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Attract New Clients Through Content Marketing

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By now, we have all heard about content marketing (thought-leadership marketing) and its role in nurturing clients and prospects. For at least five years, we've heard stories of how firms have gained clients and are actively connecting with prospects with the help of content marketing. Yet, A/E/C firms continue to distrust this notion. Why?

Consider that the expectations of professional services buyers have changed—even in just the past 10 years. Today's buyers are considering a range of options in their journey from recognition of need, to engagement of service provider, to firm advocacy and referral. In light of this, the new buying landscape includes the following:

Content marketing builds trust.

- **Connections**—Whom do you know? Whom do they know? And, are any of these connections experts in the services they need?
- **Conversations**—No heavy sales pitch. Does the A/E/C firm offer transparent discussions around challenging issues?
- **Selection**—Does the A/E/C firm continue to offer value and education, even after it has been hired?

Content marketing supports the entire client experience journey and, once a purchasing decision is made, greatly influences the willingness of buyers to become advocates.

Defining Content Marketing

Content marketing is the creation and distribution of valuable, educational, and relevant content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience—and, ultimately, to drive profitable client engagement. Content marketing includes blogs, magazine articles, videos, and other forms of content designed to teach audiences useful skills and lessons related to their industries. It is not sales material, brochures, or pitch decks.

Why is content marketing so difficult? Because it takes time! In this age of instant gratification, we tend to deploy an initiative and expect it to work immediately. I know. I'm as impatient as they come. But when it comes to content marketing, it's a long-term play.

First, you need to understand the topics that are important to your target audiences. Are there any trends, regulations, innovations, or constraints that are top of mind for the influencers and decision-makers your A/E/C firm is pursuing? These topics can serve as great fodder for content marketing. Aside from anecdotal insights from everyday conversations, you can also engage in perception research to uncover such dynamics.

Figure 1. Coffman Engineers' website offers free guide to new seismic ordinance.



The intersection of your clients' most pressing issues and your A/E/C firm's services will inform the broader issues you cover in your blogs, white papers, guides, or books. Remember, the issues and specific topics you choose to cover should:

- Be relevant to both your client and the services you provide
- Have no true consensus on what is the "right" solution
- Be enduring (not likely to go away in the short-term)
- Be a point of expertise not already "owned" by another firm
- Offer a valuable perspective
- Be broad enough to cover from different angles

Research can help you select these issues and topics.

Let's look at the City of Los Angeles and a recently passed mandatory seismic retrofit ordinance. This retrofit ordinance affects more than 10,000 wood-framed soft-story buildings. As one can imagine, an ordinance such as this comes with many questions

and possible confusion. A local engineering firm, Coffman Engineers, is connecting its expertise to this timely news.

On its website, Coffman calls out the mandatory ordinance, along with a link to their LA Seismic Retrofit landing page (Figure 1). There, visitors can register to download the guide, *Los Angeles Seismic Ordinance: What You Need to Know*.

While not every person that downloads the guide will make for a prospect, a significant percentage likely will be. Not only is Coffman Engineers highlighting an area of expertise, it is also providing valuable and helpful information to its target audience, an audience that can be nurtured further with content marketing.

In our sales funnel graphic (Figure 2), this guide functions as top and middle of funnel—attracting new prospects, developing trust, and building engagement.

Content = Trust

Content plays a critical role in both pre-sale (marketing and business development) and post-sale activity. Why? Content marketing builds trust. It gives prospective clients a sense of confidence that they are

Figure 2. Hinge's sales funnel. Courtesy Hinge.



selecting the best service provider. It gives existing clients assurance that you are working in their best interest. And it gives current and former clients proof of your expertise they can pass along to those they refer.

But, it's worth repeating: The content you provide must be educational, useful, and relevant to your target audiences if the goal is to help develop new business and generate new referrals.

Let's look at a few other examples of content marketing:

Array Architects is one of the country's leaders in the design of healthcare facilities. The firm says it offers a full complement of knowledge-based services including planning, architecture, interior design, and advisory services from its seven office locations. The firm describes itself as a "team of architects and designers who share a strong desire to use its expertise and knowledge to design solutions that will help people in moments that matter most."

On its website, the firm doesn't simply promote a blog or news forum—it has created a knowledge community. Here, site visitors will find a blog, the firm's

latest tweets, and a place to subscribe to new articles. Describing this forum as a community immediately sets the firm's social marketing apart from its competitors. This becomes a place for discussion, where visitors can respond to tweets or reach out directly to partners. The firm also promotes design books, case studies, videos, webinars, and podcasts—examples of thought-leadership marketing that can engage any potential client.

Freeman White is a design and consulting firm focused on solving complex healthcare facility issues. In fact, the company shares examples of its work in case studies labeled as "outcomes." These outcomes display Freeman White's design, engineering, improvement, and planning services for many types of health care buildings. The company positions itself as a solution finder, establishing its competitive advantage.

Its thought-leadership section, called "Insights," includes articles published in leading industry magazines, as well as on its blog. Like its outcomes, the blog aims to answer specific questions and demonstrate to readers the firm's strength at solving problems. Whether it's determining the least-expensive way

to solve chiller issues or how to improve operating-room efficiency, the firm demonstrates that it is a knowledgeable resource where healthcare facilities can turn for expert advice.

Each of these design firms is an industry leader. Each freely dispenses knowledge in a blog that supports the firm's position as an industry expert. Each also exhibits thought leadership beyond its website, by contributing to leading industry publications and encouraging members to speak at industry events, among other displays of visible expertise. Combined, these examples of thought-leadership marketing give these A/E/C firms a strong competitive advantage in landing new clients and projects.

Sharing the Content

Winning with content marketing goes beyond creating the content. It also means that you have to share it where your target audiences are looking for information. From Hinge's *Referral Marketing Research*, we learned that nearly 60 percent of buyers check out an individual/firm on social media before making contact, even in the case of getting a direct referral by someone they know.

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While social media seems like an obvious choice for sharing content, it's not as easy as setting up a Twitter profile. The first step is developing your social media strategy:

1. Find the right channels
2. Check out your competition
3. Create the content for your website
4. Create the guest content
5. Promote the content
6. Start conversations
7. Figure out what works for your firm

Different types of content are naturally suited for certain social platforms. Understanding when, where, and how to share them will also be key in your content marketing efforts.

Tying Content to Before and After the Win

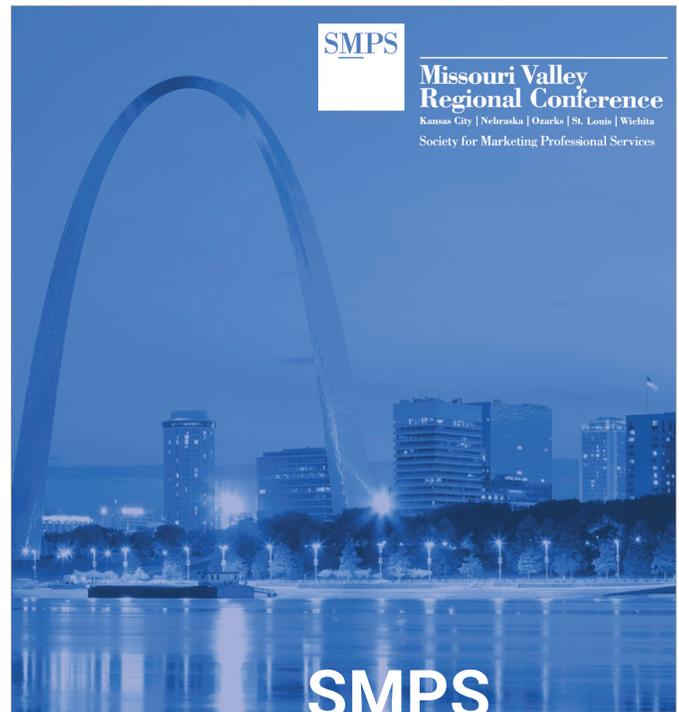
In the pre-sale stage of the client journey (Awareness and Consideration in *Figure 3*), it is important to get content out to potential clients. Consider educational content as a tool for moving the buying process forward. Not only is it an opportunity to acquire new leads (at a lower acquisition cost), it also builds trust well before the initial conversation.

Buyers begin interacting with a firm online before they reach out or are ready to buy. You need to make sure those prospective clients recognize your expertise early so they are amenable to engage and later become clients.

But just because you closed the deal and have a new client, this does not mean that content stops being important. The newly minted client wants to know it made the right decision, and ongoing educational content can help do that (Retention and Advocacy in *Figure 3*).

If these clients have an informed and positive relationship with your A/E/C firm, they can become strong referral sources. If they have content to provide to referred colleagues and peers, even better.

Of course, content marketing also provides a vehicle for A/E/C firms to go beyond traditional client referrals. This is especially important considering that, according to our research, 81.5 percent of professional services firms have received a referral from someone they have never worked with before.



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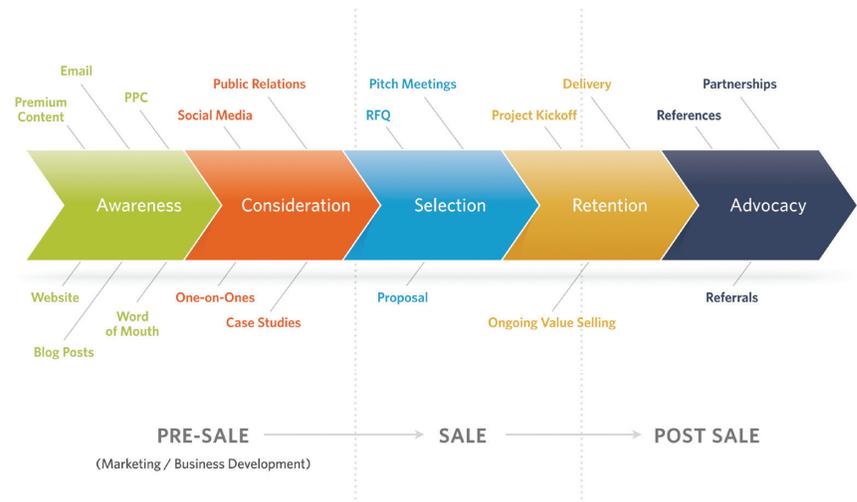
The greater reach that online educational content provides can be highly effective in nurturing your visibility as an expert and help you build reputation-based referrals.

Benefits Contribute to Growth

The following are just a sampling of the benefits to be gained from content marketing:

- Demonstrates expertise
- Allows prospects to sample your thinking and approach
- Gives search engines something to find—search engines love original content
- Helps qualify and nurture leads and build your brand
- Costs less than traditional outbound marketing
- Works around the clock and around the globe
- Serves as a differentiator
- Generates referrals
- Lowers the acquisition cost of leads—online leads from content drive both growth and profitability

Figure 3. Professional Services Client Experience Journey. Courtesy Hinge.



With content marketing, your A/E/C firm is visible at every stage of the buyers' journey: pre-sale, sale, and post-sale. But, just producing content is not enough.

When it comes to producing quality content, follow this simple formula:

What is important to your clients + services you want to promote

Focus on the overlap of those considerations. And remember, content marketing is not a quick fix. Rather, it's an investment in your brand, extending your visibility and demonstrating your expertise. ■

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