Rattleback

The A/E Firm
Content Marketing Mandate

Everything You Need to Know to Drive Content into Your Practice

It's the Marketing Model for Consulting Firms

Over the past 50 years, the single most proven approach for cultivating new client relationships for management consulting firms has been thought leadership marketing. So much so, that an explosion of online publishing has occurred over the last 5 years — **The Source for Consulting database, White Space**, that indexes thought leadership produced and published by management consulting firms indexes over 5,000 pieces of thought leadership each year. And, that's just from the consulting industry.

Yet, A/E Firms are Slow to Adopt

Despite this proven success in other facets of professional services, most A/E firms have been slow to adopt — leaning on their past portfolio of work like a crutch and asking it to stand practically by itself as proof of the firm's expertise. Yet, we know senior client executives value high quality content and would likely consume more of it from A/E firms.

But, can content really drive tangible opportunities and project revenue for architecture or engineering firms?

And, if so, how do firms actually market themselves this way?

Modern A/E Marketing

To drive long-term success, the modern A/E firm marketing department must build four critical capabilities over the next 2-3 years:

1

EXTRACT KNOWLEDGE

The ability to simultaneously extract knowledge from both the firm's consultants and the marketplace and coalesce it into critical client insights.

2

TRANSLATE INSIGHTS

The expertise to translate those insights into high quality thought leadership content.

3

COMMERCIALIZE CONTENT

The ability to systematically commercialize that content to get it read, understood and retained by senior client executives.

4

UNDERSTAND DATA

The skills to interpret data that comes back from the effort and apply it to both marketing and business development activities.

This eBook makes the case for content marketing in the A/E practice, shines a light on a handful of firms already doing it well, and outlines best practices for adopting a content marketing model in your firm.

Can Content Marketing Actually Drive Revenue?

As of the writing of this eBook, we're not aware of any definitive research demonstrating hard outcomes from web and content-based marketing in A/E firms. At this point in the evolution of the practice, only a select number of firms are applying this marketing approach well. Of those that are, not all actually care about data or ROI — rendering a macro-level study difficult.

We can point to the growing body of anecdotal evidence from those select firms having success with this approach.

Content Marketing Success Stories

CARL DAVIS

CEO

"The last two years have been two of the best in our firm's history. I attribute it directly to our knowledge sharing efforts."

- AT KA CONNECT 2014 -

ARRAY architects

KEVIN FOX

CORPORATE MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER
(FORMERLY)

"Our daily blogs drive 10% of our web traffic. The website generates 15 to 20 solid business inquiries per week."

- IN ENR -

BURNS & McDONNELL

ANDY ERNSTING

BRAND COMMUNICATIONS LEAD

"In the first 14 months our new website traffic went up exponentially. We are receiving inbound requests for new business, for calls, for articles. To my pleasant surprise, the quality of the requests has been very high."

- VIA INTERVIEW -

DLR Group

LEILA KAMAL

VP OF DESIGN & EXPERTISE

"It's difficult to measure. But, clients are definitely seeking us out specifically for our expertise and our research rather than us digging under rocks to find them."

- AT KA CONNECT 2015 -

EYP/

Two Models
for Sustaining
High Quality Content

If asked to operate in isolation, most A/E firm marketers can't produce high quality content in a sustainable way. Many architects and engineers struggle to discern from within their individual knowledge base what would be useful and valuable to clients. And, even more frequently the knowledge that does reside in the firm is largely inaccessible to the firm's marketers.

For a content marketing effort to work in an A/E firm, it has to develop a process and approach for extracting knowledge from the market and from its people.

There are Two Content Models That Work

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

*Firms adopting this model are investing in people, processes and technology to build a culture based on sharing knowledge and best practices. They're actively encouraging dialogue and knowledge sharing across disciplines, offices and markets. They're accelerating the activity using knowledge management platforms, like **Synthesis**. And, marketers are mining the dialogue to identify topics for content marketing efforts.*

EXAMPLES OF FIRMS THAT DO THIS EXCEPTIONALLY WELL INCLUDE ARRAY ARCHITECTS AND DLR GROUP.
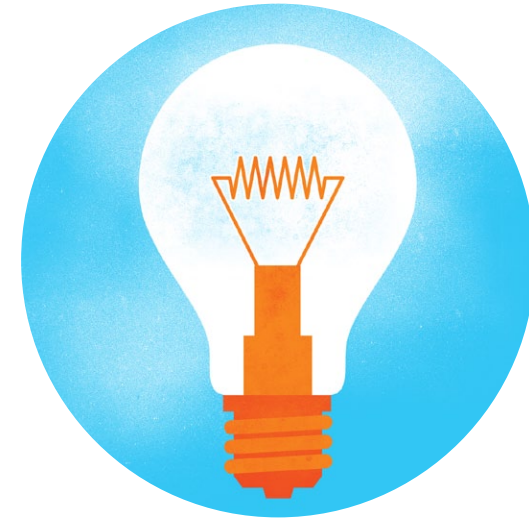
RESEARCH

Firms adopting this model are "investing in primary research to create both a practice advantage and a marketing advantage" (credit: Chris Parsons). Research may be tied to the firm's work or it may be broadly tied to client issues. Regardless, effective primary research connects the firm to issues that matter to its clients, enables it to identify a unique perspective on those issues, and yields high quality content that attracts clients to the firm.

EXAMPLES OF FIRMS THAT DO THIS EXCEPTIONALLY WELL INCLUDE PGAV DESTINATIONS AND ARUP.

The Evolution of Modern Marketing

Historically, A/E firms have staffed marketing primarily as sales support functions. While some firms have dedicated business development professionals operating within the marketing department, in many firms business development is a shared responsibility amongst firm principals operating as "doer-sellers." In this model, marketing is organized as a support organization to assist a handful of "rain makers." Marketing teams are responsible for managing RFP processes, supporting proposal development, facilitating presentation development and interview preparation, supporting tradeshow marketing, and producing all the related collateral materials needed along the way.

Modern marketing teams require some of their existing skills and some new ones as well.

A modern marketing department built to extract knowledge, turn it into thought leadership, and drive digital marketing looks different from a traditional sales support team.

The Seven Critical Skills

Of the 7 critical skills of modern A/E firm marketing, some may be shared within a few roles, some may be full-time employees, and some may be outsourced to external agencies or specialists:

1

RESEARCH+CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

Extracting knowledge from the market and the firm's consultants and translating it into compelling content.

2

PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT

Crafting and managing the proposal development process.

3

EVENT MANAGEMENT

Cultivating high quality speaking opportunities and managing the firm's tradeshow strategy.

4

SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGEMENT

Building the firm's corporate social presence and training individuals within the firm on how to use social media effectively.

5

DESIGN

Supporting high quality content with high quality visualization.

6

DIGITAL MARKETING

Driving both the firm's digital properties and its growing technology stack and using data to improve both marketing and business development efforts.
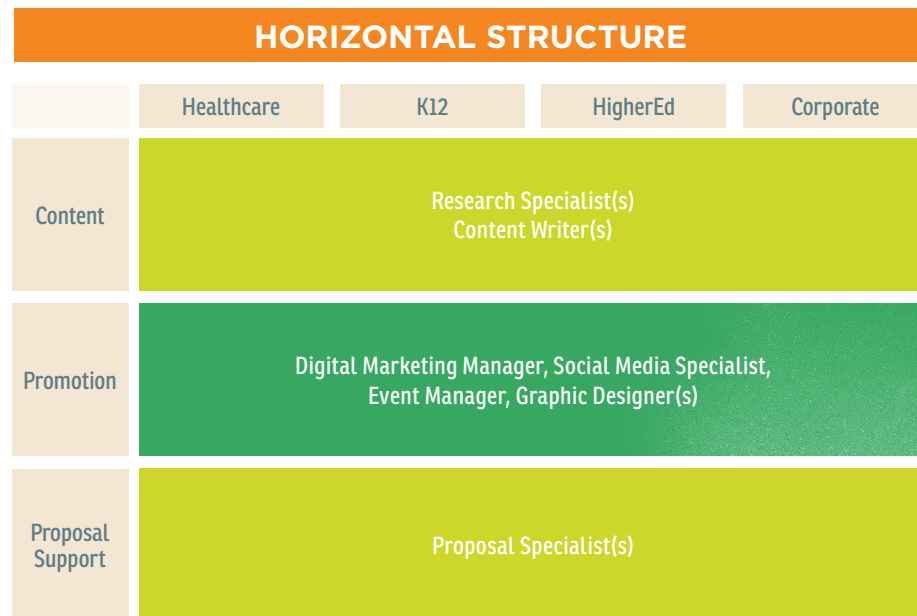
7

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Ensuring both the accuracy of information across systems and the proper flow of that information between systems.
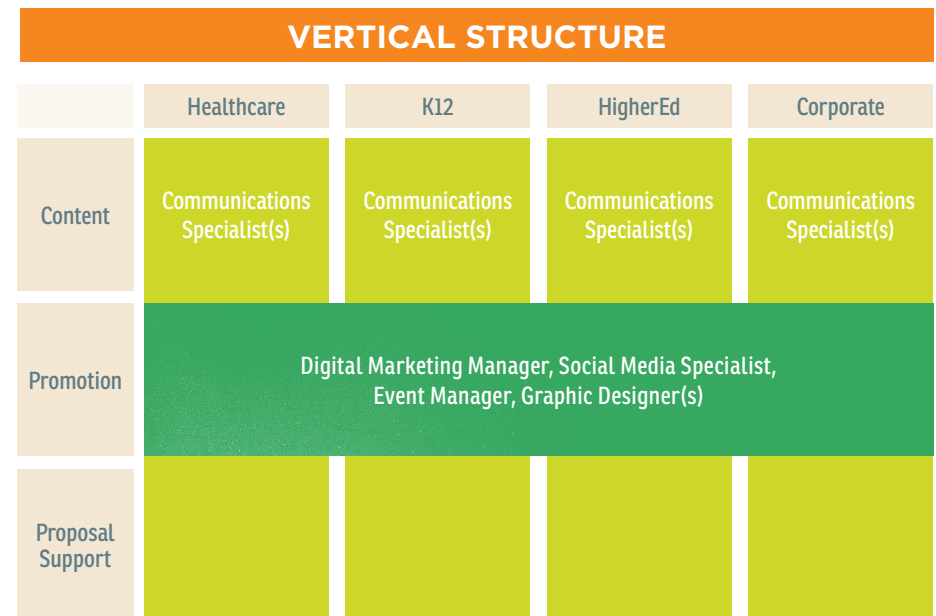
Two Ways to Structure the Marketing Team

Once a firm has identified its skills gap and determined how to close it (through retraining, hiring or outsourcing), it needs to look at the best ways to organize its team. Based on the clients we interact and work with across the country, we've seen two approaches to structuring the team — a horizontal model that aligns marketing resources primarily against skills and a vertical model that aligns resources primarily against markets:

HORIZONTAL STRUCTURE

	Healthcare	K12	HigherEd	Corporate
Content	Research Specialist(s) Content Writer(s)			
Promotion	Digital Marketing Manager, Social Media Specialist, Event Manager, Graphic Designer(s)			
Proposal Support	Proposal Specialist(s)			

- SINGLE MOST POWERFUL BENEFIT -

Allows marketing and communications teams to work on what interests them most and develop deep, specific expertise in that area.

VERTICAL STRUCTURE

	Healthcare	K12	HigherEd	Corporate
Content	Communications Specialist(s)	Communications Specialist(s)	Communications Specialist(s)	Communications Specialist(s)
Promotion	Digital Marketing Manager, Social Media Specialist, Event Manager, Graphic Designer(s)			
Proposal Support				

- SINGLE MOST POWERFUL BENEFIT -

Allows marketing and communications teams to build industry-specific knowledge to better support and drive the efforts of subject matter experts within the firm.

Develop Your Content Strategy

An effective content marketing initiative must tend to both the short- and long-term needs of the firm. To do that, we recommend building a content strategy by working through these 7 steps:

1

STRATEGIC PLAN REVIEW

Prioritize content based on where the firm's leadership sees the most opportunity in the marketplace.

2

GAUGE STRENGTHS + WEAKNESSES

Content can close a gap in experience or it can widen your firm's lead relative to competitors in certain markets or service areas. Evaluate both options.

3

ISOLATE OBJECTIVES

Are you looking to attract new clients or deepen relationships with existing ones? The best content programs focus primarily on one or the other.

4

REVIEW BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT PLANS

Look at the 4-5 highest priority pursuits for the next 12 months. Align content against the pressing issues of those prospective clients.

5

CONDUCT INTERVIEWS

Reach beyond market leaders and principals to talk to associates, project managers and client contacts. The best insights often come from the people operating inside the work.

6

SEARCH ONLINE

Conduct topical searches and see what you find. Does content already exist on that topic? Is it good? What unique perspective can your firm bring?

7

DEVELOP A CONTENT CALENDAR

Translate your resulting topical list into an editorial calendar outlining who, what and when. This will be a living, breathing document you visit weekly and modify regularly.

Commercializing Your Content

Often, diversified firms produce content in equal measures to support each individual practice area. The result is content that's sporadic and disconnected. That said, one of the driving objectives of content marketing is to position the firm as an expert on a topic of pressing importance to clients within a specific market or segment. To do this, the firm needs to coordinate its efforts and build a "body of work" on that particular topic (credit: Jeff Durocher).

The biggest mistake we see firms make when they commit to a content-driven marketing model, is spreading their resources too thin.

The Content Marketing Wheel

At Rattleback, we developed the Content Marketing Wheel as a guide to identify a pressing marketplace issue that the firm would like to own, and then coordinate a system of content around the topic that enables the firm to introduce its point-of-view to clients through short-form content, to demonstrate its depth in knowledge through long-form content, and create engagement between consultants and clients.

ATTRACT

Multimedia

5-6 Blogs

45-50 Tweets

1-2 Articles

FLAGSHIP

Research Report eBook

CONTENT

Interactive Tool

Events & Webinars

1-2 Case Studies

Infographic

ENGAGE

The most effective content marketing programs are driven by a combination of consistent application of high quality content and 1-2 topical campaigns each year that present the firm's deep point-of-view on a topic that matters.

Getting Found Online

SEO is a broad and diverse topic that is constantly changing. Whole books could be written on it and they'd need re-written a week after they're published. That said, there are a few rules that hardly ever change. If you follow them, you will have success driving search traffic to your site.

GOOGLE IS SMARTER THAN YOU

Your task in SEO is not to somehow "trick" Google into driving traffic to your site. Rather, it's simply to ensure that Google understands what your content is about so it can associate it with relevant topical searches.

THERE ARE NO SHORTCUTS

Be very wary of anyone promising to get your site to the "first page of Google." There may have been a time when some "keyword magic" and "link building" could make this happen. But, with over 1 billion websites in 2015 those days are gone. Having success on Google requires meaningful time and effort.

CONSISTENT QUALITY AND FREQUENCY WINS

Getting found online is not hard it just takes a commitment to consistently develop high quality content. Google wants to provide the best content to its searchers. And, the frequency by which it indexes your site is directly tied to the frequency with which you add quality content to it.

Search Optimizing Your Content

The first step in optimizing your content for search is simply thinking like a searcher. Think about how someone might search for the article you're publishing, and develop a collection of phrases someone might type into a search box. Then, imbed those phrases into these four elements of your site page:

PAGE TITLE

Provide a good overview of the page in no more than 60 characters.

H1 TITLE

Make sure the headline of the page describes what the article is about.

PAGE URL

Create a string-of-text-that-describes-the-page.

META DESCRIPTION

Describe the page in less than 155 characters so when it renders in search results people have a reason to click.

The language you use for each of these four elements should be independent from each other so you can capture the myriad of ways people think about a topic.

If you commit your firm to consistently producing high quality content and you follow these simple steps to search optimize each piece of content you produce, I am confident you will have success being found online.

Bringing Data into Content Marketing

Google Analytics and Google Webmaster Tools tend to be your two best sources of useful data. To be clear, analytics should not drive your content strategy, they should be used to inform it. Use analytics to:

DETERMINE THE TYPES OF SEARCHES WHERE YOUR CONTENT IS MOST FREQUENTLY FOUND
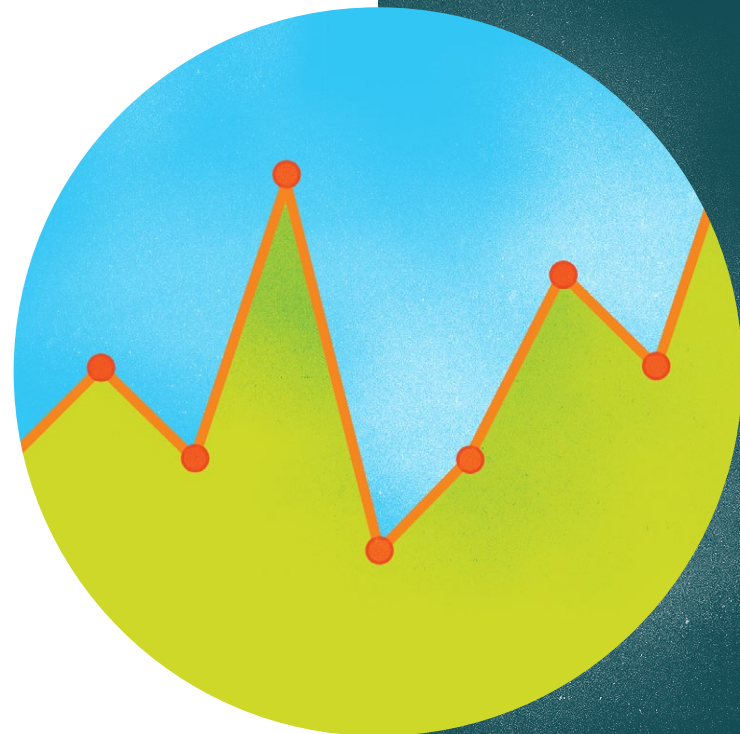
GAUGE THE PERFORMANCE OF YOUR EFFORTS OVER TIME

UNDERSTAND WHICH CONTENT TYPES AND TOPICS GENERATE THE MOST INTEREST

UNDERSTAND HOW USERS ARRIVE AT YOUR SITE TO SHAPE THEIR EXPERIENCE

The Most Helpful
Google Analytics Reports

AUDIENCE OVERVIEW

THIS IS WHERE YOU ARRIVE WHEN YOU LOGIN TO GOOGLE ANALYTICS

Look at this report monthly and compare your performance against both the previous period and the previous year. With consistent application of content, you will see both your site's sessions and users (individual people) grow over time. Over the last 3 years we've grown the traffic to our site over 400% by following the recommendations in this eBook.

ACQUISITION OVERVIEW

THIS REPORT GIVES YOU A SUMMARY OF HOW PEOPLE ARRIVE ON YOUR SITE

A site without content will likely derive less than 40% of its traffic from search. With consistent application of content you will see both total traffic rise and the percentage of that traffic coming from search rise as well (probably upwards of 60%).

LANDING PAGES

THIS REPORT TELLS YOU WHERE PEOPLE ARRIVE ON YOUR SITE

To find it, drill down into Behavior > Site Content > Landing Pages. Prior to your content marketing effort, your top landing pages will almost certainly relate to the firm, its culture, and employment opportunities (sites without content tend to attract a disproportionate share of job seekers). After you've been driving content for a few years you will find the majority of your top landing pages to be articles you've published to your site. Every few months, use the data in this report to identify your top points of entrance and refine those pages by updating content and calls-to-action.

Helpful Technologies to Drive Your Efforts

For the most part, successful content marketing is built around people. A firm's consultants and clients have much of the knowledge the marketing team hopes to capture and translate into content. Accomplishing this is first and foremost a task of establishing a strategy, then consistently and diligently working the activities in that strategy over time. That said, there are a number of technologies a firm can use to make the process more effective.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING

CONTENT PLANNING

SYNTHESIS

*The team at **Knowledge Architecture** has systematically built the blueprint for knowledge sharing in the architecture engineering industry through in-person events and online communities like **KA Connect** and its flagship product, **Synthesis** — a social Intranet and knowledge management platform for multi-location, multi-discipline A/E firms.*

GOOGLE DRIVE

At Rattleback, we've found that a good old fashioned spreadsheet is one of the best ways to keep track of an editorial calendar — from planning content topics, content formats, authors, and timing. We've found a good way to do this is simply to create a shared folder in Google Drive with a Google Sheets document. This lets us collaborate on the calendar while maintaining historical versions easily.

DROPTASK

*If spreadsheets make your head hurt, take a peek at a solution like **DropTask**. Firms like **Array Architects have started using DropTask** to visualize the workload of their marketing teams. They use it to organize content and marketing projects, structure teams and responsibilities, and keep things on-task and on-track.*

KAPOST

*For a more comprehensive way to manage the process from end-to-end, consider a solution like **KaPost** — a cloud-based platform that has features along all stages of the content lifecycle — from developing client personas, planning content topics, managing content calendars, getting feedback on content drafts, helping you see gaps in your content as it's published, and measuring the results of your effort.*

Looking Ahead

For years, relational marketing has been seen as the most effective model for attracting and engaging potential clients in an A/E firm. Yet, more and more firms are realizing the efficacy of competing largely on knowledge. They're reinventing their marketing approach, teams, processes and agency relationships to carve out a new and better way. I hope this eBook gives you the path to follow their lead.

OTHER USEFUL RESOURCES

The 3 Flows of Modern A/E Firm Marketing →

7 Steps to Develop Your Content Marketing Strategy →

The Content Marketing Wheel: Drive Your Content Like a Campaign →

Rattleback Interviews with Leading A/E Firm Marketers →

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Mlicki is Principal of Rattleback, the marketing agency for professional services firms. Rattleback designs websites and content marketing programs that help A/E firms attract clients online.