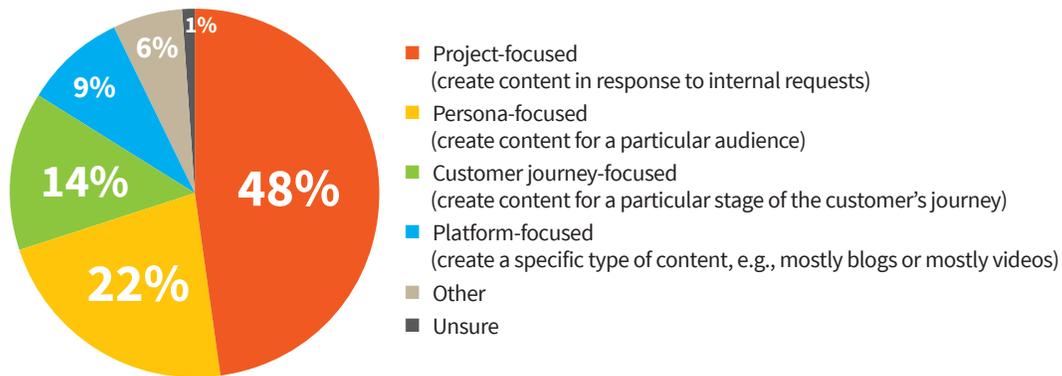


At first this seems confusing. If the top two challenges are knowing which audiences to prioritize and what is most important to the audiences, **how can it be that businesses are so confident about the messaging, channels, and calls to action they are creating?**

We found the answer in another question: When we asked about the typical approach taken by content creators in their organization, almost half (48%) said the creators are “project-focused” (i.e., they create content in response to internal requests).

This finding suggests that many businesses today are simply waiting impatiently to speak. They know what they want to say (because their content teams are primarily responding to internal requests to do exactly that). But they’re often unclear on what audiences actually want to hear—or which audiences should be prioritized.

## Typical Approach Taken by Content Creators



This makes sense, considering only 10% of respondents strongly agree their organization is delivering the right content to the right person at the right time. And while 39% somewhat agree, more than half (51%) are neutral or disagree.

It's time for marketers to focus, listen, and get much better at understanding how to deliver content that will solve their customers' needs.

## ACTIVE AUDIENCE LISTENING: IMPROVING OUR ABILITY TO CREATE CONTENT WITH CONTENT INTELLIGENCE

Research shows the average person listens at only about 25% efficiency.<sup>5</sup> In any average conversation, we miss around three quarters of the meaning of what is being said. Most often, we are either not paying attention, or waiting to speak.

In our personal relationships, the solution to the “waiting to speak” phenomenon is to engage in “active listening.” In active listening, we concentrate on what is being said, acknowledge it, respond, and remember.

Several key principles are involved in active listening, but four of the most important are:

### FOCUS—STOP TALKING & JUST LISTEN

When someone is in active listening mode, they don't interrupt, or finish someone else's sentences. They concentrate on what the speaker is saying.

## EMPATHIZE—UNDERSTAND THE SPEAKER’S POINT OF VIEW

Active listeners aren’t just filing away ideas to either address or dispute. They make a conscious effort to understand the speaker’s point of view and the ideas being expressed.

## PATIENCE & WAITING FOR NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

A pause—even a long one—doesn’t necessarily mean the speaker is finished. Similarly, we don’t just listen with our ears, but with our eyes. Active listeners watch for other indicators, such as body language or tone of voice.

## REMEMBERING—BUILDING MEMORY

Active listeners remember what they hear—some even use tools to help them recall entire conversations.

We can apply a similar set of principles to our content and marketing strategies. By actively and consistently examining our audiences’ needs and really listening to what they’re telling us, we can improve on the how, what, where, and when of content creation and distribution.

# THE ACTIVE LISTENING OF CONTENT MARKETERS

As we’ve discovered with this research, there are large opportunities to improve our content strategy performance by switching to a more active and continual listening strategy, rather than simply waiting to speak.

At CMI, we often discuss the need for marketers to continually look at their audiences’ needs (before they start creating content) to improve the quality and performance of content. This can be tough, however, when marketers are under constant pressure to publish content.

Yet rather than simply pushing out content in a format that matches the request of internal business managers (or that they *think* audiences will interact with), marketers can use intelligent tools to surface audience needs ... in other words, gather insights about what really matters to the audience—*before* taking any further steps. They can use these insights to optimize and evolve content before anyone in the audience even raises a hand to identify themselves. These tools can help marketers answer more fundamental questions about their audiences and content, such as:

- What content works for whom?
- Where do we have content gaps for existing personas, and where are the emerging personas?
- How do we assign the most effective writers/editors/designers to projects?
- How do we make sure we’re working effectively with the assets we have?
- How do we articulate content ROI and react effectively to changing strategic needs?

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**There are large opportunities to improve our content strategy performance by switching to a more active and continual listening strategy, rather than simply waiting to speak.**

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Ultimately, marketers must be able to listen as well as they speak. We can look to the four key principles of active listening as best practices for getting started.

## THE FOUR PRINCIPLES OF ACTIVE LISTENING FOR CONTENT PERFORMANCE

If we apply the four principles of active listening, we begin to see an integrated approach take shape—an approach that brings together human process, scalable technology, and measurable data.

### FOCUS—STOP TALKING & JUST LISTEN

Does your organization possess content intelligence? Do you segment content consumption by audience, study that data, and develop actionable insights to share with your team? Do you use those insights to develop and optimize content that customers truly want at every stage of their buying journey? Can you stop publishing (even for a short time) to assess the gaps in your content strategy?

You can't just look at what's "most popular" on your site or blog to learn what's resonating with your audience. Remember: the "most useful" hammer is completely useless if you don't have a nail. Develop a systematic approach and look for tools to help you determine what matters most to your audiences. Compare your efforts to your competitors' (both content and product), and identify any new, niche audiences emerging from different segments.

Set aside time to just focus and listen to hear what's really being said.

### EMPATHIZE—UNDERSTAND THE SPEAKER'S POINT OF VIEW

The audiences' needs and points of view will change as they move through the customer journey and over time in general. Market disruptions, technology, culture, and human emotions change the way people research and buy products and services.

For example, a healthcare company we worked with tracked customers' emotional states at different parts of the journey and against certain content delivery methods. They found that at a particular stage of the journey, consumers became "extremely frustrated" with the amount of choices presented. But, ironically, the healthcare company and most of its competitors were presenting long educational articles at this stage, detailing the pros and cons of all the choices. This only compounded the frustration of most of the consumers. By switching to a shorter, simpler Q&A guide, they achieved better results.

Can you create strategies and customer journey maps that not only measure content consumption, but also identify the audience's state-of-mind and preferences for content format, channel, or even length?

## PATIENCE & WAITING FOR NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

In addition to asking audiences what they need and observing their content consumption, it's equally as important to regularly perform research to anticipate their needs.

As we develop content, yes, we should be answering the questions customers already have. But we should also be answering the questions they don't even know they have!

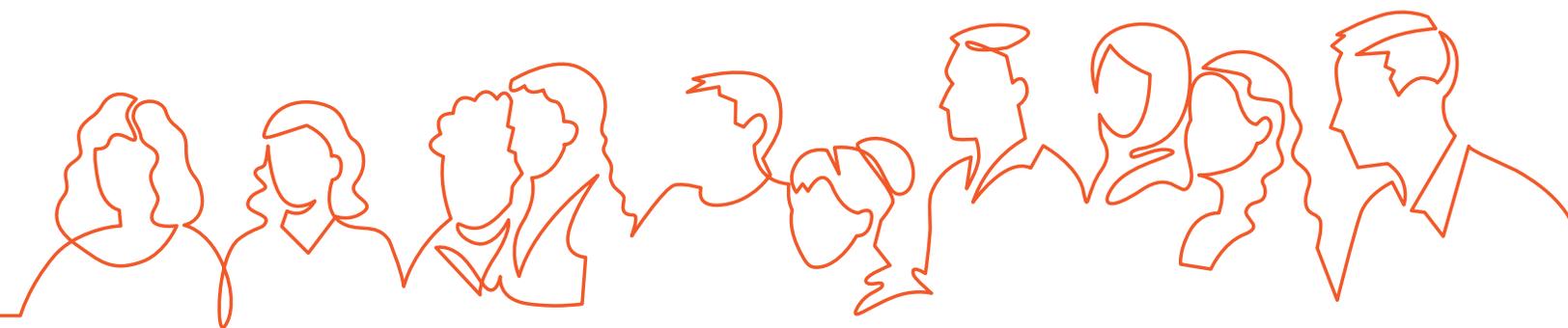
For example, a writer went to a Nike store to try on running shoes. The staff wouldn't let him buy shoes until they filmed him running on a treadmill. They played the video back to show him how his feet "fell" while he was running. Because they educated him on the type of support his feet needed, he was happy to buy shoes there.<sup>6</sup>

Examine how often (and how deeply) you research what your customers are trying to achieve, and balance that with the expertise and recommendations you are making. Are you just answering the easy questions? Or are you teaching customers new things?

## REMEMBERING—BUILDING MEMORY

When you develop an audience-focused listening strategy, you'll need a way to record the things you learn. What process do you have for sharing your actionable insights? What systems and technologies can show how you are progressing with your approach to managing content performance?

One of the key insights from our research is how pronounced the "communication between teams" is as a strategic content management challenge. One of the biggest benefits of developing a process to develop better active listening skills will be the ability of the content team to inform other parts of the organization. Using smart tools for uncovering audiences' needs and measuring content performance are great first steps. But also consider internal activation and participation programs to better inform others in your business who may be waiting to speak. Active listening can empower us to know when, where, and how to cue the many voices in our companies to speak in more relevant ways.



# CONCLUSION: SOMETHING TO SAY VS. SAYING SOMETHING

There is a wonderful quote by Plato: “The wise speak because they have something to say; fools because they have to say something.”

The success of content as a strategic function of marketing and communication will depend solely on our ability to measure its contribution to the business. Of course, technology will be an inherent piece of how we scale our content production capabilities. But it’s a foregone conclusion that no business will “out speak” or “out produce” its way to results.

For long-term success, companies will begin deploying strategies that enable their marketing teams to listen as actively as they speak. That’s when our marketing can evolve from simply saying something to having something valuable to say.

## ENDNOTES

- 1) [State of Marketing, Fifth Edition](#). Salesforce Research. 2019.
- 2) Carufel, R. [“Does Data Science Reliance Detract from Humanized Brand Experiences?”](#) March 6, 2019.
- 3) [State of Engagement: Bridging the Customer Journey Across Every Last Mile](#). CMO Council. 2018.
- 4) [2019 Content Management & Strategy Survey](#). Content Marketing Institute.
- 5) Husman, R.C., Lahiff, J.M., & Penrose, J.M. *Business Communication: Strategies and Skills*. Chicago: Dryden Press. 1991.
- 6) Quinn, M. [“Teach Customers Why They Need A Product Before Trying To Sell It To Them.”](#) Business Insider. May 1, 2013.

## ABOUT CONTENT MARKETING INSTITUTE

[Content Marketing Institute](#) is the leading global content marketing education and training organization, teaching enterprise brands how to attract and retain customers through compelling, multichannel storytelling. CMI's [Content Marketing World](#) event, the largest content marketing-focused event, is held every September in Cleveland, Ohio, USA, and [ContentTECH Summit](#) event is held every spring. CMI publishes [Chief Content Officer](#) for executives and provides strategic consulting and content marketing research for some of the best-known brands in the world. Watch this [video](#) to learn more about CMI. Content Marketing Institute is organized by UBM, which in June 2018 combined with Informa PLC to become a leading B2B information services group and the largest B2B Events organizer in the world. To learn more and for the latest news and information, visit [www.ubm.com](http://www.ubm.com) and [www.informa.com](http://www.informa.com).

## ABOUT VENNLi

Vennli is the content intelligence platform that helps marketing leaders drive growth and be more relevant to customers in messaging, content strategy, and marketing communications across the entire customer lifecycle—from awareness to advocacy. Vennli's platform gathers real-time, AI-enabled persona data including insights about what matters most to the target market throughout the buyer journey and makes intelligent recommendations on content, messaging, and communication that will attract, convert, and retain more customers. Visit [www.vennli.com](http://www.vennli.com) or follow [@VennliApp](https://twitter.com/VennliApp) for more information.

