

Blogging Brings Bucks:
How Content Marketing Design Affects Readership Characteristics
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Abstract

To increase the likelihood of sales, businesses must increase the readership of their websites. This study discusses the best way to design content marketing pieces — blog articles featured on a company's website —to increase different readership characteristics. The researcher conducted a content analysis of 74 content marketing pieces published over the course of a year on one particular company's blog. Trained participants coded each blog article looking for four different design elements: the length of the piece, how many images were included, how many headings were included, and how many lists were included. The researcher then correlated those design elements with the number of online views, the duration of those views, and how many viewers clicked on links to move themselves to another page on the site. The researcher then used regression analysis to find any statistically significant relationships between design and readership. In this pilot study, the researcher found that an image could increase the time spent on a website by 24.6 seconds, and decrease the chances of a reader moving onto a different site by 2%. Nothing correlated design with page views on a content marketing piece, nor did any of the other design elements seem to affect how long a reader stayed on a piece or the chance of that reader would move to a different part of the website. These findings suggest the need for further research and may help future marketers design their content marketing pieces.

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As of May 2013, Pew Internet Research found that almost 72 percent of U.S. adults have social media accounts and use them regularly. This number has grown substantially in the eight years since Pew Internet Research first conducted the study in 2005, when only eight percent of U.S. adults used social media. With the majority of U.S. adults using social media, marketers view online communication as the perfect way to quickly connect to large groups of people, which can increase their potential customers' knowledge about their companies and in turn increase profits (Odden, 2011; Gomez, 2005).

Advertising, marketing, and public relations fields all use online means to connect with their customers. The Public Relations Society of America defines the practice of public relations as "...build(ing) mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" ("What is," 2011). To do so, public relations practitioners and marketers now use social media and content marketing to reach out to their audiences (Barnes & Mattson, 2009). Some public relations experts have gone so far as to say that public relations is no longer anything more than promoting a business using online means (Conner, 2013). Marketers, public relations practitioners, and advertisers are learning to use the internet and social media to connect their companies to their audiences in two ways: First, as a way to directly communicate with invested customers, and second, to reach out to potential customers to increase sales (Horton, 2009).

One of the ways marketers use online means to connect to their potential customers and increase sales is through search engine optimization. Search engine optimization (SEO) is a tactic marketers use to increase traffic to their website by increasing the ranking of where a company's website falls on a search engine results page (SERP). Marketers do this by:

1. Researching specific keywords or key phrases potential customers are typing into search engines that could bring up their company's website
2. Optimizing their company's website with those keywords
3. Creating content that includes specific keywords for which they want to "optimize" their company's website.
4. Sharing those content articles on social media.

This four-step process helps a company's website appear higher on the search engine results page when a potential customer searches for a specific keyword. Miklosik (2013) defined search engine optimization as creating more instances of a specific key word on a website for web search engines to find that particular site more often. Although this is a simplistic view of search engine optimization since the ranking on a search engine results page is determined by a number of factors in the search engine's algorithm, more keywords can increase views on a piece of content, which can increase profits. The person searching for those optimized keywords will be more likely to click on a website higher in the search results and will be interested in learning about or purchasing the product or service the company is selling (Miklosik, 2013).

In the third step of search engine optimization, creating content is also known as content marketing. Content marketing is publishing any type of blog article with the purpose of educating current customers and optimizing the company's site for search engines to garner potential customers (Odden, 2011). Those pieces of content are then shared on social media. Marketers who use content marketing and social media to promote their company usually do three things:

1. Create content or blog articles on a company's website.
2. Optimize those articles for search engines.

3. Share the content on different social media platforms (Gomez, 2005).

When marketers create content that includes these keywords, it increases the chances of a company's website showing up higher on the list of results according to the Google algorithm (Miklosik, 2013). Marketers usually publish multiple pieces of content each week that include those specific keywords because when search engines find more information using those keywords on the company's website, there is a greater chance of the website being higher on the search engine results page (Odden, 2011; Gomez, 2005).

The goal for content marketing and search engine optimization is to increase the readership of a website. Marketers want more readers so that there is a higher chance to convert those readers into customers. Research has shown that the more readership and views a site has, the greater profits it will produce (Collidander & Dalhén, 2011). Using interesting content shared on social media to draw readers to a company's website will hopefully have those readers buy the product or service the company is selling (Odden, 2011; Gomez, 2005).

The first part of content marketing is creating content. For the purposes of this research, content is defined as any type of informative blog article published on a company's website or blog with the intent to:

1. Increase the audience's knowledge about the company or product,
2. Boost search engine optimization efforts, and
3. Increase the company's profits (Odden, 2011; Gomez, 2005).

Content for content marketing can be made up of a wide range of informative pieces, including articles, interactive advertisements, or infographics, all designed to promote interest in a company or its product (Odden, 2011; Gomez, 2005). At the end of this content, there is

usually a link where readers can click to find more information, which will send readers through the buying cycle where they can purchase the product or service the company is selling.

If a reader clicks on this link, it translates into what is known as a click-through rate, which tells a marketer what percentage of readers are going to different pages on the company's website (Odden, 2011). The bounce rate for a page is the percentage of readers who open and close a page without clicking on any other link on the page that could bring them through the buying cycle and closer to purchasing the company's products or service. A low bounce rate means a high percentage of readers clicked on the links provided on the page. A high bounce rate means a high percentage of readers clicked off of the page without moving through the buying cycle. Marketers want to lower their bounce rate because that increases the number of readers who travel through the buying cycle and increases the possibility of selling their product or service.

After a piece of optimized content is published on a company's website or blog, the company uses social media platforms to share the content with its customers (Odden, 2011; Gomez, 2005). This link sharing also helps to increase where a given page falls on a search engine results page. Some of the platforms marketers use to share their optimized content are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or YouTube. By sharing these links on social media, the marketer hopes to increase traffic of the company's website (Odden, 2001).

Most previous research on content marketing with social media has focused solely on asking whether using social media and content marketing helps a business increase its online presence. It is no question that creating content and sharing that content using social media will increase a company's online presence (Collidander & Dalhén, 2011; Gomez, 2005). However, there is a distinct lack of research on one specific part of the process: the content itself. This

study delves into the design of content marketing to see what can increase views, keep readers on the page, and get them to click on other parts of the webpage that take them through the buying cycle.

Literature Review

Using online means to connect to potential customers and increase sales is growing dramatically when it comes to marketing (Barnes & Mattson, 2007, 2009; Barnes & Lescault, 2014; Barnes, Lescault, & Wright, 2014). To some, public relations is no longer just about crisis management, writing press releases, or putting on events, but is more about being in constant contact with customers and potential customers 24 hours a day and seven days a week (Conner, 2013). This new form of marketing is still being fine-tuned, as research suggests it has the benefit of providing more empathetic interactions with customers but at the cost of a marketers' sanity, since they can be reached at all times, including the middle of the night (Bridgen, 2011). As this method is still being explored, there are many previous studies that discuss social media and content marketing that will be examined in this literature review.

Search Engine Optimization

Marketers use search engine optimization to increase traffic on their site in order to increase sales. Search engine optimization is a four-step process. First, a marketer does keyword research to see what their company's potential customers are searching for on search engines, then they optimize their company's site with those keywords, then they publish content articles on their company's website, and finally share those content articles through social media. Publishing blogs with specific keywords can influence search engine visibility and increase views on a company's site (Odden, 2011). Odden suggested creating a social media plan that

focused on audience outreach and tactics that combined blogging and social networking to best market a company.

Having a high-ranked web page on a search engine is more cost effective to marketers than having an advertisement in Yellow Pages or directory position (Kharbanda, 2006). It costs virtually nothing except manpower and increases sales because it brings more people to the page since it is found higher on a search engine results page. SEO is not used as a marketing tool for just businesses either; religious groups are excelling at it as well. Chen (2011) researched the tactics The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints used when utilizing SEO for marketing purposes. Avinash Kaushik, Google analytics expert, spoke highly of the LDS Church's efforts in SEO, which sparked Chen's research. According to Chen, the LDS Church creates 200,000 to 400,000 links a month. He found the LDS Church's success came from the number of different keywords the church creates content about and then promotes through social media. The Church's members share that content through their own social media, effectively making the LDS Church one of the top SEO companies Google has seen.

Content Marketing

One of the main methods of search engine optimization is content marketing. Content marketing is creating content rich in optimized keywords and interesting information. It has two main goals: to increase traffic to a company's website by increasing its rank on a search engine results page and to take potential customers through the buying cycle (Odden, 2011; Gomez, 2005). This content marketing can be anything from infographics to videos, but most of the time is a simple blog post. As Barnes (2007, 2009, 2014) found, a company that operates a blog could be more profitable.

Barnes and Mattson (2007, 2009), Barnes and Lescault (2014) and Barnes, Lescault, and Wright (2014), completed a multi-faceted study on profitable companies and their content marketing, specifically blogging, throughout a span of five years. The researchers looked at the 2006, 2008, and 2013 Fortune 500 companies (500 of the world's most profitable companies each year) and the 2006, 2008, and 2013 Inc. 500 companies (500 of the fastest-growing companies in the world) to see how integral content marketing was to their success. The study was an attempt to connect lucrative companies' success with their use of content marketing (Barnes & Mattson, 2007). The researchers looked at each company's website to see whether the company had an in-house blog. In 2007, eight percent of Fortune 500 companies were blogging (Barnes & Mattson, 2007). In 2009, 16% of the Fortune 500, 38% of the top 100 of the Fortune 500 and three of the top five companies on the list had blogs they updated regularly (Barnes & Mattson, 2009). In 2013, Barnes, Lescault, and Wright (2014) found that 34% of the Fortune 500 companies were blogging. The researchers concluded the Fortune 500 companies were using content marketing; however, they were lagging behind those companies named in their similar Inc. 500 study (Barnes & Mattson, 2009).

In 2007, Barnes and Mattson found 19% of the Inc. 500 companies were blogging and in 2009, 45% were blogging (Barnes & Mattson, 2009). Barnes and Lescault found that in 2013 52% of the Inc. 500 were blogging. This is no mere coincidence. Publishing content on a blog can increase a company's traffic on its website and, if a blog post has a low bounce rate, can increase a company's profits.

Chun-Yao, Yong-Zheng, Hong-Xiang, and Shin-Shin (2007) discovered blogs and content marketing were major parts of marketing campaigns for companies. The researchers explained that one of the biggest opportunities for marketers using blogs is search engine

optimization (Chun-Yao, Yong-Zheng, Hong-Xiang, & Shin-Shin, 2007). In *Public Relations Quarterly*, Schwartzman (2005) gave tips for marketers to blog effectively. He recommended maintaining social interaction for readers of the blog and titling blog posts to optimize for search engines (Schwartzman, 2005).

Without views and traffic on the blog, content marketing has no effect on profits. One researcher looked at how often a content marketer should publish articles to maintain views. Carrabis (2009) suggested that if blogs are updated every 30 days there is a significant decrease in views; however, bloggers who maintain a short posting cycle, or one blog a day, have more views. Carrabis said consistency in tone, language and ideas is beneficial for increasing and keeping an audience (2009). Credibility is also important for a marketer embarking on publishing content marketing on a blog. Studies have shown when blogs do not seem as credible, or their credibility comes into question, the marketing behind the blog is basically obliterated (Burns, 2008, Kaye & Johnson, 2011).

Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner (2010) researched if and how content marketing works. Social media is considered a “word-of-mouth” communication, even though the parties are not communicating face-to-face. These researchers suggested the most effective way to make something “go viral” (an online sensation that reaches a large number of people in a short amount of time) is to use content marketing campaigns, as they produce feelings of community, involvement, and desire for social interaction (2010). Gomez’s (2005) research on blogging shows that blogs provide a way for marketers to speak socially to a targeted audience. Gomez found blogging can provide increased profits because those interested in the content within a specialized blog will be more likely to find the blog searching online, click on the blog on social media sites, read more of the blog, follow links to other web pages, and buy products.

Collidaner and Dalhén (2011) found that reading blogs on a company's website can increase an individual's intent to purchase, and content marketing may be more effective in increasing intent to purchase than traditional media. Collidaner and Dalhén sent out an equal number of blog posts and magazines to participants followed by a questionnaire to determine which was more effective in marketing and increasing awareness and profits (2011). They found potential customers who read blog posts had a higher purchase intention of a brand than potential customers who read a magazine article discussing the same brand (2011). Colliander and Dalhén said this increase in purchase intention was correlated with the para-social interaction (PSI) associated with a blog post compared to a magazine article. Para-social interaction is the illusion of a face-to-face interaction. Blog posts are better for marketing than magazines because they bring more of a social interaction between customers and the company, which increases purchase intention (Collidander & Dalhén, 2011; Gomez, 2005). Kumar, Bhaskaran, Mirchandi and Shah (2013) found a company can boost its profits through social media marketing. A well-planned content marketing campaign generated growth and profits for the company they researched (Kumar et al., 2013).

Social Media Promotion

Another part of search engine optimization and content marketing is sharing links to pieces of content on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn. The use of social media for marketing is also increasing, as evidenced by a separate part of Barnes and Mattson's 2009 research. They determined the Fortune 500 companies' social media platform usage by conducting telephone interviews. Forty-three percent of the respondents said that social media was "very important" to their marketing strategy (Barnes & Mattson, 2009). Barnes and Mattson found the familiarity of social media increased almost 20% in one year: in 2008, 57% of

respondents said they were familiar with social media, which jumped to 75% in 2009 (Barnes & Mattson, 2009). Blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were found to be the favorite social media platforms of marketers (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008). Of those platforms, the marketers perceived Facebook and Twitter as the most effective in networking with potential customers and sharing links to their websites (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008).

Twitter is quickly becoming a tool that is used to create marketing campaigns and to unite companies with their publics (Water & Williams, 2011). In 2014, Twitter averaged 288 million users. As a part of content marketing, social media platforms like Twitter are often used to promote links to blog articles (Thoring, 2011.) In a study of United Kingdom publishers, Thoring (2011) found that larger publishers were more likely to be using Twitter and Facebook as marketing tools. He also found 68% of tweets sent by these publishers had hyperlinks in them connecting the tweet to another website, such as the UK publisher's blog. In fact, 34% of the tweets connected to another social network (Thoring, 2011).

Search engine optimization and its subsets of content marketing and link building can increase traffic on a site, which will hopefully increase sales for a company. However, how can a SEO specialist design a piece of content so it increases readership, thus increasing profits for a company? This is what prompted the researcher's research questions, discussed in the next section.

Rationale and Research Questions

There is no arguing that social media and content marketing is a remarkable marketing force for a company. Research has shown that content marketing is increasing, and with a well-conceived campaign, content can increase views, increase sales, and increase an individual's intent to purchase. However, the real question is, how does it work? Although content marketing

campaigns are the newest way to market a company, there is little to no understanding of how the best campaigns work. This question prompted the researcher to look at one particular part of a content marketing campaign: the content itself. The researcher wanted to know how to write the best blog article to achieve views, keep readers on the page, and make them click onto other parts of the page. This prompted the researcher to ask:

RQ1: To what extent, if any, does length affect the possible profitability of a promotional writing piece?

RQ1A: To what extent, if any, does length affect views of a promotional writing piece?

RQ1B: To what extent, if any, does length affect the bounce rate of a promotional writing piece?

RQ1C: To what extent, if any, does length affect the average time spent reading a promotional writing piece?

RQ2: To what extent, if any, does inclusion of images affect the possible profitability of a promotional writing piece?

RQ2A: To what extent, if any, does inclusion of images affect views of a promotional writing piece?

RQ2B: To what extent, if any, does inclusion of images affect the bounce rate of a promotional writing piece?

RQ2C: To what extent, if any, does inclusion of images affect the average time spent reading a promotional writing piece?

RQ3: To what extent, if any, does inclusion of bullet points and lists affect the possible profitability of a promotional writing piece?

RQ3A: To what extent, if any, does inclusion of bullet points and lists affect views of a promotional writing piece?

RQ3B: To what extent, if any, does inclusion of bullet points and lists affect the bounce rate of a promotional writing piece?

RQ3C: To what extent, if any, does inclusion of bullet points and lists affect the average time spent reading a promotional writing piece?

RQ4: To what extent, if any, does inclusion of headings affect the possible profitability of a promotional writing piece?

RQ4A: To what extent, if any, does inclusion of headings affect views of a promotional writing piece?

RQ4B: To what extent, if any, does inclusion of headings affect the bounce rate of a promotional writing piece?

RQ4C: To what extent, if any, does inclusion of headings affect the average time spent reading a promotional writing piece?

Method

To answer the research questions above, the researcher conducted a content analysis of 74 content articles written for a particular company's blog over the past year (May 2013 – August 2014). The company, Piracle Inc., has developed check-printing software, printing services, and electronic payment software, and markets its services using content marketing. The articles coded were published once or twice a week, used optimized keywords, and linked to other parts of the website; the content was shared via Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

To begin the content analysis, the researcher went to Piracle's blog and selected each of the content articles written by the researcher over a period of a year (May 2013- August 2014).

The researcher decided to code only the blog articles she had written as a control; the blogs written by other Piracle employees did not have the same design elements coded for in this study. After selecting 74 blog articles, the researcher went to Piracle's website analytics and recorded each article's page views, bounce rate, and average reading time. Some of the content articles were published earlier than more recent articles, thus having more time to garner views and data. The researcher controlled for this by taking the data for the page views, bounce rate, and average time spent for a year from when the blog article was published. Four blogs had not been published for an entire year by the time this study was conducted. Therefore, the researcher took the data from these blogs from the day they were published until March 25, 2014. For identification purposes, each blog was assigned a blog code, which was simply the date the blog had been published. If a blog had been published on July 3, 2013, its blog code was 07032013. Once the researcher had gathered the page views, bounce rate and average time reading for each blog article, training of coders began.

The researcher trained four coders in how to recognize different elements of design within each of the blog posts. To begin the training process, each coder was emailed a coding training booklet to read (Appendix I). After the coders received the training booklet, the researcher spoke to each one and went through the booklet with them. After the coders had gone through this booklet, the researcher sent them each the same four blogs to code along with a Content Marketing Code Booklet (Appendix II) to see if their inter-coder reliability was high enough to begin the actual coding for the study.

The four coders gave their training code booklets back to the researcher, who tested them for inter-coder reliability. Using Holsti's coefficient of reliability (Holsti, 1969), the researcher found the coders had a 95% inter-coder reliability. To find this, the researcher took each instance

where the four coders agreed, multiplied it by 4, and then divided it by the sum of each coding decision made by each coder. With only one instance where the coders did not agree, the inter-coder reliability was a 95%, which was high enough for the coders to begin coding for the actual content analysis.

To begin the coding process, the researcher randomly assigned the four coders 18 content articles each. The coders recorded the length of each blog article, how many images accompanied each article, how many lists accompanied each article, and how many headers accompanied each article. At this point, one of the coders had to drop out because of a family emergency. That coder's assigned blog articles were redistributed to the remaining three coders. After the coders returned their completed codebooks, the researcher randomly selected three articles to test for inter-coder reliability and coded them. After comparing the coders' results and the researcher's results, inter-coder reliability was 100%.

After coders completed their work, the researcher compiled the data on a spreadsheet. The codes for each blog's length, number of images, headings, and lists were matched with the blog's analytics on the spreadsheet using the special blog article code. The researcher then performed regression analysis in three instances. Regression analysis was chosen as the most appropriate tool for this data as there were many different variables in this content analysis. Regression analysis allowed the researcher to isolate particular variables and control for others while analyzing the data.

Regression analysis ($y = \alpha + \beta_1 + \beta_2 + \dots + \beta_n$) tests to see if any independent variables (β) have a significant effect on a dependent variable (y). Each regression was tested at a .05 alpha level. The first regression was completed to determine whether the length, number of images, lists, or headers ($\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4$) in each blog article affected how many people read the blog article

(page views, y). The next regression was completed to determine whether the length, number of images, lists, or headers ($\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4$) in each blog article affected if readers clicked onto another page in the site (bounce rate, y). The final regression was completed to determine whether the length, number of images, lists, or headers ($\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4$) in the blog article affected how long readers stayed on the blog article (average time spent, y). The results for each analysis follow.

Results

What Effect Does the Length (β_1), Number of Images (β_2), Number of Lists (β_3), and Number of Headers (β_4), have on the Page Views (y) of a blog?

The first regression analysis tested the null hypothesis that the length, number of images, headers or lists ($\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4$) in each blog article did not have a significant effect on the page views of the blog article. This was tested at a .05 alpha level.

Table 1
Results of Regression Analysis on the Effect of Design Elements on Page Views

Design Elements	p	S	β	F	R^2
Regression				0.39	0.05
Intercept	0.37	145.30	128.87		
Length	0.74	0.26	-0.087		
Images	0.78	21.42	-5.94		
Lists	0.44	118.4	-90.14		
Headings	0.06	22.64	43.07		

The adjusted R Square for this regression was 0.002, which signifies that only two tenths of one percent of variation in number of page views can be explained by any of the independent variables. The regression itself had a significance of 0.39, essentially showing there is no statistical significant relationship between the dependent and independent variables. Table 1

shows that none of the independent variables had a statistically significant effect on how many page views the blog garnered. Specifically, the length of the blog, the number of images it had, the number of lists that were included, or the number of headings that were included, had no effect on page views. This result can be easily explained, and will be discussed in the next section. For this analysis we failed to reject the null hypothesis.

What Effect Does the Length (β_1), Number of Images (β_2), Number of Lists (β_3), and Number of Headers (β_4), have on the Bounce Rate (y) of a blog?

In the second regression analysis, the researcher tested the null hypothesis that the length, number of images, headers or lists (β_1 , β_2 , β_3 , β_4) in each blog article did not have a significant effect on the bounce rate of the blog article. This was tested at a .05 alpha level.

Table 2
Results of Regression Analysis on the Effect of Design Elements on Bounce Rate

Design Elements	p	S	β	F	R_2
Regression				0.02	0.16
Intercept	1.18E-24	0.05	1.18E-24		
Length	0.72	0.000095	0.72		
Images	0.0025	0.007	0.0025		
Lists	0.20	0.041	0.2		
Headings	0.17	0.008	0.17		

This particular regression was highly significant at a .01 level. The adjusted R Square, 0.11, shows that 11 percent of the variation of the bounce rate of Piracle's blogs can be attributed to the independent variables. Looking closer at Table 2, one can see that this variation most likely comes from the images included in the blogs, as they are the only statistically significant variable in the regression. From the regression, the researcher can conclude that with the inclusion of images in a blog article, the bounce rate of a blog article decreases by 2%. As previously discussed in this study, a lower bounce rate is beneficial, as it shows that the reader is interested

in the content of the blog article and wants to learn more about the website itself, thus clicking onto another portion of the site. This will also be discussed more in-depth in the next section of this paper.

The other three independent variables had no statistically significant effect on the bounce rate of Piracle's blogs. However, the researcher rejected the null hypothesis because the analysis showed that images did have a high statistically significant effect on the bounce rate of a blog article.

What Effect Does the Length (β_1), Number of Images (β_2), Number of Lists (β_3), and Number of Headers (β_4), have on the Average Time Spent (y) on a blog?

In the third regression analysis, the researcher tested the null hypothesis that the length, number of images, headers or lists (β_1 , β_2 , β_3 , β_4) in each blog article did not have a significant effect on the average time spent on the blog article. This was tested at a .05 alpha level.

Table 3
Results of Regression Analysis on the Effect of Design Elements on Average Time Spent on Page

Design Elements	p	S	β	F	R_2
Regression				0.00035	0.26
Intercept	0.047	0.62	1.26		
Length	0.39	0.0011	-0.00099		
Images	0.000025	0.092	0.41		
Lists	0.65	0.51	-0.23		
Headings	0.12	0.097	0.15		

This regression was extremely significant at a .01 level (0.00035). The adjusted R Square was 0.21, meaning that 21 percent of the variation of the time spent can be attributed to the independent variables of the regression. This variation can most likely be attributed to the images of the blog, which were extremely significant with a p value of 0.000025. As can be seen in

Table 3, the coefficient of the images variable is 0.41, which predicts that with every image included on a blog, the time spent on that blog increases by 24.6 seconds. This is extremely helpful for a website, as the goal for the site is to have individuals stay on the site and read the content of the blog article for as long as possible, in order to get the message or sales pitch to them.

Discussion

The results of this study have profound implications for content marketing when it comes to design. The goal of this content analysis was to see if design had any effect on readership characteristics of content in content marketing. The main conclusion that the researcher has found from completing this study is that if a content marketer wants to increase how long readers spend on a company's website, or increase the possibility of having readers click onto another portion of the website, they should include images in their content. The researcher also found that design elements such as the length of the article, or the inclusion of headers and lists, do not need to be focused on when designing how a piece of content looks, as they do not affect the particular readership characteristics discussed in this content analysis. Looking a bit deeper into the results of this study can prove helpful for content marketers as well.

The first regression analysis that the researcher completed found the length, number of images, lists, or headers had no effect on how many people read the article. In retrospect, this finding is rather obvious. Most of the time, these content articles are being shared through social media. That means most of the content's readers do not know the design elements of an article before they read it, as they are clicking on the link from social media posts. Most social media sites only use a title and a short sentence describing the linked content. Thus, there would be no

way for the length, images, headings, or lists to influence how many people read the content article.

Topic is far more likely to drive page views, since readers would be more likely to click and open a link that piqued their interest. For further research, it would be interesting to study what types of headlines and topics garnered more page views, instead of how long a particular article was, or how many images, headers, or lists it contained. It could also be interesting further research to see if an inclusion of an image when sharing a piece of content on social media would garner more page views for a piece of content, as the second and third regression have proven that images are important for other elements of content readership.

In the second analysis, the researcher found that the only variable that effected bounce rate was the inclusion of images. According to the regression, the inclusion of every image decreased bounce rate by 2%. A bounce is defined as a reader who opens the blog article and then closes it without moving onto any other part of the website. Marketers generally put links and calls to action within their content to try and move readers through the website, either to give them more information or to get them to buy their product or service. A low bounce rate means more readers moved onto those parts of the website, while a high bounce rate means more readers closed the page after reading the content. Marketers want a lower bounce rate because that means the chances that a reader will buy what the company is selling increase dramatically. This conclusion is extremely helpful for marketers, as they know they can possibly lower their bounce rate by including images within their content.

This conclusion was interesting to the researcher. Initially, the thought of including images within a piece of content did not seem as if it would make readers more interested in clicking on through the website – should not the writing itself compel them to do that? At a 2%

decrease in bounce rate per picture, though, this finding shows that companies are increasingly marketing to a visual world. Readers want things they can swallow easily, and the inclusion of images in a content article is reminiscent of placing pictures in a picture book for children.

Illustrate the ideas in the written portion of the content, and readers may be able to understand it more, thus prompting them on through the website. For future research, it may be interesting to see if there is a cut off for this decrease, where too many images becomes harmful for the bounce rate.

In the second analysis the length of the post or its inclusion of headers or lists had any effect on bounce rate. This also surprised the researcher, as many content marketers stick with “the shorter the better,” when writing content because they say their readers have a short attention span. The idea of a long piece of content makes many marketers shutter, as they believe their readers will lose interest and click away from the page. It is also seen as important to provide “easy to swallow” paragraphs with headers, for the same reason. There is another camp of marketers who worry about writing things too short, as their readers will not become interested in the content and want to click through the website. It is interesting that through this study neither of those ideas seem to matter, as length or number of headers did not seem to affect the bounce rate of an article. Of course, with further research using more data, headers and length may prove to be important to bounce rate as well.

The final regression analysis found that once again, the only variable to effect the average time spent on an article was that of images. For every image included in a content article, the average time spent on that article increased by 24.6 seconds. This was initially surprising to the researcher, as including images in a post has a stigma of the reader ignoring the word content of an article and skimming through the content, just looking at the pictures. However, it seems as

though images may make individuals stay on the page longer, taking in more information and then wanting to learn more about the website or product, especially since images affected bounce rate in an article as well. It seems as if the inclusion of images within a piece of content made the readers more interested in spending more time on the page, possibly soaking in more information, and letting the marketing work by trying to learn more about the company or the product they were selling. For further research, it would be interesting to see if there was a cutoff for how effective images were depending on how many there were on a page at once.

Limitations and Further Research

The main limitation for this study was that it was a pilot study, done with a very small sample size. That sample size only used one company, and one company's blog, on only one topic. Now that the pilot study has been completed, the researcher would be interested in continuing the study by morphing it a bit. First, the researcher would take out the page view variable, and focus on the bounce rate and average time spent on the page. It would be interesting to do the same study on different companies and their blogs that discuss different topics, instead of just focusing on one blog with one topic for one company. That way, the researcher could conclude with more surety that the findings mentioned in this study could be generalized to a larger population. Or, the researcher may find with a larger amount of data there is some stock to be put in the importance of length and inclusion of lists and headers in content marketing; this study's data pool was just too small to find significance.

There are other portions of this study that beg for further research. One potential area for further study is how topic affects page views. The researcher would also be interested in doing a branch-off study looking at the effects of a headline on a piece of content when shared via social media, or the number of page views that content article garners. It would also be interesting in

the same study to see if the inclusion of images within a social media share would affect how many page views it received. Another interesting branch-off study would be to see to what extent the inclusion of images effects bounce rate and average time spent on a piece of content. Is there a point when there are too many images on an article? The researcher thinks this could be helpful for marketers who are planning their content, to get an idea of how many images they should post on their pieces of content.

Conclusion

Content creation and social media use in the marketing field has blossomed over the last 10 years; multiple studies have shown a strong correlation between use of content marketing and increasing profits and business. This study looked in depth at one piece of content marketing — the content itself. The method used to conduct this study was to look at one particular company's content articles and determine if specific design elements, i.e., the length, inclusion of images, headings and lists, garnered views, higher reader time, and a low bounce rate. The research found through this content analysis that the inclusion of images decreased the bounce rate of an article by 2% per image and increased the average time spent on an article by 24.6 seconds per image. No amount of design affected how many page views there were since topic is more likely to affect how many people click on a piece shared on social media. The length and inclusion of headers or lists did not affect the bounce rate or the average time readers spent on the page. Although this was a pilot study with a small sample size, the researcher believes with further research, using the method used in this study, similar findings can be derived from larger sample sizes.

Overall, the researcher believes this study can provide interesting conclusions for marketers who want to know how to design their blog articles for their content marketing. If the

marketers are interested in capturing readers' attention for longer periods of time and increasing the chances of the readers moving through a company's website, then the marketers should use images. These images will increase the average time spent on the page, possibly helping them to learn more about the company and its product, and increasing their desire to purchase. Including images will also decrease the bounce rate of the article, taking more readers through the website and increasing their chances of purchasing. Thus, it is possible by including more images in content, and running a content marketing campaign, that a marketer can help increase a company's profits.

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Appendix I

**Blogging Brings Bucks:
Effective Elements of Promotional Writing**

**Coding Training Booklet
Spring Semester 2015
Whitney Baum Bennett
Master's Thesis**



Introduction

If you are reading this, then you have volunteered to be a coder in the project: Blogging Brings Bucks- Effective Elements of Promotional Writing. First off, thank you! You are helping me beyond measure by doing this. Second, let me introduce you to my project and what I am researching. In short, my master's thesis is looking at design elements of blogs and seeing if those design elements effect if people read a blog article or not. I will compare the design elements of each blog article, and then see how many people read the blog article, how long they stayed on the page and if they moved from the blog to a different part of the website — which is, of course, the main goal of all promotional writing.

Luckily, as a coder, you don't need to worry about how many readers are on each blog, or how long they stayed. All you need to do is look at the blog articles and write down which kinds of design elements make up the blog article. I have approximately 100 blog articles I need to code. 100 blog articles is a lot of coding for just one person, plus, I have a bit of bias when it comes to the project, since I wrote the blogs. That's where you come in. As a coder for this thesis, you will be reading around 20 different blog articles, and coding the design elements in each one. How do you do that? That's what this booklet is for. This is your training booklet that will explain what each element of design I am looking for is, and how to code for it.

What is “Coding”?

What is coding? No, I'm not asking you to build a website out of HTML. Coding means you are taking something that can't be analyzed statistically, and making it into a number format that can be analyzed statistically. For example, the sentence:

A blog published on May 4, 2012 has three pictures, two lists and is 678 words long.

Is really hard to put into a statistical test to compare it to other blogs. But the data:

Blog 05042012_1

Pictures: 3

Lists: 2

Length: 678

Is extremely easy to put into a statistical test. We've essentially made words into numbers, and those numbers can be plugged into statistical test, compared, analyzed and then have conclusions drawn upon. But, in order to code correctly and efficiently, each coder has to be on the same page when it comes to the codes, and what they mean. Maybe one person thinks that a paragraph contains a list, while another coder doesn't. That's why we have this booklet - to train coders on what each code means and how to recognize it during coding.

Coding: A How-To

To begin coding, you will need a coding sheet, and blog articles to code. Your coding sheet will look like this:

Appendix I

Promotional Writing Code Book

Coder ID _____

Date _____

Coder use only:

Researcher Use Only:[illegible]

I will send this to you via email as a word document. That way, you just have to type your codes into each column, save it, and send it back to me, with your name attached. In this email, I will also send you folders containing the blog articles I want you to code. (For training, you will only be coding 5 blogs. For the real coding, you will be coding around 20). Each one of these blog folders has a specific number. To begin coding, write the number of the blog that is on this folder in the first column labeled "Blog Number." Make sure to put the corresponding codes for length, images, lists and headers in the same row as the blog number.

The last three columns can just be ignored, as they are for the researcher's use only.

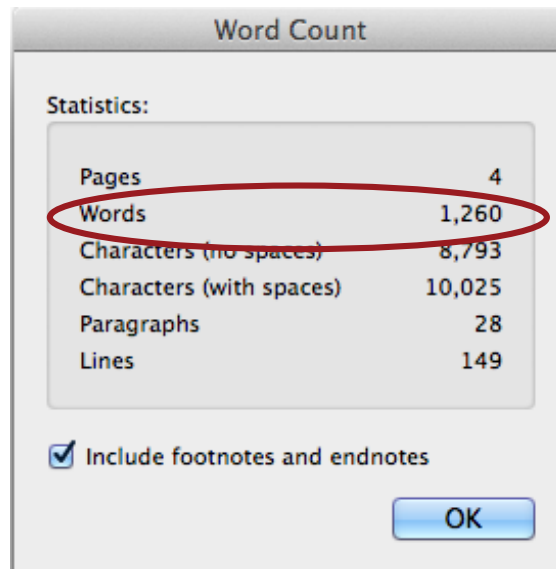
The first step in learning to code for this project, is to know what elements of design we are looking for. There are four different things you will be looking for in each blog. They are:

Length	Images	Lists	Headers
How long each blog article is.	How many pictures are included in each blog article.	How many lists are included in each blog article.	How many subheadings are in each blog

Fortunately, since each one of these is numerical, it lends itself to coding fairly easily. So, how do you code for them? We'll go into each one in depth.

Length

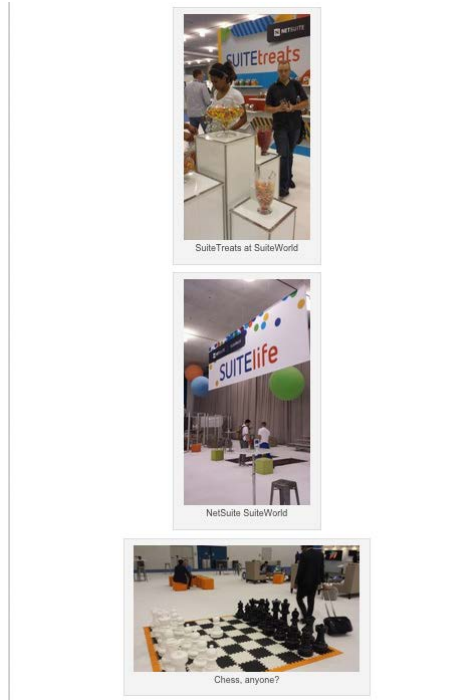
First is the length of the blog article, without the title. The best way to do this, is to copy the blog that is sent to you into a word processor. If you are working with Microsoft Word, you can go to the Tools button on the toolbar, and then click WordCount. Then, make sure to check the "include footnotes and endnotes" button. Take the number of words (not characters) and write it into the last column of the coding sheet.



For this blog, you would write 1,260 in the first column.

Images

Pictures are defined as any visual element in this project. That means any diagram, infographic or photograph included within the blog article. So, if it isn't text, it's most likely considered a picture. You will count up how many images are in the particular blog, and write them in the second column. Let's take a look at some examples:



so we
would write 1 in the second column of our code book.



This diagram is an image, and the blog only has one, so we would write 1 in the second column of our code book.



makes payment approval even easier. The admin establishes who will be able to approve payments and assigns dollar thresholds the individual's accounts. When an accountant goes to print a check for less than that specified amount, he or she can get the signature of the approver on the check, and print the check out or sent out ACH payments without worrying or losing time.



For amounts more than the specified amount, the payments must be approved, but the ease of access that Create-A-Check 11 contains, makes the approval process simple. The approver receives an email notification, signs in, and enters his or her encrypted username and password to sign the checks and make sure they are the correct amounts and supposed to be on the books.

Lists

A list can be bulleted or numbered, a short paragraph or can take up the length of the blog. So, you will count up how many lists are in the particular blog, and write that number down in the first column. Let's take a look at some examples:

Businesses have a variety of ways to pay or take payments. This is a list of the cheapest and quickest methods of payment available, to find out where your company can cut costs, and boost efficiency.

- 1) **Cash**
Cash is by far the cheapest and quickest method of payment. If you have the money, you can get cash easily, from ATMs, banks, even getting cash back at a register. There usually is no charge to receive cash, unless through an ATM not hosted by the bank your account is through. It is quick as well, as usually you can mail cash or drop off cash to the person or business to whom you owe money. On the receiving end, it's painless, there is no fee for depositing cash, and it is quick and easy to get into an account. However, it's not often that people pay bills through cash or employees are paid through cash. Usually accounts payable or payroll have large sums of money indebted to vendors and employees, and it is a waste of time to go around and hand deliver bank notes. Although cash is the cheapest and most efficient method of payment, it's not a viable option for company payment.
- 2) **Checks**
Checks are still a viable and useful way to pay money. In a study done by Harland Clarke in 2007, they found that 31 % of payments were made through checks. In non-cash methods, checks are the cheapest and quickest way to get money from account a to account b. There are no fees for checks, unless the account is overdrawn, but that isn't regular. Purchasing checks can be expensive, but if a company purchases [check printing software](#) they can increase security and efficiency while cutting costs. Blank check stock has a variety of security features, and when used with [check printing software](#) that has different user permissions, encrypted signatures and approval lists for payments, the risk of [check fraud](#) diminishes, along with price of payment. Checks take little to no time to clear, but ACH payments can rival a check for its time to transfer money depending on the bank.
- 3) **ACH Payments**
ACH payments are relatively new when it comes to methods of payment; however, they are slowly becoming a popular way to pay. ACH Payments are fast, the transfer of money is almost instantaneous, but, like the check, the form must be filled out first and sent to the bank. It is more costly than checks, coming in at about .25 cents per transaction. However, the flat rate is much better than credit or debit cards. It is especially beneficial for companies who use check printing software that allows for check printing and ACH payment creation. This way payment can be cheaper because the company can choose to do either or.

s "checklist" is a list. We would write a 1 down in the third column.

Headers

Last, but not least, are the headings of each blog article. A heading is any way the blog is broken up into different sections. You will count how many headings there are, and then write that number in the last column. Even if the entire blog article is a list, count each of the list elements, as a header. Let's look at some examples:

Is MICR Toner Necessary?

Some people use pre-printed checks to transfer money to and from bank accounts, but for those businesses that cut multiple checks each quarter, using something like check-printing software to print their checks onto blank check stock can be a huge money and time saver. If a business is using check-printing software to print their checks, then they are usually advised to print with MICR toner. However, is this actually something that is necessary for printing your own checks with [check printing software](#) and blank check stock?

In all honesty, MICR toner doesn't necessarily have to be used for a check to clear. There are optical readers that can read the same text and MICR line at the bottom of checks, and some banks have this technology. However, not all banks are equipped with optical MICR line readers, and if they receive a check that isn't written with MICR toner, the chances of getting a processing fee jump astronomically. The bank will run the check through the MICR reader, and when it cannot be read, they will set it aside and key in the information manually. This does cost money, and it can make the check clear slower. While there are some banking institutions where MICR toner is not needed, it's chance you don't want to take, especially when processing fees can be a percentage of the actual check. Maybe give examples of what the fees are like.

Is MICR Toner Expensive?

MICR toner can seem expensive, with prices upwards of \$100. However, [compared to other ink](#) that is used in normal print jobs, MICR toner is relatively inexpensive. When you compare using MICR toner to other inks

and 3 in the header column.

Training versus True Coding

Congratulations! You have made it through training. Now, your next step is to use the knowledge you have gained in this booklet to do a trial run of coding on 5 different blog articles. These 5 blogs will be emailed to you in the same email, or an email following this booklet. I will also send a coding sheet. Please type your name in the space called “Coding ID” on the coding sheet, so I know who is who. Please code the blogs, and send your answers back to me in the form of a word document.

The other coders will be coding the same 5 blog articles for the trial run. I will do a statistical test called “inter-coder reliability” to make sure that everyone understands the codes and knows how to fill out the coding sheet. If inter-coder reliability is low, we may have to do more training. Once a good statistic has been reached for inter-coder reliability, we will start the real coding. Real coding will be exactly the same thing, except for more blog articles.

Please let me know if you have any questions whatsoever, and THANK YOU again for volunteering to code for this project.

Coder ID _____

Date _____

Researcher Use Only:[illegible]