Content Marketing Process Model: A Meta-Synthesis of the Literature

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to design and validate a content marketing process model based on the systematic review of the literature. The research approach of the present study was a combination of two stages. Firstly, using the meta-synthesis method, all dimensions of content marketing are identified and the research model is presented. Then, in order to validate the model, the fuzzy Delphi method was conducted in three rounds. The population of the first stage was consisted of 652 documents in this field, of which 55 were selected. The second population includes 16 experts in the field of content marketing who participated in all three rounds of the Delphi. Content marketing process model was achieved in four stages of planning, production, distribution and communication, measurement and optimization. In each stage, the steps and components necessary to implement the marketing content were identified and explained. Considering the use of two methods of meta-synthesis and Fuzzy Delphi, the proposed model is sufficiently valid and can be used as a roadmap for the establishment and implementation of content marketing performance in different companies and industries.

Keywords

Introduction

In recent decades, the "*content*" is used as a marketing strategy due to the widespread of digital communications and social networks. This trend has led to the emergence of the term "*content marketing*" which focuses on content creation, delivery and content management (Elisa & Gordini, 2014). In various previous studies, this term has been defined and used in different ways. For example, in the September 2010 report '*B2B Content Marketing Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends*', content marketing evangelist Joe Pulizzi defined content marketing as follows: "*Content marketing/custom media (sometimes called custom publishing, custom content or branded content) is the creation and distribution of educational and/or compelling content in multiple formats to attract and/or retain customers.*" However, in an earlier e-book entitled "*Get content, get customers: How to turn prospects into customers with content marketing*", Pulizzi and Barrett (2008) explained this concept in detail.

Rose and Pulizzi (2011) later argued that "content marketing is a strategy focused on the creation of a valuable experience". The key objectives for content marketing as identified by Rose and Pulizzi are brand awareness or reinforcement, lead conversion and nurturing, customer conversion, customer service, customer upsell, and passionate subscribers.

In this regard, Elisa and Gordini (2014) consider this strategy focused on changing and improving the behavior of prospect customers and turning them into loyal customers and buyers through the production of valuable content. In other words, the key goal of content marketing is to improve brand loyalty, converting leads into customers.

Although the importance of using the content marketing strategy has been recognized by many marketing experts, many recent studies explored the fundamental role of this strategy in strengthening the firm's brand and its relation to consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions (Georgiva & Djoukanova, 2014; Donofrio, 2014; Puro, 2013; Milhinhos, 2015). However, a literature review shows that due to the novelty of this strategy, it is not studied enough by researchers. The existence of a comprehensive framework for recognizing dimensions of content marketing is a requirement of its effective implementation and requires deep research to be properly designed and implemented. Therefore, the main question of the meta-synthesis of the literature was that "*how is the process model of content marketing which covers all the dimensions and components necessary for its implementation?*"

Materials and Methods

This research was based on a mixed approach and has been done in two steps. First, using the meta-synthesis and the seven steps of Sandelowski and Barroso (2007), components and dimensions were identified for designing the initial content marketing model. For this purpose, all of the scientific documents (papers, theses, etc.) related to content marketing basics were reviewed and a sample of 652 documents was considered as the population. Then, a sample of 55

documents was selected based on valid criteria and techniques used to screen for the next analyses. In the second step, using the Fuzzy Delphi method, the views of professionals and content marketing experts were applied to the initial framework.

The study population at this step was consisted of the experts in the field of content marketing in Iran including faculty members of universities, content management companies and content marketing researchers in the fields of business management, information technology (e-commerce) and entrepreneurship (e-business) that were selected by non-probabilistic sampling and a combination of purposive and chaining methods. Accordingly, at first, 10 candidates were identified through their scientific research. Then, they were asked to introduce other people who are suitable to participate in this study. Therefore, six other eligible candidates were nominated who have expressed their willingness to participate in the Fuzzy Delphi panel.

Results

In order to achieve a content marketing process model, its implementation steps are based on previous studies and the seven-step approach developed by Sandelowski and Barroso (2007) as follows (Figure 1).
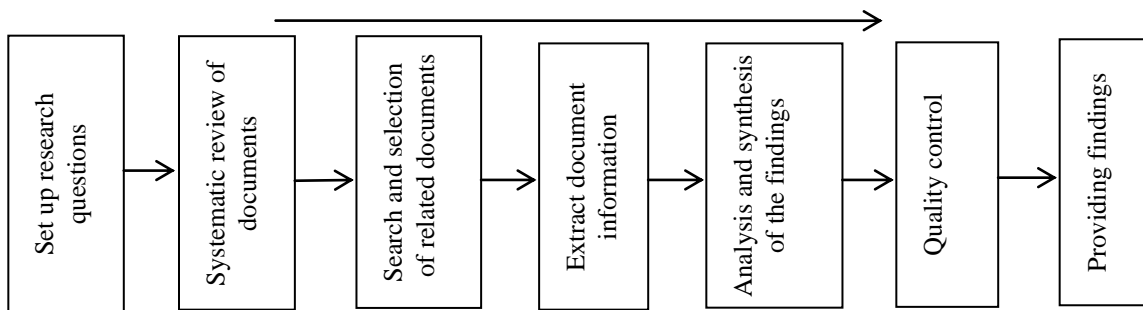
Figure 1. The Seven steps of meta-synthesis

Step 1: Setting up research questions. In this step, basic questions were raised and the document domain was determined by responding them (Table 1).

Table 1. Questions of the first step of meta-synthesis

Parameter	Research questions
What	Identification of dimensions (stages, steps, and components) in the literature on content marketing.
Who	Various documents, including scientific papers, theses and book chapters that addressed the stages, steps and components of content marketing.
When	All existing documents published from 2008 to 2016 (the date of the research).
How	Thematic review of documents, identification and marking of key points, categorization of concepts and identified categories.

Step 2: Systematic review of documents. At this stage, eligible studies were selected to enter the meta-synthesis. Hence, different databases, journals and search engines were searched and various keywords were used to search the documents. Based on the search and review of databases, journals and search engines, 652 documents were retrieved.

Step 3: Search and selection of related documents. In this step, the quality of the retrieved documents was evaluated using the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) tool. This tool was designed based on ten questions: 1) research objectives; 2) method logic; 3) research design; 4) sampling method; 5) data collection; 6) reflection, which includes the relationship between researcher and participants; 7) ethical considerations; 8) accuracy of data analysis; 9) clear expression of findings; and 10) the research value, which helps the researcher determine the accuracy and validity of qualitative research studies (Griebler & Nowak, 2012). Accordingly, any documents received a score based on the above-mentioned criteria: excellent documents (41-50), very good documents (31-40), good documents (30-21), medium documents (11-20) and weak documents (0-10). On this basis, only excellent and very good grades (documents with a score of over 30) were selected and other studies were excluded from the survey.

The next step is the final refinement and information extraction. Figure 2 shows the algorithm used to refine the documents and to select appropriate examples.
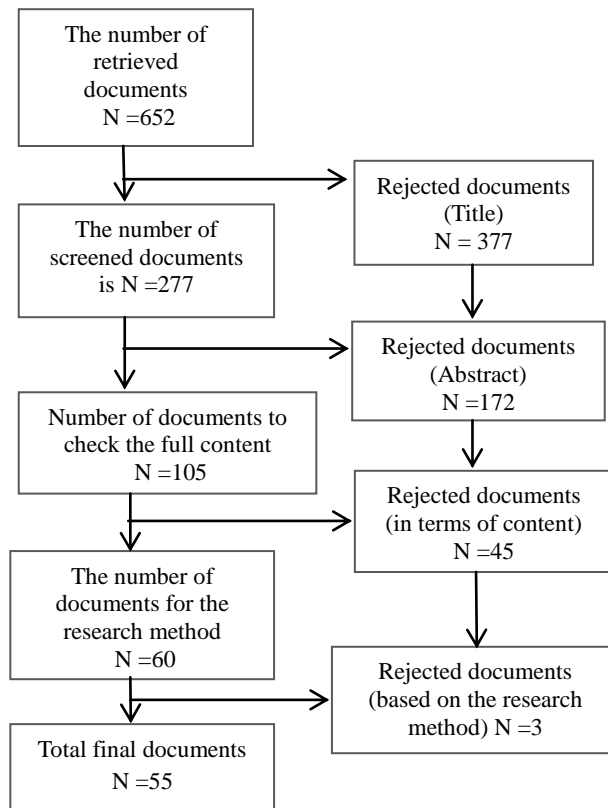
Figure 2. Selection algorithm of the appropriate documents analysis

Of the 652 examined documents, 619 were in English and 33 in Persian, and 55 of which were selected for further study.

Step 4: Extracting the document information. In this step, the final documents were studied by content analysis and key points related to content marketing were noted. In total, 14 components for content marketing stages, 13 components for content marketing steps, 56 components for content creation, 6 components for content format, 5 components for distribution media, and 7 components for effectiveness measurements were identified with the high degrees of frequency.

Step 5: analysis and synthesis of the findings. In this step, the qualitative analysis of findings was conducted with the aim of creating a new and integrated interpretation of it (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). That is, all the extracted mechanisms in the previous step were categorized in the same sense, taking into account the concept of each of them. Accordingly, the identified components in five categories include: elements of content marketing planning; the intrinsic elements of content production; content formation elements; medium elements in the distribution of content; and the elements of the effectiveness of the category which provided the basis for the proposed content marketing model. All stages, steps and concepts along with their code are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Categorization of identified components

Categories	Concepts	Codes
Content marketing planning elements	Define target audience	Identifying the audience's demographic data (such as age, sex, marital status, education level, occupation, income level); Identify needs, interests, and desires
	Identify objectives	Increase brand awareness; Lead generation; Customer retention
	Define an editorial calendar	Determine topics, format and type of content (determine what content should be created); assigned content producer(s) and responsible for the content; determine distribution channel(s); content distributions schedules
Elements inherent in content production	Valuable / excellent	Inform; educate; important; meaningful; satisfying purchase-related information needs; respond; specialized
	Related	In line with the customer's interests; in line with the needs of customers; customization
	Reliable	Truthful; without bias; authentic, reliable and accurate; quality
	Entertainment	Attractive (stretching, impressive and engaging and exciting); story-like, convincing (persuasion); engaging; humorous; good and fun; intelligent
	New (exclusive)	Creative; fresh; original and timely
	Coherent	Coordinated with previous content; consistency
	Sharing	Reproducing; participatory; accessible / available; free
	Purposeful	Non-commercial; non-supportive; helpful; effective; clear; inspiring and instructive

Content formation elements	Format	Common in use; inexpensive; sharing; simultaneous use
Medium elements in content distribution	Interactive	Social and participatory; owned media; earned media
	Usability	Accessibility; free
Elements of measuring effectiveness	Consumption	Pages views; number of downloads; average time on page
	Share	Number of likes; number of shares; number of tweets; number of re-tweets; number of posts sent (forwards); number of emails; number of incoming links
	Lead Generation	Pages views; number of followers; number of comments; average time on page
	Sale	Online sales; offline sales

Step 6: Quality control extracted codes. To control extractives, a comparison of the researchers' opinion with a content marketing expert was conducted and the agreement rate between the two evaluators was evaluated using Cohen's kappa coefficient. Considering the significance number of 0.00 and the index value of 0.89, we can claim that the extraction of codes has a good reliability.

Step 7: Providing findings. Based on the obtained findings, the basic framework of the content marketing process model was developed as shown in Figure 3.
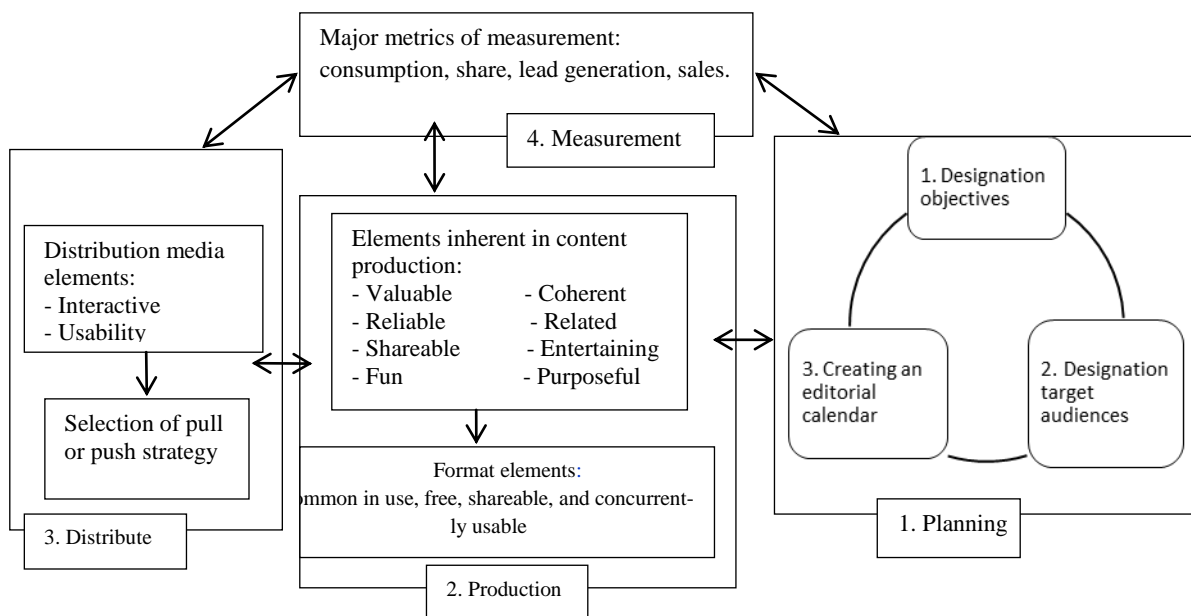
Figure 3. Basic framework of the content marketing process model

1. Planning (P): makes the first step of a content marketing process model. This stage involves three steps: "designation business objectives from content marketing", "designation target audiences", and "creating an editorial calendar". The editorial calendar for content editing is a timeline that specifies the frequency of content publishing and content distribution channels. The planning stage is a rotating process. This means that there are three steps from the planning stage of the back and forth route for adjusting the steps.

2. Production (P): The second stage of the content marketing process model refers to content creation; at this stage, the content related to the intentions and concerns of target audiences will be produced. In this regard, it is necessary to pay attention to the inherent elements in the production of content and content elements. Content inherent elements include all elements that help marketers generate valuable content. The most important of these are: value, relevance, reliability, sharing, entertainment, exclusive, coherence, and purposeful content. Additionally, at this stage, it is essential for the marketer to focus on the form of the content produced in terms of the prevalence of the format and its use with a variety of tools and platforms for its users and the ability to share it. That is, the content should not only be in proportion to the distribution media, in terms of volume and duration, but also in a way that can be easily shared with the audience and allows the audience to use it simultaneously.

3. Distribution (D): At this stage, the marketer should choose a media that is highly interactive and capable of being widely used between customers based on the type of content. It is also necessary at this stage to determine the type of content distribution strategy (pull / push / or both).

4. Measurement (M): At this stage, content marketing experiences and activities are evaluated using the main measurements (consumption, share, lead generation and sales), and the results obtained from this stage for making decisions and planning are used to effectively implement of content marketing.

However, the model has a relative validity due to being based on the past research. Nevertheless, in order to determine the degree of agreement on the stages, steps and components obtained and its approximation to a more scientific viewpoint using Fuzzy Delphi, the views of content marketing experts from Iran were studied in three rounds. Modifications were made to the experts in the initial model and the model of the content marketing process was modified and revised in Figure 4.

The developed content marketing process model 2PDM (**P**lanning, **P**roduction, **D**istribute and Communicate, **M**easurement and Optimization) is presented in Figure 4.
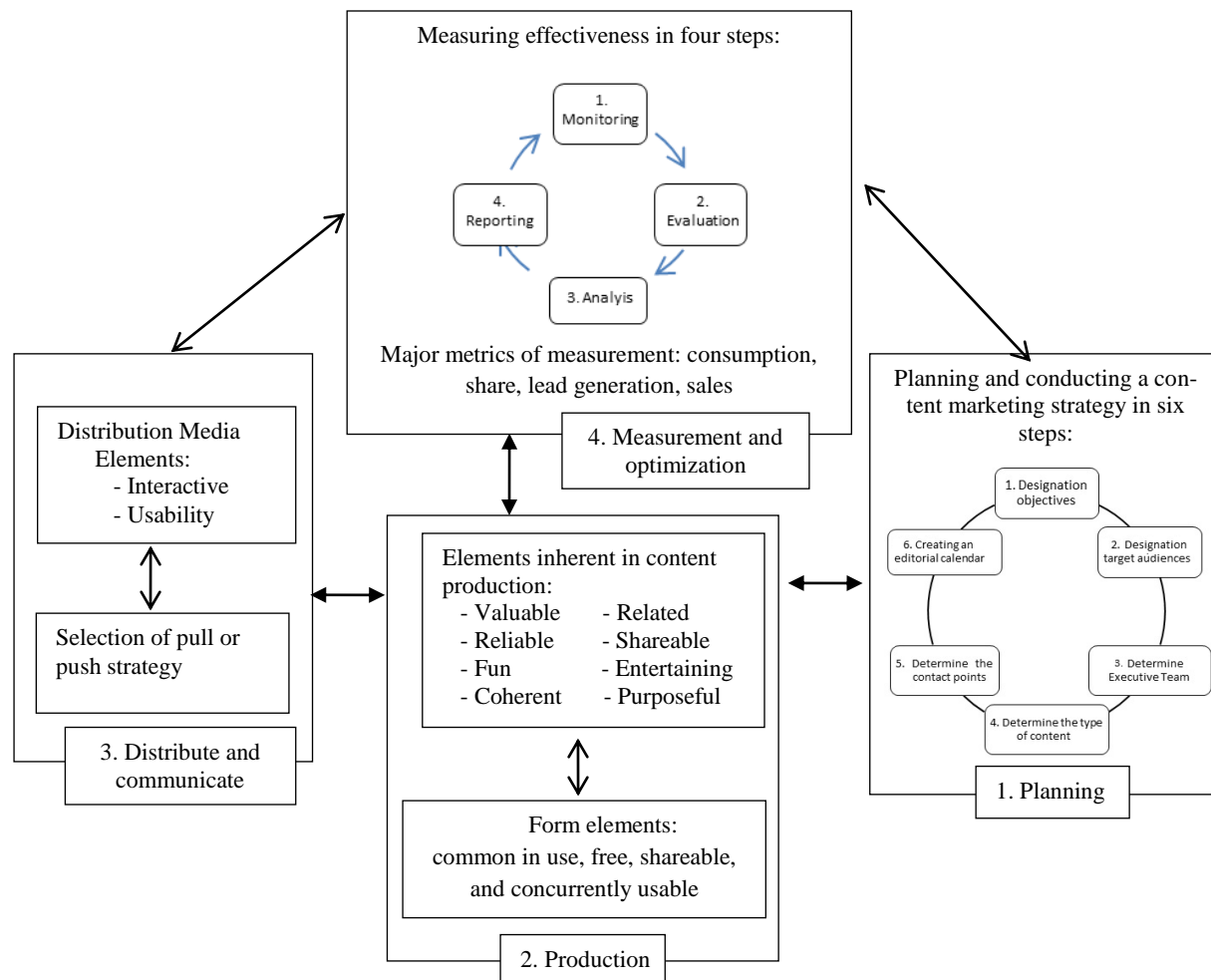
Figure 4. 2PDM Content marketing process model

The developed process model has changed in several ways compared to the original research model. First, the three main steps of the planning stage in the initial model were developed in a six-step process during the fuzzy Delphi process. Accordingly, the third step of this stage is to identify the members needed to form an executive team and determine their responsibilities. These people can be provided outside of the company with specific skills or internally trained personnel training. The purpose of "determining the type of content" is to look deeply into the content that is intended to be produced. It is important to determine the type of content in accordance with customer preferences and the level of features and expertise of the content producer team. "Determination of contact points" refers to the identification of points (corporate website, telegram, and other social media) that customers interact with the company. Finally, the last step of this stage is creating an editorial calendar.

The second change is related to the content distribution stage. According to the consensus of experts, this stage should be accompanied by communication with the audience. That is, business must communicate with its audience and listen to its audience and respond to their responses by responding to the audience's notes and feedbacks.

The third change is related to the measurement stage, which was coupled with optimization and in four steps: (1) monitoring; (2) measurement; (3) analysis; and (4) reporting that was added to the measurement stage according to experts. "Monitoring" refers to identifying, sorting out and describing data. "Measurement" refers to the assessment of content marketing activities using the main measure (consumption, share, lead generation, and sales). Then, in the "Analysis" step, the evaluation results are analyzed for better understanding and in the last step "Reporting" the results for better decision making and planning for effective content marketing are reported.

Discussion

Conducting research in relation to the process and implementation steps of content marketing is very limited due to the emergence of this area. Therefore, the present study attempted to provide the content marketing process model by identifying the main dimensions of content marketing. However, previous research (Du Plessis, 2015; Mahdizadeh Molabashi et al., 2016, Naseri, 2017) have been focusing on several key elements of content marketing through surveys or non-systematic reviews. But no attention has been paid to other dimensions of content marketing, including stages, executive steps, and formation and medium elements, as it was intended in the present study. Accordingly, the findings of the present research showed that the concept of content marketing involves the stages, steps, dimensions, and features that marketers and content strategy planners need to address for its implementation and effectiveness. Also, due to changes in content marketing process model, it can be seen that between the views of content marketing experts in Iran and the documents available in this field, which are mostly based on studies outside of Iran, there is a significant proximity in the implementation process, stages, steps and components for producing, distributing and measuring content.

Conclusion

The final output of this study is to present a content marketing process model that provides the necessary executive instruction for content marketing, from the stage of developing a content marketing strategy to measuring the effectiveness of content marketing activities for businesses and individuals interested in content marketing initiatives. In addition, the findings of this research provide a significant insight into the dimensions, the implementation process and the effectiveness of content marketing for various industries and businesses in order to integrate content marketing activities with other marketing activities.

The next important point in the proposed model is stating the proceedings related to the stage of the model. In other words, how deep we delve into each of the stages and steps is something dependent on the administration manager's decision and the available facilities. In this research less attention was paid to the required tools and the focus was mainly on the executing process.

Therefore, defining the tools and the framework for their use needs another study. For example, creating a timeline and measuring the effectiveness of each stage can be done through different tools.

Considering the fact that this research aims to identify the main dimensions and components of content marketing and present a process model for its implementation; it is suggested that the executive function of this model be tested empirically at the level of a small business. This could help publicize more research results.

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