Are You a CONTENT Marketer or a Content MARKETER?

What your strongest instinct makes you miss, and how the other perspective can improve your work.

In my publishing days, editorial and design colleagues would joke that we were allowed to sell advertising on the backs of their articles. Those of us on the commercial side returned the favour: they were welcome to put their articles on the backs of our advertisements.

Same paper. Different ideas about which side was the front. I was on the commercial side of that exchange. It is a rather good way to reveal your priorities while pretending you are only making a joke.

In roughly fifteen years of content marketing conferences, panels and playbooks, I have rarely seen this difference explored in depth. That strikes me as odd. We talk about "the content marketer" as though there were one standard professional profile. The people I meet suggest otherwise.

The CONTENT marketer focuses on what makes the content worth someone's attention. The content MARKETER focuses on what makes that attention worth the business's investment. Two recognisable professional profiles, with different strengths and blind spots. Both instincts can live inside one person without being equally developed. Content marketing needs creative and commercial judgement in the same decisions, not just in the same department.

AI gives that old back-of-the-page joke a new edge. Each of us can get further with our own ideas before needing the other's contribution. That makes it easier to skip the awkward conversation where an attractive idea meets an inconvenient question.

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Where my capitals go

You know where my capital letters tend to go now. I have spent years arguing for more marketing in content marketing. I have even joked that we should have called the discipline marketing content. But I need to be equally demanding about what my marketing instinct allows into the room. If I ask an original idea to prove itself using only evidence available for familiar ideas, I have built a respectable defence against originality. I cannot spreadsheet my way out of that.

Those of us on the marketing side have our rituals of reassurance: another report, another forecast, another round of research. These can improve a decision. They can also make us feel insured against an uncertainty they have merely described. Research can inform a creative decision. It cannot insure it.

The creative instinct has its own comforts. The work is distinctive. Peers love it. Nobody has done anything quite like it. The audience has yet to be consulted, but the acceptance speech is coming along nicely.

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Meanwhile, across the table, somebody has removed every uncertain element from the proposal. The spreadsheet approves a piece of work that nobody has a reason to notice.

Both people believe they are protecting quality. Both have professional reasons. Neither has a monopoly on creativity or commercial sense. The difficulty starts when we treat our strongest form of judgement as sufficient.

Think of a photograph with shallow depth of field: exquisite detail in the subject, everything beyond it blurred. Professional expertise can produce a similar effect. We become so good at examining one part of the picture that we stop checking what lies outside it. The problem is not how sharply we see. It is how much we leave out of focus.

That narrow view feels especially comfortable among people who share it. Agreement comes quickly. So does permission to miss the same thing.

Better at our part, worse at the decision

AI can help each of us optimise what we already care about. More creative treatments without questioning their purpose. More reassuring analysis without noticing that the idea has become lifeless. We can get better at both and still make a poorer decision about what will serve our audience in a way that advances our business goals.

The pressure reaches both perspectives. A polished article can be generated; so can a polished marketing plan. If our defence is the document we deliver, both of us have a problem. Our value needs to show in the decisions that connect audience benefit with business purpose.

Content marketing is old enough to stop treating this as an unfortunate communication problem. Sustained investment requires a dependable way to connect our expertise. “They work well together” is lovely. What happens when they do not?

We want the other discipline’s contribution. We are less enthusiastic about its interference. Yet that interference is where our judgement gets tested. Leave it until approval and we discover the disagreement when changing anything is expensive and defending everything feels sensible.

Give the disagreement a job

Both perspectives belong at the table from the start, whether inside one person or across several chairs. They should shape the purpose, the idea and how it reaches people together. A finished article thrown over the wall with “now find an audience for it” is not a handover. It’s a dump of unfinished work. Distribution cannot retrospectively give it a reason to exist.

The reverse is equally unhelpful: a fully specified marketing plan handed to a creative colleague with instructions to “make it engaging”. By then, the decisions that most needed creative judgement may already have been made.

Suppose a customer interview includes a difficult implementation: what should viewers gain from hearing it, and what should that make possible for the business? The creative lead wants the passage because it makes the story credible. The marketing lead fears viewers will assume the difficulty applies to them, although their circumstances differ. Cutting it could turn the interview into a testimonial in disguise. Keeping it could mislead. Neither concern disappears because everybody has listened nicely.

Put four things on one page before another round of editing.

The decision. Keep, cut or reframe the passage? Agree what viewers should be able to judge and name the person accountable for the call. That person can come from either background. Authority comes from responsibility for the assignment.

The risk each person sees. Each explains the other’s concern until the other recognises it. “You want a boring interview” does not count. Neither does “You don’t care about results”. Understanding a concern well enough to defend it is a more demanding exercise than waiting politely for your turn.

The move that addresses both. Keep the difficult experience and explain the circumstances that caused it. Show the edit to a few intended viewers. What did they understand? What worried them? What would they do next? Their answers will not forecast revenue. They can reveal whether our intentions survived contact with an audience.

The call, and what could change it. Suppose viewers understand the context, but the marketing lead still fears fewer enquiries. The owner chooses to keep the passage because helping suitable prospects make an informed decision is the agreed purpose. Record the concern and a review point. Look for misunderstanding about who the problem affects. If that persists, change the edit.

Agreement would be welcome. It is not a condition for proceeding. Where a small test is possible, give it a budget and deadline. Where it is not, make the uncertainty explicit and decide. “Let’s test it” must not become the polite version of “I refuse to choose”.

What changed because you were there?

Creative judgement has changed how the business explains its offer. Commercial judgement has made the story more useful to people considering it. Neither person had to abandon the concern that made their contribution valuable.

That is the test for the next project: name one decision that changed because the other perspective was involved. A distribution route? A protected experiment? A different success measure? If the answer is only that somebody approved the work, we have barely started.

For those of us whose first instinct is towards the marketing, this also means allowing creative expertise to take us beyond our own confidence. I do not have to feel comfortable with an idea before supporting a test of it. I do need to understand the creative reasoning, agree what we are risking and know what we want to learn.

I still want more marketing in content marketing. I also want the creative judgement that makes my business reasoning work harder, especially when I am pleased with how clear it looks. The next time a colleague interrupts that view, I want to ask a better question before defending it: “What can you see from there that I am missing?”

AUTHORSHIP NOTE

How this Perspective was made

The perspective and judgement are mine.

I used AI to help develop the wording and presentation, while I retained the argument and conclusion.

I selected, edited and stand behind the final text.

About Bert van Loon

Bert van Loon is an independent speaker, moderator and conversation partner working across marketing, organisations, technology and change. Drawing on decades of experience in publishing, entrepreneurship, management and associations, he looks for perspectives that make complex questions more workable. Based in Burgundy, France, he works internationally.

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