

CONTENT MARKETING METRICS: THEORETICAL ASPECTS AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

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Abstract

In recent years both practitioners and academics have shown an increasing interest in Content Marketing and in the metrics to measure its impact on firm performance. However the literature remains fragmented. In attempting to fill the gap, this paper has two main objectives. Firstly, we review the existing literature on content marketing and the main metrics used. Secondly, we analyse the degree of use and effectiveness of content marketing strategy and metrics, on a sample of 235 Italian firms.

Keywords: Content marketing, content marketing metrics, performance measurement, Italian firms

Introduction

The introduction of digital technology and the spread of the Internet have led to radical changes in the way companies meet the expectations and interests of its stakeholders (Rancati, 2010; Wertime & Fenwick, 2008) and in corporate communication (Winer, 2009). In digital communication, compared to the conventional method, content plays a major role. "Content is King" is, in fact, one of the most popular slogans throughout the digital economy. Focus on content involves analyzing new communication models, very different than the usual formats used by firms. Content marketing (CM) attracts potential consumers and increases their engagement and empowerment (Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007) through the creation, dissemination and sharing of free content, and being relevant, meaningful, valuable and able to inspire confidence in existing and potential customers. However, literature still includes a few more contributions (Keyes, 2006; Rowley, 2008; Pulizzi & Barrett, 2009; Halvorson, 2010; Handley & Chapman, 2010, 2011; Gunelius, 2011; Lieb, 2011) which try to define CM, and, above all, to show how to measure its impact on firm performance.

Thus, in an attempt to bridge these gaps, the paper has two main research objectives: 1) to study the evolution of the concept of CM and the main metrics used for its measurement; 2) to analyze the degree of use and effectiveness of CM strategies and metrics by a sample of Italian firms.

The paper is structured as follows: paragraph 2 provides a review of the literature regarding CM, paragraph 3 examines the main metrics used for measuring CM, paragraph 3 describes the methodology, whilst paragraphs 4 and 5 analyze the degree of use and effectiveness of CM and CM by a sample of Italian firms. Conclusion highlights some managerial implications, limitations of the research and further research avenues.

Literature review

The use of the content as a marketing strategy has recently undergone a deep evolution thanks to the spread of digital communications and social networks. The digital dimension, in particular, has led to the birth of terms such as digital CM (Rakic et al., 2014; Koiso-Kanttila, 2004; Rowley, 2008) which focusses on the changes that technological innovation has produced on creation, delivery and content management. Consequently, in recent years, studies on CM (Keyes, 2006; Pulizzi & Barrett, 2009; Halvorson, 2010; Handley & Chapman, 2010, 2011; Gunelius, 2011; Lieb, 2011; Nelli, 2012; Jefferson & Tanton, 2013; Rahimia & Hassanzadeh 2013) have significantly increased, nonetheless without reaching a clear and unique definition of the concept and of metrics which are used for its measurement. Thus, trying to systematize the literature review on this topic seems particularly relevant. Table 1 shows a review of the main definitions of CM in the literature. In particular, the review, according to other recent systematic reviews within the management field (Abatecola et al., 2014; David & Han, 2004; Newbert, 2007), focused only on double peer-reviewed journal articles, regardless of their impact factor. Computer based research was performed in November 2014 by using the academic journals within the Ebsco-Host database. The most suitable research keywords, mainly derived from the reading of leading journals articles and books on CM, were chosen. We have conducted a 5 phase research. In the first phase we have researched papers that contain in their abstract the keyword content marketing, selecting 382 articles. In the second phase, the relevance of the articles was ensured by requiring that the articles selected in the previous phase also contained in their abstract, at least one of the following keywords - *concept** or *definition* or *theory** or *framework*. The asterisk at the end of a keyword allowed for different suffixes (e.g. theory or theoretical). This phase outputted 110 papers. In the third step, the relevance of the 110 articles was ensured by requiring that those articles also contained at least one of the following three keywords - *literature reviews* or *background* or *synthesis* - in their abstract. This phase

yielded 26 articles. In the fourth step, these 26 papers were further scanned by reading all their abstracts and texts, thus controlling their connection with the research topic. This phase produced 3 articles. Finally, in the last phase, the snowballing technique (Iacobucci & Churchill, 2010) was adopted for integrating the results from the previous phase with papers, book chapters or books, relevant to our research topics, but not found in the EBSCO-Host database. This phase delivered 9 papers, shown in Table 1.

Tab. 1 – Main definition of CM (in chronological and then alphabetical order)

| AUTORE | RIVISTA/LIBRO | DEFINIZIONE |
|---|---|--|
| Chaffey D., Mayer R., Johnston K., Ellis-Chadwick F. (2000) | Internet marketing, Pearson Education, Edinburgh. | Content is the design, text and graphical information that forms a web page. Good content is the key to attracting customers to a web site and retaining their interest or achieving repeat visits. |
| Keyes J. (2006) | Knowledge management, business intelligence and content management, Auerbach Publications, Broken South Parken. | Content marketing is usually focus on intranet-based or internet-based corporate content, including data and knowledge bases. |
| Pulizzi J. e Barret N. (2009) | Get content. Get customers, McGraw Hill, New York | Content marketing is a marketing technique of creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience – with the objective of driving profitable customer action. Content marketing is owning, as opposed to renting media. It's marketing process to attract and retain customers by consistently creating and curating content in order to change or enhance a consumer behavior. |
| Halvorson K. (2010) | Content strategy for the web, New Riders, Berkeley | Content strategy is the practice of planning for the creation, delivery, and governance of useful, usable content. |
| Handley A., Chapman A.A. (2010) | Content Rules, John Wiley & Sons, New York | Content marketing is anything an individual or an organization creates and/or shares to tell their story. What it isn't: A warmed-over press release served as a blog post. It is conversational, human and doesn't try to constantly sell to you. It also isn't a tactic that you can just turn on and off and hope that will be successful. It has to be a mindset that is embraced and encouraged. You've got to start thinking like a publisher and use that to plan and execute your entire marketing plan which content of any variety should be a part. |

| | | |
|-----------------|--|---|
| Gunelius (2011) | Content Marketing for Dummiers, Wiley, New York | Content marketing is the process of indirectly and directly promoting a business or brand through value-added text, video, or audio content both online and offline. It can come in long-form (such as blogs, articles, e-books, and so on), short-form (such as Twitter updates, Facebook updates, images, and so on), or conversational-form (for example, sharing great content via Twitter or participating in an active discussion via blog comments or through an online forum). |
| Lieb (2011) | Content Marketing: think like a publisher. How to use content to market online and in social media, Que Publishing, Indianapolis | Content marketing, in other words, is nothing Companies having been creating and distribu for many years, both to attract new business a existing customers. However, here's the poin differentiation from more traditional forms o and advertising: using content to sell isn't sel advertising. It isn't push marketing, in which are sprayed out at groups of consumers. Rath strategy—it's the marketing of attraction. It's when consumers need you and seek you out educational, helpful, compelling, engaging, a sometimes entertaining information. |
| Slater (2014) | Content marketing: recycling and reuse. How your best online content can engage and attract new customers, i30 Media Corporation, New York | Content marketing is a dynamic way to get c is the process of sharing expertise and knowl to attract potential customers and establish a with them. Content marketers have to be focu creating, publishing, and sharing suitable con However, many content marketers often over readily available source of content – articles, blog posts, videos, images, and other assets t created years before yet still have the potentia new customers. |
| Ramos (2014) | Content Marketing: insider's secret to online sales and lead generation. One Night Expert Publishingm New York | Content marketing is a marketing techniques high-quality, relevant content to educate, eng acquire your target customer. Content marketing is not just creating conten of producing content; your objective is alway true potential of content marketing lies in its ability to provide a conv for your leads to follow on their own schedul convenience. |

After analyzing these 9 papers, it has been possible to identify three pillars that characterize CM: 1) contents; 2) customers engagement and 3) goals. With reference to the first pillar, some authors (Handley and Chapman, 2010, 2011; Lieb, 2011; Jefferson and Tanton, 2013; Rose and Pulizzi, 2011) argue that CM means to produce quality content, unique,

significant, valuable, dynamic and more relevant than its competitors. The content must: 1) be able to generate interest, involving, but also informing and educating the customer; 2) express all those values that identify the firm in terms of uniqueness, consistency, quality and relevance; 3) be pro-active, that is able to evolve over time. In regard to consumer engagement, the main role of the customer is therefore reflected in the content management system, creating a logical customer centric view based on a constant adaptation of content in relation to customer needs and preferences (Gunelius, 2011, p.56). However, customers are increasingly becoming a part of the process of creating value through frequent interactions with the firm (value co-creation). This leads on to overcome conventional models of communication because of the technological process: internet, in particular, has accelerated the process of consumption democratization, making the final customer more and more informed, and interconnected with the firm and customers.

Transferring power to customers (customer empowerment) allows the value co-creation of CM through a dialogue between customers and firms. Finally, the third element relates to the objectives pursued by the CM that does not lead back to the single action of operation marketing, but concerns “the creation, capture, delivery, customization and management of content across an organization so that it delivers a consistent message about that company and is useful to the customer” (Parkin, 2009, p. 125). According to Rakic et al. (2014) firms use “digital CM to support the implementation of multiple business objectives, such as brand awareness, attraction of customers, along with creating the leads and maintaining of customer relationships/loyalty etc.”. Accordingly, with literature review and with the three main features identified in this study, we define the CM as being a tool to share content, but also to create value and high returns along with the financial means of customer distribution, attraction, involvement, acquisition and retention.

Content marketing metrics

It is possible to summarize CM metrics in four main categories: *consumption, sharing, lead generation and sales metrics*. These categories, autonomous on the one hand, however at the same time closely related to each other on the other hand, allow firms to measure the contribution of the three pillars of CM to value creation, identifying any gap between the results obtained and planned and, consequently, to implement corrective actions in order to achieve the goals.

Consumption metrics help the marketing manager measure brand awareness and website traffic generated by the content, thus measuring the effect of the first pillar of CM. Some of the more prominent consumption metrics are: a) page views, b) downloads, c) visitors, d) time on page, e)

social chatter. Content marketers often use these metrics because: 1) they are very intuitive and easy to measure through software such as Google Analytics; 2) give a vast amount of useful information.

Sharing metrics measures the level of content sharing by consumers with their network of people with a direct and significant impact on the engagement. Thus, these metrics are a useful tool for the measurement of the second pillar of the CM. Examples of sharing metrics are: a) likes, shares, tweets, +1, b) email forwards, c) inbound links. This category of metrics is extremely useful for measuring the diffusion and the sharing of content amongst a large number of consumers and their network of people. However, as consumption metrics, these metrics do not provide any information on the real economic return generated by the CM.

Lead generation metrics measure how often content consumption results in a lead. Thus, lead generation is often an emphatic goal for content creation, especially in B2B. Some crucial metrics in this category include: a) form completions, b) email, newsletter and blog subscriptions, c) blog comments, d) cookies, e) RSS feed, f) conversion rate. Lead generation metrics are the first of the four groups that give an economic-financial value of the CM.

Finally, sales metrics help to identify the impact of CM on firm performance. Thus these metrics help marketers to find out how CM impacts customer acquisition and sales goals. Examples of these metrics are: a) online and offline sales, b) customer retention, c) cost saving, d) Content Marketing ROI. Despite the importance of these metrics, they are often little known and used by marketers. This is a first evidence of a conception of the CM, still limited to the functions of publishing and sharing, and not as a fundamental tool to create value.

Methodology

To understand how Italian firms perceive CM and measure its effects on firm performance, we have administered an online questionnaire to the marketing manager of a sample of 1,000 Italian firms. The questionnaire consists of 20 questions divided into two sections: the first, consisting of 5 multiple choice questions, allows us to obtain general info about the sample (e.g. gender and the age of the respondent, size, business sector, geographical area). The second, consisting of 15 questions measured by a Likert scale, analyze: 1) the use of CM and how marketers rate the effectiveness of their organization's use of CM; 2) the main goals of CM strategies; 3) the main tactics used by Content Marketers to achieve goals; 4) the amount of the total marketing budget for CM and 5) the knowledge and use of the four categories of metrics previously examined. The initial response rate to this survey was 18% (180 firms). To increase the number of respondents, a

follow-up was sent out. The final response rate was 20% (202 firms). In addition, we have performed checks for potential non-response biases by dividing our respondents into early and late respondents. This procedure is performed under the assumption that late respondents are more similar in nature to non-respondents than early respondents. No statistical differences between the early and late respondents were observed, which suggests that non-response bias was not a major problem (Kanuk & Berenson, 1975; Gordini & Rancati, 2014). Finally we have eliminated all questionnaires with missing data, obtaining a final sample of 202 Italian firms (table 2).

Tab. 2 - Sample

| Business Sector | N (%) |
|---|--------------|
| Manufacturing | 36 (18%) |
| Publishing Media/Internet/Online services | 49 (24%) |
| Accounting/Banking/Financial | 32 (16%) |
| Advertising/Communication/Marketing/PR | 85 (42%) |
| Size (by Employees) | |
| Micro (fewer than 10 employees) | 42 (21%) |
| Small (10-50 employees) | 85 (42%) |
| Medium (50-250 employees) | 45 (22%) |
| Large (more than 250 employees) | 30 (15%) |
| Geographical Area | |
| Nord | 105 (52%) |
| Centre | 73 (36%) |
| Sud | 24 (12%) |
| Job Title | |
| CEO | 105 (52%) |
| Marketing Manager | 97 (48%) |

Results

Results show a good use of CM between Italian firms. 79% of our sample has claimed to know and use tools of CM in carrying out their activities. In analyzing how marketers rate their organization's use of CM (table 3), results show that respondents consider CM to be very effective in 33% of cases, effective in 45%, low effective in 13% and not at all effective in 9% of the cases.

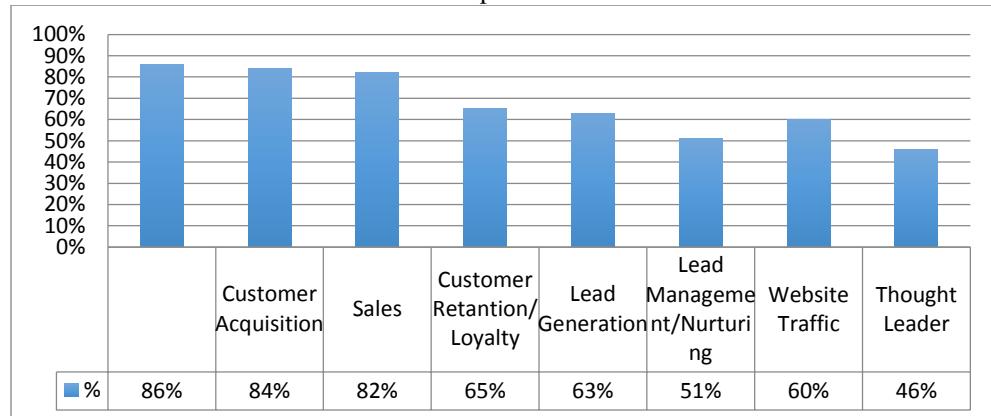
Tab. 3 - Use and Rate of CM

| | |
|--|-----|
| Use of CM between Italian firms | 89% |
| Rate | |
| Very Effective | 33% |
| Effective | 45% |
| Low Effective | 13% |
| Not at all effective | 9% |

Among top goals of CM (graf.1), content marketers identify brand awareness (86%), customer acquisition (84%), sales (82%). Other goals are

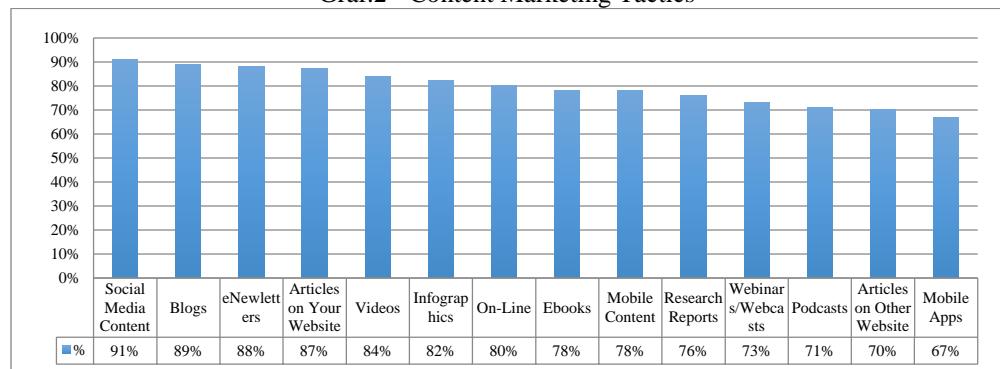
customer retention/loyalty (65%), lead generation and lead management/nurturing (respectively 63% and 51%), website traffic (60%) and thought leaders (46%).

Graf.1 Top Goals of CM



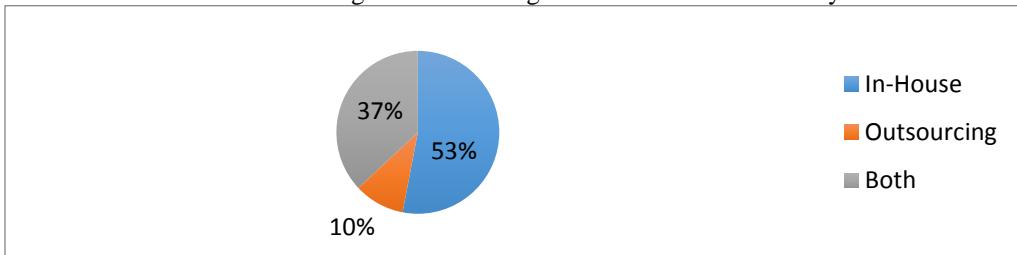
To achieve their goals (graf.2), Italian companies mainly use an average of 14 content marketing tactics such as social media content (91%) blogs (89%), eNewletters (88%), articles on the website of the company (87%), video (84%), infographics (82%) or online presentations (80%). In particular Italian content marketers cite Twitter (93%), Facebook (90%), LinkedIn (87%), Slideshares (81%) or Google + (81%) as the social media platform they use most often to distribute content.

Graf.2 - Content Marketing Tactics

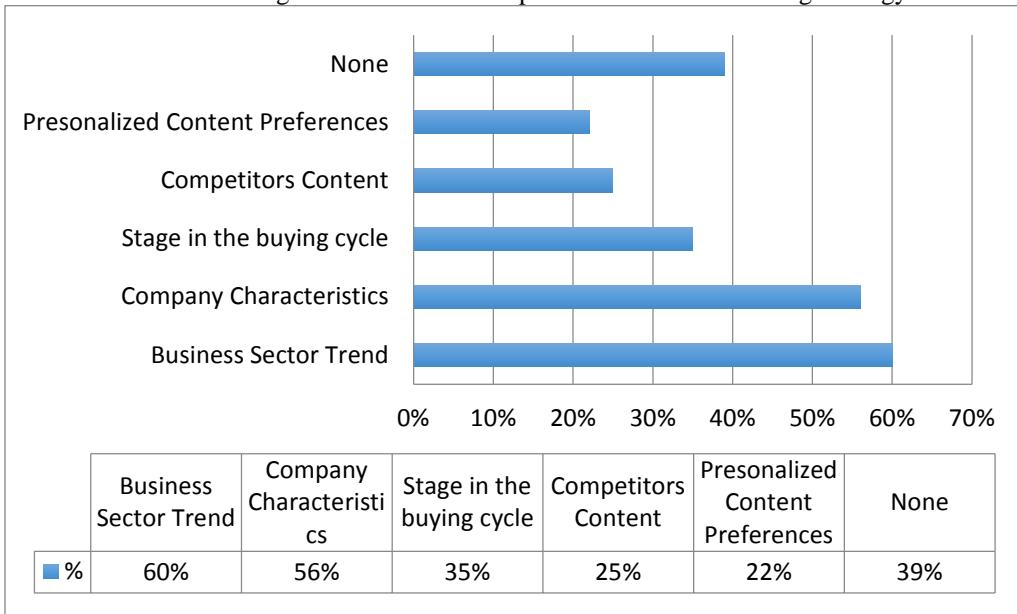


53% of Italian firms create in-house content, whilst only 10% use outsourcing and 37% use both (Graf.3). However, only 31% of Italian firms use a documented and accurately planned content strategy to achieve their objectives, based, for example, on industry trends, company characteristics, stage in the buying cycle, competitor's content marketing strategies, and personalized content preferences (Graf.4).

Graf.3 - Insourcing vs. Outsourcing of Content Creation in Italy

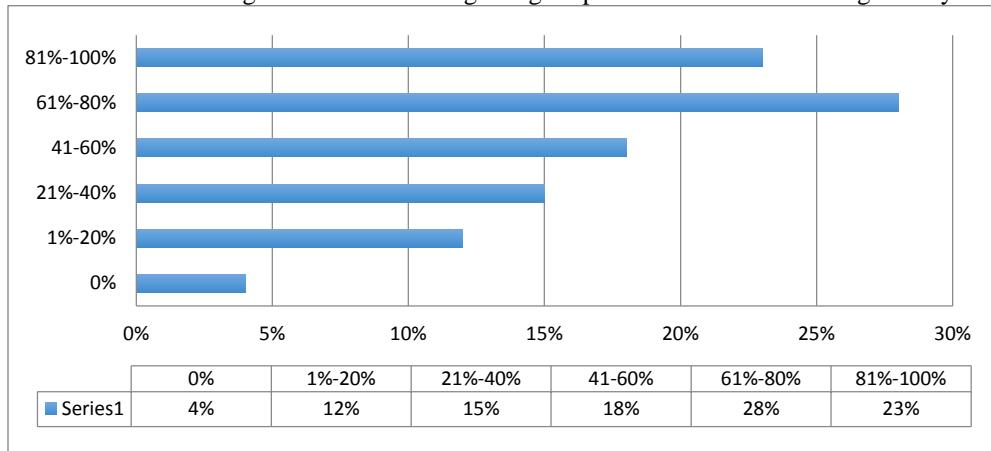


Graf.4 - Percentage of documented and planned Content Marketing Strategy



Analyzing how much content marketers allocate from their total marketing budget to content marketing strategies and tactics (graf.5), results in the suggestion that in 2013 investments were constantly growing. In particular 51% of the Italian sample invest more than 60% of their budget in CM, whilst only the 4% the 0%.

Graf. 5 - Percentage of Total Marketing Budget Spent on Content Marketing in Italy



Finally, we have analyzed the level of knowledge and use of the four categories of metrics previously analyzed (table 4). According to the main literature, results of the Italian sample show: 1) an extensive use of consumption (on average 83% of the sample) and sharing (on average 72%) metrics, i.e. metrics that measure the returns of the activities of publishing and sharing and which are easily calculable in terms of both time and cost; 2) an average use of lead generation metrics (average 66%) and, overall, 3) a low use of sales metrics (average 36%), i.e. the metrics that give a real economic-financial measure of CM strategies.

Tab. 4 - Percentage of use of the four categories of content marketing metrics

| CATEGORIES | USAGE (%) |
|---|------------|
| Consumption Metrics (on average) | 83% |
| Page views | 93% |
| Visitors | 90% |
| Video views | 88% |
| Time on page | 86% |
| Document views | 85% |
| Downloads | 81% |
| Social Chatter | 80% |
| Page views/visitor | 77% |
| Visitors returns | 75% |
| Time on page/visitors | 75% |
| Sharing Metrics (on average) | 72% |
| Likes, share, tweets, +1, retweets, pins | 86% |
| Mail forward | 75% |
| Inbound Links | 55% |
| Lead-Generation Metrics (on average) | 65% |
| Form completions | 78% |
| RSS feed | 75% |
| Blog comments | 73% |
| Email subscription | 70% |

| | |
|--------------------------------------|------------|
| Newsletter subscription | 62% |
| Qualitative feedback dai consumatori | 61% |
| Blog subscription | 53% |
| Conversion rate | 51% |
| Sales Metrics (on average) | 36% |
| Online sales | 72% |
| Offline sales | 85% |
| Customer Retention | 23% |
| Manual reporting & Anecdotes | 15% |
| Cost Saving | 12% |
| Content Marketing ROI | 9% |

Conclusion

CM has taken a leading role in the marketing studies. However, according to the main literature, our results show that Italian companies are still too anchored to a reductive vision of CM that qualifies CM simply as a tool to publish and share content and not as a key factor for value creation. In summing up our results we suggest that: 1) Italian companies show a good use of CM, rate it as being effective, and allocate more than 60% of their total marketing budget to CM. However, they do not tend to develop a documented and planned content strategy and they are not investing in the training area of human resources dedicated to CM activities. This is a first evidence that Italian firms do not yet recognize a strategic role relating to value creation at CM; 2) Italian companies make extensive use of metrics designed to measure aspects related to the publication and sharing of content, but, at the same time, a low use of metrics to evaluate the economic-financial impact of the CM strategies and tactics. This demonstrates a further evidence showing that Italian firms, thus far, do not fully understand the centrality of CM in order to obtain and sustain a competitive advantage. Hence, these two results suggest that Italian firms still do not recognize the strategic role of CM in the value creation process.

The results of our study suggest some managerial implications in developing the debate on CM as a strategy in order to increase performance and create value. In particular, content marketing managers should 1) abandon the idea of the CM as merely being a simple tactic to publish and share content; 2) begin to carefully plan CM strategies, using human resources dedicated specially to this activity; 3) increase the use of economic-financial metrics (i.e. lead generation and sales metrics) to properly assess the impact of CM on value creation.

The main limitations of the research are 1) the small size of the sample and 2) the fact that the analysis has been conducted only at an aggregate level regardless of size, business sector or geographical area of the sample. Thus, our results do not allow a complete understanding of the different

dimensions of the CM according to the above three criteria. For example, the lack of an accurate planned CM strategy may be due to the small size of the firms of the sample.

Future research avenues could then 1) extend the preliminary results of this study to other countries, 2) use larger samples and 3) apply the analysis according to size, business sector and geographical area in order to better understand both the role and impact of CM.

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