THE 2018 STATE OF
DIGITAL CONTENT

*Content strategies shift away from thought leadership
to product-focused information*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Altimeter's 2018 State of Digital Content gives digital marketers and content strategists the latest facts and figures about how companies are using digital content to drive business results. Based on a survey of 400 content and digital marketers across North America, Europe and China the report provides key insights into what strategies, channels and content formats perform best in each industry and region. It also identifies trends in innovation, current organization and governance practices, and key metrics for measuring success.

KEY FINDINGS

- Majority of companies (41 percent) can tie revenue impact directly to content.

- 42 percent of companies can create personalized content based on customer data but only 38 percent of them can deliver it in real-time based on actions.

- Product-focused content (29 percent) outperformed all other content archetypes, including thought leadership, brand-focused content, company-focused content and user generated content, especially in Europe and China.

- The biggest challenges for content teams are people related, with respondents identifying team alignment (24 percent) and hiring the right skills (17 percent) as top challenges.

- Visual content like short form video (52 percent) and images (51 percent) were the top performing content formats, rated as more engaging than blog posts, whitepapers or podcasts.

- Instead of views, companies are measuring content success with metrics such as interactions (30 percent) and efficiency/cost savings (23 percent).

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, companies are no longer debating whether digital content provides value to the business. For years marketing departments have leveraged content like thought leadership, entertaining social media posts, corporate blogs and native ads to establish credibility, promote brand awareness and increase trust among consumers to great effect. But the success and ubiquity of this digital content has led other business functions to claim a stake in deploying it. Sales, service, e-commerce and product teams also benefit from delivering digital to consumers, and, in some cases, are able to provide even more value with their content—which includes product information, support manuals, and buying guides—than marketing groups.

Although digital content is no longer exclusively the domain of marketing, it remains the department most likely to own the content strategy and manage the channels on which it is implemented. Thus, the new challenge for companies is how to manage a digital content operation that serves the needs of the customer, delivers on business goals, and is implemented by different departments in a holistic way.

With this survey, we aimed to benchmark the best practices and priorities of content-producing companies across a range of industries and geographies. We asked 400 content and marketing executives and practitioners about the entire range of digital content produced by their companies—not just their marketing and promotional content like company blogs, whitepapers or social media posts.

We sought to find out how content-producing companies are managing the strategy and production of content, how and who creates it, how its effectiveness is measured, what is working and not working, and what challenges these companies face. We segmented the results of the survey by industry, to show how the use of content formats and channels vary across different verticals—and to share the implications of that data.

The goal of the report is to give digital marketers and content strategists an idea of how to chart their progress along advanced content initiatives such as unified strategies, data analysis, and personalization and success attribution.
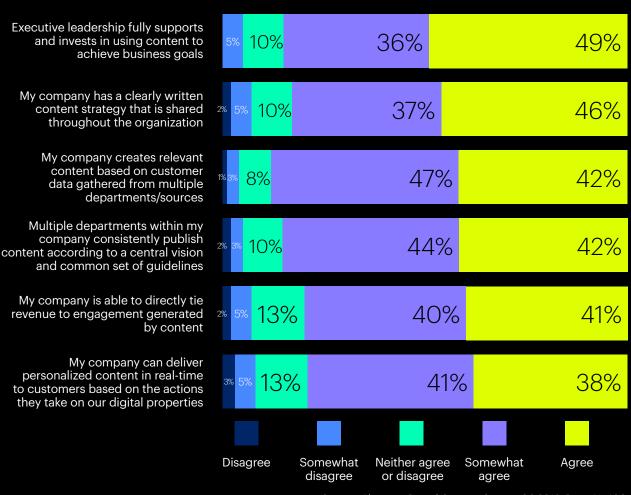
MOST COMPANIES CAN ATTRIBUTE REVENUE, SECURE EXECUTIVE SUPPORT AND ALIGN DEPARTMENTS TO CONTENT STRATEGIES

Deploying digital content is no longer a "niche communication tool for most of the companies we surveyed; it's an integral part of their customer engagement strategies. We asked respondents to measure their companies against the six behavioral indicators of maturity we identified through interviews with top content-producing companies. Their responses suggest that the majority of companies (79 percent) surveyed are on the high end of sophistication when it comes to producing, deploying, and leveraging digital content.

Overall, we found European companies to be far less mature than companies in China and North America across all the indicators. There are a few reasons for this. For one, the practice of native advertising or content marketing isn't as prevalent in Europe as it is in North America, where companies are more adept at creating content that isn't advertising or product related. In China, companies focus much more on product content in service of a booming mobile commerce industry. Both North America and China have developed sophisticated technologies to serve the content they prioritize.

FIG 1: INDICATORS OF MATURITY FOR CONTENT PRODUCING COMPANIES

Q: Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements

Executive leadership fully supports and invests in using content to achieve business goals
5% | 10% | 36% | 49%

My company has a clearly written content strategy that is shared throughout the organization
2% | 5% | 10% | 37% | 46%

My company creates relevant content based on customer data gathered from multiple departments/sources
1% | 3% | 8% | 47% | 42%

Multiple departments within my company consistently publish content according to a central vision and common set of guidelines
2% | 3% | 10% | 44% | 42%

My company is able to directly tie revenue to engagement generated by content
2% | 5% | 13% | 40% | 41%

My company can deliver personalized content in real-time to customers based on the actions they take on our digital properties
3% | 5% | 13% | 41% | 38%

Disagree | Somewhat disagree | Neither agree or disagree | Somewhat agree | Agree

49% of respondents said their companies' leadership is invested in deploying content to achieve business goals. Leadership support is possibly the most important driver of progress within a content producing organization, as it means content teams have buy-in for their strategies, and resources for acquiring the newest skills and technologies. Only 36 percent of respondents in Europe said they had executive support, which was much lower than the percentage of respondents from North America (52 percent) and China (57 percent) who said they did. Leadership support also varied by industries: manufacturing had the highest level of executive support (64 percent) while healthcare had the lowest (44 percent).

46% of companies had a clearly written content strategy that is known throughout the organization. As the value of digital content becomes applicable to functions other than marketing, a written content strategy is critical to communicate a common vision and plan that multiple teams can follow. Again, companies in Europe were far less likely to have a written strategy (28 percent), compared to companies in North America (56 percent) and China (45 percent). The technology industry scored the highest in this area (60 percent) and healthcare the lowest (38 percent). Demand for healthcare products and services is usually inelastic, therefore, marketing content isn't as much of a priority as in other industries. Healthcare companies, like those in finance, are also restricted in what they can say and publish due to regulations, so they have generally been cautious adopters of content marketing practices.

42% of companies reported being able to create personalized content based on multiple customer data sources. Gaining insights from multiple, possibly disparate data sources is a prerequisite for creating targeted, personalized content, and an important sign of digital content maturity for businesses. Companies in both China (37 percent) and Europe (33 percent) lagged behind companies in North America (48 percent) in their ability to do so, which reflects the more sophisticated technology platforms available to marketers in North America. The retail industry was the best at personalization (54 percent) as evidenced by sophisticated product recommendations of e-commerce giants like Amazon and Zappos. Healthcare companies (34 percent) were the least sophisticated in this area, which is understandable due to the extra caution they have in using personal customer data due to privacy concerns and regulations.

42% of companies had multiple departments producing content independently, but still followed a central vision and common set of guidelines. A key component of executing a unified content strategy is the ability of multiple teams to coordinate their efforts and operate from a universal set of guidelines to ensure consistency of tone, voice, and overall objectives. Once again, companies in Europe (28 percent) were significantly behind companies in North America (45 percent) and China (50 percent).

41% of companies said they are able to directly tie revenue to engagement generated by content. Not only are companies getting better at using content to do more than just create awareness about their brand and products, content analytics software is also doing more to track revenue-generating activities that result from that content. European companies were least successful at tying revenue to content engagement, with only 17 percent of respondents saying they were able to do this, compared to 50 percent and 46 percent of companies in North American and China respectively.

38% of companies said they can deliver personalized, relevant content in real time based on actions customers take across digital properties. This personalized content could be as simple as an ad showing up in the social media feed of a customer who visited a website, or as sophisticated as a follow-up email automatically sent to an online shopper who abandons his cart. Companies in North America led the way with 45 percent of respondents saying they had the ability to deliver this type of content, compared to 39 percent in China and 25 percent in Europe. The retail industry (56 percent) was the best at delivering real-time personalized content, which is predictable since this content is highly effective in ecommerce where consumers make fast, impulsive purchasing decisions. Manufacturing (30 percent) and healthcare (26 percent) were the least mature, which makes sense given that their customers and digital audiences engage in much slower and deliberate decision-making when considering their products or services.
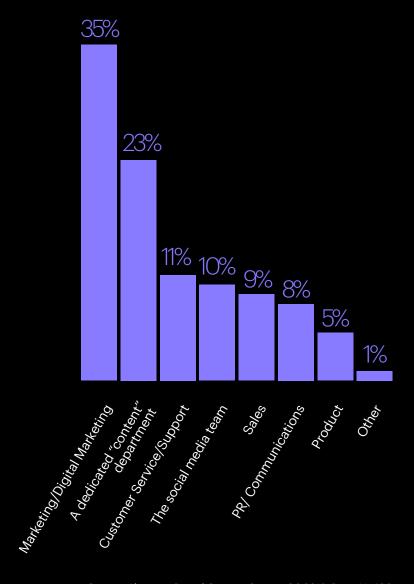
DIGITAL MARKETING OWNS THE CONTENT STRATEGY

Although digital content can serve the needs of many departments within a company, the marketing department (35 percent) is still most likely to own the content strategy. This is not surprising, since marketing has traditionally been the owner of all creative content assets as well as the operator of most digital channels where content is delivered.

However, as the value of digital content continues to be recognized beyond marketing, 23 percent of companies opted to have a standalone content department that conceivably creates and implements a company-wide content strategy.

- China was the only region where a dedicated content team (36 percent) rather than a marketing one (28 percent) was more likely to own the content strategy. It also had the highest percentage of companies reporting that the customer service or support team owned the digital content strategy, which shows that their strategies are much more focused on product support rather than promotional or marketing content.

- Banking was the only industry where a dedicated content team (36 percent) rather than the marketing department (30 percent) was slightly more likely to own the content strategy. This is likely explained by the fact that content in the financial industry has to be more rigorously vetted due to strict regulations on what they can say, and having a dedicated unit to monitor all content produced can facilitate compliance.

FIG 2: LEADING DEPARTMENTS RESPONSIBLE FOR CONTENT STRATEGY

Q: Which department is primarily responsible for your digital content strategy?

Department	Percentage
Marketing/Digital Marketing	35%
A dedicated "content" department	23%
Customer Service/Support	11%
The social media team	10%
Sales	9%
PR/Communications	8%
Product	5%
Other	1%

Source: Altimeter Digital Content Survey, Q3 2018; Base: N=400

THE TOP CONTENT STRATEGY OBJECTIVE IS TO PROVIDE HELPFUL PRODUCT INFORMATION

As digital content grows to serves the needs of multiple departments, aligning all those teams on a single content strategy becomes harder and harder. Twenty-four percent of respondents reported that this was their biggest challenge, followed by hiring the right talent, and producing personalized content based on customer data.

It was encouraging to see that most respondents found that proving the business impact of digital content was the least difficult aspect of their job. This suggests companies are using better tools to track how effectively content drives revenue, but also that companies are no longer using digital content exclusively to achieve goals that don't have an immediately measurable impact, such as for PR or brand health.

FIG 3: TOP OBJECTIVES FOR CONTENT STRATEGY

Q: What is the most important objective for your content strategy?

Objective	
To provide customers with accurate, helpful information and support for buying, using or repairing our products	32%
To inspire trust, loyalty and be regarded as a transparent organization	24%
To create awareness of the brand and generate positive feelings about it	18%
To position us as thought leaders and subject matter experts in our industry	15%
To be seen as part of the same community as our customers	11%

Source: Altimeter Digital Content Survey, Q3 2018; Base: N=400

- Companies in China said they were much more focused on creating product or support-based content (44 percent) than companies in North America (28 percent) and Europe (27 percent), who regarded creating support content as equally important as developing content that inspires trust of the company.

- For healthcare companies, inspiring trust (32 percent) was a greater priority than positioning themselves as thought leaders (12 percent) or providing product information (30 percent). Overcoming fear and building trust are major needs of healthcare customers such as hospital patients or consumers of medications, and digital content can go a long way to meet them. The opposite was true for retail, where only 16 percent of respondents said inspiring trust was a top priority compared to 38 percent who said producing product information and support content was their top objective.
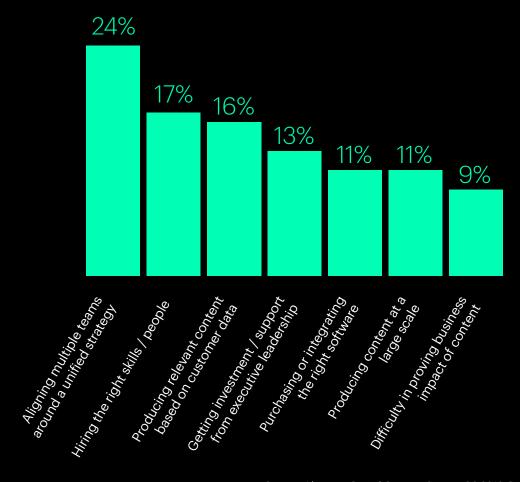
ALIGNING MULTIPLE TEAMS AROUND A UNIFIED STRATEGY IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE

Our research shows that the most popular objective for content strategy is to provide customers with accurate, helpful information and support for buying, using, or repairing products (32 percent). This type of content is more likely to be created by product or customer support departments, which further highlights how content is evolving beyond what we know as "content marketing."

In fact, respondents reported that thought leadership and branding, which are the two most common goals associated with content marketing, were much lower in their lists of objectives. It shows that companies are prioritizing content strategies that are more likely to serve customer needs (such as providing information and demonstrating transparency) rather than brand needs (such as creating influence and awareness).

FIG 4: TOP CHALLENGES FOR CONTENT PRODUCING COMPANIES

Q: What is the biggest challenge you face in creating and implementing a content strategy?

24%	Aligning multiple teams around a unified strategy
17%	Hiring the right skills / people
16%	Producing relevant content based on customer data
13%	Getting investment / support from executive leadership
11%	Purchasing or integrating the right software
11%	Producing content at a large scale
9%	Difficulty in proving business impact of content

Source: Altimeter Digital Content Survey, Q3 2018; Base: N=400

- In Europe, hiring for the right skills (21 percent) was as much of a challenge as aligning teams around a unified strategy (21 percent), which could help explain European companies' low maturity scores reported in Figure 1. Without the right skills—especially data analysis and marketing automation—it's difficult for any company to make progress on their digital content objectives. It's a Catch-22 situation for European companies: they have the lowest levels of executive support for using content, making it harder for them to invest in better skills and technology, which in turn would help them improve their ability to claim revenue impact.

- Companies in the retail industry had a harder time producing relevant content based on customer data (26 percent) than aligning teams around a unified strategy (14 percent). Companies in the retail industry are more likely to invest in data-based personalization than companies in other industries, so it follows that data analysis would be their top challenge.

- Interestingly, technology respondents were slightly more likely to find purchasing the right software (22 percent) a bigger challenge than aligning teams (20 percent).

DEDICATED CONTENT DEPARTMENTS MANAGE CONTENT PRODUCTION

Although more than a third of companies report that their marketing departments own the content strategy, companies mostly use a centralized model for managing the production of content, and are increasingly relying on in-house talent instead of agencies to develop it.

- The majority (45 percent) use a centralized content team to manage the creation of content for different departments and channels. The benefits of this model are brand consistency for all creative assets and the ability to easily implement changes to brand identity, tone, and standardized formats. The downside is that, as a company gets bigger, a centralized content department can't keep up with the content demands of every department, leading to bottlenecks and slower campaign deployments.

- Twenty-two percent of companies have adopted a "holistic" model which we see as the most evolved way to manage the production of digital content. This

model is highly recommended for larger companies because it allows different teams to have independence and creative ownership over content production, while requiring calling for them to follow guidelines and standards that ensure consistency of the content across all channels. As this approach demands less oversight from a central authority, it is less likely to create bottlenecks in production. Although there are big benefits to this model, it requires a tremendous amount of foundational work to set up and continuous trust, collaboration and executive support to be successful.

- It's encouraging to see that only 14 percent of companies create content without any coordination between teams or alignment on a single vision. We see this as the least mature model, used by companies where content is not strategically deployed, and multiple teams or departments produce content on an ad hoc basis for their own—often disparate—needs.

FIG 5: HOW COMPANIES ARE ORGANIZED FOR PRODUCING CONTENT

Q: Which model most closely describes how your company manages content production across multiple departments or geographies?

Centralized:
A dedicated content team manages all content production on behalf of several functions (e.g. marketing/comms, customer support, sales, product)
45%

Holistic:
Following a unified strategy, vision and set of guidelines, every department in the organization is empowered to independently produce and publish content
22%

Hub and Spoke:
A small central content team helps various departments produce content, but supervises all content for consistency and messaging
19%

Organic:
No single department manages or coordinates content production; efforts occur throughout the organization with little/ no coordination
14%

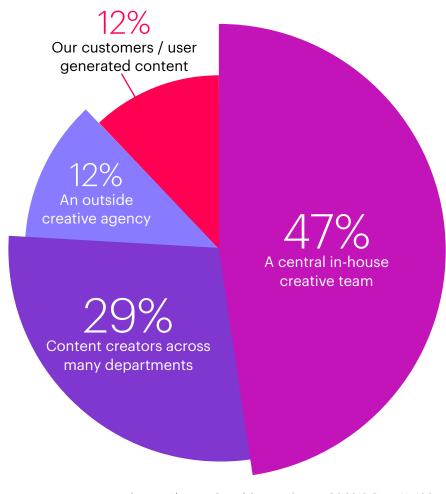Source: Altimeter Digital Content Survey, Q3 2018; Base: N=400

THE MAJORITY OF CONTENT IS PRODUCED BY AN IN-HOUSE TEAM

We've seen a big shift away from relying on creative agencies to develop content (12 percent) to producing it in-house (47 percent). Huge improvements in technology have allowed non-experts with basic knowledge of image and video editing to create high quality digital content and ads—making going in-house a lot cheaper. It's also more efficient to have an in-house operation that creates the content and measures and optimizes its impact, rather than outsource parts of it where data and communication can become fragmented.

- Interestingly, companies entrust their customers to produce the same amount of content (12 percent) as agencies, which shows that the community engagement and authenticity of user-generated content are valued just as much as the high quality digital campaigns that agencies offer. The big difference is user-generated content is considerably cheaper.

- The technology industry had the highest segment for user-generated content (20 percent), which makes sense as tech companies have very engaged forums for technical support and discussing best practices. Banking had the highest percentage of companies using an outside agency (24 percent) possibly due to the high degree of specialization required due to regulations and complex language.

FIG 6: CONTENT PRODUCTION OWNERSHIP

Q: Who produces the majority of your digital content?

12%
Our customers / user generated content

12%
An outside creative agency

29%
Content creators across many departments
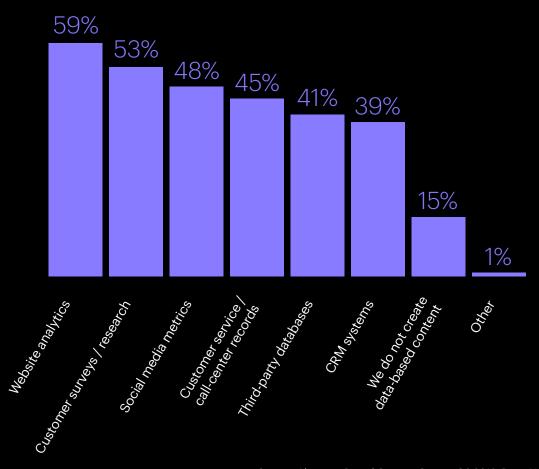
47%
A central in-house creative team

WEB ANALYTICS ARE THE MOST POPULAR SOURCE OF DATA TO CREATE CONTENT

Companies are getting savvier about using performance analytics and customer data to create more targeted content or refine existing assets. Web analytics (59 percent) were overall the most popular source of data used to create personalized content, which makes sense since they are easily accessible to most content teams, directly tied to where most content is published (the website) and in the case of Google Analytics, free to use.

- The top sources varied by industry: Retail companies relied on website (68 percent) and social media analytics (60 percent)—its most used digital channels—to create personalized content. Companies in the mostly B2B manufacturing industry rated CRM data (64 percent) as its top source.

- Healthcare companies, which are the least sophisticated in terms of digital maturity, reported using customer surveys (68 percent) and call-center records (66 percent) to gain insights on customers to create their content.

FIG 7: TOP SOURCES OF DATA FOR PERSONALIZATION

Q: What sources of data do you use to create personalized / targeted content? (choose 3)

Bar chart values:
- Website analytics: 59%
- Customer surveys / research: 53%
- Social media metrics: 48%
- Customer service / call-center records: 45%
- Third-party databases: 41%
- CRM systems: 39%
- We do not create data-based content: 15%
- Other: 1%

Source: Altimeter Digital Content Survey, Q3 2018; Base: N=400

INTERACTIONS INSTEAD OF VIEWS ARE A BETTER MEASURE OF SUCCESS

When we conducted this survey in 2016, "reach" was the most important metric for content marketing teams. But in 2018, companies ranked it at the bottom of the list (12 percent) and replaced it with metrics representing engagement (30 percent), efficiency (23 percent), and conversion (23 percent). Marketers view these quantifiable interactions with content as better indicators of success, since they're more likely to impact business goals such as cost savings or revenue generation.

There are a few factors that caused this shift. For one, it's become increasingly difficult for companies to make their content go viral ever since Facebook and Twitter changed their algorithms to downgrade organic corporate content. To attain the same levels of reach they were getting for free, companies now have to pay to promote posts on social media. Couple that with the fact that there isn't an easily quantifiable correlation between reach and business results, and the return-on-investment of simply attaining reach begins to look unfavorable.

In addition, increasingly better analytics platforms have made it easier to measure engagement, drawing a straight line between content that's been viewed and actions taken as a result (e.g., contacting the company or learning more about its products or services).

- For European respondents, measuring efficiency (28 percent) was as important as measuring engagement (28 percent) in determining success. And in China, there was slightly more emphasis on conversion metrics (28 percent) rather than on engagement as a measure of success, which further highlights the more commercial (as opposed to brand marketing or promotional) role of content in Chinese businesses.

- Retail respondents were also more likely to use conversions (34 percent) than other metrics. Since almost all retail has an e-commerce component, it's easier for these companies to track content to direct actions on the same platform (web or mobile app) that result in purchases.

FIG 8: TOP CONTENT PERFORMANCE METRICS

Q: What is the most common metric you use to measure how your content is performing?

Engagement
(e.g. clicks, shares, comments, mentions)
30%

Efficiency
(e.g. cost savings on customer support calls)
23%

Conversion
(e.g. downloads, direct sales)
23%

Reach
(e.g. likes, views)
12%

Inbound
(e.g. time spent on website / owned properties)
12%

Source: Altimeter Digital Content Survey, Q3 2018; Base: N=400

PRODUCT-FOCUSED CONTENT PERFORMS BETTER THAN PROMOTIONAL CONTENT OR THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

In 2016, Altimeter categorized all content produced by companies into five content archetypes. In this survey, we asked respondents to choose which archetype performs the best for their audience. The five content archetypes are:

CONTENT AS PRESENCE: Content that entertains and engages a broad audience while promoting brand awareness and brand health.

CONTENT AS CURRENCY: High-value, high-investment content that helps the customer make a decision in their personal or professional lives, and promotes the brand as a subject matter expert or 'thought leader."

CONTENT AS A WINDOW: Inward focused content that highlights the brand's employees, practices and culture, promoting transparency and trust with the customer.

CONTENT AS SUPPORT: Product-focused content that educates customers about specific features and helps them operate, repair and best utilize the brand's products.

CONTENT AS COMMUNITY: Content that promotes and serves a niche community of customers that is supported by the brand.
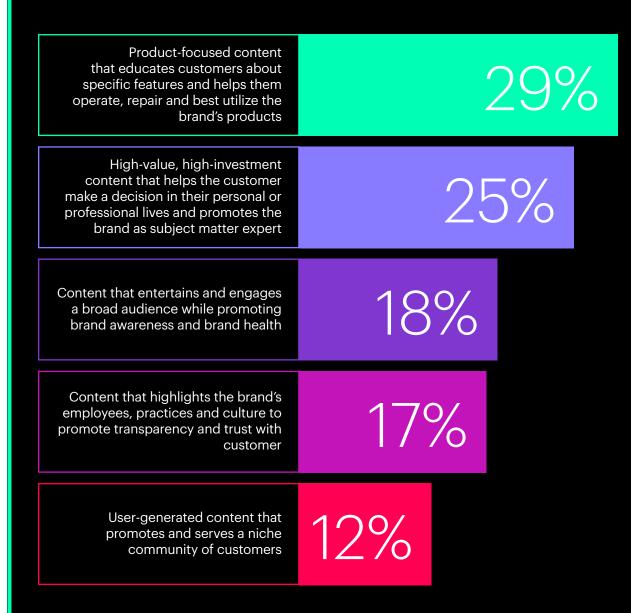
The results showed that product-focused content (29 percent) performed better than other types of content that are more typically associated with "content marketing" such as thought leadership (25%), brand awareness content (18%) or employee and company focused content (17%). This is a reminder that marketing content isn't always the primary need of the customer. Marketing teams should take notice of the content that is actually being demanded by their specific audiences, before publishing content merely for the sake of having an entertaining presence or earning industry credibility.

- "Content as support" was ranked as better performing than "content as currency" by companies in both Europe (28 percent vs. 23 percent) and China (35 percent vs. 24 percent), but North American respondents rated them equally (27 percent). This , suggests that American and Canadian companies use content to provide information to customers that is valuable—but not necessarily related to their products—whereas Chinese and European companies primarily use content to directly sell their products.

- "Content as support" was understandably rated as the best performing content archetype by consumer product and goods-centric industries like retail (44 percent) and manufacturing (38 percent). This makes sense given that customers in these industries are more likely to make purchases based on how relevant they think the product is to their specific needs.

- In contrast, service-oriented industries such as banking (36 percent), healthcare (26 percent) and technology (40 percent) said "content as currency" performed the best for them. This type of content establishes credibility and expertise, making it suitable for targeting discerning customers who choose vendors or services based on perception of expertise rather than product features.

FIG 9: BEST PERFORMING CONTENT ARCHETYPES

Q: Which one of the following types of content performs the best for your company?

Content	
Product-focused content that educates customers about specific features and helps them operate, repair and best utilize the brand's products	29%
High-value, high-investment content that helps the customer make a decision in their personal or professional lives and promotes the brand as subject matter expert	25%
Content that entertains and engages a broad audience while promoting brand awareness and brand health	18%
Content that highlights the brand's employees, practices and culture to promote transparency and trust with customer	17%
User-generated content that promotes and serves a niche community of customers	12%

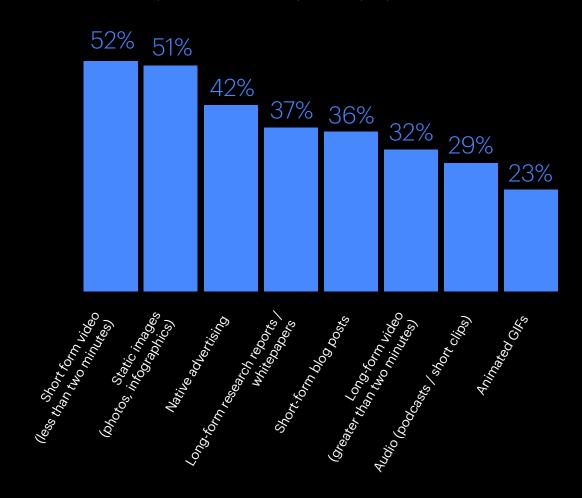Source: Altimeter Digital Content Survey, Q3 2018; Base: N=400

SHORT VIDEOS AND IMAGES
PERFORM BETTER THAN OTHER FORMATS

When it comes to content formats, visuals clearly outperform text or audio. Companies rated short-form videos (52 percent) and static images (51 percent) the best performing content formats across every geography and industry. However, long-form video (greater than two minutes) didn't perform as well as text-based content like whitepapers (37 percent) and blog posts (36 percent), showing that when it comes to video length, the shorter the better.

These results were roughly consistent across all industries and geographies, which suggest that, although the preference for certain types of content and messages varies by industries and products, digital audiences find some content formats clearly more engaging than others. It's a signal to companies to invest in visual content, regardless of what they're selling.

FIG 10: BEST PERFORMING CONTENT FORMATS

Q: What content formats perform the best for your company? (choose 3)

Content Format	Percentage
Short form video (less than two minutes)	52%
Static images (photos, infographics)	51%
Native advertising	42%
Long-form research reports / whitepapers	37%
Short-form blog posts	36%
Long-form video (greater than two minutes)	32%
Audio (podcasts / short clips)	29%
Animated GIFs	23%

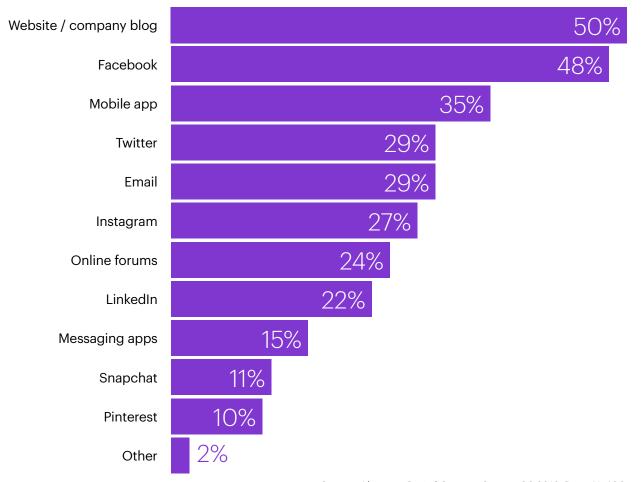Source: Altimeter Digital Content Survey, Q3 2018; Base: N=400

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THE COMPANY WEBSITE AND FACEBOOK ARE THE BEST CHANNELS TO DELIVER CONTENT

In terms of choices for content delivery, the company website was rated the best channel (50 percent), but Facebook was considered almost as good (48 percent), with the mobile app following (35 percent). Given that people who visit a company website or mobile app are already looking to engage with the business in some form, we would expect the content in those channels to have high engagement. Additionally, website analytics are easily available, so content creators are better equipped to track web content performance and optimize that channel.

Facebook's high engagement rates underscore how well suited it is as a content delivery platform, both for paid and organic content. Facebook displays content such as articles and blog posts in a way that is particularly optimal for viewing, showing up in users' timelines and automatically promoting articles and videos that have high engagement or are relevant to a user's interests. In addition, it provides robust analytics to measure content performance, especially

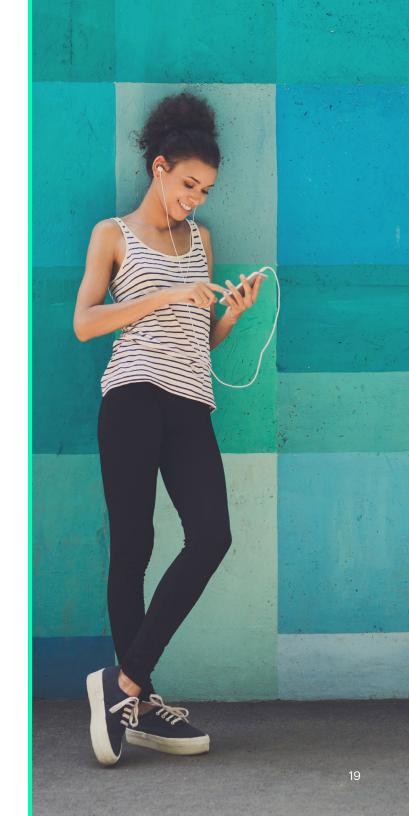## FIG 11: BEST PERFORMING DIGITAL CHANNELS

Q: Which digital channels perform the best for your content? (choose 3)

Channel	Percentage
Website / company blog	50%
Facebook	48%
Mobile app	35%
Twitter	29%
Email	29%
Instagram	27%
Online forums	24%
LinkedIn	22%
Messaging apps	15%
Snapchat	11%
Pinterest	10%
Other	2%

Source: Altimeter Digital Content Survey, Q3 2018; Base: N=400

compared to Twitter and LinkedIn, which provide content performance stats, but are less optimal for understanding the behaviors of different demographic segments.

There has been a noticeable dip in the performance of email as a digital channel since we last conducted this survey. In 2016, it was the second-best performing channel after Facebook, but two years later, only 29 percent of companies rate it as the top performing. Customers are flooded with emails from every business they've ever bought from, or websites they've registered with, receiving discounts, event announcements and personalized offers. Given all the noise customers must sift through, it's difficult for emails to stand out. Additionally, email providers like Gmail are getting better at filtering out promotional emails from regular communications, and most people don't even see them until they click on a separate folder. As a result, we believe engagement rates for email will continue to decrease further.

- Results are noticeably different in China, where Facebook is banned. Chinese respondents rated mobile app as the dominant digital channel for customer engagement (62 percent), followed by the company website (49 percent), and online forums (38 percent).

- For the banking industry, LinkedIn (44 percent) was as valuable as Facebook (44 percent) as a channel of engagement, and respondents rated these two social media channels as performing better than the company website (36 percent), mobile app (34 percent), and email (28 percent). This suggests customers don't necessarily seek out "content" such as articles, research or news from financial institutions, but will engage with it if it shows up in their social media feeds.
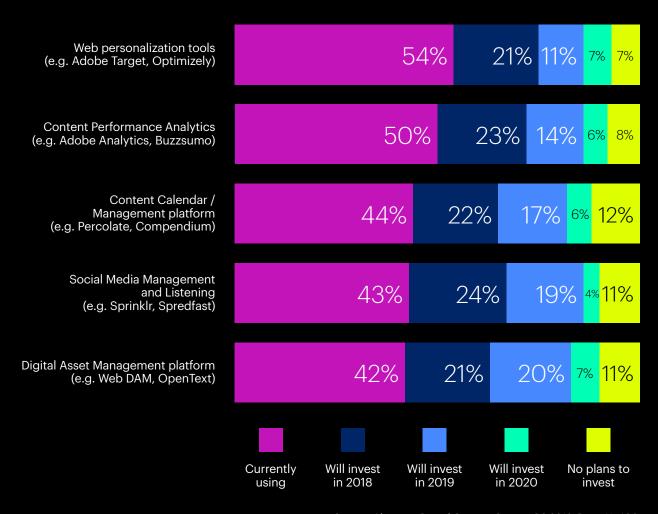
WEB PERSONALIZATION TOOLS ARE THE TOP TECHNOLOGY INVESTMENT

Almost half of all companies were currently using some advanced digital content software for web personalization, content analytics, content management and planning, social media listening, and digital asset management. This corresponds with the high level of maturity of most content-producing companies.

Tools that focus on personalization are currently in use at the majority of companies surveyed (54 percent), but digital asset management tools are expected to see the most investment in the next two years. As companies become better at creating and delivering content at scale, they must integrate their content delivery systems and deploy content across many different channels. Doing so requires increased coordination among teams and creates more demands on a central in-house team. Thus, a sophisticated digital asset management system that can archive content from many disparate sources becomes a necessity.

FIG 12: MOST USED DIGITAL CONTENT TOOLS

Web personalization tools (e.g. Adobe Target, Optimizely): 54%, 21%, 11%, 7%, 7%

Content Performance Analytics (e.g. Adobe Analytics, Buzzsumo): 50%, 23%, 14%, 6%, 8%

Content Calendar / Management platform (e.g. Percolate, Compendium): 44%, 22%, 17%, 6%, 12%

Social Media Management and Listening (e.g. Sprinklr, Spredfast): 43%, 24%, 19%, 4%, 11%

Digital Asset Management platform (e.g. Web DAM, OpenText): 42%, 21%, 20%, 7%, 11%

Legend:
- Currently using
- Will invest in 2018
- Will invest in 2019
- Will invest in 2020
- No plans to invest

- Surprisingly, the use of social media management and listening tools was lower than expected, with only 43 percent of companies currently using them. This most likely indicates that companies would rather listen, post and measure content for free directly through individual social media channels, instead of paying for an enterprise grade platform that performs those tasks holistically and is integrated with other marketing tools.

- Companies in Europe lagged behind companies in both North America and China in their current use of sophisticated tools, which correlates directly to the lower levels of maturity reported in Figure 1.

- Overall, retail companies had the highest rates of adoption of web personalization (64 percent), digital asset management (48 percent) and content performance analytics (62 percent) tools. These high percentages reflect the high volume of content retailers have to create, publish, and analyze on their digital channels.
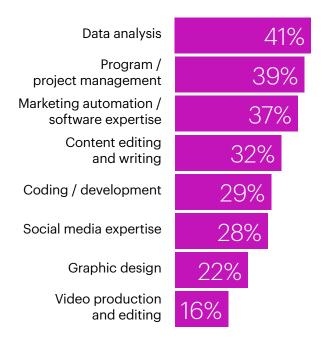
DATA ANALYSIS IS THE MOST DESIRED SKILL FOR NEW HIRES IN 2019

Forty-one percent of companies reported that data analysis is the most in-demand skill for new hires on the content team, not surprising given the shift to producing smaller quantities of more relevant, more personalized content. In the early days of content marketing, companies couldn't find enough content creators to scale business content to the mass level they wanted. But now, companies are less focused on producing mass content, and trying to be more targeted in their approach, hence the increased demand for employees who can access and produce actionable insights from many different sources of data.

- Companies ranked project management (39 percent) and marketing automation expertise (37 percent) as the next most important skills they are looking for, which further shows how sophisticated and cross-functional content marketing is becoming as a practice. Project managers are needed to coordinate all aspects of a multi-channel campaign, and marketing automation experts are tasked with delivering those campaigns in a targeted, personalized way across email, the web and mobile. This is a far cry from the days when content marketing teams limited themselves to only publishing content on corporate blogs and promoting it through social media channels.

- Surprisingly, video production and editing skills were the least in-demand skills (16 percent), along with graphic design (22 percent). Given that our survey shows that video and visual content outperformed the written word, it appears most companies aren't prioritizing the right skills. However, it's important to note marketing teams now expect their digital channel operators to already have light editing skills for photo and video, especially for creating content for websites and social media. It's also likely that most marketing teams would rather outsource rich media production to agencies or specialized contractors, given the high costs, expertise, and time needed for video production.

FIG 13: MOST DESIRED SKILLS FOR NEW CONTENT TEAM HIRES

Q: Which are the most important skills you are looking to hire for in the next 12 months? (choose 3)

Skill	Percentage
Data analysis	41%
Program / project management	39%
Marketing automation / software expertise	37%
Content editing and writing	32%
Coding / development	29%
Social media expertise	28%
Graphic design	22%
Video production and editing	16%

Source: Altimeter Digital Content Survey, Q3 2018; Base: N=400

CONCLUSION: ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

Based on the results of this study, we make the following recommendations to brands and content strategists planning initiatives and investments in 2018-2019:

- **ALIGN TEAMS BY USING DATA TO CREATE A CENTRAL VISION.** As it becomes easier for anyone—not just a creative department—to become a content creator, coordinating the efforts of multiple departments, or even multiple teams within a single department, becomes more difficult. We've found that the most effective way to align teams is to show them a holistic set of data that provides insights into customer needs, behaviors, and preferences. Data wins a lot of arguments, especially when it comes to prioritizing the content you need to produce. Once you've established profiles of your customers, you can create a vision for how you will serve them through content. Independent teams can then continue producing their own content, as long as it is consistent with the goals you've outlined in your vision.

- **USE THE DATA MOST RELEVANT TO YOUR BUSINESS.** In an effort to become more customer-centric, companies often pursue projects that require collecting all the customer data they have into a central repository before making any decisions about how to personalize or target their content. However, our research shows that companies within each industry use the best available sets of customer data to create content. Whether its web analytics, CRM, or even a customer survey, you can start gaining insights and delivering personalized content without having to wait for a "360-view of the customer," which requires multiple, disparate sources of data.

- **PRIORITIZE THE CONTENT ARCHETYPES AND CHANNELS THAT MATTER.** Our research shows that certain content archetypes perform better in some industries compared to others. If you're a B2B manufacturing company, it makes sense for you to invest in high-quality thought leadership, but if you're an e-commerce retailer, your best performing content is probably product related. The same applies for channels. Some social media channels are much better suited to one industry over another. The key to success is doing the data work to understand the channels where your company can make the most of its content—and prioritize them ahead of the others.

- **INVEST IN VISUALS.** Short-form video and images are by far the best performing content formats across all geographies and industries. Yet, according to the study, nobody is hiring graphic designers and video editors in 2018. This seems like a huge missed opportunity, or perhaps it is a reflection of the high costs of making visual content. However, all our research points to the fact that visual content is increasingly becoming the preferred way for most audiences to consume information, and businesses would do well to adapt.

METHODOLOGY

We surveyed 400 content and marketing executives and practitioners in companies with at least 1,000 employees, across three geographies, North America (US and Canada,) Europe (UK, France and Germany), and China. Additionally, we made sure to include a fixed quota of respondents from five industry verticals: banking / finance, healthcare, manufacturing, retail, and technology. We asked each respondent multiple choice answer questions about how they strategize, produce, deliver, and measure digital content.

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