

Reflections on The Great Marketing Experiment:

What We've Learned as Independent Consultants About Content-Based Marketing

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*Not experts, just enjoying our own learning and hoping to share

What is content-based marketing? According to the Content Marketing Institute, content-based marketing is “a marketing technique of creating and distributing valuable, relevant and consistent content to attract and acquire a clearly defined audience – with the objective of driving profitable customer action.”

As independent evaluators, we use content-based marketing to increase awareness of our businesses and provide valuable information about evaluation to our clients and those who follow our work. We are each at different points of our journey as entrepreneurs, and we have each chosen different marketing strategies to hone. We share what we have learned below.

What Brad has learned from LinkedIn (In business 6 months)

- **Why:** I started my evaluation practice a bit more abruptly than planned and knew I needed to accelerate my networking. I was aware much of my early work would likely come from relationships and connections (rather than RFPs) and also knew LinkedIn provided an immediate opportunity to share with decision-makers and leaders what I can offer. Additionally, I knew I wasn't the most educated or experienced evaluator but knew my colleagues and past project partners valued my work, and I wanted to leverage this.
- **What:** LinkedIn is a growing platform with a huge, business-primed, audience. When on LinkedIn, leaders are ready to learn and discuss business, rather than a more social platform. Additionally, LinkedIn currently has more people than content. The opportunity for your content to be shared broadly and have an expanded reach is considerably higher than other platforms.
- **Success:** Since truly leaning into LinkedIn in January, I have had significant success. I have grown my network, connected with new concepts and ways of evaluating, and developed many relationships. While my posts or interactions often start on LinkedIn, it has been seamless to ask for a 30-minute call or say hello at an event. It also allowed me to establish that what I knew, as a young and new evaluator, would be pivotal for my success, as social proof. Having made the connections and shared common projects or clients, it has become easier for me to navigate a new landscape. Finally, I have also learned the evaluation climate of a new city, having only been in Chicago for the past 18 months.
- **Tips and Tricks:** The 'production value' of your post/image/article doesn't need to be perfect. Perfect is often the enemy of done. [Even a screenshot can communicate!](#) Consistency is helpful, a week or two of posts every other day is significantly better than 10 posts on one Tuesday. [Thoughtful and encouraging posts](#) resonate and will garner attention. Re-sharing posts and 'liking' a post is less effective than original content and commenting on a post. Interact with others; comment thoughtfully, tag each other, send personal messages, [send friend requests with small notes](#), etc. (It is still a *social* network!)

What Amanda has learned from blogging/email marketing (In business 5 years)

- **Why:** I moved from Maryland to Ohio in 2018 and realized that I could no longer exclusively rely on my old local network to generate business. I started sending quarterly email newsletters to share what was happening in my business and remind people that I was still open for work! I began to focus more heavily on email marketing when I was reminded that email is not subject to algorithms - it seemed like an easy way to get in front of my clients and potential clients and share information of value.
- **What:** I've shifted my focus from updates on what I'm doing to sharing the value I bring to my clients and the benefits they would get from working with me. I write blog posts twice a month and email them to my list -- in those, I try to use stories ([like when I connected my family's Thanksgiving dinner to evaluation](#)) to distill evaluation concepts into more digestible tidbits and help people realize that they can do evaluation even if they're not a statistician. Because I am still growing my list, I am able to use free software (I use MailerLite) to manage my email lists and communications.
- **Success Story:** For me, one of the biggest challenges in email marketing and blogging is how to grow your audience. Not everything I've tried has been successful - but that's okay. I did a lot of research and learned that offering a lead magnet (or opt-in freebie) is a great way to grow your list by sharing something of value for free. I recently launched my first real lead magnet -- [a guide for educators on data tracking](#) -- and got over 100 new subscribers in just a few days!
- **Tips and Tricks:** I've learned that newsletters are considered passé - what is recommended now is to focus on one main idea per email and make it clear what a potential client should do to reach you or start the buying process. Consistency is also key - find a schedule that works for you but is also frequent enough that people still open what you send. I've also been told that since most of the people on your list won't read everything you share, it's a good thing to share it more often! Finally, be yourself! Add a personal touch and use first-person language.

Collective lessons learned about content-based marketing in evaluation

1. **Barriers are often internal.** As independent consultants, we tend to be pretty achievement-oriented, so a "failure," even on social media, doesn't feel great. We've had to remember that each post/blog/email won't be perfect (and doesn't need to be). Perfection is not the goal here!
2. **Trial and error is encouraged!** Marketing cycles are short and offer opportunities for quick feedback loops to improve. So when those "failures" happen, we are probably the only ones who are still thinking about it a few days later! It's important to brush yourself off and keep trying.
3. **Be patient.** You may not see immediate results from your marketing, but that doesn't mean you are not making an impact. Sometimes, you are simply planting a seed and waiting for it to grow -- people will remember your expertise or post later on and follow up when the time is right for them.