

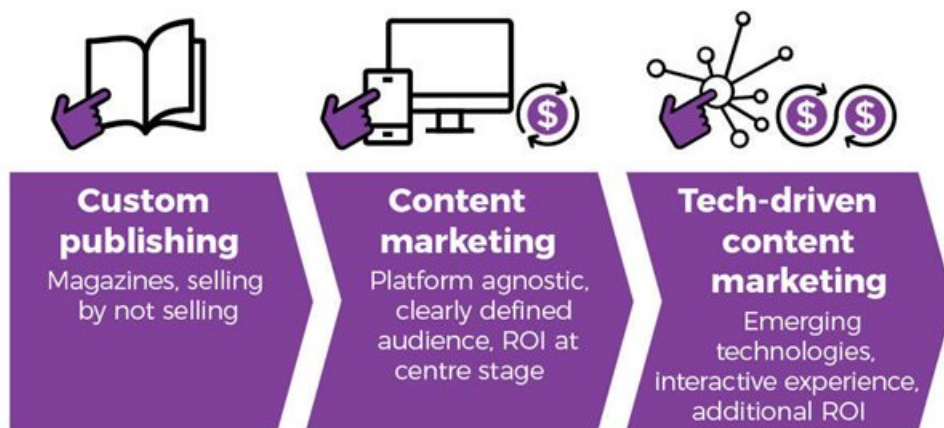
The story of content marketing

By [Aileen Lamb](#)

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Content marketing has its roots in custom publications, specifically John Deere's *The Furrow*, which launched in 1895. Still in production today, the original brand magazine was ahead of its time, teaching farmers ways to be more profitable. Fast forward 125 years and value creation is still at the centre of what content marketers do. Only now, we're operating in a world of rapid tech evolution and growing economic uncertainty.

The evolution of content marketing...



Chapter 1: from magazines to content everywhere

Custom publishing started evolving into the platform-agnostic content marketing in the mid-2000s. New Media, which began operating as a custom publisher for brands in 1998, dropped the “Publishing” from its name in 2011 to signal its transition to a digital-first content agency.

Digital enabled the shift from assuming what customers wanted or needed to know – now they can tell us directly. Today, brands that listen to and engage in honest conversation with their customers are the ones excelling in the marketing game.

Over the past decade, the volume of content consumed on digital devices has increased at an incredible rate. And Covid-19 accelerated this even more, with much of the world confined to homes sometime during the 2020 global pandemic.

South African [statistics showed](#) a rapid increase in online traffic when lockdown started in March 2020. While this is slowly decreasing as the economy opens up, it remains high. As Covid-19 fatigue has set in, users have migrated from news channels to more localised content on what they can do and how during the adjusted lockdown regulations.

This has certainly been picked up on food brands. Food24 (owned by New Media) and *Woolworths Taste* saw a 78% and a 181% increase in unique users respectively when lockdown level 5 was in effect. This follows local and global trends, where isolation and social distancing have both necessitated far more home cooking and given people time to learn and experiment. Many South Africans were also seeking to recreate the magic of eating out at home.

SimilarWeb shows that visits to the top 100 cooking and recipes websites worldwide increased by 33% from February 2020 to April 2020. In terms of the South African audience, total visits for this category increased by a massive 86%, understandably, given the lack of food delivery options under Level 5 lockdown.

Chapter 2: from vanity metrics to true ROI

To connect with a customer, it's clear that you have to offer them content that's relevant to them on their preferred platform. There is a tendency to stop there though, to focus on views, shares, likes and comments. But content marketing, when measured correctly, should be linked to specific business outcomes and data collected from customer engagement through to point of sale and beyond.

When *Taste* adapted its content strategy in response to lockdown, it was not to increase sales, which might have been seen as profiteering off a crisis, it was to make the lives of the Woolworths shopper easier, supporting them with affordable, pantry-friendly recipes. We worked with keyword research, data from social media and data on top-selling products to predict and respond to trends.



Woolworths *Taste* draws a crowd

New Media 14 Aug 2020



This was so successful that Woolworths decided to continue posting *Taste* content to its own channels and, despite lockdown regulations easing, to continue featuring "lo-fi" made-at-home videos. Another result was that click-through rates on strategic content on Woolworths' direct mailers peaked, with one content piece receiving a 66% CTR and another receiving 59.7% CTR in March.

An example of concrete ROI that directly ties to the bottom line is Vodacom. Calls to Vodacom's customer care line have dropped by many thousands as a direct result of SEO-optimised how-to content on the Vodacom now! blog. Using a formula developed by the client, we've been able to determine that these posts save Vodacom around a quarter of a million rand a month. Vodacom customers – and, as a bonus, its competitors' customers – are finding this content via Google.

How do you determine what's of value to your client's customers though? And how do you strategically plan your content to make sure it aligns with what they're looking for, ultimately leading to ROI? Market research and consumer insights are key, and the digital revolution has allowed us to read people in a way print never could. Layering these insights into marketing calendars ensures a balance between what clients want and what their audiences need.

The data-driven digital journey we've taken has allowed us to continue adding value to our clients. Years ago, we began to work with them to purposively ramp up their digital migration. This has kept them relevant to consumers, diversified our portfolio and further reduced our dependency on print ad revenues.

The next chapter: from digital-first to interactive experience

New Media completed its acquisition of established tech solutions agency Swipe iX in June 2020. This brought the full-stack app and web development, and UX and interaction design into the stable.



A freshened up *Food24* brings smart inspiration to SA's kitchens

Brent Smith, New Media 1 Jul 2020



Swipe iX also specialises in emerging technologies such as machine learning systems that target the most relevant content to those who would most benefit from it, and big data-powered gamification techniques that can help motivate interactions with content. Augmented and virtual reality platforms, as they continue to mature, will also play a much bigger part in creating immersive content experiences, as will the use of conversational agents in crafting interactive storytelling experiences.

If you provide customers with what they want and tailor it according to your business objectives, it's a win-win. As the story of content marketing unfolds further, the ethical usage of data and emerging technologies will increasingly come into play, deepening the connection between brands and their customers.

Machine learning, AR, VR and the like are not just "cool", they pack a real punch in terms of telling engaging brand stories, ultimately improving customer affinity and retention, even in the midst of a global crisis.

ABOUT AILEEN LAMB

Aileen Lamb is the CEO of New Media, the company that owns Eat Out. She has over 20 years of experience in all aspects of media - in the UK and South Africa - and was the driving force behind the digitisation and relaunch of successful media brands including Eat Out, VISI and Woolworths TASTE

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